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—SPECIAL ISSUE—

CONTEMPORARY AFRICAN NOVELISTS IN AMERICA

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Special Issue: Contemporary African Novelists in America
Guest Editor: *Simon Lewis*

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Introduction

Simon Lewis
College of Charleston

Abstract: *This special issue of the renamed* Journal of Global Postcolonial Studies *builds on an earlier (2013) special issue's investigations into new writing from the continent of Africa. The new issue focuses specifically on African writers in the United States—whether the writers were born in the US, attended school in the US, or are currently based in the US. The introduction sets out some of the demographic factors—push and pull factors in African migration to the US—and draws attention to the importance of American MFA programs not only in attracting would-be writers to US universities but also in setting up networks with agents and publishers. Two of the most important themes in the three articles, three practitioner essays, interview, and review essay that make up the issue pertain to the impact of online publishing and networking, and the relationship between Africans and African Americans. In relation to the latter theme, while it would be reassuring to think that the current boom in US publishing of African writers represents a wider American interest in all things African, the success of these novels may also have to do with the fact that so many are set in the United States, whether wholly or in part. The recurrent theme of immigration to the US gives many NGANA (New Generation of African Novelists in America) novels direct—and salutary—relevance to US readers, non-African ones as well as fellow non-resident Africans. As Black outsiders in the United States, African immigrants have a particularly acute insight into the way race and racism affect daily life in this country, and the way racial discrimination intersects with other forms of prejudice.*

The work of African writers in the US represents an extraordinarily rich strand of contemporary global postcolonial expression. Maybe, too, it can offer a productive challenge to those of us who teach African literature in the US to see our pedagogy, as Vincent Ogoti suggests, as part of a practice of "un-scarring: of piecing together the full, messy story" of Africans in the Americas so that "the wound itself becomes a source of collective understanding rather than mere spectacle" (XX).

Keywords: African writing; African diaspora; immigration; race; digital publishing

Just over a decade ago, Lindsey Green-Simms and I co-edited a special issue of what was then the *Journal of Commonwealth and Postcolonial Studies* on new writing from Africa. The special issue was responding to an

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efflorescence of writing from Africa, especially Nigeria. At that time, it had already become customary to talk about "third-generation" Nigerian writing with Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie, whose *Purple Hibiscus* had appeared ten years earlier in 2003, the poster child of that supposed generation. Indicating Adichie's significance, Green-Simms's introduction referred to "Jumping Monkey Hill," a short story from Adichie's 2008 collection *The Thing Around Your Neck* that pointed both to the growing commodification of African writing and the simultaneous resistance to the kinds of external stereotyping that frequently still accompanied that commodification. The new generation of African writers insisted that they would achieve success on their own terms, reserving the right, as Steve Biko had done, to write what they like. As Green-Simms put it, Adichie's story delineated the tension between "the persistence of the gatekeepers of African literature" and "the determination of a generation of writers who are moving beyond past limitations and stereotypes" (3).

The essays in that special issue indicated the kind of range that younger writers were exploring—dealing satirically with 419 scams, gender expectations, and patriarchy and experimenting with and extending the postcolonial Gothic mode, while also using more classic realist modes to address issues of transnationalism, civil war, and the legacies of colonialism and racism. In addition to the full essays, shorter pieces in the special issue drew attention to contemporary trends in the field. Keguro Macharia's two versions of "Blogging Queer Kenya" addressed the role of writers in enhancing the gay community; Macharia's pieces, along with Tsitsi Jaji's short essay on on-line Zimbabwean literary communities, were early indications of the multiple ways in which the Internet was transforming both the content and mode of African literature. Meanwhile, Samantha Pinto, quoting J. M. Coetzee's aphorism that the new "stubbornly fails to arrive," addressed the "impossibility" of truly novel modes of African representation and expression when attempts to "combat monolithic readings of the continent repeat the very 'old' terms of African writing's misapprehension" (141).

A dozen years on, the cohort of amazingly talented writers I have dubbed NGANA (the New Generation of African Novelists in America) has grown and grown, with major new voices establishing themselves almost annually.[1] Since 2013, writers such as NoViolet Bulawayo (b. 1981—*We Need New Names* [2013], *Glory* [2022]); Okey Ndibe (b. 1960—*Foreign Gods, Inc.* [2014]); Chigozie Obioma (b. 1986—*The Fishermen* [2015], *An Orchestra of Minorities* [2019]); Danai Gurira (b. 1978—*Familiar* [2015], *Eclipsed* [2015]); Imbolo Mbue (b. 1982—*Behold the Dreamers* [2016], *How Beautiful We Were* [2021]); Yaa Gyasi (b. 1989—*Homegoing* [2016], *Transcendent Kingdom* [2020]); Akwaeke Emezi (b. 1987—*Freshwater* [2018], *The Death of Vivek Oji* [2020]) have all—as their blurb-writers might have put it—"burst onto the scene"

with their debut novels, and they don't look like fizzling out as many have already produced equally impressive follow-up novels. Nnedi Okorafor (b. 1974), who started publishing children's books and YA fiction in the early 2000s, has gone on from strength to strength, defining africanfuturism[2] and africanjujuism in the process and helping to expand the field of genre fiction and graphic novels for African writers in the US. Mainstream publishers have snatched these writers up and promoted their work assiduously in ways that were barely imaginable twenty years ago, let alone in the twentieth century.

This new special issue of the renamed *Journal of Global Postcolonial Studies* therefore builds on the prior issue's investigations into the tension between the old and the new in this boom in contemporary African literature. Moreover, in 2025, we are already into what can be considered a fourth generation dominated by "digital natives": writers who have never known a world without a Web. These writers' experience of publishing is almost as remote from that of the young Amos Tutuola, Chinua Achebe, or Tsitsi Dangarembga, whose manuscripts so nearly avoided gathering dust in London offices, as Tutuola et al.'s experience was from the first European writers after the Gutenberg Revolution. Referring specifically to the contemporary Nigerian literary landscape, Chibueze Darlington Anuonye has coined the term "Facebook writers" to describe the burgeoning group of younger Nigerian writers, especially poets, for whom Facebook has become the "foremost publishing platform." First establishing themselves via Facebook, these poets and writers have acquired a visibility far exceeding that of prior generations. Writing about the winners of the 2022 Nigeria Prize, Kola Tubosun of *Olongo Africa* described "the leading poetic voices on the continent" as "belong[ing] to a new generation of writers bred in the jungles of the internet and raised in the angst of 21st-century dilemmas and preoccupations" ("Nigeria Prize"), a visibility that has then fed into a much more vibrant print publishing environment than had previously existed.[3] The consequences for scholars attempting to evaluate this digital literary culture are fascinatingly teased out by Ainehi Edoro-Glines in this issue.

Fundamental as these changes have been, however, this special issue is not only concerned with periodicity, generational difference, and the impact of the shift from print to digital, but it also focuses on the specific impact of the US as a driver of contemporary African literature. Africans have been coming to the US, especially for university educations, for many decades. Future political leaders Nnamdi Azikiwe and Kwame Nkrumah both studied at Lincoln University and the University of Pennsylvania in the late 1920s and 1930s, for instance, while future Nobel Peace Prize–winner Wangari Maathai was one of the African students brought to the US by way of President John F. Kennedy's so-called "student airlift." Among the giants of the "first generation" of African literature west and

east, Chinua Achebe and Ngugi wa Thiong'o enjoyed lengthy careers at US universities. During the apartheid era, many prominent South African writers—including the poets Mazisi and Daniel Kunene, Dennis Brutus, and Keorapetse Kgositsile, and the short story writer and memoirist Zeke Mphahlele—found at least temporary refuge in US universities. In the age of decolonization and the anti-apartheid struggle, as the late-career autobiographical writing by Achebe and Ngugi indicates, almost all of these writer-politicians were primarily concerned with what was going on in their home country. Even after 1945, when they were caught in the cultural crossfire of the Cold War, their chief political preoccupation was generally their home country's relation with its former European colonial power rather than with the US. Permanent immigration to the US was not what drew those writers westward across the Atlantic.

Indeed, permanent immigration to the US by Africans remained relatively rare until at least the 1980s. Even as late as 2000, the Pew Research Center records that there were just over half a million African immigrants in the US, but the number has been steadily growing ever since, had almost quadrupled by 2019, and currently stands at just over two million (Tamir). The Migration Policy Institute records that "the number of sub-Saharan African immigrants in the United States has increased 16-fold since 1980." Black migration from elsewhere in the world has not risen so sharply, meaning that "people of African origin now make up 42% of the country's foreign-born Black population, up from just 23% in 2000" (Tamir).

And they're doing conspicuously well, tending to have significantly "higher levels of education than the overall foreign- and native-born populations" (Lorenzi). As of 2019, for instance, the Migration Policy Institute found that "42 percent of sub-Saharan Africans ages 25 and over held a bachelor's degree or higher, compared to 33 percent for both all foreign- and U.S.-born adults. Nigerians and South Africans were the most highly educated among the top sending-country nationalities, with 64 percent and 58 percent respectively holding at least a bachelor's degree" (Lorenzi). Given their educational achievement, it is not surprising that Nigerians (51 percent), South Africans (62 percent), and Cameroonians (49 percent) were "almost as likely to be employed in management, business, science, and arts occupations as their U.S.-born counterparts (39 percent and 41 percent, respectively)" (Lorenzi).

In the case of Nigeria, the *japa*[4] phenomenon of out-migration has been fueled by a combination of typical push-factors, including political instability, insecurity, and economic precarity. These factors are particularly powerfully felt by Nigeria's young people for whom even a rapidly expanding higher education sector cannot keep up with demand. The boom in African writing in the US, however, is not driven simply by demographics and migratory push-factors. The significant increase in African migration

to the US has in the last twenty years been accompanied by a major new trend within the literary-academic complex. Setting aside the impact of the current administration in the US, American universities have offered an extremely attractive pull-factor for young people wishing to gain marketable credentials that will allow them to find employment appropriate to their skills and talents.

One particular facet of US academia has had a specific impact that has assisted the current visibility of African authors: namely, the multitude of MFA programs and the possibility of associated assistantships. While MFA programs in creative writing have been well established in the US, going back to 1936 at the University of Iowa, and in the UK from 1970 on, they have not until very recently been a significant feature of university curricula in Africa, with South Africa being an exception. While the majority of African students in the US are drawn to professional degrees in medicine, engineering, business, computing, and so on, growing awareness of the opportunities created by MFA programs has drawn budding African writers to the US in unprecedented numbers. As the novelist Chukwuebuka Ibeh says, "Getting an MFA is basically time to write, and as a writer, there's nothing more valuable than time. Many writers struggle because writing isn't as lucrative as other forms of art, and so many writers, while creating art, have to hold a regular job, and writing has to take a back seat." If you can score an assistantship or a scholarship, offering not just time but *paid* time, American MFAs offer unmatchable opportunities to aspirant African writers. For the two or three years or so that you're studying, you're being paid to be a student, paid to write, quite possibly gaining some teaching experience, *and* making connections with or gaining access to literary agents and publishers. All of that, as Ibeh says, "is very attractive to African creatives and is leading to a mass movement toward attending MFA programs in the U.S." (Mitchell).

Ibeh's reference to a "mass movement" may sound like an overstatement, but as Darlington Anuonye explains in the preamble to his interview with Daniel Simon in this issue, "African writers can be found in most of the significant MFA programs in the US." Significantly, they are not pulling up the drawbridge behind them to cement their own positions but are "growing African literature not just by publishing their own work but also by promoting and facilitating the works of others as editors" (XX). This is a remarkable change from just twenty years prior, when, for example, Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie made her epoch-marking debut with *Purple Hibiscus* (2003). *Purple Hibiscus* is probably as significant for the new generation of African novelists in America (NGANA) as *Things Fall Apart* was for the "first generation" writers, but to begin with, Adichie experienced some of the typical difficulties African authors encountered when looking for British or American publishers. After shopping the manuscript around a

number of publishers and literary agents, Adichie finally secured Djana Pearson Morris as her agent and publication by the small independent Algonquin Books out of North Carolina. Algonquin's relatively small list meant that they were able to focus considerable promotional effort on the book which rapidly gained popular acclaim and the first of many awards for Adichie, including the Commonwealth Writers' Prize for the Best Book (2005), and the Hurston/Wright Legacy Award, as well as being shortlisted for the Orange Prize for Fiction (2004). That success then led to Viking's purchase of the rights to *Purple Hibiscus,* marking Adichie's breaching of the walls of mainstream American publishing houses.

While it would overstate the case to say that the transformation of the literary-academic marketplace in the wake of *Purple Hibiscus* is entirely down to Adichie, there can be no doubt about the post-*Hibiscus* boom—mirroring the boom in Latin American literature published in English translation in the 1970s following Gabriel García Marquez's *One Hundred Years of Solitude,* and the boom in Indian literature in English in the 1980s and 90s following Salman Rushdie's *Midnight's Children*. Adichie has personally played a significant role in this boom, paying her success forward and very deliberately fostering an environment in which the NGANA writers can thrive. Again, her impact is not unlike that of Achebe, who in the 1960s played a crucial role as the Series Editor for Heinemann's African Writers Series. Adichie is arguably even more independently influential than Achebe, having established her own writing workshops in Nigeria since 2009. And in the same way that Achebe wanted to use writing didactically to let Nigerians and Africans know where the rain first started beating them, Adichie has a similar ideological intention: to give Nigerian writers the "tools" to "start to tell our own stories" (Shea).

When Adichie produced *Purple Hibiscus* by way of a Johns Hopkins MFA program and the connections opened up by that, few African authors in the US had achieved publication by that route, and publishers' assumptions about the (non-)market for African literature still militated against US publication. Adichie's visibility, her success, and her entrepreneurial efforts have changed all that. Writers as diverse as Teju Cole (*Open City* by way of Kalamazoo College), Yaa Gyasi (*Homegoing* by way of Stanford and the University of Iowa), Uzodinma Iweala (*Beasts of No Nation* by way of Harvard), NoViolet Bulawayo (*We Need New Names* by way of Texas A&M, Southern Methodist, and Cornell), and Akwaeke Emezi (*Freshwater* by way of NYU and Syracuse) have all followed in her footsteps and been gleefully snapped up by American publishers.

In this issue, Anuonye cites the recent example of Chukwuebuka Ibeh whose precocious success with his debut novel *Blessings* would have been almost unthinkable in prior decades. Ibeh's case illustrates how members of the current generation of "Facebook writers" have been able to use

digital visibility to move into print. Having won one of the highly coveted and fiercely competitive places in Adichie's workshop and published a number of stories online, Ibeh did not have to hunt for agents and publishers—they came to him. He was snapped up by literary agent Emma Leong of the UK-based Janklow and Nesbit agency, who negotiated with Isabel Wall at Viking to get *Blessings* into print by the time Ibeh was barely twenty-three. Wall recalls that she "read a stunningly moving short story of his online and immediately contacted him to ask if he'd ever thought of writing a novel" ("Viking Scoops"). Ibeh, who had already been a staff writer for the online *Brittle Paper* while a student of history and international studies at the Federal University in Otuoke, Nigeria, thus *began* his MFA at Washington University of St. Louis with a completed novel in the bag, and agents and publishers already lined up. He has been using his time at Wash U to work on a second novel and to hone his teaching skills. As he joins the ranks of the MFA professoriate in the US, he will be rubbing shoulders with such other literary academic stars as Chris Abani (Northwestern), Teju Cole (Harvard), Samuel Kolawole (Penn State/Warren Wilson), and Chigozie Obioma (University of Georgia).

Scholarly interest in non-resident African writers (NRAs, analogous to the NRI—non-resident Indian—category) has burgeoned, too. Migration was the theme of the 2023 annual conference of the African Literature Association (ALA), recent special issues of the *Journal of the African Literature Association* (*JALA*) have conspicuously added phrases such as "in Africa and the diaspora" to their titles,[5] and in 2024 Lokangaka Losambe and Tanure Ojaide published their mammoth *Routledge Handbook of the New African Diasporic Literature*. Building on earlier work by Isidore Okpewho and Paul Zeleza and distinguishing between migrants (temporarily displaced writers) and diasporans (writers who have permanently settled in a new host country), Losambe and Ojaide have devised a tripartite periodization of recent African diasporic literature. Acknowledging that these three groups and periods are often blurred and overlapping, they label these three "waves" as the "Sankofan" (late 1960s–1980s), "Janusian" (1990s–2020s), and "offshoots of the new Arrivants" (those born or [who] have grown up outside Africa") (2). The Sankofan wave is characterized by writers who had already established themselves prior to leaving Africa and who even after emigration and settlement elsewhere drew on the "bountiful cultural storehouses of their respective, originary, ethnic African locations" for inspiration (2). The Janusian wave, which Losambe and Ojaide associate with Afropolitanism, consists of writers that "simultaneously cast a critical gaze upon three life-worlds: the African societies they originate from, the Western world they presently live in, and the humanistic or globalist consciousness they project" (3). Their writing tends to be "transnational and liberated from the cultural nationalism" of earlier generations.

As a result of their birth or upbringing outside of Africa, the Offshoots of the New Arrivants in Losambe and Ojaide's schema tend to "connect with and experience Africa through physical visits, archival research, and oral stories that they often produce as documentaries or integrate into their fictional narratives, dramas, and poetry" (5). By differentiating among these NRA/NGANA writers by experience as well as simply by generation, Losambe and Ojaide have come up with criteria that go beyond (and indeed muddy) more straightforward periodization, whether based on dates (writers of the 1960s, say) or political processes (colonial, anticolonial, postcolonial). While all of the contemporary authors mentioned in this introduction and discussed in the essays that follow are members of what I have labeled the NGANA generation—by virtue of their date of birth and location in North America—Adichie and Ibeh, born more than twenty years apart, are both members of Losambe and Ojaide's Janusian wave, while Yaa Gyasi, Teju Cole, and Tope Folarin fit better into Losambe and Ojaide's category of Offshoots of the New Arrivants.

While it would be reassuring to think that the current boom represents a wider American interest in all things African, the success of these novels may also have to do with the fact that so many are actually set in the United States, whether wholly or in part. The recurrent theme of immigration to the US gives many NGANA novels direct—and salutary—relevance to US readers, non-African ones as well as fellow NRAs. As Black outsiders in the United States, African immigrants have a particularly acute insight into the way race and racism affect daily life in this country, and the way racial discrimination intersects with other forms of prejudice. Again, Adichie may have produced the definitive novel in this area. Her masterly 2013 novel *Americanah* illustrates how Ifemelu, a young Nigerian woman overstaying her student visa, negotiates the new Black identity forced on her by the blunt instrument of American race construction. In a brilliant metafictional move, Adichie has Ifemelu achieve Web-wide fame by writing a blog dedicated to Non-American Blacks: "Dear Non-American Black," Ifemelu writes, "when you make the choice to come to America, you become black. Stop arguing. Stop saying I'm Jamaican or I'm Ghanaian. America doesn't care. So what if you weren't 'black' in your country? You're in America now" (222).

Ifemelu's experience of racism is simultaneously hurtful and baffling to her. On the one hand, her illegal status makes her both psychologically and physically vulnerable, but at times, American racism is almost comical; for instance, Ifemelu doesn't understand why an innocent reference to eating watermelon might be misconstrued, and she is totally bemused by a shop-assistant's attempt to avoid distinguishing between two shoppers by reference to their skin-color. Adichie's latest novel *Dream Count* similarly exposes some of the absurdities of American behavior around race and

particularly critiques the combination of ignorance and arrogance that "makes them [Americans] think they can decide for the rest of the world how they should think" (*Dream Count* 349).

In the face of these concerns, Idrissou Mora-Kpai in this issue movingly and eloquently addresses some of the intellectual and artistic adaptations that he has had to make as a filmmaker moving to the United States. Acknowledging that he "was not prepared for the omnipresent and visceral confrontation with race in the US system, which felt so different to the European one and which did not immediately allow me, as an African, to understand my own positionality in that system," he explains the particular kind of double-consciousness African immigrants in the US exhibit, variously "pitted *against* non-white migrants who often aspire to overtake them within national racial hierarchies" (emphasis added) but also as vulnerable to "the violence of anti-Black racism as any other Black American." In his documentary *America Street*, Mora-Kpai "engag[ed] with the community from a position of solidarity and cultural resonance," but his essay questions whether the recent success of blockbuster Hollywood movies such as *Black Panther* and *The Woman King* might be "contributing to commodify African stories, which are stripped of authenticity and reduced to products for external consumption" (XX).

Negotiating similar tensions, the writing of Teju Cole and Tope Folarin, analyzed so carefully in this issue by Brenda Tan, Innocent Ngulube, and Sakiru Adebayo highlights the difficulties involved in navigating the parameters of the "particular kind" of blackness that African immigrants and their children have to inhabit in the United States. Adebayo frames his analysis of Folarin's essay by reference to Fanon's famous chapter on the "fact of blackness" in *Black Skin, White Masks,* describing Folarin's young protagonist as experiencing his "'blackness as a zone of non-being' and, for this reason, struggl[ing] with a profound sense of disembeddedness and a feeling of homelessness in his own skin." As Adebayo argues, however, Folarin's Tunde is eventually able to move beyond his own objectification and alienation to "fashion a fluid sense of identity," thereby contributing to the "expansion of black subjectivities" in contemporary America (XX).

How those subjectivities interact and are affected by other constructions of identity (as determined by class, gender, level of education, etc.) is a frequent theme of NGANA novels. Tunde's inner psychological confusion, for instance, is reflected in the way that mutual misunderstanding among and between Africans and African Americans in Teju Cole's work is held in delicate balance with the sense of racial solidarity. In her essay in this issue, Tan scrupulously unpacks a couple of key passages in Cole's *Open City* and *Tremor* in which the two protagonists of those novels acknowledge their error in assuming solidarity with other Africans—in New York and Paris, respectively—who do not share the narrators' class status.

Tan's analysis of Cole's persistent questioning of his narrators' subjectivity in *Open City* and *Tremor* reaches a less positive conclusion than Adebayo's account of Folarin's Tunde. Resisting a linear, developmental approach, Tan insists on the constant tension in the relations between race and blackness, with particular attention to the ways in which class position affects those (non-)identities. In ways that resonate with Vincent Ogoti's use of Simon Gikandi's *Slavery and the Culture of Taste,* Tan locates the origin of blackness in North American racial slavery as "the negative figuration invented by Western Man to ratify his own humanness" (XX). Tying this process to global capitalism, Tan argues that Cole's narrators' co-optation into a supposedly progressive racial discourse of inclusivity can ultimately provide only a temporary solution to the crisis of growing impoverishment in the Global South.

Innocent Ngulube, in his essay on Cole's *Tremor,* adds a further dimension to Tan's argument by picking up on the way *Tremor* emphasizes that other primal violence in American history: the destruction of indigenous peoples, notably in what came to be New England. In reinserting African and indigenous experience into the American narrative, Ngulube Africanizes the archive of American racial violence. Drawing on Achille Mbembe's expansion of Derrida's and Foucault's theorization of the archive as well as Mbembe's concept of brutalism, Ngulube like Tan, Adebayo, and Ogot links the phenomenology of being black in the United States to histories and structures of racial violence that have been silenced and rendered invisible.

Regardless of whether you are African or African American, being Black in America comes not only with the myriad microaggressions of everyday life, but also with the risk of physical violence. There are police shootings of characters in at least two NGANA novels, Uzodinma Iweala's *Speak No Evil* and NoViolet Bulawayo's *We Need New Names*. You might think that such violent, tragic events would be major plot devices. Sadly, they seem to be just one more random peril—little different than being hit by a car or struck down by cancer—that Africans coming to America have to endure. Part of the subterranean moiling that could at almost any moment manifest as a tremor.

I had hoped in this issue to include essays that covered more than prose fiction and filmmaking. One of the most remarkable interventions into the literary-academic complex in the US has been made by Kwame Dawes on behalf of African poetry. Born in Ghana to Jamaican parents, Dawes's own publishing output is prolific and multi-generic. His most recent collection of poems, *Sturge Town*, lists no fewer than twenty prior collections, along with two novels, a collection of short stories, a stage play, a memoir, and two critical books on reggae aesthetics. In the same way that Adichie has paid things forward by opening pathways to publication for

new African novelists, Dawes has used his positions at US universities, first in South Carolina, and more spectacularly since 2012 at the University of Nebraska, to create opportunities for African poets. In addition to taking over as editor of *Prairie Schooner*, working with the Cave Canem Foundation, and running the annual Calabash International Literary Festival in Jamaica, Dawes inaugurated the African Poetry Book Series with the University of Nebraska Press. On moving to Lincoln, he established the African Poetry Book Fund (APBF) which publishes annually the winning manuscript of the Sillerman First Book Prize for African Poets, as well as the New-Generation African Poets Chapbook Boxset (comprising collected chapbooks of emerging writers, with special emphasis on those who have not yet published a full-length collection), new collections by select African poets including Nigerian Romeo Oriogun, South African Uhuru Portia Phalafala, and Zimbabwean Tsitsi Jaji, and an African Classics Series including the work of Nigerian Gabriel Okara, Ghanaian Kofi Awoonor, and South African Keorapetse Kgositsile. Through the APBF, too, Dawes has, since 2014, overseen the Glenna Luschei Prize for African Poetry, the only pan-African prize for a collection of poetry. Outdoing James Brown as the hardest-working man in the po-biz, Dawes has turned Lincoln, Nebraska into the capital of contemporary African poetry.

Dawes's recent move to Brown University opens further fascinating pathways. While it is doubtful that African poets will enjoy anything like the popular success and scholarly attention of their novelist peers, Dawes's arrival in Rhode Island coincides with his and his wife Lorna's securing of a two-million-dollar grant from the Mellon Foundation to "collect and contextualize African poetic works, biographies, critical scholarship, and media coverage into a single, publicly accessible online resource." This new African Poetry Digital Portal is, as Lorna Dawes puts it, "'a digital reunification,' bringing together dispersed materials from oral recordings housed in Togo to manuscripts in France to translations in U.S. libraries" (Dave).

Green-Simms ended her introduction to the 2013 special issue of the *Journal of Commonwealth and Postcolonial Studies* with an appropriate caveat concerning the issue's inevitable lack of comprehensiveness. This issue, too, provides analysis of only a tiny sampling of contemporary African writing in America, but we hope it has drawn attention to and perhaps offered some definition of significant trends within this extraordinarily rich strand of contemporary global postcolonial expression. Maybe, it can also offer a productive challenge to those of us who teach African literature in the US to see our pedagogy as Ogoti suggests, as part of a practice of "un-scarring: of piecing together the full, messy story" of Africans in the Americas so that "the wound itself becomes a source of collective understanding rather than mere spectacle" (XX).

Notes

1 In focusing on African writers in the US, this special issue, and hence this introduction, is limited to anglophone authors. Even in relation to francophone authors, though, US-based academics have had significant impact: For instantce, Alain Mabanckou, based at UCLA, is not only a highly successful novelist and poet but has also used his academic position to challenge the centrality of France in relation to *la francophonie*. Similarly, writers from North Africa, such as Moroccan Laila Lalami (University of California-Riverside), Egyptian Alaa Al-Aswany (University of Chicago), and the American-born British Libyan novelist, essayist, and memoirist Hisham Matar (Barnard College) have all held positions at high profile US universities. (These three are all a little older than the anglophone NGANA writers, and the forces affecting their travel to and experience in the US are significantly different from the sub-Saharan authors discussed in this issue.)

2 See Okorafor's definition of these terms at https://nnedi.blogspot.com/2019/10/africanfuturism-defined.html.

3 Some of these writers, too—notably Adichie, Tomi Adeyemi, and Nnedi Okorafor—have become highly visible in celebrity culture, offering a "recalibration of what literary authority can look like, fragmented, networked, and distributed across books, interviews, literary events, red carpets, and Instagram reels" (Edoro).

4 The term *japa* derives from the Yoruba for running away or escaping, generally with the connotation of needing to use one's wits in order to effect the escape. Common in Nigerian slang, since 2020 and the success of Naira Marley's hit single, it has become particularly associated with youth out-migration from the country (see, e.g., Okunade and Awosusi).

5 2017: "Justice and Human Dignity *in Africa and the African Diaspora*"; 2023: "Of Freedom and Literature *in Africa and the Diaspora*"; 2024: "Afro-Hispanism and the Arts *in and beyond Africa*" (emphasis added).

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New African Diaspora Modes of Self-Writing: Memory, Racialization and Autofiction in Tope Folarin's *A Particular Kind of Black Man*

Sakiru Adebayo
University of British Columbia, Okanagan

Abstract: *In this paper, I argue that the use of autofiction in the works of contemporary African writers in America can be understood broadly as a new African diaspora mode of self-writing. It can also be thought of as a creative attempt at self-interpolation or self-inscription into Black diasporic subjecthood in America. I also argue that autofiction (as a kind of self-writing) in the works of these authors (such as Akwaeke Emezi, Chinelo Okparanta, Tope Folarin, Teju Cole) opens up possibilities for thinking about a new African diasporic subjectivity that is constitutive of and yet distinct from both "native" American and continental African Blackness. I propose that by approaching self-writing as one of the apparatuses of reading the new African diaspora in America, we are able to see its narrative not simply as another facile immigrant story but as a distinguished (even if emerging) literary tradition in its own right. Specifically, in this paper, I analyze Tope Folarin's debut novel,* A Particular Kind of Black Man*. I explore the journey of the novel's protagonist to diasporic selfhood under harsh conditions of racialization in America. I examine how Folarin uses this novel to recast the autofictional self against dominant racial and class structures in America. I argue that if autofiction is an attempt at writing the self and making the subject, then it is invariably about memory, because memory is always at the heart of the construction of personal and collective identity. Hence, I propose that an understanding of autofiction as a mode of self-writing allows us to make better sense of the profuse attention given to the subject of memory in* A Particular Kind of Black Man. *Overall, this paper argues that, in writing his particulate Black self into existence, Folarin adds to the conversation about the heterogeneity of Blackness as well as the many constellations of African diasporas in today's America.*

Keywords: autofiction; memory; diaspora; Africa; America

> "Memory isn't just a catalog of things past; in times of desperation or loss or exile, a memory can be a passageway into the future." (*A Particular Kind of Black Man*, 245)
>
> "Writing is a form of reconstituting oneself and a way of countering the effects of ontological separation and metaphysical catastrophe." (Nelson Maldonado-Torres, "Outline of Ten Theses on Coloniality and Decoloniality")

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> "How do we begin to understand differences within Black communities? How do we define and refine the practice of writing African peoples into a history of overlapping diasporas?" (Earl Lewis, "Writing African Americans into a History of Overlapping Diasporas")

Racial and Diasporic Subjection

It was in 1986, in an all-white, all-Mormon town in Utah, that a five-year-old Black boy of African immigrant parentage first learned to see himself through the white gaze. On one of the hottest days of fall that year, Tunde, the protagonist of Tope Folarin's *A Particular Kind of Black Man (APKBM)* came to the knowledge of his otherness when an old, white, Mormon woman he met on his way to school told him: "remember, if you are a good boy here on earth, you can serve me in heaven" (*APKBM* 1). The woman's statement refers to the old Mormon theology of an accursed Black race: the notion that Black people, the supposed descendants of Cain, would only get to heaven as slaves. While the absurdity of the woman's statement is not in doubt, even to most Mormons today, it is Tunde's reaction that is tragic on so many levels. Tunde found the woman's words "magical" and "alluring" to the point that he started to envision what his heavenly servitude would look like. He "imagined carrying buckets of water for her on the streets of gold, rubbing her feet as angels sang praises in the background" (*APKBM* 2). He also imagined the day when he would have his own heavenly shack beside the old white woman's heavenly mansion. This scene in Folarin's debut novel is, no doubt, a scene of racial interpellation, but it also brings to mind the Fanonian *fact of blackness* where the Black man or, in this case, the Black child has no ontological resistance in the face of whiteness (Fanon 90). Therefore, growing up as a child of an African immigrant in America, Tunde was made to see his "blackness as a zone of non-being" and, for this reason, struggled with a profound sense of disembeddedness and a feeling of homelessness in his own skin (Fanon 10).

This first encounter with whiteness did not only shape Tunde's diasporic boyhood; it also informed many of his psycho-existential complexes later in life. As an adolescent, he realized that he was neither Nigerian (where his parents came from) nor African American (the racial group in the United States that traces its ancestry back to the enslaved Africans). In the succeeding decades of his life, he grappled with repeated episodes of internalized self-hatred, racial melancholia, and dysphoric feelings of unbelonging—all of which crystallized into the "alienated consciousness" with which he navigated the world as an adult (Irele 2). It also did not help that the pressures of immigration put a strain on his mother's mental

health (which necessitated her permanent return to Nigeria) and his father's career chances. After the separation of his parents, and in the face of his father's economic woes, Tunde and his brother lived in shelters and were at some point moved from one foster home to another. It is amid all the poverty and America's overcharged racial politics that Tunde must figure out who he is and who he wants to become. Therefore, on his existential journey to becoming and being, Tunde resorts to journaling his experiences and imaginings as a way of "surviving" and "taking control of his life" (*APKBM* 172).

While Tunde is a fictional character and while all the peritextual elements of *A Particular Kind of Black Man* establish it as a novel, some of the events, places, and references in the novel draw directly from Tope Folarin's real life. In many of his interviews, Folarin confirmed that most aspects of the novel come from personal experiences and that Tunde is in many ways a fictionalized version of himself.[1]

Folarin even said that he started writing the book as a memoir before its narrative arc transformed organically into fiction (Keys 2020). Hence, *A Particular Kind of Black Man* is a work of autofiction because it is at once fictional and autobiographical. However, as autofiction, the novel does not simply document Folarin's life from childhood to adulthood. Instead, it serves as his attempt at writing himself out of the obliviating and interlocking currents of diasporic alienation, familial dysfunctions, and, most of all, America's antiblackness.

This paper, therefore, aims to investigate Folarin's protagonist's journey to diasporic selfhood under the harsh conditions of racialization in America. It explores Folarin's protagonist's struggles to map the particularities of his Blackness in a contemporary American context where one is bound to encounter multiple histories and formations of Blackness. To put it in another way, I examine how Folarin uses his debut novel to recast the autofictional self against dominant racial and class structures in America. I argue that this autofictional recasting of self is made possible through the novel's constant invocation of memory (of the past and the future). Memory, as many scholars have established, is always at the heart of personal and collective identity. Therefore, it is unsurprising that memory takes center stage in Folarin's attempt at writing a fictive self and mapping the contours of his subjectivity in America. In all, my argument in this paper is that an understanding of autofiction as a mode of self-writing and self-constitution allows us to make better sense of the profuse attention to and fascination with the subject of memory in *A Particular Kind of Black Man*. It also allows the novel's protagonist to emerge from the scenes of racial subjection, work through the challenges of living in liminality, and articulate a new African diasporic subjectivity that is neither distinctly African nor African American.

Autofiction in the Literature of the New African Diaspora in America

Since the publication of *A Particular Kind of Black Man* in 2019, critics and reviewers have been unable to agree on how to categorize the book. Some critics have contended that it is an immigrant novel[2] while others have called it a bildungsroman[3] or a semi-autobiography,[4] but Folarin insists that his novel is an autofiction. He even wrote a follow-up article to express his bewilderment at critics' reluctance to recognize his novel as an autofiction (Folarin 2020). In this article titled "Can a Black Novelist Write Autofiction?", Folarin takes Euro-American critics to task for their adamant construing of autofiction as a literary innovation popular only among white writers. It is also worth mentioning that in the reception and marketing of the novel, some reviewers described Tunde (and by extension, Tope Folarin) as an African American while others simply labelled him as African.[5] Overall, there seems to be no consensus among reviewers (and critics) on where to place Tope Folarin and his work: Is he an African writer? An African American writer? Or an African immigrant writer? These contentions or polarised opinions in the interpretation and reception of Folarin's novel point to one of the most difficult undertakings in the publishing industry today, which is the categorization of literary works. However, despite all the debates surrounding the categorization of Folarin and his works, I insist on situating *A Particular Kind of Black Man* within the literary context and tradition of "the new African diaspora" because doing so helps us to better appreciate and unpack the novel's complexities.

In their edited volume, *The Routledge Handbook of the New African Diaspora Literature*, Tanure Ojaide and Lokangaka Losambe describe the "new African diaspora literature" as one that involves transnational and global writings from authors with African migrant backgrounds. Similarly, in the American literary context, Yogita Goyal writes about a group of contemporary writers with African migrant backgrounds who supposedly belong to "a generation that not only heralds an African literary renaissance in America but also insists that new migrations demand new conceptualizations of diaspora" (2). Folarin is part of this group of writers (with African immigrant backgrounds) who were either born, raised, or spent their formative years in the United States. These writers embody and inhabit multiple heritages, nationalities and worlds, all of which reflect—and jostle against one another—in their writings.

Because writers like Folarin were not born in Africa, their writings are replete with characters seeking to find the parts that connect them to the continent and its overlapping diasporas. Unlike their parents, these writers' connection to Africa is tenuous and that tenuous connection has serious implications for how they see the world and how the world sees them. Their experience of the continent is mediated through visits, archival

research, cultural transmission, oral stories, and inherited rituals from their parents and grandparents (Ojaide and Losambe). Therefore, because Folarin was born in America but raised with "deep respect" for Nigerian culture,[6] most of his writings convey a "Nigerian experience that is made in America" (*APKBM*, 244). Whether it is in his short story, "Miracle" which won the Caine Prize for African Writing in 2013, or his other famous short stories, such as "Genesis" and "The Summer of Ice Cream" there is a consistent authorial drive to represent the strivings of the Nigerian American community in his work. Also, just like *A Particular Kind of Black Man*, most of Folarin's published and forthcoming works constitute a fictionalized version of his life and personal experiences as a child of Nigerian immigrants in America, making him an autofictionist extraordinaire.[7]

It is pertinent to mention that despite Folarin's bewilderment at critics' "whitewashing" of the genre of autofiction, there are many new African diaspora writers in America whose works have actually been read as autofiction (e.g., Teju Cole, Akwaeke Emezi, Chinelo Okparanta, Maaza Mengiste, Dinaw Mengestu). For instance, all of Teju Cole's novels (*Everyday is for the Thief, Open City,* and *Tremor*) have been analyzed by numerous scholars as works of autofiction. In fact, on autofiction.org, a website dedicated to collecting, archiving, celebrating and discussing works of autofiction, Cole is listed as one of the most notable artists who write autofiction today. Akawaeke Emezi's *Freshwater* (2018) has also been regarded as an important work of autofiction by a few critics.[8] Some of the works of the Nigerian-American writer, Chinelo Okparanta, have equally been described as autofictional.[9] Likewise, in one of the chapters of the book *Autofiction and Cultural Memory*, Hywel Dix argues for the possibility of reading Maaza Mengiste's *The Shadow King* as a work of autofiction because of the ways Mengiste draws directly from her family histories in writing the novel. Maureen Corrigan makes a similar argument for Dinaw Mengestu's latest novel, *Someone Like Us* (2024).

However, some critics (Worden; Winter), especially within the American literary circle, have argued that autofiction is a neoliberal genre and that its proliferation (alongside other forms of life writing) in the last decade confirms the ways in which neoliberal reforms have led to the privileging of the individual, even at the narratological level. This neoliberal individualism, such critics imply, contributes to the commercialization of the narrative self and the commodification of the narrated subject, all of which result in the popularity of autofiction in contemporary American publishing. While this argument may be valid, I want to emphasize that the impact of neoliberalism in the proliferation of autofiction does not make it less generative or of less literary value. In fact, for many of the aforementioned African writers, autofiction serves as a mode of self-interpolation or self-inscription into diasporic subjecthood. There is

something about the diaspora that invites a reencounter with the self and a re-narrativization of subjectivity. Thus, autofiction in the works of these aforementioned writers, who are all based in America, gives expression to a new African diasporic subjectivity that is constitutive of and yet distinct from both "native" American and continental African Blackness. Additionally, reading autofiction as one of the new African diaspora modes of self-writing in America allows us to move beyond the migrantization of their stories. This point about moving beyond migrantization is crucial because many new African diaspora writers, especially those born in America, have relentlessly pushed back against the tendency to (mis)read their stories as immigrant stories.[10] This pushback, on the one hand, challenges the attempt to relegate their writings to the margins of American literature, as is often done to many migrant writings. On the other hand, it invites us to consider their writings as emerging from and belonging to a distinct, even if nascent, literary tradition in America.

It is also important to emphasize that despite the charges of individualism, autofiction is not just about the individual. Rather, it situates an individual in a wider culture (Dix, *Autofiction and Cultural Memory*). What, in fact, distinguishes the contemporary autofictional novel from other novel forms is that it allows "readers to search for themselves in its author in such a way that other novels do not" (Thomson). That is, unlike autobiographies which are often focused on celebrated individuals, and unlike normal works of fiction which readers approach without assumptions on the biographical parallels between the author and the protagonist, autofiction centers around an ordinary protagonist (assumed to be the same as the author) whose experiences and struggles many readers easily relate to or identify with. Therefore, while my analysis of *A Particular Kind of Black Man* focuses on the protagonist's identity construction in a fiercely racialized diasporic space, it also serves as a launchpad for broader discussions on the place of the new African diasporic subjects in America's social and cultural landscapes. In writing the particularity of his Blackness into existence, Folarin adds to the conversation about the heterogeneity of Blackness as well as the many constellations of the African diasporas in today's America. So, in the next section of this paper, I zero in on the specific ways in which autofiction serves as a kind of self-writing and how it contributes to the making of the new African diaspora subject in *A Particular Kind of Black Man*

Self-Writing and the Metaphysics of Difference in the New African Diaspora in America

According to Ato Quayson, the idea of self-writing was put into circulation in African studies through Achille Mbembe's 2002 essay, "African Modes of Self-Writing." In this seminal essay, Mbembe argues that not only

colonialism but also nativism and radical nationalism have hindered Africa's struggle to attain full selfhood. Quayson notes that Mbembe's essay, as important as it is, fails to highlight the individual forms of self-accounting implied in the idea of self-writing. Because of this failure, Quayson points us to a much older essay by Michel Foucault also entitled "Self-Writing" (which may have inspired Mbembe's essay). Quayson argues that Foucault's version of self-writing is more attuned to the individuated self and that it "brings to the foreground a number of elements that, though specifically tied to the writing practices of ascetics, may be extrapolated into the ontological shaping of Being in its alienated form" (31). Put simply, Foucault draws from the writing practices of the ascetics in the first two centuries of the Roman Empire to make a point on how self-writing serves as a way of bringing an alienated self into *subject*ion. Foucault notes that writing, in general, is "a matter of constituting oneself as a subject of rational action" and that self-writing, in particular, is "a way of manifesting oneself to oneself and to others" (221). Ultimately, to self-write is to pull oneself out of an ontological void and "make one's face appear in others' presence" (Foucault 216).

Foucault's insights on self-writing are very important for analyzing autofiction because, as I have been arguing, autofiction is not just any kind of life writing but a mode of self-constitution and self-making within society. This, of course, does not mean that autofiction is a straightforward and easily classifiable mode of self-writing. Scholars have noted that autofiction "is neither stable nor unequivocal" (Ferreira-Meyers 203) and that there is no single way to define it (Dix 2022). Some critics do not even consider it to be a literary genre but "an anti-genre . . . that self-consciously resists categorization and seeks actively to destabilize the tenuous connection between autobiographical writing and the world it describes" (Vanderhyden 1). Nevertheless, in the context of my reading of *A Particular Kind of Black Man*, autofiction serves as an avenue for exploring personhood, narrativizing subjectivity, and philosophizing the self. Autofictional works allow their authors the "means to re-write dominant narratives about the world in which they work and thereby broaden the cultural memory of those societies in the service of greater diversity and equality" (Dix 2022, 2). Put another way, autofiction is a mode of writing that uses the self as a point of reference and a resource for fictionalization in a bid to work out a subject position that has been obfuscated in prevailing discourses. The point about the fictionalization of the self in autofiction is worth reiterating not simply because of its postmodern or even neoliberal undercurrents, but because it invites us to reflect on how fictionality (of the self) can illuminate actual life experiences rather than the other way around. After all, some cognitive scientists have been arguing for a long time that the "self is a functional fiction" (Swann and Buhrmaster 1)—that one's sense of self is a cognitive construction and,

therefore, a fiction of some sort. Put differently, our sense of self is based on our innate capacity to create narratives about our lives (Goldberg). Hence, by way of returning to Foucault, self-writing (and self-fictionalization) becomes a writer's way of "projecting the self into view" and "constituting their own identity" through narrativization.

Among other things, autofiction's capacity to provide insights into the fictionality of the self, refuse categorization, embrace aesthetic hybridity, and subvert dominant narratives makes it a generative aesthetics of the new African diaspora literature. However, there are instances where the new African diaspora autofiction does not simply mirror an autofictional journey to self but also includes moments where the autofictional pact is disrupted.[11] For example, with *A Particular Kind of Black Man*, Folarin refuses to follow the practice of onomastic correspondence in autofictional writing by not naming his protagonist after himself (the protagonist is "Tunde" and not "Tope"). Nevertheless, the questions of hybridity, fictionality of the self, and the refusal of categorization have real life consequences for the new African diaspora writers because they are constantly straddling many worlds at the same time. One also observes in their writings that the new African diaspora subjects' struggle to attain full selfhood and become claimed or unclaimed by existing identity groups is often met with what Mbembe describes as "the metaphysics of difference." Again, to be clear, Mbembe uses the phrase "the metaphysics of difference" to expose the faults in postcolonial African self-fashioning and to critique the autochthonous rhetoric often used to reinforce the uniqueness of the African identity. Mbembe is particularly suspicious of Africans who magnify their alterity and heighten their difference "not as a symptom of greater universality, but rather as the inspiration for determining principles and norms governing Africans' lives in full autonomy and, if necessary, in opposition to the world" (26). Conversely, in the context of Folarin's novel, it is not the African who insists on his own difference; rather, he is marked as an "other" by the external forces and hegemonies of the diaspora. Put another way, the politics of minoritization and the thrust of foreignness place the new African diaspora subject on the receiving end of the metaphysics of difference (in America). Consequently, this metaphysics of difference produces different kinds of complexes, phantasms, desires and memories that coalesce into a weltanschauung and a subject position unique to the new African diaspora in America.

As a child, this metaphysics of difference created in Folarin's autofictional protagonist the "consciousness of his Black body as a negating activity" (Fanon 258). On his first day of school, five-year-old Tunde was quick to pick up on his perceived difference when the school principal gave him a vaguely pleasant welcome speech with the most unwelcoming demeanour. Tunde says about the principal: "It was in her eyes. The way she looked

at me like I was something scary and unknown. That's how I knew I was different" (*APKBM* 7). This metaphysics of difference would also play out again and again on the school playground, where his white classmates tried to "scrub off his curly hair" and "rub off the black dirt that covered his whole skin" (*APKBM* 7). Tunde, as a result, becomes that proverbial Black person who, in the white world, "encounters difficulties in the development of his bodily schema" (Fanon 110). As a child, he avoided looking at himself in the mirror because he was ashamed of how he looked (*APKBM* 104). The internalized self-discontent was so deep that, in a fashion similar to Pecola Breedlove in Toni Morrison's *The Bluest Eye* (1970), Tunde longed for "a smaller nose and a skin that's a few shades lighter" (*APKBM* 189). Tunde's fraught and split sense of self as a child developed into an acute form of double consciousness as an adolescent. He moved through the world with what Kathleen-Marie Higgins describes as an odd "awareness of oneself as being in tension with oneself" (61). He also referred to himself "as this person who is me and isn't me" (*APKBM* 107). He felt stuck in this liminal diasporic space where he was denied the right to self-actualization and was unable to escape the tyranny of otherness.

When his family finally moved from Utah to Texas where he got the opportunity to interact with other Black kids, Tunde quickly realized that he was also different from African Americans. In fact, in Texas, he experienced bullying mostly from his African American schoolmates who did not know what to make of his "white accent," unpronounceable African name, and very dark skin tone. Tunde felt ostracized as a high school student, and after his numerous failed attempts at "performing blackness," he concluded that he did not know how to be black. He said, "This was my main problem, I had no idea how to be black. I mean, I was black, I am black, I can't change that, but I had no idea how to be black *American*. An African American. Even though I'd spent my entire life in America, I had no idea how to be black like Will Smith, like Michael Jordan . . ." (*APKBM* 134). In this instance, Tunde expresses not only his struggle under the white gaze but also his inability to come to grips with the complex intraracial dynamics between Middle Passage and non-Middle Passage Blackness in contemporary America.

Furthermore, Tunde was inspired to go to Morehouse College, a historically Black college, because some of the Black people he admired (e.g., Martin Luther King Junior) went to the same college. However, on arriving at Morehouse, he wrestled with the fact that he felt "uncomfortable" and "out of place" in rooms full of other Black students. Also, at some point in college, he became very critical of his African American schoolmates' "determined provincialism" (*APKBM* 183). While interrogating his feeling of displacement in the gathering of other Black students, Tunde came to the realization that he had, for so long, been living *as a particular kind of Black*

man—the kind of Black man who has "been mostly or completely accepted by mainstream American society," i.e., white people (*APKBM* 105). Tunde elaborates, saying, "I didn't know at the time but by modelling myself after these men I was choosing to become a very specific kind of person. The kind of Black man who was nonthreatening and well-behaved. The kind of Black man who is successful and benign" (*APKBM* 105). There is a lot to unpack here. First of all, Tunde's statement, which is arguably the topic statement of the entire novel, gets to the heart of the new African diaspora subjects' fraught relationship with race in America. Because they are putatively removed from America's mistreatment of enslaved Africans and their descendants, the new African diasporic subjects are conditioned to believe that they have the luxury of engaging with whiteness in America without any historical or emotional baggage. But because America's anti-black racism is systemic, epidermal, and is no respecter of national backgrounds, Tunde's statement could also be read as a subtle address to new African diasporic subjects to reevaluate how they see and position themselves in relation to whiteness in America. Most importantly, the statement reveals Tunde's two-way struggle to perform Blackness while aiming at the same time for the love and acceptance of whiteness. From the novel, we get a sense that these two "warring ideals" and "unreconciled strivings" only worsened Tunde's sense of alienation, and it was not until he experienced a mental breakdown that he was forced to reexamine and figure out for himself the kind of Black man he really wanted to be. The first thing he had to reconcile with after his mental breakdown was the fact that "he would never feel black, Nigerian, or American enough" (*APKBM* 170). This reconciliation with his supposed national, racial and ethnic alienation became quite salutary because it pushed him to stop seeking validation from external forces, look within himself for salvation, and recognize that he is—*his being*—is enough. He realized that, although he did not feel at home in America (or Nigeria, for that matter), he could prevail only by first feeling at home within himself.

After his mental breakdown, Tunde started writing in a diary. Even when it is not always clear what is diarized and what is narrated in the novel, Tunde's diary entry on 7 November 2000 helps to put things into perspective. On this day, Tunde writes: "I guess I have finally realized that the person I see in the mirror is the person I'm supposed to be, not the person I actually am" (*APKBM* 106). In addition to the fact that this diarized statement points to a kind of meta self-writing where Tunde, an autofictional character, writes to and about himself, it also points to the moment where he finally identifies the root of his crisis and what he needs to do about it. He says later in the novel that "the problem was that I'd spent my entire life trying to fit one box or another" (*APKBM* 170). While Tunde's fate after this point in the novel is not entirely clear because

of the way he slips more and more into memory and the imagination, his statement here carries a lot of emancipatory possibilities, especially for new African diaspora subjects like him who are often said to be "living out of context" and are often on the receiving end of identity pigeonholing (Farred). His statement also gestures to the promise that abounds in the embrace of a fluidity of identity instead of an endless struggle to fit into one national or cultural box that society tries to impose on him. It is from this embrace of a fluid rather than a simplistic sense of self that the possibility of self-liberation emerges. It is also how he is able to tap into the revolutionary potential that, according to Brent Hayes Edward, lurks in the feeling of alienation. It is how his experience of double consciousness becomes reorganized as not merely a deprivation but also a gift—"a gift of second sight" (Du Bois 8).[12]

The gift of second sight, according to Kathleen Marie Higgins, describes how racialized subjects develop a multidimensional awareness of self in a way that yields profound rather (than one-dimensional) understandings of the relationship between self and society. This gift of second sight, which comes with double consciousness, relates to what is described as the "gift of double memory" in *A Particular Kind of Black Man* (more on this in a moment). Consciousness, after all, mediates—and constitutes an integral part of—memory. And, as we have already established, memory—as well as the imagination—is at the center of the way people construct identity. Therefore, in the next section of this paper, I examine, through the character of Tunde, the role that memory plays in the process of becoming and in the (re)constitution of the subject. I look at how memory is employed in the service of self-writing, self-fictionalizing, and self-understanding in *A Particular Kind of Black Man*. I focus particularly on the idea of the "gift of double memory" which the novel establishes as integral to Tunde's diasporic self-making.

The Gift of Double Memory and the Autofictional Mode of Self-Making

Brigit Neumann used the phrase "fiction of memory" to describe how the work of fiction is capable of showing the inner workings of memory as well as how memory itself can be understood as a work of fiction.[13] Building on this, Dix (2020) suggests that there is a correlation between the fiction of memory and autofiction because both are "typically focalized on a narrator looking back on a particular experience in the past and attempting to invest emotional meaning and significance in the present" (17). However, it is Anja Tippner who makes a more compelling case for the nexus between memory and autofiction as she argues that autofiction is, in and of itself, a memory form. By this Tippner means that autofiction, more than other forms of life writing, acknowledges the "fictionalizing effects of remembering" and actively appropriates memory in the process of self-making

(46). Therefore, it comes as no surprise when Laura Cernat argues that *A Particular Kind of Black Man* is autofictional not simply because Folarin shares parallels with his protagonist but because the novel "plays with memory effects and their impact on narrative" (12). Besides, Tunde draws our attention to the importance of memory in self-writing when he announces in the novel that he started writing about himself as a way of "transcribing (his) memories" (*APKBM* 103). In other words, self-writing, for Tunde, functions as a transcript of memory that helps him on the journey to full diasporic selfhood.

Again, as a work of autofiction, *A Particular Kind of Black Man* easily calls attention to how identity is constituted through the invocation of memory, but the kind of memory that I want to focus on in the rest of this paper is the one that Tunde describes as a "double memory." Right after high school, he started to notice something strange in the way he remembered things. He discovered that he had a habit of remembering two versions of the same event. While a version of this double memory actually happened to him, the other version (which he often remembered just as vividly as the first) did not. In one of the entries in his diary, he paints a picture of what this double memory looks like as he writes:

> I've been experiencing these double memories for about five months now. The first time was a few days ago after I graduated from high school, when my friend Matt gave me a ride home after we'd spent the evening hanging out at the Waffle House. As I was falling asleep that night, though, I remembered walking home from the Waffle House. I had no doubt that I'd actually gone with Matt– it was hot outside, and late, and I didn't feel like walking so I jumped into his car the moment he offered. But I also remembered declining his offer. I remembered walking across the parking lot and down the sidewalk. I remembered repeatedly wiping the sweat off my brow with my forearm. I remembered stepping on branches and leaves and cursing under my breath. I remember getting momentarily lost after I tried to take a shortcut through a little stand of woods about a mile from my apartment . . . As I lay in bed that night I was confused by the clarity of these alternate images in my mind. Where had they come from? What was I supposed to do with them? (*APKBM* 102)

There are so many issues to unpack from the above episode of double memory in *A Particular Kind of Black Man*. First of all, these memories are double precisely because each of them feels real and tangible—in fact, the more of such episodes he had, the harder it became for him to distinguish between the ones that were true and the ones that were false. This was

partly why he kept diarizing his experiences so that he would be able to confirm the true version of his double memory whenever he got confused. Secondly, the doubleness of Tunde's memories makes him an unreliable narrator, something he owns up to in the way he draws attention to the fallibility of his memories at many points in the novel. Unreliable narration, it turns out, is a major feature of autofictional narratives. Scholars (Ferreira-Meyers; Dix 2020, 2022) have argued that autofiction foregrounds the inherent unreliability of human memory. Dix (2022) even notes that autofictional narratives, unlike autobiographies and memoirs, do not offer to tell the complete/authentic truth about the past but are rather concerned with exploring the barriers of memory that obtrude on an event and its retelling. Dix notes that autofictional narratives "invite us to ask not '*What happened?*' but '*What does it mean for the people involved?*'" (6). In light of this, Tunde's double memory, as well as his inability to determine which memory is true or false, is plausible to readers and does not necessarily stir in them the need to fact-check (as they may have done if they were reading an autobiography or a memoir) because they are more or less aware that they are reading about the author's real-life through a fictional lens.

Furthermore, if memory is intricately tied to identity, then Tunde's double memory is not unconnected to his divided sense of self. At some point, he embraces the possibility that each iteration of his double memory comes from each part of his bifurcated self and attributes the alternate life he remembers to his alter ego (*APKBM* 104). But when distinguishing which parts of his double memories were real or false became difficult, he became frustrated and frightened. He said: "How am I supposed to discover who I am if I can't tell the difference between what happened to me and what didn't? If my memories and my actual life experiences are diverging?" (*APKBM* 171). At first, Tunde thought his double memory was a pathology inherited from his mentally ill mother and was afraid that it would hinder his journey to discover himself, but his perspective changed after he spoke with his Nigerian grandmother on the telephone. Here is an excerpt of the conversation between Tunde and his grandmother (note: the grandmother's words are italicized):

> "*So what is bothering you*?"
> "Well I've been having troubles with my memory recently. I know this might not make sense, but I've been remembering things that didn't happen to me. At first these memories were about things I had just experienced, but now I'm having false memories about earlier periods of my life. I have no idea where they're coming from, but they are vivid. Really vivid. Almost like they are not actually memories, but things that are happening to me right now" . . .

> . . . "*Why are you fighting this? You said that you can see things that did not happen to you as if they did. Tell me why this is bad*?"
> "Because they are not my memories"
> "*Have you considered that this might be a gift*?"
> "I'm sorry?"
> "*Has it occurred to you that these memories are showing you something important about your life? Something important that you need to know*?"
> "I had not considered that"
> "*Before you discard them or assume that you are sick, why don't you let them speak to you*?" (APKBM 130-132)

In this excerpt, Tunde presented his double memory as a problem that needed to be fixed, but his grandmother advised him to consider it a gift rather than a problem. In the same conversation, she pointed out that Tunde's memories and memory patterns were changing because Tunde himself was changing (*APKBM* 132). Therefore, the duality of Tunde's memory is a reflection of his double consciousness, while his identity crisis is a mirror of his memory crisis. To come to terms with this double consciousness and crisis of identity, he must learn not to be at war with his (double) memory. His grandmother encouraged him to embrace his double memory because memories "are meant to sustain and refresh us" (*APKBM* 131). Overall, Tunde's grandmother's advice implies that our memories are a reflection of us, not the other way around. Her words to Tunde also serve as an invitation for him to take control of his life and become a brazen subject of his own narrative.

The conversation between Tunde and his grandmother marks a turning point in his life because, from that moment on, he stopped censoring his memories. After this conversation, the novel becomes flooded with a mixture of a diaristic prose style and poetic sentences. Also after this conversation, the novel's formatting, page layout, and other peritextual arrangements change. For example, unlike the other pages of the novel, pages 197–236 do not have the name of the author and title of the book at the top of them. It also helps to note that this telephone conversation (in the excerpt above) between Tunde and his grandmother comes right in the middle of the novel and that his memory, imagination and reality become completely blurred after that point in the novel. To put it another way, after the novel's midpoint, which is marked by Tunde's life-defining conversation with his grandmother, it becomes quite unclear whether Tunde's narration is coming from the memories of lived or unlived experiences. This opacity in the narrative progression of the novel serves as an aesthetic illustration of the fluidity of reality and fiction, especially where memory and identity are concerned.

In the last section of the novel which, unlike the other parts of the novel, is narrated in the present tense, Tunde (now an adult) travels to Nigeria for the first time to meet his mother and his extended family members. But, again, it is still not entirely clear if he is remembering or imagining this visit. While in Lagos, Nigeria, he says: "Something about this place, this time in my life, feels familiar" (*APKBM* 251). And right after this statement, he goes on to describe some parts of Lagos in a way that resembles a part of Utah that he had described in the first part of the novel. His description of his mother in Lagos also resembles his description of his Nigerian American stepmother earlier in the novel. On meeting his extended family members in Lagos, he says, "I feel as if I have experienced some of these moments before" and almost immediately after that utterance, he adds, "I am learning that memory isn't just a catalog of things past; in times of desperation or loss or exile, a memory can be a passageway into the future" (*APKBM* 245). This additional statement confirms the suspicion that his visit to Lagos is imagined, and with this understanding, it becomes sensible that he would revert to earlier memories and images to describe his visit.

In all, double memory becomes Tunde's way of reaching for the past and the future at the same time; it untethers him from the traumatic burdens of the past and allows him to conjure a future memory where he can go back to Africa to see his mother and also free himself from all his spiritual strivings and psycho-existential complexes. By embracing his gift of double memory, he realizes that his memories are not false; they are just another version of (his) reality. The double memory also brings him to a new self-realization and enables him to accept his fictive self as part of the multidimensionality of his being. It allows him to recast himself against the dominant narratives that seek to invisibilize his subject position in America. To this end, self-writing in *A Particular Kind of Black Man* becomes Tunde's way of remembering himself into existence while memory serves as an avenue for him to imagine and transcribe himself out of oblivion and (identity)crisis. The novel validates the position that autofiction has the potential to contribute to new articulations of memory when applied to marginalized groups and disempowered communities and that, more than other forms of life writing, autofiction is suitable for subverting dominant power structures and remaking a discombobulated self.

Conclusion: Writing a "Particulate" Black Self

Tunde, the self-fictionalized protagonist of Folarin's *A Particular Kind of Black Man*, moves from having no ontological resistance in the face of antiblack racism to developing a double consciousness that leads to adolescent alienation. However, as an adult, this alienation sets him on the path to becoming and on the quest for new horizons of experience (Irele).

On that quest, he had to embrace his gift of double memories as well as the gift of second sight that comes with having a double consciousness. It is in embracing this gift that he is able to stop aspiring to be *the particular kind of (neoliberal) Black man* who seeks societal (i.e. white) approval and validation. It is by embracing his gift of double memory that he is also able to fashion and construct for himself a fluid sense of identity that is free of niggling essentialisms. When viewed this way, the novel thus becomes a "study of the particulate self, the self as a constellation of moving parts" (Castillo). This self, which is a constellation of moving parts, and this identity, which is composed of disparate portions, are what best describe Tunde and other new African diaspora subjects like him. Broadly speaking, Tunde's Black particularity—even though it took him a circuitous and alienating journey of self-interrogation and examination to arrive at it—helps to "counter the hegemony of any single genealogy of Blackness" in today's America (Goyal "Arrival"). That is to say, Folarin's *A Particular Kind of Black Man* provides a template for discussing the many particularities and permutations of Blackness and ultimately contributes to the "expansion of Black subjectivities" in the United States today (Phiri 153). Most importantly, when Tunde stops trying to fit into an identity box, he becomes another *kind of Black man*, the one who understands that he comes from many worlds but does not belong exclusively to—even when he is able to lay a claim on—any.

Notes

1 For example, see Michel Martin's 2019 interview with Tope Folarin on NPR
2 See Sana Goyal's (2019) review of the novel in LA Review of Books.
3 See Elaine Castillo's (2019) review in New York Times.
4 See Michel Martin's review on NPR.
5 The review of the novel on *Publisher Weekly* calls Tope Folarin a second-generation (African) American while Lanre Apata, in his review in *The Republic*, describes the novel as an African novel.
6 See Akati Khasiani's 2016 interview with Tope Folarin in *Brittle Paper.*
7 In the *New African Diaspora Podcast Series* (2024), Folarin, interviewed by Sakiru Adebayo, notes that his forthcoming (which will be his second) novel is also a work of autofiction.
8 There are so many readings of *Freshwater* as autofiction but one notable example is Jo Livingstone's (2018) reading in *The New Republic*.
9 In the essay, "Appropriating Their Way into Existence: How Black Writers Upended Autofiction", D.K. Nnuro (2023) describes Chinelo Okparanta as one the contemporary Black writers who are "practitioners of autofiction."

10 In the essay "Can a Black Novelist Write Autofiction", Folarin writes about how some reviewers misread his novel as an immigrant novel even though the protagonist was born and raised in America. Dinaw Mengestu (who came with his parents to the US at the age of two) has also tirelessly resisted the "tropes of immigrant life" in his works (see: https://www.latimes.com/opinion/story/2024-07-27/dinaw-mengestu-someone-like-us-review). Lastly, the Nigerian-American writer, Nnedi Okorafor, has spoken against the reading of her novels as immigrant novels (for more on this see: https://tinhouse.com/podcast/nnedi-okorafor-remote-control/)

11 If the autobiographical pact is an implied contract of authenticity and truthfulness between the autobiographer and their readers, the autofictional pact allows the author to interfere with objective truth and narrate the subjective self without feeling guilty about doing so. However, even when the peritextual data of a book indicates fiction, there is an expectation that the main character in an autofiction is the same person as the author. This is usually solidified in the fact that the main character bears the same name or initials as the author. It is what autofiction scholars have described as an onomastic correspondence between the author and the main protagonist (for more, see Ferreira-Meyers and Srikanth).

12 In *The Souls of Black Folk*, W.E.B. Du Bois (1903) describes the double consciousness that Black Americans feel as not merely a deprivation but also as a gift of second sight.

13 Memory as a work of fiction refers to the idea that remembering at both individual and collective levels contains fictious elements, the idea that human memory is bound up with elements of the imagination. See: Neumann, 333–343.

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Racial Conscription and Its Limits: Antinomies of Race in Teju Cole's *Open City* and *Tremor*

Brenda Tan
Rice University

Abstract: *This essay argues that relations between race, blackness, and class in Teju Cole's novels* Open City *(2011) and* Tremor *(2023) are mobilized by an antinomy in the global production of raciality between the progressivism of racial inclusivity narratives and the reality of neocolonial expropriation in the world's largely non-white postcolonial countries. I argue that the narrators of these novels construct race, what appears as stable difference, in opposition to blackness, the constitutive aporia that ratifies the humanity of Western Man. By pacifying blackness through race, the narrators recuperate racial difference in contradistinction to blackness's radical alterity to the human. Race in this contained form comes into crisis when confronted with capital, revealing race's complicity in reproducing capitalist relations. Therefore, the racial antinomy is a contradiction produced and mobilized by capital as a form of appearance that obfuscates the violence engendered by the expansion of the capitalist world-system into the global periphery.*

Keywords: race; Teju Cole; capitalism; Nigeria; migration; literature

In Teju Cole's novel *Open City* (2011), virtually everything is formally articulated and conceptually filtered through a Nigerian migrant's (non)identification with his black identity.[1] After moving to the United States, the narrator Julius confronts a changed racial lexicon that he cannot seem to get quite right. In an early scene in the text, Julius enters a black cabdriver's taxi without greeting him:

> I gave [the address] to the cabdriver and said to him: So, how are you doing, my brother? The driver stiffened and looked at me in the mirror.
>
> Not good, not good at all, you know, the way you came into my car without saying hello, that was bad. Hey, I'm African just like you, why you do this? . . . I wasn't sorry at all. I was in no mood for people who tried to lay claims on me. . . . Anger had welled up within me, unhinging me, the anger of a shattered repose. (40–41)

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Later in the novel, ruminating on Ellis Island, Julius returns to the cab scene:

> Ellis Island was a symbol mostly for European refugees. Blacks, "we blacks," had known rougher ports of entry: this, I could admit to myself now that my mood was less impatient, was what the cabdriver had meant. This was the acknowledgement he wanted, in his brusque fashion, from every "brother" he met. (55)

In a move that will become paradigmatic of his character, Julius breaks into the congealed surface of everyday life, here the deceptively placid appearance of Ellis Island, by appealing to narratives of historical violence and mentally integrating himself in a global black community. Yet, the deflection and bitterness that accompanied his initial interpellation into this shared blackness, his physical vulnerability to racial conscription, troubles any easy application of Julius's race as a grounding mechanism for his relationship to the external world. In Cole's later novel, *Tremor* (2023), a different unsettling of internal racial identification occurs, this time in relation to class. Here, the narrator Tunde is on vacation in Paris when he comes upon a trinket table outside the Louvre. When he attempts to photograph the trinkets, the black migrant trader selling the items angrily protests:

> He sees these men as his brothers. Each time he sees informal black traders in Europe he considers himself on their side against all the hostility they experience. At least that's the story he has convinced himself of. But to this brother at the Louvre he was no brother. (77)

Again, an attempted evocation of commonality between "brothers," yet this time the cohesion implied by shared race falls apart, unable to surpass class borders. Julius and Tunde differ radically in their readiness to situate themselves within a global black identity, yet the two men share something in common: they are affluent Nigerian migrants who can choose if and when to align themselves with economically precarious black workers. The cabdriver and the informal migrant traders in these passages are not offered a choice: they simply *are* situated in their blackness. Two things become apparent here: on the one hand, Julius's blackness as a condition of vulnerability to interpellation is malleable in relation to *class*. On the other hand, blackness as this condition of vulnerability differs from *race*, the stable black identity Julius and Tunde reach for in these passages with varying degrees of success.

This productive tension between race and blackness in Cole's novels animates their narrators' productive (non)identification with both

categories. Following Sara-Maria Sorentino's work in "The Idea of Slavery: Abstraction, Analogy, and Anti-Blackness," I read *Open City* and *Tremor* for their deployment of race in contradistinction to their engagement with blackness, which must always be a negative one within this paradigm:

> Insofar as the concept of race emerged as a thought project to consolidate the teeming contradictions unleashed by racial slavery, blackness, I argue, should be studied in its specific (non)relation to race. Slavery violently forces blackness into a historical form—"race" and its offshoot, the human . . . Blackness, then, is not one node on a continuum of racial oppression. Even as blackness is racialized as the lowest link on a developmental scale, blackness . . . simultaneously operates as the constitutive outside of scaling itself. (Sorentino 16)

For Sorentino, blackness is radically and axiomatically aporetic—the negative figuration invented by Western Man to ratify his own humanness. In contrast, race is the appearance of differential ordering as subjectivity's failure to fulfill its program. Race therefore manifests itself in the real world under the guise of the human, but one that is always incomplete. A slippage from blackness to race registers the outsized tangibility of the latter in relation to blackness that is, although analogically enabling of an entire lexicon of being, itself the "zero degree of social conceptualization" (Spillers 67). Hortense Spillers sets the foundation for Sorentino in her widely influential essay "Mama's Baby, Papa's Maybe: An American Grammar Book," where she draws a distinction between "body" and "flesh" as one where the latter's "hieroglyphics," bearing the "primary narrative" of the originary crimes against black flesh that birthed racial slavery, is transferred and encoded in the body (Spillers 67). Sorentino adopts Spillers's notion of the flesh as primary narrative to theorize blackness as first-order substrate to race as second-order appearance. Blackness, then, is nonreducible to and often obfuscated by a racial ordering that asserts itself as ontologically immediate. Raciality, or the racialization process in praxis, bears immanent ruptures that are masked and temporarily resolved by race's ontological appearance, thus rendering racial blackness potentially recuperable on its surface as *a priori* difference, thus a difference naturalized. However, in the real world, raciality, which can only concretize as difference, is continually productive of new violences at the same time as it rehearses the original rupture that engendered blackness. Although Sorentino's methodology differs from my own—her work elsewhere functions as a crucial rejoinder to Marxist criticism—her vocabulary and conceptual framework enables me to develop a critique of race as that which can conceal more than it illuminates in objectifying itself. Our task, then, is to

mine the literary text for moments where blackness is pacified by race while keeping in mind that, although raciality appears to objectify itself as legitimated difference, it can only *appear* to do so.

The literariness of Cole's novels offers us an entry point into those forms of consciousness, here specifically racialized ones, that undergird the capitalist mode of production. In his reading of Marx's 1857 Introduction to the *Grundrisse*, Stuart Hall compels us to understand artistic production as mediated by the productive base insofar as the latter capacitates "forms of consciousness" from which imaginative relations to historical reality are constructed (Hall 62). Reading Hall alongside Anna Kornbluh's suggestion that "the dialectical conceit of the novel as critique encompasses both that the novel makes thinkable the conditions of social relations and that a utopian element is consequent upon this thinking," I argue that the literariness of Cole's novels allows them to register both the interplay of social forms sustaining capitalist modernity and their constitutive contradictions (Kornbluh 401). That race appears in Cole's novels as both orienting crux and destabilizing force in his narrators' engagements with the external world is made possible by racialized forms of consciousness embedded in artistic production under capitalism and the novel's utopian vocation to critique those social relations. For example, in both novels we are introduced to the Nigerian migrant not in the first days of arrival, but always looking into the past from a standpoint "after" migration. Significantly, this temporalization prevents the reader from accessing the narrators' initial shock of confrontation with their blackness in America—therefore with a new racial configuration where black skin becomes a visible mark of difference. Insofar as raciality establishes itself as *a priori* difference, anti-blackness always already pervades any attempts to engage with the past. Indeed, by the beginning of *Open City*, the negativity of blackness has already become, for Julius, a focal point for both memory and present reality. We see this retroactive logic at play when he recalls secretly stealing Coca-Cola, the quintessential American commodity, from his parents as a young boy. Though "[a]s a 'half-caste,' [Julius] had no conception" at the time "of what it would mean to be darker," the memory is now suffused with the other children's fears that "Coke would make them darker" (132). In imbibing the soda that makes him darker, Julius's entry into blackness is linked to his Americanization. Thus, his present entanglement with American anti-blackness retroactively claims the past and infuses it with meaning. This literary registering of racialized consciousness supplies both the ground of the novel and an implicit critique of race's ontologizing operation.

Following Hall's articulation of race as the "modality" through which "class is 'lived,'" I argue that the relationship between race and blackness in Cole's novels can tell us something about that third category variously

theorized as being enabled by or even fundamentally constitutive of race yet crucially distinct from it—class (Hall et al. 239). Significantly, it is the class axis that cuts into what appears as a paradoxical and deepening bifurcation in the global production of raciality in our contemporary conjuncture. In the Western liberal paradigm of progress, the history of modernity (i.e., capitalism) is one of increasing racial inclusivity—from the so-called abolition of slavery in the imperial core in the nineteenth century to post–WWII national independence for the former colonies. Contra this telling of history as one of rising prosperity for the world's non-white population, the history of national liberation is one of *capital's* liberation from fetters to accumulation. As Bret Benjamin has noted, the Bandung Era's (roughly 1955–74) political aspirations of third-world sovereignty necessarily existed within the context of the totality of the capitalist world-system—therefore, national liberation was, in part, made politically possible by the third world's entry into the global market. Thus, decolonization is marked by the inclusion of "vast new populations into a world market as commodity-subjects and monetary-subjects" (Benjamin 43). However, around the 1960s and 1970s, capitalism experienced a period of crisis and stagnation. In response, capital restructured itself by imposing austerity measures in the Global North and structural adjustment programs in the Global South—with the ultimate result of pushing global wages down and expelling value-producing laborers into a growing surplus population (Benjamin 46). In line with Marx's predictions that "[t]he relative mass of the industrial reserve army thus increases with the potential energy of wealth," the integration of former colonies into the capitalist world-system has created more wage-dependent people than it can employ, and thus mass unemployment (Marx 798). While the deleterious effects of capitalism's post-1970s restructuring have been partially deferred in the Global North by outsourcing crisis to the periphery, the gap between countries at different "level[s] of development" "no longer mobilizes a dynamic of recuperative modernization—it only mobilizes the dynamic of barbarism" (Kurz 371). Having reconfigured itself to maximize value extraction for Western and postcolonial elites at the cost of impoverishing millions, and bringing itself to crisis in doing so, modernity as such collapses into barbarism—a situation achieved on the backs of the world's non-white working and forcibly unemployed populations. An international division of wealth is drawn between the largely white Western countries and the largely non-white Global South. The narrative of supposedly linear progress through capitalist expansion is belied by growing poverty in the formerly colonized countries. At the level of appearance, then, a certain antinomy characterizes the contemporary production of global raciality.

The three coordinates—race, blackness, and class—are constellated by a historical conjuncture in which oil-rich Nigerian capital, under the

patronage of Western investment, integrates itself into the global economy. The blackness/race/class relation in Cole's novels clues us in on how to read the antinomies of global raciality within a quasi-developmental narrative whereby Nigeria's ascent as Africa's fourth largest economy is inaugurated by a litany of destruction: the expulsion of the peasantry from communal lands by the military and multinational-owned plantations, massive devaluations in money wages, the wholesale destruction of village communities, record emigration numbers (Federici 27), and the expropriation of oil profits from the Nigerian people by foreign capital and Indigenous elites (Omeje 45). Capitalism's expansion into the formerly colonized countries necessarily depends on narratives of global racial uplift to obfuscate the lived realities of neocolonial expropriation. Within that process, racial difference must be pacified as *naturally existing* difference, for to understand how the former was and is culturally and economically produced is tantamount to confronting racism as a social formation whose difference-producing abstractions are inextricable from class in organizing and hierarchizing social relations under capitalism. For each novel, my argument will first interrogate the relationship between race and blackness, in which the former subsumes the latter through rejecting or reconciling with it. Then, I will show how raciality comes into crisis when confronted with the class relation.

Much criticism on Cole's debut novel in the United States has noted that Julius, the narrator of *Open City*, remains largely detached and "affectless" throughout the novel in profound and discomforting contrast to his meticulous interest in historical tragedies (Joseph; Vermeulen). The novel opens as Julius, a young Nigerian psychiatrist living in New York City, contemplates the city on his evening walk. The very first word on the first page is "And," situating the reader in the middle of a thought that carries us through the landscape of New York City, Beethoven, Wagner, Roland Barthes, St. Augustine, and ends with a phantasmagoric vision of metro riders hurtling toward their deaths in "movable catacombs" (3, 7). Julius's narration throughout *Open City* is similarly fluid and mobile in its depictions of multiple orders of life and death, yet it is intermittently woven in with casual displays of his callousness. For instance, he denies bus fare to a crippled man, shuts his window to Take Back the Night activists as they march the streets in protest of sexual violence, and loses empathy for a friend after "[h]e had brought [Julius] too close to his pain" (24, 23, 129). This steady but relatively sidelined accretion of apathetic moments culminates in Julius's jarring realization toward the end of the novel that he had sexually forced himself on the sister of a childhood friend and somehow retains no memory of it (244–245). Scholarship on Cole often chalks up these disparities—between his impressive array of high-cultural references, his obsession with historical tragedy, and his deep sense of isolation

and uncaring despite it all—to the limits of cosmopolitanism (Gonzalez; Vermeulen). Betty Joseph reads the novel's oscillating affect as one that affords interrogation of "existing norms of cosmopolitanism . . . still wedded to an ideal of national identity" (Joseph 88). Against this ideal, "the lived present of the nation . . . must be accounted for . . . to reveal the class, race, and gender differentiations that come in the shape of heterotemporalities that unsettle the continuum of a national past-present-future" (Joseph 89). Far from a happy unity within cultural difference, *Open City*'s cosmopolitanism is one that stages its sustained tensions. In alignment with Joseph's critiques, I home in on the specter of blackness and the novel's attempt to pacify it within raciality, which in turn functions to stabilize class relations. What is revealed through disentangling these precarious orders of mutually-sustained difference is the totality that produces the grounds upon which cosmopolitanism is possible and thinkable—the combined and uneven development of the capitalist world-system.

Julius is detached from his blackness and the vulnerability it physicalizes—yet he is subtly agitated by its latent presence. In fact, he usually deems encounters with racialization that threaten his own status as human, as belonging to categories of "Man" to borrow Sylvia Wynter's terminology, as undeserving of emotional unraveling or even much thought at all. An encounter with two children who accuse him of being a "gangster" because "[h]e's black" elicits from Julius not introspective internal monologue, but deflection: Julius's defense mechanism is to think about the rest of his journey home (Cole, *Open City* 31, 32). Similarly, when Moji, the aforementioned sister of his childhood friend, insists that "the name Africanized killer bees is a piece of racist bullshit . . . as if we don't have enough to deal with without *African* becoming a shorthand for murderous," Julius tellingly steers the conversation away from the topic of racism: "I've always found bees inscrutable. . . . For so long, I said, they have been used as machines for making honey, their obsession was turned to human advantage. Now they are proving adept at dying, too . . ." (199). Julius, ever interested in historical tragedy and abstract thought, here refuses to engage with anti-blackness's anagogical capacities, for this would directly weave himself—a Nigerian and African—into the abstracted idiom of anti-blackness. Crucially, his method of circumvention is to move away from the figure of dehumanized blackness into the figure of the human. The Africanized bee, whose African label is synonymous with its murderous capacities, becomes the bee whose honey making abilities are harnessed by man. Thus, Julius relies on the notion of the human as modern, rational man—inventor of science and master of nature—to redirect the discussion from black dehumanization into an affirmation of his own humanity. Indeed, what links Julius's moments of aversion is an anti-blackness that enables American normativity—the gangster who embodies danger and

excitement for tourist children (who most likely live in white-dominated suburbs) and the murderous African counterpart to civilized Western Man i.e. forms that threaten Julius's sense of himself as fully human.

It is not difficult to speculate the origins of Julius's apathy to his racial difference, which did not always manifest in the form of blackness. As with the narrator of *Every Day is for the Thief* (2014), Cole's second novel published in the United States, Julius's partial whiteness allegorizes his incomplete identification with both Nigeria and the United States. In his childhood schooling at the Nigerian Military School, notably established by the British in transitioning colonial Nigeria toward neo-colonial economic dependence and having served since to militarize the government against frequent protests, Julius's half-European heritage incited suspicion: "He looked at me, a half-Nigerian, a foreigner, and what he saw was swimming lessons, summer trips to London, domestic staff; and thus, his anger" (Cole, *Open City* 83). Specifically, violence asserts itself in the form of a brutal caning at the hands of a Lieutenant who enacts on Julius's body his frustration against the lack of socioeconomic mobility in postcolonial Nigeria (83). As Joseph notes, "[i]t was his schooling that built, as Julius describes it later, his 'callous self-confidence,'" and therefore his "denial of vulnerability" (Joseph 84). Julius's sense of racial alienation from the world is thus engendered by the neocolonial apparatus put in place to secure the smooth functioning of Nigeria's crude oil economy against the discontent of the vast majority of Nigerian people who will never see the benefits of its profits (the World Bank estimated in 2005 that only 1 percent of Nigerians benefit from oil revenues [Omeje 45]). We see here that radical inequity in profit distribution, i.e. growing class disparities, produces racial violence that is in turn suppressed by state violence, a militarized apparatus established by foreign capital and maintained by Indigenous capital. Capital's presence in Nigeria therefore instigates racial differentiation while suppressing its attendant violence.

Mentally and physically calloused against racial difference, Julius's relationship to race undergoes a double inversion after migrating to the United States. On the one hand, blackness, not whiteness, takes over as the signifier of racial difference. However, this not an equitable difference. Whereas whiteness connotes destructive excess—in the Lieutenant's words, "the rich little maggots who swallow our country whole"—blackness is the lack that threatens to implode meaning from within: the misrecognition of a "dark canvas sheeting on a construction scaffold" that is "resolved" from a specter of "the body of a lynched man dangling from a tree" (Cole, *Open City* 83, 75). On the other hand, Julius develops a "renewed association with . . . Nigeria" that is now rendered an "[abstraction]" and "fantasy" (Joseph 84, 79, 78). Having molded most of his memories of his African past into "a secure version of the past," he constructs the story of

his Nigerian origins, and therefore his blackness, into rationalized forms (Cole, *Open City* 156). In other words, against the constant threat of consignment into the non-humanity of blackness, Julius vigorously asserts his humanity by interpreting his daily experiences through the logic of autotelic bourgeois thought. Here, I am referring to the "motif of autogenesis" through which the bourgeois subject of modernity, "modern man, *homo autotelus*, literally produces himself" (Buck-Morss 7–8). Crucially, in correlation to what I have argued is Julius's aversion to his physical vulnerability through blackness, Susan Buck-Morss particularizes "anaesthetics," or an imperviousness to the senses, as the means for modern man to assert a mythology of himself as "entirely self-contained": "if [autogenic being] has any body at all, it must be one impervious to the senses, hence safe from external control" (Buck-Morss 8). Modern man discards the body and reproduces himself via cogito. As for Julius, his neurotic instinct for intellectualization replicates the subsumption of daily life to the ideal: three men playing cards in a café become "an exact Cézannesque tableau," a Mahler record playing in a music store "[falls] over [his] activities for the entirety of the following day" and adds "new intensity in even the most ordinary things all around the hospital," and even Moji confronting Julius with the sexual act he had forced on her veers all too easily into "a . . . story concerning Nietzsche and Gaius Mucius Cordus Scaevola" (Cole, *Open City* 116, 17–18, 246).

When cogito falls, the consequences are catastrophic:

> A woman had died in the room next to mine, she had died on the other side of the wall I was leaning against, and I had known nothing of it. I had known nothing in the weeks when her husband mourned, nothing when I had nodded to him in greeting with headphones in my ears, or when I had folded clothes in the laundry room while he used the washer . . . I had not noticed not seeing her around. That was the worst of it. (21)

In Julius's delusion of a reality contained and made knowable through masculine thought, not knowing something is quite literally world-ending. In Wynter's terminology, the birth of Man (in its first form as Man1) and its subsequent overrepresentation as the only available category of being human was only possible through the correspondent invention of "the physical referent of the projected irrational/subrational Human Other to its . . . rational self-conception," of which people of African descent come to signify the quintessential form (Wynter 281–282). Against Man's rationality, the subrational Other is predetermined by nature as enslaved to a lack of reason. Thus, in Julius's reaction to his neighbor's death, we see him struggling on the precipice of his own humanity. What appears as

empathy here is, in actuality, Julius grappling against his own potential lapse into the realm of the subrational Other.

That race becomes "the line that connected [Julius] to [his] own part in these stories" in lieu of blackness becomes abundantly clear through Julius's neurotic dependency on histories of racial violence (for example, the passages on the Rwandan genocide and the Holocaust) to make conceptual meaning of the world around him (59). Indeed, the previous quotation appears following an account of the World Trade Center, which obliterated minority neighborhoods for its construction in the 1960s before the destruction of the towers on 11 September 2001—a sequencing that directly reaffirms his reliance on the spectacle of racial violence to parse and engage with the external world. Absent compassion for the people and events he orbits, Julius deploys raciality as a conceptual crutch in manifestations both negative—"Ellis Island was a symbol mostly for European refugees. Blacks, 'we blacks,' had known rougher ports of entry"—or idealistic: "I was the listener, the compassionate African who paid attention to the details of someone else's life and struggle. I had fallen in love with that idea myself" (55, 70). Crucially, race exists for Julius only insofar as it appears primarily as a historical enabler of atrocity, or even as edifying difference, but never as a present or personal threat to his humanity. Anti-black violence is a historical fact whose lexicon of difference does not contaminate Julius's present or future. Race, then, is thinkable difference that staves off blackness as the unthinkable negative image of Man.

Significantly, Julius does not choose to think about racial slavery very often in the book, and when he does it is only when he is in a vulnerable state: once after a patient's death, in a state "subject to a nervous condition," and another time after an assault and robbery when he was still suffering from a pain in his left hand (161–163, 218–222). These pages explicate the history of American banks that profited from selling African people into slavery on sugar plantations and white expropriation of black corpses from a disinterred African burial ground. But race in *Open City* is only ever depicted to illuminate the ultimate humanity it obfuscates. For example, when asked if black people in America were really like the hip-hop artists "shown on MTV," Julius responds: "American blacks are like any other Americans; they are like any other people. . . . Many of them are poor, that is true, for reasons of history . . ." (119). Anti-blackness here is a thing of *history*, therefore the past, and not acknowledged as a present abstraction that continues to reproduce itself in the present day, for example in American prisons. Never does he confront blackness as a technology for making black individuals *un*like other Americans, for rendering black life into an absence. At the level of history, race becomes Julius's deflection mechanism for blackness. Race is mere difference that does not occlude black individuals from becoming "like any other people" so that one does not have to

confront how the human was invented in the first place. In so doing, the novel inscribes blackness into a protective raciality, as nondisruptive difference, that quells its irruptive potential.

Probing these moments of ostensible aesthetic and intellectual cohesion for their sutures yields a deeper subtext of difference only subtly present on the text's surface—class. Even the aesthetic unity of the novel fissures upon closer examination, for example in the references to Mahler, which appear at the novel's beginning at a music store and the novel's ending at a concert, where the fantasy of an "aesthetic cosmopolitanism" that "can make a subject whole" gives way to an aesthetic capable of "fragment[ing] (rather than solidify[ing]) the boundaries of the cosmopolitan subject who consumes it" (Epstein 416, 414). Indeed, before the robbery and assault, Julius had seen the two assailants and perceived what he took to be "a gesture of mutual respect based on our being young, black, male; based . . . on our being 'brothers'" (Cole, *Open City* 212). Race here fails to coagulate into concrete solidarity, instead materializing the violence of class division.

False assumptions of racial unity fracture most visibly in a visit to Chinatown. While allusions to Chinese raciality are interspersed throughout the novel, here it becomes the dominant signifier of racial difference. As Julius gazes at the motley profusion of Eastern commodities—"tea," "herbs," "roast duck," red "printed leaflets," "porcelain Buddha figures," "bamboo cages," "Ming Dynasty lacquerware," "humorous pamphlets of the 'Confucius Say' variety," etc.—he relies on orientalist fantasy to meaningfully situate the foreign objects and sheer heterogeneity confronting him:

> In the midst of this cornucopia sat an old woman . . . preserving a hermetic air that . . . hadn't been disturbed since horses drank water from the troughs outside. Standing there in that quiet, mote-filled shop, with the ceiling fans creaking overhead, and the wood-paneled walls disclosing nothing of our century, I felt as if I had stumbled into a kink in time and place, that I could easily have been in any one of the many countries to which Chinese merchants had traveled and, for as long as trade had been global, set up their goods for sale. (190–191)

Julius's timeless, fetishistic account transforms as a Chinese marching band passes by:

> The song . . . in all respects . . . matched the simple sincerity of songs I had last sung in the school yard of the Nigerian Military School, songs from the Anglican songbook *Songs of Praise*, which were for us a daily ritual, many years before and thousands of miles away from where I stood in that dusty, sun-suffused shop . . . so closely did the melody

> match my memory of those boyhood morning assemblies that I experienced the sudden disorientation and bliss of one who, in a stately old house and at a great distance from its mirrored wall, could clearly see the world doubled in on itself. I could no longer tell where the tangible universe ended and the reflected one began. . . . To be alive, it seemed to me, as I stood there in all kinds of sorrow, was to be both original and reflection, and to be dead was to be split off, to be reflection alone. (192)

A curious ambivalence of emotion prompts Julius to declare this doubling of experience, of past reanimated by present, as affirmative of life. The serendipitous parallel between Chinese and Nigerian raciality is cosmopolitanism in its most quintessential form—what appears to Julius as the happy unity of difference. Yet this difference is upheld and underwritten by economic subjugation, exemplified by a reference to the Opium Wars commemorated by a monument and the Anglican songbook that must be sung daily in the Nigerian school—in both cases, the original sin of primitive accumulation that produces new subjects and land for capitalist expansion. The Opium Wars contributed to the political instability that increasingly forced Chinese migrants to leave their country in the late nineteenth century (Yow 21). Across the United States and in New York specifically, anti-Chinese racism culturally and economically corralled migrants into protective Chinatown enclaves (Tchen xxiii). Thus, New York's Chinatown is not a timeless, orientalist fantasy, but a racialized entity marked by economic violence—it was violent encounters with difference that invented Chinatown in New York City and necessitated the invention of blackness in contradistinction to what is "Anglican." Racial difference here is the naturalized image and afterlife of primitive accumulation, an international division of wealth among poor and rich countries. Here, we return to the antinomy we opened with: how do we understand the racial composition of the international division of labor if our narrator himself, as both postcolonial elite in Nigeria and an affluent migrant in the United States, is proof that these hierarchies are not always stable? To answer this, it is necessary to complement our reading of the race/class dynamic in *Open City* with that in Cole's third novel, which confronts class more explicitly.

If, in *Open City*, the novel mobilizes race to pacify blackness, in *Tremor*, the novel embraces blackness as means to arrive at the same goal: the affirmation of raciality. Mirroring Cole's own move from Columbia to Harvard, Tunde is faculty member at a prestigious unnamed New England university. He is in all respects a more heroic depiction of the postcolonial intellectual than Julius. The latter's self-centeredness is formalized by *Open*

City's unerring focus on his internal narration, which swallows dialogue so that all speech is relayed through Julius in the absence of quotation marks, while Tunde's desire to think collectively is evident in the novel's inclusion of multiple perspectives: the first section of the novel uses third person perspective to tell the story of Tunde and his wife, Sadako; the second transcribes Tunde's speech at a museum; the third tells fragmented stories of various Lagos citizens in first person; and the last section features Tunde speaking in first person. Where Julius intellectualizes his experiences selfishly, Tunde is constantly thinking about injustice and suffering for the sake of other people. It is this collectivity-minded orientation that enables him to reconcile his blackness with raciality.

For all the ways he is dissimilar to Julius, Tunde nevertheless responds to racist interpellation in a similar fashion. When confronted by a librarian's microaggression, or an anonymous email accusing him of "being in a position that should have gone to someone more deserving," Tunde refuses to reflect on these attacks (Cole, *Tremor* 11, 40). Once again, the novel refutes the identification of blackness with social death. We see blackness transform from the negation of black life into its affirmation in Tunde's ponderings on the black soap, *ose dudu*, whose provincial origins he used to find "vaguely embarrassing" as a young city boy accustomed to using brand names "like Joy and Imperial Leather" (23). At first, these thoughts are punctuated by memories of walking home from school in a city polluted by roadworks that "belonged to a multinational company" bellowing out black smoke and grit that "st[ung] their eyes and [got] into their tea, insinuate[ed] its way past the mosquito netting onto every bed, descend[ed] on the tables, chairs, and sofas of the house. . . . Tiny black roads of grit coursed through them all" (24). Here, the insinuation is bleak and overt: Western multinational companies privatize and expropriate Nigerian resources and labor, and in so doing produce blackness as pollutant and disease. Far from leveling the playing field between developed and undeveloped countries, neocolonialism, i.e. colonialism's afterlife, sustains an international hierarchy between Global North and Global South characterized and legitimized by anti-blackness. In the present, Tunde counters this anti-blackness by "immers[ing] himself in the paradoxical thought of a blackness that wicks filth away" through weaponizing traditionally produced black soap (26). This sets the tone for the rest of the novel so that Indigenous culture and labor can recuperate blackness as means to expand consciousness beyond the limits of a reified Western subjectivity. Reflecting on his longtime admiration for West African music, Tunde proclaims:

> [T]he music of Mali (and Guinea, the Gambia, and the entire sphere of Manding cultural influence) . . . is now an acoustic amulet averting evil from him. The music shields him. . . .

> The defense it affords him is a lonely one conveyed in languages he does not know but that he emotionally comprehends. These languages tell him that the material reality in which he exists is not where his spirit is best nurtured. His material world is set in the center of white learning . . . there is another life into which his roots are suck, a life to which he has access through language, through dance, through music. . . . He has noticed that when he attempts to put the experience of this music into words his words are received as categories: the category of music as entertainment, the category of anthropological interest, the category of good taste, the category of unusual taste, the category of racial solidarity, the category of being a stranger in someone else's home. (70–71)

West African music, along with other cultural forms like language and dance, acquires a charged valence in contradistinction to emaciated Western culture—the "white learning" that desiccates language into reified forms. Read through the Lukácsian lens of reification, social relations take on thing-like characteristics. All forms of objectivity, including bourgeois thought, become indistinguishable from the commodity fetish (Lukács 87). In reified consciousness, the multiplicitous potential of language is confined into predetermined categories ready to constrain its energies. The repetition of "material" reality and world in the passage underscores both Tunde's immediate physical presence in the imperialist United States and the metaphorical hardening of words into reified categories. The inclusion of an uninterrogated "racial solidarity" as category elicits the question of what racial solidarity can look like when not hemmed in by thingified language. Tunde attempts to answer by harnessing blackness's untranslatable essence. Continuing, he says:

> Let the untranslatable remain untranslatable. . . . The sound of the kamale ngoni, the njarka, the kora, the guitar, the balafon, certain voices imbued with gestures going back, it is said, to the time of Sundiata Keita. Every time he hears these sounds he is back in Mali though he has never been to Mali. He is restored to his place in the web of time and put in contact with his ancestors. (Cole, *Tremor* 71)

This common thread connecting Tunde to the sounds of West African music; that which protects him from reified American culture by alienating him from it; the "untranslatable"; the irreconcilability with Western categories of the human including its forms of thought—is blackness. Tunde's blackness shields by distancing him from cultural proximity to Western culture and allowing him to dwell in the non-present world of time (the past of Sundiata Keita) and place (Mali, where he has never been).

Blackness is that which makes Tunde legible to himself by grounding him in an organic unity of black culture moored by roots both imagined and real. As radical alterity to white learning, blackness becomes Tunde's tether to concrete networks of raciality—West African artforms made more precious insofar as they offer an escape route from commodified Western culture. Blackness, as untranslatable negativity, becomes race: difference elevated into an organic unity.

Yet even this unitary, romantic notion of racial blackness comes up short when confronted with the class relation. A few days after these musings on Malian music, Tunde is leaving the Louvre and, upon seeing a group of black vendors selling die-cast miniatures of the Eiffel Tower, decides to photograph their trinkets. A physical altercation ensues when one of the vendors angrily demands that Tunde delete the photos:

> He sees these men as his brothers. Each time he sees informal black traders in Europe he considers himself on their side against all the hostility they experience. At least that's the story he has convinced himself of. But to this brother at the Louvre he was no brother. That he was Nigerian . . . that the man himself was probably Senegalese, what difference did that make? The man saw nothing but a class enemy. Selling trinkets at the Louvre was a precarious life and possibly he had no papers, possibly he was part of a network in which he was indentured. (77)

Having come from an affluent Nigerian family, Tunde cannot relate to the precarity of migrant labor. In lieu of shared socioeconomic experience, he imagines mutuality and kinship grounded in racial alignment with these men that is instead ruptured by stark class disparities. The disparity between beneficiaries of neocolonial wealth and those left out of the spoils cannot be easily alleviated by an undifferentiating pan-African or racial solidarity. In Fanon's words, "an overall undifferentiated nationalism" must be replaced with "social and economic consciousness" (Fanon 93). That Tunde and the vender might share a West African heritage does nothing to bridge the gap between the former's freedom to take and the latter's vulnerability to being taken from. Race emerges with the full force of contradiction—here, class bisects raciality into oppositional, irreconcilable forms. Tunde's racial blackness comes into crisis. However, where race fails as a vehicle for connection, capital succeeds. Wealth exchange is specified as the only available means of mediating the interaction so that it can become reciprocal, or at least more so:

> He was furious not only because a photo might endanger him but because he had been given nothing in exchange. Tunde hadn't bought anything, hadn't asked for permission, hadn't paid for the right, hadn't even considered doing so. (77)

Exchange, the transfer of wealth, is the only language—the universal language—Tunde and the vendor have in common, and racial blackness falls short in its mediating potential.

Tunde carries this lesson with him to his later encounter with a club singer in Bamako, Mali. Upon learning that the young woman is the daughter of "the late famous Bako Dagnon," "[a]stonished all Tunde can do is open up his wallet and give young Bako twenty thousand CFA francs in homage" (82–83). We are again in the orbit of Lukács's theory of reification, except this time on the other side of it: only the money-commodity can successfully mediate social relations. Race seemingly evaporates against the mediating powers of capital, "a social relation that invents a world in its image" and posits itself as the universal mediator of sociality (Best 3). Significantly, race does not disappear altogether, nor is it solely determined by class relations. Rather, race is a social formation, what Ruth Wilson Gilmore calls a "death-dealing displacement of difference into hierarchies," with which class relations are inextricably mired (Gilmore 16). Race is mobilized by capital as a technology of immiseration that bifurcates black migrant traders, severed from their means of subsistence by capitalist expansion and forced to find work outside their native countries, and affluent Western buyers who benefit from commodities made affordable by cheapened labor-power. From the standpoint of the migrant laborer, then, race signifies a position of subalternity within the international division of labor. From the standpoint of Tunde, the affluent migrant, race is the edification of difference that comes into crisis when confronted with capital.

In this essay, I have traced the interaction between race and blackness in Cole's novels and shown that, in both cases of obfuscation or affirmation, the ultimate result is to obfuscate the class relation. If race, as both anodyne and supplementary to blackness, fails to reconcile the affluent postcolonial migrant with a growing black surplus population (young black thieves in *Open City* or illegal trinket vendors in *Tremor*), then what appears as an antinomy concerning race is fundamentally a contradiction produced by capital. Perennially in need of fresh blood to drench itself in, capital can only survive by encroaching upon previously uncommodified territories for new sources of profit. The cultural pacification of blackness—the attempt to constrain its negativity into mere variety as opposed to disruptive alterity—was a necessary obfuscation for capital to incorporate black elites into the capitalist world-system under the guise of racial inclusivity. Far from an issue of mere representation, racial inclusivity discourse actively contributes to capitalism's smooth functioning. As Best notes in her reading of *Capital III*, "in a capitalist society, the empirical state of things—the world of immediate appearances—cannot coincide with capital's inner movement '*without abolishing the entire system of capitalist production*'" (Best 63). Recognizing the distinction between capital's inner

movement and its forms of appearance is indispensable for class struggle. If a raciality decoupled from blackness's alterity functions properly in Cole's novels insofar as it serves to ameliorate class tensions, it is because rerouting race into progressivist discourse can only be a temporary solution when confronted with the stark reality of growing impoverishment for the world's nonwhite subaltern populations. It is only a matter of time before the antinomy ruptures.

Brenda Tan is a PhD student in the English Department at Rice University. She studies Anglophone African and Afro-Caribbean literature, third-world Marxisms, peripheral modernism, postcolonial theory, and critical race theory.

Notes

1 This essay does not capitalize the "b" in "black" because it is interested in challenging the impulse to define blackness, which has historically enabled classifications of the world into racialized hierarchies. For discussion on this, see Nicholas Whittaker's "Case Sensitive: Why We Shouldn't Capitalize 'Black.'"

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Africanizing the Archival Vision of American Racial Violence in Teju Cole's *Tremor*

Innocent Akili Ngulube
University of Malawi

Abstract: *Born in Michigan in 1975 and raised in Lagos, Teju Cole belongs to a new generation of African novelists who came to the United States of America as immigrants or students. Inspired by the publication of Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie's epoch-making novel* Purple Hibiscus *(2003), these Afropolitan novelists self-reflexively thematize their immigrant experiences and racial dynamics between contemporary America and Africa. Genealogically, then, Cole's Afropolitan positionality and orientation afford him privileged access not only to insider knowledge of American history, but also of his Yoruba cultural heritage. His novella,* Every Day Is for the Thief *(2007), and debut novel,* Open City *(2011), epitomize Cole's transcultural sensibility. His latest novel,* Tremor *(2023), extends this thematic trajectory through kaleidoscopic narration and anecdotal focalization of the protagonist and author surrogate, Tunde—a Nigerian lecturer at Harvard University, photographer, art critic, and music connoisseur. I argue that Cole Africanizes the archival vision of American racial violence through his transcultural solidarity with African Americans and political activism.* Tremor *thus interrogates the archives of American racial violence from counter-hegemonic perspectives that empathize with Afrodiasporic experiences.*

Keywords: Teju Cole; archive; racial violence; Afropolitan; transcultural

Introduction

Although Afropolitan novelists increasingly critique the effects of American racism, they less frequently trace its historical roots. All too often, they formulaically focus on how racial prejudice and violence complicate the identity formation and cultural relations of Afrodiasporic protagonists. By foregrounding the teleology of race relations, Afropolitan novelists unwittingly background, and hence trivialize, the evolution and implications of American racial history. As a result, their novels lack the ethical and aesthetic awareness of how American racism reproduces and sustains its hegemonic influence throughout the formative phases of the nation's turbulent history.

Teju Cole provides a much-needed paradigm shift in *Tremor*. The novel is set primarily in present-day Massachusetts and Africa, but the protagonist's musings delve into the past. Massachusetts was one of the thirteen

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British colonies that became the United States of America, and it sided with the Northern States before the outbreak of the American Civil War in 1861. The industrial Northern states wanted to limit the expansion of slavery into Western states, whereas the Southern states feared that such a move would lead to the institution's abolishment and, ultimately, the collapse of their agrarian-based economies. Worse still, even after the end of the Civil War and the official abolition of slavery in 1865, descendants of African slaves (African Americans) were denied their civil rights due to the enactment of Jim Crow laws.

By extension, the historicization of American racial violence insightfully evokes Cole's Afropolitan aesthetics and politics through kaleidoscopic narration. In structuralist terms, *Tremor*'s multiperspectivity and polyvocality accord Cole's alter ego and author surrogate, Tunde, the narratological role of a central focalizer. That is to say, the novel's plot structure events, their sensory conveyance, and their emotional effects are filtered by and through his homodiegetic point of view.

As Teju Cole's alter ego and author surrogate, Tunde simultaneously reflects on the constant uneasiness and insecurity of his position as a Nigerian American academic at Harvard University—which includes privilege and class. From this Afropolitan positionality, he enacts political activism against racial violence, the transatlantic slave trade, and Western imperialism. This is the counter-hegemonic effect that Cole creates in his Afropolitan novel. He not only depicts experiences of and responses to racial prejudice in contemporary America, but he also draws attention to these instances of dehumanization by re-historicizing their transcultural modalities and *noticing* what has frequently been overlooked. In effect, Tunde reveals what has been omitted—what is *not* visible, what has *not* been stated in the existing archives, namely historical documents, paintings, music, social media, films, YouTube videos, and museums.

I argue that, in *Tremor*, Cole Africanizes the archival vision of American racial violence through his transcultural solidarity with African Americans and political activism. He achieves this archival criticism in several stylistic and discursive ways: re-historicizing the Puritan settlers in such a way as to bring out their racial violence, condemning the racist shaming of an African American serial killer (Samuel Little) on YouTube by the Federal Bureau of Investigations (FBI), metafictional commentary on the evils and effects of the transatlantic slave trade, and critiquing Western commodification of African art. In doing so, *Tremor* invites the reader to interrogate the archives of American racial violence from counter-hegemonic perspectives that empathize with Afrodiasporic experiences.

Theoretically, in this regard, Cole's novel demonstrates the discursive significance of the archive to global postcolonial studies. Archives are not merely sites and repositories of historical documents but rather signify

continuities and discontinuities of human traditions. As Foucault eruditely elaborates in *The Archaeology of Knowledge*, the archive extends beyond the physicality and mechanics of institutional documentation; it is a discursive formation and practice with its own rules and statements that are subject to periodic amendment (145–46). In *Archive Fever*, Derrida agrees with Foucault by asserting that the word "archive" operates on two related principles of commencement according to nature or history and commandment according to the law (1). Thus, despite appearances, the archive is a hegemonic apparatus of knowledge production and circulation in a given society. It polices what can be said, thereby consolidating normative signifying practices at the expense of non-normative ones.

This is the poststructuralist understanding of the archive that is adopted by African postcolonial critics. In *Refiguring the Archive*, Hamilton et al. enlighteningly argue that:

> [T]he archive is also always already being refigured: the technologies of creation, preservation and use, for instance, are changing all the time; physically the archive is being added to and subtracted from, and is in dynamic relationship with its physical environment; organisational dynamics are ever shifting; and the archive is porous to societal processes and discourses. (7)

The archive, tellingly enough, is a sociopolitical construct and hence regularly undergoes structural and ideological reconfiguration. For Hamilton et al., this cultural situatedness and malleability render the archive (just like epistemes of the canon and orientalism) discursively invaluable to postcolonial interventions such as decolonization and subaltern studies (9). It follows that the archive generates and subverts hegemonic power at the same time.

In Achille Mbembe's contribution to *Refiguring the Archive*, he similarly interrogates the power and limits of archives. He contends that the institutionalization of archives follows the legitimizing protocols of discrimination and selection, in that some recorded narratives enjoy privileged status over unrecorded ones (20). Paradoxically, however, archives "have no meaning outside the subjective experience of those individuals who, at a given moment, come to use them" (23). The ironical implication is that, notwithstanding their militarized custody, archives are open to hegemonic abuse. Since antiquity, the ruling elite and state apparatuses have used archives to justify their authoritarian excesses.

One of the enduring archival abuses in the current age of globalization and neoliberalism is racism. In a 2016 essay titled "Africa in the New Century," Mbembe reveals that new forms of racism are proliferating worldwide, thereby counterintuitively reinforcing xenophobic prejudice and violence (102–3). While racism is a ubiquitous phenomenon (taking a

variety of forms worldwide), its most widespread manifestation is meted out to/affects the African continent. In "Thinking about the World from the Vantage Point of Africa," Mbembe further points out that modern discursive practices associate the word "Africa" with primitivism and even nonhumanity (267). For these overlapping reasons, Africa has borne the brunt of racial violence ranging from the transatlantic slave trade to (neo) colonialism.

Accordingly, Mbembe situates new waves of racism at the core of Western neo-imperialism in his 2024 book discerningly titled *Brutalism*. He borrows the concept of brutalism from architecture, which is aesthetically characterized by austere, bold, mammoth, raw concrete, and blocky features of post–World War II buildings, especially in the United Kingdom. In the preface, Mbembe symbolically defines brutalism as "the process through which power as a geomorphic force is constituted, expressed, reconfigured, and reproduced through acts of *fracturing* and *fissuring*" (xii). For Mbembe, the constitutive instrumentality of brutalism is "an exercise in the demolition of beings, things, dreams, and life in the modern African context" (xiv).

However, epistemes of transculturality—namely Afropolitanism, Afrofuturism, and Afropessimism—constitute forces of radicality and creativity with which to subvert and thwart the cataclysmic momentum of brutalism (Mbembe 4–5). Suffice it to say that the US is uniquely positioned as a global superpower to inflict its manifestation of anti-Black/anti-African brutalism on the world both ideologically and in the built environment/material culture. It is therefore incumbent upon the new generation of African novelists in the United States of America to exercise their imaginative acuity against the hegemony of racial brutalism.

Teju Cole's Political Activism against American Racial Violence

This counter-hegemonic challenge is exactly what motivates and underlies Teju Cole's writing. As a public intellectual, he consciously combines academic, artistic, and political roles. So, for example, in a "Chicago Humanities Festival" YouTube video of February 8, 2024, Cole, among other things, discusses different aesthetic and thematic aspects of his novel *Tremor*. More pointedly, he touches on the ever-pertinent, far-reaching, and emotive issue of violence in contemporary American society. In this thematic context, he states that: "Am American and like any good American am very critical of America. One of the things that gets to me is the role that violence plays in culture here and how violence is one of the central modes of entertainment both serious and unserious." Although Cole does not specify the forms, perpetrators, victims, and ramifications of the violence, we can infer that he is particularly concerned with racial violence.

Indeed, the textual evidence of American racial violence appears in the lifeworld and political activism of Cole's alter ego and author surrogate, Tunde. Through his encounters with the various archives—historical documents, paintings, music, social media, films, YouTube videos, and museums—Tunde vicariously experiences the racial violence that has characterized American history from the time of European settlement to the present day. So, for example, in the final chapter of *Tremor*, Tunde reveals the racially violent origins of his partner's home:

> MASSACHUSETTS IS SIMPLY HOME for Sadako. It was different for me and moving here altered my sense of what it meant to live with history. I had experienced New York City as a place tense with the nineteenth century. In Massachusetts I am aware of deeper time and older layers. [. . .] The historical record everywhere present in these towns immerses each day in a distant past, marks each place with the hard lines of the seventeenth century, the eighteenth century, the nineteenth century, the twentieth century, the twenty-first century. The archives are full of voices. (Cole 223–24)

Tunde exposes the *longue durée* of American racial violence, especially how its archival legacy reproduces contemporary sociopolitical materiality and its dehumanizing effects. He therefore galvanizes readers of *Tremor* and fellow characters alike into exercising transcultural solidarity and counter-hegemonic agency against American racial violence.

As a mirror image of Cole's political activism, Tunde demonstrates the discursive power of transculturality, as prominently theorized by Frank Schulze-Engler. Drawing on the pioneering insights of Wolfgang Welsch, Schulze-Engler posits that culture is no longer a hermetic phenomenon because the attribution of modernity exclusively to a Western provenance has been invalidated by globalization processes of transnationality, migration, diasporization, and hybridization (xii). Due to their transculturality, contemporary African Anglophone novels like *Tremor* enact the exploration of globalized modernity beyond its essentialist (mis)representations (xii; see also Schulze-Engler 153). It is therefore the case that transculturality underpins the (re)conceptualization, instantiation, and traction of Afrodiasporic discourses: Afropolitanism, Afrofuturism, Afropeanism, and Afrotopia. Taken together, these African-centered epistemologies constitute the counter-hegemonic basis for the emerging discourse of Global Africa.

Pivotally, in this transcultural consideration, Teju Cole is arguably the most vocal critic of American racial violence among the new generation of Afropolitan novelists. Unlike many of his contemporaries, Cole is both a Black outsider and insider of the United States of America. He was born to

Nigerian parents in Michigan (Kalamazoo), raised in Lagos, returned to America aged seventeen to complete education, and now works as a professor of creative writing at Harvard University. He is simultaneously American and Nigerian by birth, thereby exercising greater transcultural latitude and agency against sociopolitical ills of both nation-states.

To complicate matters more, Cole's national identity does not fit into the racial compartmentalization of the United States Census Bureau and the Department of Homeland Security. According to Falola and Oyebade, in *The New African Diaspora in the United States*, the two agencies define all immigrants as foreign-born, and this demographic category includes: naturalized American citizens, legal/green card permanent residents, temporary migrants, refugees and asylum grantees, and illegal/undocumented immigrants (1–2). Cole himself explains in a 2016 interview with Taiye Selasi that:

> I'm a bit of a problem for the categorisers, partly because I don't fight the categories. I'm comfortable being described as Afropolitan, or African, or American, or pan-African. Or Yoruba, or Brooklynite, or black, or Nigerian. Whatever. As long as the labels are numerous. I'm "local" in many places. But I don't think this is a greater or lesser life than the one lived by people who are more grounded in one terrain.

In a 2017 interview with James M. Hodapp, Cole similarly celebrates his Yoruba, Nigerian, African, and Black identities (248). In a 2015 email interview with Aaron Bady, Cole adds the following identity signifiers: African American, American African, Black American, Nigerian American, and American.

Cole then explains to Hodapp that he embraces multiple identity labels because Afropolitan existence is necessarily contingent and multilayered (247). Cole's transcultural flexibility contrasts sharply with other African novelists in the United States, particularly those who resist the Afropolitan label. A notable example is Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie's unapologetic rejection of Afropolitanism in a 2020 interview with Clarisse Juompan-Yakam. For her, Afropolitanism erodes the authenticity of African identity. Cole shares Adichie's concerns but points out in the interview with Bady that, due to transcultural mobilities between Africa and America, identity hybridity and Afropolitan elitism are inevitable, however discomfiting.

Moreover, despite their ideological differences, the novels of Cole and Adichie display similar politics of Afropolitanism. Miriam Pahl shows how the two novelists mobilize the decolonial concept of critical cosmopolitanism in challenging the stock stereotype that Afropolitanism is a function of consumer capitalism and therefore apolitical (73). Rather,

> [M]any African diasporic authors express a globally oriented critical perspective in their literary and cultural works that does not merely praise the possibilities of globalization but more importantly examines persisting power differentials and injustices. Many of these globally positioned authors inhabit a specific location in contemporary society, constituted of their financially enhanced, mobile position and their personal history. (Pahl 74)

Pahl's argument accords with Tunde's flashback in *Tremor* that during "the so-called Third Indian War, Abenaki people were dispersed by the colonial settlers, dispersed by those who took it as their God-given right to seize their lands, who took it as their right to kill them if they resisted" (Cole 9). Cole thus Africanizes the archival vision of racial violence from within the fabric of contemporary American society in line with his transcultural positionality and Afropolitan orientation.

As both a Black outsider and insider, Cole exercises more political leverage to interrogate American domestic and foreign policies than his fellow Afropolitan novelists. He openly and trenchantly subverts the imperialist and racialized foundations of the modern American society, as illustrated by his famous essay titled "The White-Savior Industrial Complex." Using the Nietzschean aphoristic style on Twitter, Cole defines "The White-Savior Industrial Complex" as:

> the fastest growth industry in the US [that] supports brutal policies in the morning, founds charities in the afternoon, and receives awards in the evening. The banality of evil transmutes into the banality of sentimentality. The world is nothing but a problem to be solved by enthusiasm. The White Savior Industrial Complex is not about justice. It is about having a big emotional experience that validates privilege. (1–2)

To put it another way, "The White-Savior Industrial Complex" symbolizes the raison d'être of the American nation, whose diplomatic image rests on the racialized logic of self-justification. "The White-Savior Industrial Complex" hence becomes the archival wellspring of nationwide egoism, Messianism, heroism, white privilege, and racial violence.

In *Tremor*, Cole intertextually traces the origins of the "The White Savior Industrial Complex" by offering a rereading of *The Searchers*, "a fictionalized account of the life of Cynthia Ann Parker" (13). Tunde reads that: "During the many conflicts between Native Americans and American settlers abductions were frequent, abductions that were later pressed into the service of a national myth" (12–13). Ironically, though, archives of national myths reveal rather than conceal the impunity of American

racial violence and heroism, as evidenced by this horrific incident: "In 1675 the colonists had burned alive six hundred Narragansett people, about half of them women and children, in Rhode Island" (13–14). As he reads these "Catalog of horrors," Tunde empathetically experiences "history's own brutality, which refuses symmetries and seldom consoles" (Cole 14).

In keeping with this transcultural solidarity, Cole interrogates the humanitarian claims of "The White-Savior Industrial Complex." He discerns a racialized tendency of framing Africa as a convenient foil for American exceptionalism, tokenism, paternalism, and parochialism ("The White-Savior Industrial Complex" 6–7). The fact that Cole himself is subjected to "many microaggressions of American racism" and that victimized "voices are falsified or blocked entirely from the discourse" indicate the deep-rootedness and pervasiveness of archived brutalism ("The White-Savior Industrial Complex" 4–5). Being "sensitive to the power of narratives" (5), Cole presents *Tremor* as a counter-hegemonic space for Africanizing the archival vision of American racial violence.

"The Archives Are Full of Voices": Re-Historicizing the Racial Violence of Puritan Settlers

In *The Political Unconscious*, Fredric Jameson famously reminds us to "Always historicize," the implication being that "we never really confront a text immediately, in all its freshness as a thing-in-itself [but] as the always-already-read; we apprehend [it] through sedimented layers of previous interpretation" (ix–x). From this New Historicism perspective, the reading process involves "rewriting a given text in terms of a particular interpretive master code" (x). It follows that writing and reading are historically and (trans)culturally mediated and entangled processes. They are shaped by and respond to the prevailing ideologies and geopolitics of their time.

On that score, Teju Cole's *Tremor* applies the interpretive master code of archival criticism. This Afropolitan novel traces the archive of racial violence from the birth of the American nation to the present. That is, although the United States did not participate in the colonial conquest of Africa from 1884 onward, its brutal treatment of Native Americans and African slaves parallels, if not surpasses, the evils of European colonialism. For instance, Tunde muses that "To be here [Massachusetts] is to be reminded of first principles, of who founded what and where they did it, of whose life was made impossible once the whites began to immigrate into this territory. This terrain is the morning of the new country, its first few pages" (Cole 223). Cole's novel re-historicizes the evils of British colonization, starting with Virginia (Jamestown) in 1607 and then Massachusetts (Plymouth) in 1620. The founding of the United States of America on 4 July 1776 is thus inescapably bound up with the legacy of racial violence, which has been

archived in history texts, paintings, museums, social media, YouTube videos, music, and films.

This is America's racialized past that is often forgotten. In *A Forgetful Nation: On Immigration and Cultural Identity in the United States*, Ali Behdad interrogates the implications of this amnesia for race relations between America and its immigrants. The theoretical premise of Behdad's book is that postcolonial critics traditionally overlook the colonial baggage of the US and hence fail to subject it to serious criticism:

> [P]ostcolonial theorists have ironically been forgetful of the neo-imperial context in which their works have been produced and received, evading for the most part the complex and powerful ways in which the United States has displaced European hegemony since the mid-twentieth century. [. . .] Even more ironically, when postcolonial critics have broached such contemporary issues as globalization, transnationalism, and cultural hybridity, they have too often done so in a celebratory manner that views new configurations of power mostly in salutary terms. (x)

Behdad singles out Homi K. Bhabha and Arjun Appadurai as proponents of these diasporic inflections of American nationalism. He joins Donald E. Pease who also accuses postcolonial critics of being partisan to the metanarrative of American exceptionalism that disassociates the country's nationalism from British imperialism (qtd. in Behdad x).

Behdad additionally discerns a concomitant inattention to the racialization of American nationalism, as evidenced by the enforcement of anti-immigration policies, particularly after the 9/11 tragedy (xi–ii). In Chapter 1, Behdad summarizes his argument to the effect that the United States of America "is an amnesiac nation that disremembers its violent beginnings to fashion itself as a unified imagined community" (23). Since 1776, then, historical amnesia has belied the archival manifestation and consequences of America racial violence.

In the aforementioned "Chicago Humanities Festival" YouTube video, Cole elaborates on his archival critique of racial violence. When asked how he aestheticizes violence and brutality in *Tremor*, he responds that the inheritance of violence must be thematized in ways that retain the shock value. He adds that, in doing so, *Tremor* becomes an open text in which the margins and bases of tradition are constantly interrogated and revised. As already noted, however, Cole alludes to the American records and traditional inheritance of racial violence against Native Americans, African slaves, African Americans, and African immigrants. Indeed, as emphasized by Ali Behdad, the historical remembrance, rather than amnesia, of American racial violence provides the entry point into its archival criticism.

In Cole's *Tremor*, the racial violence of Puritan settlers archivally unfolds when Tunde and his partner, Sadako, travel to Maine to buy antiques. The opening chapter of the novel informs the reader that "this part of Maine is a venerated area for the genteel wing of the political right" (Cole 7). Quite predictably, Tunde sees "a small photocopied note in all-caps" with the following information:

> WELLS HOMESTEAD. THIS HOMESTEAD WAS SETTLED IN 1657 BY DR. THOMAS WELLS. IN AUGUST OF 1703 HIS GRANDSON DEACON THOMAS WAS AWAY LOOKING FOR A NURSE FOR HIS WIFE SARAH (BROWNE) WHO HAD GIVEN BIRTH THE EVENING BEFORE TO A DAUGHTER. WHILE HE WAS AWAY THE TOWN OF WELLS WAS ATTACKED BY INDIANS. THEY STRUCK AT HIS FARM FIRST. AXING THEIR WAY INTO THE HOUSE, THEY MASSACRED MRS. WELLS, HER INFANT, 4 YEAR OLD SARAH AND 2 YEAR OLD JOSHUA. THEN THEY BURNED THE HOUSE DOWN. AFTER THIS TERRIBLE TRAGEDY MR. WELLS LEFT FOR IPSWICH, MASSACHUSETTS, RETURNING SOMETIME AFTER 1718 WITH A NEW FAMILY TO RECLAIM THE HOMESTEAD. IT REMAINED IN THE WELLS FAMILY UNTIL 1906. (Cole 8)

This archival information unveils the history of racial violence between the Puritan settlers and Native Americans in New England. Ironically, however, the description of this particular tragedy is racialized, in that Mr. Wells's atrocities that touched off this revenge attack are omitted from Puritan archives. What we have, instead, is a normative vilification of Native Americans as savage murderers.

However, as a Black outsider and insider of the American nation, Tunde is privy to the hegemonic economy and slippages of the archive of racial violence. He confesses that: "After nearly three decades in the U.S. his sympathies have been tutored in certain directions. He learned early that a 'terrible' tragedy meant that the victims were white. Later and by bitter experience he came to understand that there is always more to tragedies than is narrated, that the narration is never neutral" (Cole 9). Tunde therefore subjectively experiences and condemns the racialized inscription of white supremacy in the archive of American racial violence.

For this reason, he sympathizes with Native Americans for being subjected to genocide, displacement, and racial violence. Tunde recalls in this regard that during "the period of the so-called Third Indian War, Abenaki people were dispersed by the colonial settlers, dispersed by those who it was their God-given right to seize their lands, who took it as their right to kill them if they resisted" (Cole 9). Similarly, we read that Tunde finds "the

name and birth dates of Deacon Wells's children in country records," but the "Indians were without names" (9). Clearly, these self-incriminating narratives are systematically disremembered from white American archives and collective memory. This is the archive of American racial violence that Tunde, as Teju Cole's alter ego and author surrogate, exposes and interrogates.

In the spirit of political activism, Tunde cites a book titled *The Terror Dream* by Susan Faludi, which "connects the machismo of the Bush presidency to a long-running American obsession with captivity narratives, a tradition that began in colonial times and saw its main task as protecting white women from dark-skinned invaders" (Cole 10). Tunde gets a copy at the library of the Kennedy School. Against the grain, the book informs Tunde that "During the many conflicts between Native Americans and American Settlers abductions were frequent, abductions that were later pressed into the service of a national myth" (Cole 12–13). To archive such national myths, "Hundreds of captivity narratives resulted and the ideal of heroic rescue deeply influenced American culture, not least in films like the 1956 John Wayne vehicle *The Searchers*" (13). Like the photocopied note in the Maine antique shop, Faludi's book and Wayne's film further reveal the archive of American racial violence. Mythologically, for this hegemonic purpose, Puritan settlers are depicted as heroes, while Native Americans as abductors.

Ironically, though, *The Searchers* troubles this archival binarism by depicting scenes of racial ambivalence. As Tunde discovers from Faludi's book:

> *The Searchers* was a fictionalized account of the life of Cynthia Ann Parker who was taken by Comanche warriors in 1836 when she was ten. Parker lived with Comanche people for twenty-four years until she was brought back to her white family against her will. The story the film presents is one of pure heroism but in reality Parker, named Naduah by her Comanche family, had become a wife to a chieftain and a mother of three children and had spent ten years failing to reintegrate to white society. She tried to return to her Comanche family but was forcibly brought back a second time. Finally, following the loss of her daughter to pneumonia in 1871, she began to refuse food and slowly starved herself to death. (Cole 13)

The tragic story of Cynthia Ann Parker underscores the fact that Puritan settlers were also victims of the ideology of racial violence, although they presented themselves as victorious heroes all the time. In dehumanizing the Native Americans, the Puritan settlers also dehumanized themselves.

In *Tremor*, Cole exposes other archived instances of American racial violence against Native Americans, including genocide, enslavement, and public execution (see, for example, 13–14, 198, 214). More importantly, he reveals the ubiquity of racial slavery in the US—not just in the South, but in the North, including in venerable institutions such as the nation's oldest university, Harvard. At the same time, though, Cole is also making the point that racial violence against Native Americans is not separate from the racial violence of the transatlantic slave trade (that is, of Africans). In the eyes of Puritan settlers, these *non-white* races were subhuman and therefore warranting enslavement, dehumanization, and even extermination. Nonetheless, it must be acknowledged that Native Americans and deracinated Africans were not passive victims to institutionalized violence. Rather, it prompted self-defense violence, and yet the white archival imagination recorded such reprisals as primitive and savage.

In this paradoxical regard, Cole's novel presents a case of the merchant enslaver John Codman, two of whose slaves, Mark and Phillis, conspired to poison him in 1755. As a reprisal, three justices (Harvard alumni) "condemned Mark and Phillis to death and shipped their co-conspirators off to Caribbean sugar plantations" (Cole 231). Phillis's execution was particularly grisly. "In September 1755," she was "tied to a stake and set on fire, an extremely rare punishment in colonial New England, an act of terrifying cruelty" (231), which harrowingly reminds the reader of heretic executions during the medieval period that Foucault describes in part one of *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison* (see "The Body of the Condemned" and "The Spectacle of the Scaffold"). From his empathetic point of view, Tunde states that "The archives are full of voices" (Cole 224), by which he metaphorically exposes what Graham Huggan has called "white settler society's collective historical guilt" (132).

Metafictional Commentary on the Archives of Slavery

Like Native Americans, ancestors of African Americans were subjected to the chattel slavery of the (in)famous Middle Passage. From the 1400s, Africans were brutally deracinated from their continent and dehumanizingly transported to the New World to forcibly work in the plantations, especially in the Southern states of the United States of America. The atrocities of the transatlantic slave trade, which spanned almost 400 years, have been archived and criticized in myriad ways.

Teju Cole's approach to this kind of critique takes a characteristically Africanist form and a metafictional examination of the archive. As Patricia Waugh theorizes it, metafiction "is a term given to fictional writing which self-consciously and systematically draws attention to its status as an artefact in order to pose questions about the relationship between fiction and reality" (2). Perhaps the two defining techniques of metafiction are

authorial self-reflexivity and narrative intertextuality. In these postmodernist strategies, the author lays bare the process of writing fiction and/or the text's intertextual relationship with a network of its precursors. In short, metafiction achieves the defamiliarization effect of blurring the ontological boundaries between fiction and reality.

In *Tremor*, Cole intertextually draws on the famous painting by Joseph Mallord William Turner titled *Slave Ship (Slavers Throwing Overboard the Dead and Dying, Typhoon Coming On)* and a book-long poem by Marlene NourbeSe Philip titled *Zong! Zong!* is a poetic rewriting of Turner's painting. It graphically captures the willful murder of more than 130 African slaves by a captain of the eponymous slave ship Zong in 1781. Due to navigation miscalculations that resulted in journey delay and impending business loss, the captain ordered the drowning of the slaves in order to at least claim insurance compensation. We know about this case only because it is recorded in the legal archives as an insurance dispute. No one was ever charged with or convicted for a crime/murder. In exposing this crime against African humanity, both *Slave Ship (Slavers Throwing Overboard the Dead and Dying, Typhoon Coming On)* and *Zong!* interrogate the archival legality of slave trade.

Metafictionally, then, the two texts align themselves with Orlando Patterson's theorization of social death. In *Slavery and Social Death*, Patterson argues that the deracination of African slaves initiated the processes of desocialization and depersonalization in the sense that, in their new slaveholding societies, they were considered as socially dead persons or nonbeings (38). As chattel, African slaves were consequently denied basic human rights and subjected to unspeakable racist indignities. To varying degrees of success, African slaves resorted to different strategies of social negotiation and assimilation.

Not surprisingly, the systematicity of American racial violence through slave trade had far-reaching implications for the colonial archive. According to Simon Gikandi:

> There was one notable exception to this regime of writing: African slaves in the Middle Passage and the early plantation were not allowed to write or represent themselves. Their lives were shrouded by enforced silence; writing was a forbidden act. Yet it is precisely because of this silence that African slaves could continue to both inform and haunt the early American archive, yet one in which the only existing records were those committed to their subjection. In the process, the figure of the slave could come to complicate what an archive meant; it also made it possible for readers of this period to construct meanings about the past that were separate from contemporary American debates on race and citizenship. (84)

It follows that, in enforcing silence, the American archive rather unwittingly unmasks its racialized violence against African slaves. Counterhegemonically, some African slaves—notably Phillis Wheatley, Olaudah Equiano, and Frederick Douglass—initiated the archival critique of American racial violence before the Emancipation Proclamation of 1863 and its official ratification in 1865. This archival criticism later culminated in the Harlem Renaissance and the Civil Rights Movement.

In Cole's *Tremor*, the intertextual rewriting of the evils of slave trade further unfolds when Tunde visits the Museum of Fine Arts in Boston. In Chapter Five of the novel, he self-reflexively narrates that: "The painting grabs hold of me in an unpleasant way. I'm talking about J.M.W. Turner's *Slave Ship (Slavers Throwing Overboard the Dead and Dying, Typhoon Coming On)*. No encounter with this painting can be pleasant. Its details are terrible and its full title directs our looking, telling us to focus first on the grisly foreground and then on the roiling weather in the background" (Cole 93). By textualizing Turner's painting within the plot structure of *Tremor*, Cole draws attention to his novel's intertextual connection to M. NourbeSe Philip's *Zong!* Through metafictional devices of metalepsis and *mis en abyme*, Tunde illustrates that, like Turner's painting, Philip's poem interrogatively rewrites the suffering of African slaves "in the absence of records" (Cole 98). Together, then, Cole, Turner, and NourbeSe Philip problematize the dehumanizing effects of social death. Their fictional pieces belong to the same network of anti-slavery textuality, which empathetically Africanizes our archival vision of American racial violence.

Digital Archives of American Police Brutality and Racism

One of the enduring consequences of the transatlantic slave trade is the transcultural solidarity between African Americans and Africans. This solidarity, as Paul Gilroy argues in *The Black Atlantic*, is a product of the "intercultural and transnational formation" that discursively acts as "a counterculture of modernity" (ix, 1). In other words, the transatlantic slave trade ineluctably engendered the transculturality among Africans (both on the continent and in the diaspora), African Americans, and descendants of Puritan settlers. Needless to say, the transcultural bond between African Americans and Africans is relatively stronger due to racial commonalities.

Indeed, just like Paul Gilroy, Henry Louis Gates Jr. reminds us in *The Signifying Monkey* that:

> The black Africans who survived the dreaded "Middle Passage" from the west coast of Africa to the New World did not sail alone. Violently and radically abstracted from their civilizations, these Africans nevertheless carried with them to the Western hemisphere aspects of their cultures that were

> meaningful, that could not be obliterated, and that they chose, by acts of will, not to forget. (3–4)

As logic would have it, African Americans and Africans share transcultural value systems that Africanize our archival vision of American racial violence. Simply put, they are both racial victims and critics of the transatlantic slave trade and its multifarious effects.

From this counter-hegemonic perspective, Cole's *Tremor* foregrounds the transcultural solidarity between African Americans and African immigrants, as affirmed by John A. Arthur in *African Diaspora Identities*:

> A survey of these scholarships has revealed cultural similarities among the two groups. Blacks, in general, emphasize a strong familial system anchored in extended kin group and consanguine relationships. They tend to evaluate and embrace African cultural systems and heritage to preserve their traditions and legacies. They are racial minorities with similar colonial experiences when it comes to minority-majority group relationships at the national and supranational levels. A shared heritage of slavery and foreign colonization marks the collective experiences of the two groups. (207)

As racial minorities, African Americans and African immigrants suffer the brutality of institutionalized violence in the United States of America. More often than not, they support each other in the struggle against American racism.

However, this racial solidarity is also characterized by transcultural ambivalence, as illustrated by Tunde's opinions about Samuel Little's criminality. He is an African American serial killer whose criminal confessions are posted on YouTube by the Federal Bureau of Investigations (FBI). Although Little does not fit the stock image and infamy of a white American serial killer (Cole 36–37), Tunde describes him as "a horrible human being by any ordinary measure" (Cole 39). Thus, despite sharing a skin color, Tunde is appalled by Little's psychopathic sadism mostly against Black sex workers for that matter. What Tunde finds particularly abhorrent is Little's appeal to "racism and misogyny" in selecting "victims whose deaths would not draw much attention" (Cole 39). As with a human rights activist, Tunde empathizes with Little's victims and his students for exposing them to the moral degradation (Cole 38–39).

On the other hand, though, Cole's novel reveals the archived underpinnings of American selective justice and racial profiling. For in forcing Little to confess his crimes, the American justice system subjects him to typical American racial violence that is no less injurious for being subliminal. That is, the more Samuel Little is publicly videotaped, the more he is

made to fanatically internalize the misconception that his criminality is a function of racial abnormality and inferiority. On their part, the Texas Rangers and the entire police apparatus consciously or unconsciously perpetuate the racialized logic of white supremacy.

By extension, Cole's *Tremor* depicts that, since the creation of the American nation in 1776, racial violence has operated on three interrelated levels. According to Slavoj Žižek, there are three forms of violence: namely symbolic (embodied in language and its expressive forms), systemic (catastrophic consequences of smooth functioning of economic and political systems), and objective (invisible) (1–2). Far from being securely archived, then, the excesses and fissures of American racial violence keep on manifesting themselves in diverse modes and spheres of existence, as evidenced by the counter-hegemonic rise of the Black Lives Matter movement in 2013.

Decolonizing Western Commodification of African Art

The overlap between symbolic, systemic, and objective violence is taken for granted in postcolonial contexts. What is consistently overlooked is the fact that exoticism, especially in its anthropological and travel writing guises, provided the Eurocentric knowledge and political impetus for the ultimate scramble of Africa from 1884. From this nuanced standpoint, Bill Ashcroft, Gareth Griffiths, and Helen Tiffin define exoticism as an anthropological practice that violently deracinated objects and people from non-Western societies to Western metropoles (110–11). In these alien environments, exotics "represented whatever was projected onto them," specifically being "part of imperial displays of power and the plenitude of empires" (111). Though seldom acknowledged, exoticism has been part and parcel of Western racism, capitalism, and imperialism.

In *The Postcolonial Exotic: Marketing the Margins*, Graham Huggan focuses on the capitalist inflection of exoticism. For him, the postcolonial exotic refers to "the global commodification of cultural difference" (vii). On how exactly the postcolonial exotic works, Huggan emphasizes that:

> For the exotic is not, as is often supposed, an inherent *quality* to be found in certain people, distinctive objects, or specific places; exoticism describes, rather, a particular mode of aesthetic *perception*—one which renders people, objects and places strange even as it domesticates them, and which effectively manufactures otherness even as it claims to surrender to its immanent mystery. (13)

As this passage makes clear, exoticism is predicated on the capitalist principles of instrumental rationality and commodity fetishism. That is, "the strange and the familiar, as well as the relation between them, may be receded to serve different, even contradictory, political needs and ends"

(Huggan 13). A typical case in point has been the stealing of African artworks and commodifying them in Western metropolitan museums.

It is in this regard that exoticism is relevant to African decolonial politics beyond the conceptual delimitation of Olúfémi Táíwò. In *Against Decolonisation: Taking the Agency of Africans Seriously*, Táíwò radically limits decolonization to the attainment of independence in the 1960s, contending that any application of the term beyond this time lag risks absolutizing colonialism and, by implication, undermining African agency (see "What, After All, Is Decolonisation?" 21–66). However, if colonialism transitioned into neocolonialism as Frantz Fanon presciently discovered in *The Wretched of the Earth* (see "The Pitfalls of National Consciousness" 152), then it means that the foundational structures of Western capitalism and imperialism are still operational (albeit transfigured), rather than defunct. To avoid the reductivism of Táíwò's theorization, I adopt a more encompassing position: decolonization as the process of exposing and dismantling Western imperialism in all its overt and covert forms beyond the achievement of political independence (Ashcroft et al. 73).

Precisely this decolonial agency is what Teju Cole, through the political activism of Tunde, exercises in *Tremor*. In the opening chapter of the novel, Tunde criticizes the capitalist commodification of a *ci wara* sculpture made by the Bambara people. Contemplating the exoticism of the sculpture in the Maine antiques shop, Tunde reasons that:

> In the West a love for the "authentic" means that art collectors prefer their African objects to be alienated so that only what has been extracted from its context becomes real. Better that the artist not be named, better that the artist be long dead. The dispossession of the object's makers mystically confers monetary value to the object and the importance of the object is boosted by the story that can be told about its role in the history of modern European art. (6–7)

As Tunde reveals, exoticism does not simply dispossess artworks of their Africanness and decontextualize their cultural originality but primarily does so in order to make capitalist profit. To guarantee such profit, art collectors, antique shop owners, and gallery impresarios strategically align exoticism with collective and visceral acts of racial prejudice and violence.

Furthermore, art collectors, antique shop owners, and gallery impresarios have a notorious history of acquiring African artifacts using violent means. In *Tremor*, Cole fictionalizes the looting of Benin bronzes by British colonial forces in 1897 as follows:

> The killing done, the looting begins. The assault on Benin now became an attempt at cultural obliteration. The great

> city was stripped of its material glory, in particular its works of ritual and artistic significance. [. . .] Methodically centuries of ivory carvings and of metal plaques and metal sculptures were carted away. [. . .] No fewer than four thousand objects were expropriated from destroyed Benin and scattered across the world [. . .]. The material heritage of Bini people became a core component of the ethnographic art that filled the storerooms and displays of museums in places like London, Oxford, Cambridge, Berlin, Vienna, Philadelphia, New York, Edinburgh, Dublin, Vancouver, Basel, Washington, D.C., Glasgow, Cleveland, Liverpool, and Boston. (Cole 108–109)

The example of Benin Africanizes our archival vision of Western exoticism and racial violence. Archivally, in this respect, exoticism combines all three forms of violence (symbolic, systematic, and objective) that Slavoj Žižek has previously theorized. As a political activist, Tunde does not only subjectively experience archived instances of American exoticism and racial violence, but rather his analysis of them attempts to decolonize them.

Conversely, however, some unscrupulous Africans inflict Western racial violence upon themselves and their cultural heritage through capitalist cooptation and/or personal greed. Okey Ndibe's Afropolitan novel titled *Foreign Gods, Inc.* is intertextually relevant here. It features a protagonist by the name of Ikechukwu Uzondu, who travels from America to Nigeria to steal a patron god of his village in order to sell it at a New York gallery called FOREIGN GODS, INC. Indeed, unlike the majority of African novelists in the United States of America, Teju Cole joins Okey Ndibe in making the violence of that exoticism truly visible, thereby decolonizing readers' minds.

Conclusion

As this article hopes to have demonstrated, Teju Cole is an Afropolitan novelist, academician, art historian, photographer, and political activist, who condemns different forms and manifestations of socio-political injustice. More particularly, however, the essay focused on how Cole Africanizes the archival vision of American racial violence in his latest novel, *Tremor*. I have argued that he achieves this archival criticism by re-historicizing the racial violence of Puritan settlers, condemning American police brutality and racism, metafictionally commenting on the evils and effects of the transatlantic slave trade, and decolonizing Western commodification of African art. In doing so, Cole creates an empathetic awareness towards the dehumanization of African-descended people as embedded in and articulated by the archives of American racial violence.

Moreover, within the broader context of global postcolonial studies, Cole's novel generates new knowledge of transculturality by interrogating

the race relations between contemporary America and Africa. Indeed, as a member of the new generation of African novelists in the United States, Cole does not simply follow the pioneering footsteps of Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie's *Purple Hibiscus* (2003) but rather consolidates his own Afropolitan agency and relevance initiated by the novella *Every Day Is for the Thief* (2007) and the debut novel *Open City* (2011). In *Tremor*, then, two things are going on simultaneously: Cole offers his readers both an intellectual analysis of the ways in which racial prejudice and violence are archivally perpetuated, and a *performative* exemplification of how these vices can be subverted through exposure.

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An African Filmmaker's Journey Through Race, Art, and the Divide Between Two Continents

Idrissou Mora-Kpai
Pratt Institute

Abstract: *This essay chronicles the personal and professional journey of an African filmmaker navigating the intersections of race, identity, and artistic expression in his move from Europe to the US, confronted with different understandings of Blackness and racial difference. The essay reflects on how cultural dislocation, systemic bias, political commitments, and differing aesthetic values shape the filmmaker's vision and voice. It also gestures toward possibilities for building a more unified Black Arts scene in the United States, transcending established divisions between African American and African communities.*

Keywords: immigration; race; African diaspora; African identity; independent cinema; African American; Black artist; America Street Documentary; Charleston, SC; Black cinema

My perspective as an African filmmaker in the United States is to a certain extent shaped by my previous experience living for more than two decades in Europe. Whether it concerns the conditions of independent filmmaking, or the questions of race, Blackness, and belonging, I think of these issues in terms of comparison, continuity, contrast, or similarity between the US and Europe.

I came to Europe to pursue higher education—still free for foreign students—and after completing film school in Germany, began my career in France, where I was able to benefit from the public funding available for artists, including funding earmarked for Francophone artists from the former colonies. The advantages of such a support system and safety net were mitigated by the inherent paternalism that characterized these postcolonial relations, where our artistic platform had to be aligned with the agendas of the funding institutions and reflect national policies. Critical examinations of the colonial past and the postcolonial present were not welcome, nor was an honest discussion of race or France's current relation to Africa and its diaspora living in the metropole. As a result, I felt my creative expression stifled by those limitations.

With the intensification of neoliberal austerity policies and nationalist ideologies, the opportunities granted to artists from Africa began to erode,

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making it even more difficult for minority artists to secure support for works that challenged dominant political or cultural narratives. That was the moment I arrived in the United States.

Working in the US meant adapting to a quite different artistic and sociopolitical landscape. Concerning the former, the US lacks the type of institutional support for independent filmmakers that one finds in Europe. Here, market forces reign supreme, determining artistic expression. And while those market forces have made significant inroads to including diversity into its cultural machine, these same forces simultaneously deepen the marginalization of independent minority voices that critically interrogate the fantasies of the American post-racial age. The little support available for independent minority voices is often tailored toward specific recognized minority groups, where Africans, I came to learn, are situated in a rather strange position, usually grouped with African Americans but never fully belonging to this group.

During my studies in Europe, my understanding of American society was profoundly shaped by the works of African American filmmakers and authors who have been an important inspiration to me: Authors like James Baldwin and Toni Morrison, or filmmakers like Spike Lee, John Singleton, and Charles Burnett. They introduced me to the question of structural racism in the US and the legacy of slavery and its pervasive impact on past and contemporary Black lives. As an African living in Europe, in a majority white society with its own racial foundations, I recognized myself in their work, felt something familiar in their sensibility. I was attracted to their capacity to speak to audiences across racial divides, highlighting their experiences as universal struggles for identity against alterity, for belonging against exclusion.

Art, especially for those of us who emerge from subaltern contexts, must be more than an aesthetic exercise. It must engage with the world's contradictions, amplify marginalized voices, and interrogate the status quo. Without this, the world remains incomplete, deaf to the perspectives it most needs to hear. Like Toni Morrison, I believe that the idea of "art for art's sake" is an empty one. Morrison declared, "All good art is politics! There is none that isn't. And the ones that try hard not to be political are political by saying, 'We love the status quo.'"[i] Her words resonate deeply with my own convictions.

Through my immersion into the work of these African American Authors and filmmakers, I naively felt well prepared for my move to the US. But very quickly I realized that I was not prepared for the omnipresent and visceral confrontation with race in the US system, which felt so different to the European one and did not immediately allow me, as an African, to understand my own positionality in that system. Whereas in Europe,

Black African migrants fit into the postcolonial European contexts, where timid discussions about race are mainly led around debates on migration, integration, and in the best-case scenario, cultural exchange, Blackness in the US is exclusively discussed in relation to African American history, from slavery, to Jim Crow, to the civil rights movement and the ongoing struggles against white supremacy and structural racial oppression. In that struggle, African Americans are pitted against non-white migrants who often aspire to overtake them within national racial hierarchies. But migrants also bring with them their own traumas of displacement and foreignness, struggling to maintain their own cultures and memories in the new environment. As African migrants, we are somewhere in between. We are connected to our home countries, perceiving the US like other migrants in terms of opportunity (rather than fate or liability), but as Black people, we often experience the violence of anti-Black racism as viscerally and violently as any other Black American.

I was intrigued by this complex relationship between Africans and African Americans—between familiarity and dissonance, between solidarity and competition—and I wanted to examine this relationship further, which is why I decided to shoot my first film within the United States among an African American community.

I lived in Charleston from 2013 to 2015, and it seemed the perfect setting for this project. Historically, this port town served as an important entry point for the enslaved Africans—over forty percent of America's Black population would enter through the Port of Charleston. In this sense, Charleston evokes the enduring wound of separation between Africa and its diaspora. Today, the city is still steeped in rich West African heritage but also suffers the typical fate of urban Black communities: stark racial segregation and dispossession.

Creating a documentary in this city became an intensely personal journey. For me, making *America Street* was not about observing from a distance; it was about engaging with the community from a position of solidarity and cultural resonance.[ii] This perspective shaped both the way I approached the story and how the community received me. My Blackness and Africanness served as a bridge, allowing me to navigate the community with natural ease and acceptance. During this period, two national tragedies—the killing of Walter Scott and the Emanuel AME Church massacre—exposed the depths of racial animus in American society. These events allowed me to juxtapose Charleston's historic charm with the despair of neglected Black neighborhoods, challenging its sanitized image. The film also became a metaphor for the dissonance between America's aspirational ideals and systemic oppression.

The injustices I documented in *America Street* mirrored in eerie ways the colonial legacies of dispossession and erasure that I had captured in [my] other documentary films[iii] shot on the African continent. Displacement through gentrification is not that different from migration induced by poverty in the postcolonial African nation-state. Structural racism transcends borders; Black people experience it nationally in the US and also through geopolitics and the global economy everywhere on the African continent.

But while *America Street* heightened my awareness of a shared material condition where racial hierarchies structure access to power, wealth, and the means of production, these years also taught me more about the elusive divide within the United States between Africans and African Americans and its consequences for African cultural production in general, and filmmaking in particular, within the United States.

Often, African communities, buoyed by relative economic and cultural capital, are perceived as the "good Blacks," which causes them to sometimes distance themselves from African Americans. At the same time, Africans lack robust institutions to advocate for their representation, frequently relying on those established by African Americans. From access to professional employment to access to arts funding, Africans benefit from the gains African Americans have fought so hard for. At the same time, mainstream African American culture perceives Africa as a past, a long-distant heritage, from which one can selectively draw but with which one does not have to engage deeply, in its contemporary manifestation.

This tension is also evident in cinema. African actors (often raised and trained in Europe) increasingly secure prime roles in Hollywood, which causes some African American actors to fear for their own access to roles. In a cinema industry that is comfortable within its structures built by white supremacy, merely enhanced by liberal promises, Blackness is essentialized and diversity is considered in terms of statistics of representation, with the result that Africans and African Americans get pitted against each other in the struggle for the sparse roles.

And while African writer-directors based in the US struggle to bring their stories to life—especially narratives rooted in the continent—Hollywood profits immensely from blockbuster superhero films inspired by African heroines, further complicating the landscape for authentic African storytelling. The global success of *Black Panther* (2018, 2022) is a case in point. The film's rare, affirming portrayal of Black people connects African Americans to their origins, celebrating shared history and dignity. For a moment, pride in Africa united the diaspora. Yet this symbolic victory prompts deeper questions: When Hollywood appropriates African stories, even with Black directors and African actors, whose voices are truly amplified? Whose perspectives are silenced? Will African stories become another

resource extracted for profit, like gold and uranium before them? Or can these moments foster genuine collaboration, allowing African filmmakers to share their unique heritage and perspectives with the world and promote new forms of cultural exchange and enrichment between African and African American culture producers?

One would have hoped that such a success would perhaps open the doors for African filmmakers, convincing the studios (as well as those who sponsor independent filmmaking grants) that African stories can speak to audiences in the US and globally (that they can even sell, if one looks at it from a market perspective). Unfortunately, it seems that Hollywood is contributing to commodify African stories, which are stripped of authenticity and reduced to products for external consumption.

I'm not making this point to highlight the divide between Africans and African Americans, or to reaffirm the competition between these two groups; our struggles and aspirations are deeply interconnected, in terms of our systemic exclusion, as well as in terms of our cultural and even spiritual relationships. However, I want to take this observation as a point of departure to examine the structural differences in our positions and ask uncomfortable but necessary questions about power and representation to build the material foundation that gives substance to our existing connections.

In the best-case scenario, films like *Black Panther* could have paved the way for more egalitarian collaborations, creating a global dialogue that includes African filmmakers as equal partners, sharing their cultural wealth and shaping the narratives that define them. Although this will never happen within commercial cinema, my hope is that this could happen, one day, within the independent cinema in the United States. Unlike Hollywood, independent filmmakers are less beholden to market demands or corporate agendas. They can tell uncomfortable stories, critical stories that go beyond the dream of the post-racial age that Hollywood has subscribed to, and it is in this space that solidarities and connections across borders might be productively explored. Within independent cinema, the political artistic commitment to challenge the status-quo Morrison spoke of can survive and this could be the condition for developing novel opportunities for collaboration between African, African American, and Afro-European artists. In the long-term, my hope is that my work can contribute to building these new solidarities within independent cinema.

As I write these words, radical transformations are reshaping the country, deepening the fractures of an already fragile reality for those of us on the margins. The erosion of funding and the purge of diversity from institutions force me to question the future of our cinema—and what kind of independent cinema will be able to survive. Will the cutting of funding for diversity also mean the end of diverse voices represented in independent

cinema? Will these cuts intensify the competition between different groups that fall under the category of diversity, including the competition between African Americans and Africans? Or will we come together, artists and filmmakers of color of different origin and background, Africans and African Americans, to stand up, together, in solidarity, against the growing authoritarian suppression of our contributions, our art? One thing seems sure to me, we cannot resist these forces on our own, but need to develop collective strategies if our cinema is going to have a place in this country. Finally, we will have to connect our struggle to a broader commitment to fight against systemic racism beyond the short-sighted and lazy liberal satisfactions.

Notes

i Toni Morrison, qtd. In Kevin Nance, "The Spirit and the Strength: A Profile of Toni Morrison." *Poets & Writers*, Nov./Dec. 2008, https://www.pw.org/content/the_spirit_and_the_strength_a_profile_of_toni_morrison.

ii *America Street* is available online here: https://video.alexanderstreet.com/watch/america-street

iii *Arlit: The Second Paris*; *Indochina—Traces of a Mother*

Narrating Fractures: Teaching Notes on Yaa Gyasi's *Homegoing*

Vincent R. Ogoti
Clemson University

Abstract: *Yaa Gyasi's acclaimed 2016 debut novel,* Homegoing, *has significantly contributed to African and African American literary and cultural studies. Given its scope and thematic depth,* Homegoing *has become a significant work in contemporary global Black literature, prompting considerable scholarly analysis, focusing on a range of topics from ecocritical aspects (Asempasah et al.) to diaspora and the search for home (Madongonda and Gudhlanga), trauma and the living past (Grindstaff), historical violence and personal identity (Huang), epigenetic inheritance (Mikić), female descendency (Motahane et al.), extractive form (Okoth), bottom-up examination of Black History (Reynolds), and aurality and Afro-Modernity (Royston and Ogoti). Despite this extensive critical engagement with the novel, hardly any scholarship explicitly theorizes or reflects on its pedagogical dimensions, particularly why it is a propitious text for exploring the Black Atlantic and the legacy of slavery. A brief survey of publicly available syllabi repositories reveals that the novel is prominent in undergraduate and graduate curricula within global Black studies, African and African American literature, and African diaspora courses. This essay critically reflects on my experience with the novel both as a graduate student and as an instructor in three distinct courses: Advanced Seminar on African Cultural Studies at the University of Wisconsin-Madison, Introduction to Global Black Studies at Clemson University, and Africa and the Atlantic World at Clemson University. Drawing on these pedagogical experiences, I aim to delineate the complex thematic and historical concerns the novel raises and advance approaches for critically engaging its literary, cultural, and historical significance.*

Keywords: Black Atlantic; diaspora; storytelling; history; pedagogy

Introduction

Yaa Gyasi's acclaimed 2016 debut novel, *Homegoing*, has significantly contributed to African and African American literary and cultural studies. It was recognized on the National Book Foundation's five under thirty-five list for 2016, Oprah Winfrey's top ten books of the year, and was awarded the National Book Critics Circle John Leonard Prize and the PEN/Hemingway Award for Best First Novel. The novel explores the legacy of the transatlantic slave trade through the depiction of intertwined narratives of two half-sisters, Effia and Esi, whose lives diverge dramatically at Cape Coast

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Castle. This act inaugurates different trajectories for their Africans and African American descendants. Effia marries a British slave trader and remains in Ghana, while Esi is captured and sold into slavery in America. This dual narrative structure allows Gyasi to examine the far-reaching and enduring legacy of the transatlantic slave trade and subsequent historical forces on both sides of the Atlantic. The novel's architectonics, each chapter focusing on successive generations, illuminates how historical and personal traumas manifest over time.

Given its scope and thematic depth, *Homegoing* has become a significant work in contemporary global Black literature, prompting considerable scholarly analysis, focusing on a range of topics from ecocritical aspects (Asempasah et al.) to diaspora and the search for home (Madongonda and Gudhlanga), trauma and the living past (Grindstaff), historical violence and personal identity (Huang), epigenetic inheritance (Mikić), female descendency (Motahane, Nyambi, and Makombe), extractive form (Okoth), bottom-up examination of Black History (Reynolds), and aurality and Afro-Modernity (Royston and Ogoti). Despite this extensive critical engagement with the novel, hardly any scholarship explicitly theorizes or reflects on its pedagogical dimensions, particularly why it is a propitious text for exploring the Black Atlantic and the legacy of slavery. A brief survey of publicly available syllabi repositories reveals that the novel is prominent in undergraduate and graduate curricula within global Black studies, African and African American literature, and African diaspora courses. This essay critically reflects on my experience with the novel both as a graduate student and as an instructor in three distinct courses: Advanced Seminar on African Cultural Studies at the University of Wisconsin-Madison, Introduction to Global Black Studies at Clemson University, and Africa and the Atlantic World at Clemson University. Drawing on these pedagogical experiences, I aim to delineate the complex thematic and historical concerns the novel raises and advance approaches for critically engaging its literary, cultural, and historical significance.

Literary scholar Yogita Goyal categorizes *Homegoing* as a neo-slave narrative, a literary genre that reimagines and revises the traditional slave narrative, which originally emerged from firsthand accounts of slavery in the 18th and 19th centuries (Goyal and Gyasi). Neo-slave narratives blend historical events with creative reinterpretation to allow the reader to explore what happened in the past and its long-lasting impacts on memory and identity. While *Homegoing* aligns with the thematic concerns of typical neo-slave narratives, it also seeks to advance the narratives by troubling other common diasporic tropes, such as Afropolitanism, which is a framework that underpins some of Yaa Gyasi's contemporaries, such as Taiye Selasie and Chimamanda Adichie. Many so-called Afropolitan authors deliberately steer clear of the familiar themes of trauma and political allegory, focusing instead on contemporary everyday life, such as the

middle-class Nigerian experiences depicted in Chimamanda's *Americanah* (2013) or the intricate family dynamics in Taiye Selasi's *Ghana Must Go* (2013). Gyasi's approach is different. Instead of writing about "fashion, romance, or Afro-Modernity," she writes about "the history of Atlantic slavery across two continents over three centuries" (Goyal and Gyasi 472). In so doing, she unsettles the prevalent misapprehension that African writers have eschewed historical excavation and particularly avoided interrogating the legacies of the transatlantic slave trade.

The recent proliferation of African and African diasporic writing evinces a deliberate deviation from narratives exclusively enmeshed in trauma or what Gilroy refers to as "slave sublime" to describe the immense, haunting, emotional, and historical weight of slavery (Gilroy 131). Contemporary African authors exhibit a proclivity for nuanced historiographical engagements that underscore a critical reexamination of history, not as a reductive chronicle of suffering, but as a polyphonic landscape wherein multifaceted discourses of heritage and agency coalesce to challenge and broaden conventional paradigms of historical representation. For instance, in my Africa and the Atlantic World course, some students were exposed for the first time to accounts of slavery within Africa, specifically slave raids, such as those depicted in Gyasi's *Homegoing*. These stories led some students to a possibly hasty conclusion: that Africans were also involved in the Atlantic slave trade. This understanding sometimes led to simplistic interpretations focused on blame, guilt, and complicity. Therefore, it was crucial for me to emphasize that Gyasi, as she has stated in various interviews and scholarly works, did not intend to identify who was to blame for slavery or where it originated. Instead, her goal was to illustrate the complex realities of the slave trade as it occurred in Africa before the Middle Passage.

Gyasi eschews the conventional portrayal of the slave trade as a didactic morality narrative replete with unequivocal villains and heroes. Instead, she renders her characters in a nuanced chiaroscuro against the inexorable march of historical forces shaping their destinies. In this reimagining, individual actions are neither entirely deterministic products of structural imperatives nor wholly autonomous expressions of personal volition. Rather, her narrative navigates the complex interplay of agency and constraint to compel a reexamination of traditional moral binaries and advance a more sophisticated interrogation of how lives are both sculpted by and react against the imperatives of history.

Unlike other contemporary diasporic literary works, such as Imbolo Mbue's *Behold the Dreamers* (2016) or Akwaeke Emezi's *Freshwater* (2018), which predominantly foreground migration, identity negotiation, and existential dilemmas in diasporic contexts, Gyasi's *Homegoing* explicitly engages with the historical schema of Atlantic slavery as a foundational thematic structure. In doing so, the text distinctly aligns itself with–and

extends–the narrative traditions epitomized by canonical representations of Middle Passage fiction, exemplified in the works of Toni Morrison, Caryl Phillips, and Fred D'Aguiar. Gyasi's novel actively participates in and significantly reshapes the discursive formation of diasporic identity, as it intervenes simultaneously within African and Atlantic paradigms (Goyal and Gyasi 472). By tracing transgenerational experiences, *Homegoing* not only revisits but also reconceptualizes history (depicting memory as history) and foregrounds the legacy of slavery while advancing the conceptual and aesthetic boundaries of diasporic literature.

Gyasi's *Homegoing* distinguishes itself from canonical neo-slave literature through its expansive reconceptualization of the diaspora. The novel explicitly addresses a critical lacuna often encountered within neo-slave literature, where experiences antecedent to the Middle Passage are typically depicted as inaccessible or obscured voids (Yogal and Gyasi 473). Diverging significantly from this representational trend, Gyasi retraces historical trajectories deep into pre-colonial Ghana and depicts, with ethical and aesthetic sensitivity, the intricate socio-economic and cultural practices surrounding the Cape Coast slave castle. The novel poses fundamental questions regarding the complicated lived realities associated with the Castle, examining the multifarious consequences of the transatlantic slave trade upon African communities (Yogal and Gyasi 477). Moreover, it critically explores the underlying motivations for Indigenous participation and the morally intricate positionality occupied by African agents who navigated ambiguous roles simultaneously as victims, intermediaries, and complicit traders. Through this comprehensive historical excavation, *Homegoing* significantly broadens the discursive boundaries of diasporic and neo-slave literature and thus complicates reductive binary narratives by foregrounding a nuanced exploration of African agency, complicity, and victimhood within the transatlantic slave economy.

Entangled Legacies: Pedagogical Reflections on Homegoing

I first read *Homegoing* in 2018 in Reginold Royston's "Oral Culture and Africa" seminar at the University of Wisconsin-Madison. I was a graduate student from East Africa, and I had research interests in African, African American, and Caribbean literature and culture. Royston's seminar critically explored the connections between traditional African and diasporic oral traditions and their evolution through new media. In addition to Gyasi's *Homegoing*, we read Zora Neale Hurston's *Barracoon* (2018). Initially, the link between these two books was not apparent. However, it became clear that they offered a fresh look at how we understand and create knowledge about Africa and its diaspora. Assigning both books was an excellent move because they both highlighted key issues within the Black Atlantic, particularly the often-overlooked history of slavery within Africa as part of the

African diaspora experience. Therefore, including this perspective broadened our understanding of diaspora, moving beyond just geographical location (like nation-states) to also include the element of time as a crucial aspect of what defines the diaspora.

Gyasi noted in an interview that she was thinking about the diaspora as she wrote *Homegoing*. In our seminar discussions, we observed how the novel's architectonic exemplifies this diasporic literary mode through its depiction of an epic narrative scale that simultaneously foregrounds fragmentation, discontinuity, and rupture. In employing this narrative arc, Gyasi posits history itself as inherently fragmented and disjointed, deliberately underscoring the epistemological fractures and temporal disruptions that characterize diasporic subjectivities and historical memory. A core element of Gyasi's aesthetic is "time." She was interested in the very nature of temporality. Specifically, she sought to critically examine how slavery and colonialism have inscribed long-lasting alterations upon familial structures, nation-states, and spatial geographies. She notes, "The idea of being able to pass through about twenty years at a time in each chapter was a way of allowing me to kind of see that whole large swath of history all at once" (Yogal and Gyasi 476). There is a pervasive tendency to relegate slavery to a distant historical epoch—an event confined to the annals of the past and deemed irrelevant to the exigencies of contemporary society. This reductive temporal distancing not only trivializes the legacies of slavery but also obscures its influence on present socio-political and economic configurations.

In Professor Royston's course, we examined Yaa Gyasi's *Homegoing* before reading Zora Neale Hurston's *Barracoon*. While both texts address interrelated thematic concerns, their structures differ significantly: *Homegoing* is a novel, while *Barracoon* is a literary ethnography, a non-fiction work. A key similarity in the two texts, which later became the main idea in my co-authored article with Reginold, "Voicing Afro-Modernity: How Black Atlantic Audiobooks Speak Back," is the texts' sonic sensibility—an aesthetic rooted in *orature*. In our article, we analyzed these texts as "speakerly texts," following Henry Louis Gates' definition of such works as those that employ "the phonetic, grammatical, and lexical patterns of actual speech" to create the "illusion of oral narration" (Gates 181). The narrative dynamics of both texts are infused with a strategy of "speaking back" to Black subjects and writers. Reginold's seminar highlighted the texts' sonic sensibilities, especially the performed audiobook versions, which as we would later argue in our article, constitutes the medium of new orality.

In *Barracoon,* Hurston tells the story of Oluale Kossola, also known as Cudjo Lewis, a name assigned by his master, Mr. Jim Meaher, who struggled to pronounce Kossola (Hurston 28). Kossola was the last known surviving African from the *Clotilda*, the final American slave ship, which

sailed in 1860, long after the abolition of the transatlantic slave trade. Kossola's account, faithfully recorded by Hurston in 1930, only saw the light of the day when it was finally published in 2018 as *Barracoon: The Story of the Last "Black Cargo."* Kossola's account was not published during his or Hurston's lifetimes, due to the politics surrounding Hurston's language choice. Rebecca Plant, the book's editor, highlights that in 1931, Viking Press offered to publish the manuscript in "language rather than dialect." Hurston, however, rejected this offer, as Kossola's dialect was integral to the authenticity of Kossola's narrative (Hurston 15). Hurston's decision to preserve Kossola's words over her interpretation is a key aspect of what scholars describe as *orature* (Hurston 16).

Distinct from many slave narratives, *Barracoon* expansively situates its setting within Africa, recounting Kossola's abduction in his youth by soldiers of the Kingdom of Dahomey and his subsequent detention in a barracoon, a term derived from Spanish that denotes a barracks used to confine Africans bound for slavery in the Americas. Kossola recounts his life to Hurston in Africa Town, a community near Mobile, Alabama, where he and other survivors of the *Clotilda* lived in the early twentieth century. Kossola's narrative occupies a space between orature and literacy (Royston and Ogoti 398). His Yoruba homeland, scarred by ethnic raids and the brutal realities of slavery, shares striking similarities with the Ghanaian setting of *Homegoing*. Accepting Kossola as a reliable narrator thus unveils the intricate practices of slavery, particularly the ambiguous boundaries that intersect victimhood and perpetration.

Kossola's position as someone straddling oral tradition and literacy is explained through his religious beliefs. He understands his life as a journey through time, marked by his conversion to Christianity. For him, the key difference in identity is not about where he is physically—whether in Africa as a Yoruba man or in the United States as an African American. Instead, he sees his identity as shaped by his experiences across time—his past, present, and future—as reflected in his religion, his enslavement, and his eventual liberation. His memories and folktales vividly bring his past to life, similar to how Effia's descendants in *Homegoing* carefully passed down the ancestral stone through generations. His conversation with Hurston allows us to experience how the tension between the past and the present defines Kossola's life. Hurston repeatedly shows how difficult it was for Kossola to talk about his African past. Almost like a therapist she allows him space to recall the trauma of his kidnapping and enslavement.

> "First, I want to ask you how you feel today?"
> Another muted silence.
> "I thank God I on praying' groun' and in a Bible country."
> "But didn't you have a God back in Africa?" I asked him.

> His head dropped between his hands and the tears sprung fresh.
> . . .
> "Excuse me I cry. I can't help it when I hear de name call. Oh, Lor'. I no see Afficky soil no mo'!" (Huston 27–28).

Kossola's yearning for home finds expression in his storytelling. He is comforted by the fact that Hurston is writing down his story, believing this will allow his legacy to reach and connect with his homeland. In this way, storytelling becomes an act of bridging distances—not only spatially between America and Africa, but also temporally across generations, enabling narratives like Kossola's to transcend isolation and reconnect fragmented memories. Just as Hurston's transcription of Kossola's memories creates a conduit between his African past and his American present, Gyasi expands this gesture across centuries and lineages, crafting a narrative bridge that finally reunites the diasporic fragments of home.

Homegoing forges the connection between Africa and America that Kossola was ultimately unable to achieve before passing at ninety-five in Alabama. Though portions of the book were researched at archives in Alabama, *Homegoing* is a story about the journey of a torn family, connecting the legacies of Black life between the formerly enslaved and still colonized over 250 years. Like *Barracoon*, it is set in precolonial Africa and the American South, and, more importantly, its subjects dramatize the wretchedness of diasporization from historical, autobiographical, and literary imaginations (Royston and Ogoti 401). The idea of homegoing is a slave belief that, in death, the displaced possess the capacity to return to the land from which they were torn—a belief that permeates African American religious tradition, wherein funerals are often celebrated as "homegoing" ceremonies. This nomenclature encapsulates not merely the finality of death but also the promise of transition into new realms and the hope for redemptive rebirth in another life. Gyasi deploys this duality metaphorically and literally: while the African branch of the familial narrative clings to its ancestral memory through the symbolic inheritance of a black stone passed down through generations, the American branch is marked by the loss of this tangible link to origin. In this way, the notion of homegoing articulates an enduring longing to reclaim lost heritage, insisting that the histories of Africa and America are not disparate narratives, but conjoined threads woven into a singular, complex story (Yogal and Gyasi 474). Both *Barracoon* and *Homegoing* reconfigure historical discourse by foregrounding African narratives of slavery while simultaneously reconceptualizing time as an integral dimension of the diasporic experience. These texts underscore that slave and neo-slave narratives are not mutually exclusive; rather, they are interwoven accounts that collectively interrogate the legacies of slavery.

My second encounter with *Homegoing* occurred in 2024 during a session of Anthropologist Kaifa Roland's "Introduction to Global Black Studies" course at Clemson University, where I work as an Assistant Professor of English and Global Black Studies. Clemson University has a complex and historically significant origin tied to the legacy of slavery. The institution occupies land that was once part of a large plantation owned by John C. Calhoun, a prominent South Carolina politician and former vice president of the United States. Calhoun was a defender of slavery and owned a plantation, Fort Hill, where enslaved African Americans worked. After his death, the land and estate were inherited by his family, and it was eventually passed on to Thomas Green Clemson, who donated the land to establish a university. This connection to slavery and plantation history remains a significant part of Clemson's legacy and has sparked scholarship about the ways in which institutions engage with and acknowledge the histories of racial oppression and exploitation (see Thomas).

Roland's assigning of *Homegoing* in a week, exploring "African percussors to slavery," was excellent. The objectives of the course, as highlighted in the syllabus, were to:

> Introduce students to the varied peoples and cultures of the African diaspora, including the historical, colonial, and contemporary political-economic contexts, as well as the religious, migratory, and other cultural practices. [The course also sought] to expand students' understanding of the global Black experience while attending to the nation/region, spiritual practices, and gendered race. [Students] will investigate the origins and various ways racialization has structured the lifeways of peoples of African descent across time and place. (Roland)

Professor Roland had invited me to give a lecture on *Homegoing* and to meet the course objectives, I began my lecture with David Reynolds's assertion: "One of the most interesting aspects of *Homegoing* is its refusal to idealize the African past" (Reynolds 106). This assertion echoes Paul Gilroy's critique of certain strains of Afrocentric thought that idealize an unchanging African past while neglecting the complex role of modernity, slavery, and diaspora in shaping Black identity (Gilroy 188). In my lecture, I wanted to underscore how *Homegoing* reconceptualizes African traditional practices as dynamic, hybrid, and forged in the crucible of the Black Atlantic experience, particularly in the wake of slavery and colonialism. In other words, Black culture and the idea of memory function as fluid and historically situated responses to oppression and dislocation. I had envisioned that with such a departure heavily influenced by Gilroy's theorization of the Black Atlantic, students would not be easily drawn into mapping

instances of guilt and complicity, looking for heroes and villains in the novel. Instead, they will interpret *Homegoing* as part of a critique of Afrocentric discourses and historiography that privilege racial purity, fixed identities, and unbroken African traditions.

Indeed, Gyasi has acknowledged that she has often received pushback from Ghanaians for including African slavery in the novel (Yogal and Gyasi 484). In other words, the Ghanaians are disappointed that Ghana is a constitutive element of the Atlantic slave trade. As Gilroy argues, such views are made possible due to the proclivity of some scholars to promote a linear temporality, idealizing a glorious African past (in this case, Ghana) that ignores the complexities of diasporic life (Gilroy 87). The downside of such framing is the possibility of mythologizing Africa and the demotion of slavery as an essential traumatic moment in the Black consciousness and constitution of the diaspora. *Homegoing*'s narrative structure, shifting between descendants of Effia (Ghana) and Esi (America) until the end of the novel, whereby Marjorie, a descendant of Effia, and Marcus, a descendant of Esi, are united, underscores the idea it is impossible to theorize African tradition without addressing the trauma of slavery. Equally, the theorization of modernity cannot be divorced from the enslavement of the African people.

While I recognized that the emotional and cultural gravity of slavery (slave sublime) shapes Black consciousness but is often too painful and politically inconvenient to fully confront, I had to point out to students that the desire to forget slavery and instead focus on the perceived African greatness can distort history and memory. However, the point of highlighting Africa's role is not to apportion blame but to understand how communities must reckon with the legacy of a violent past. In hindsight, I should have emphasized that reckoning with a violent past is especially relevant at Clemson. Rhonda Thomas's *Call My Name, Clemson: Documenting the Black Experience in an American University Community* (2020) is one of the excellent public history works that bring to light the often-overlooked narratives of African Americans integral to Clemson University's history.

Although *Homegoing* is not a conventional historical account—it is a work of fiction in which the author reimagines what it means to live in a cultural zone of contact, whereby asymmetrical power relations inscribe the rhythm of life (Pratt 4)—the text provides a lens through which to view how different forces interacted to cause harm to many people. This interaction or cultural zone of encounter that Gilroy theorizes as the Black Atlantic—a transnational, intercultural space shaped by the legacy of slavery, colonialism, and the ongoing movement of Black people, ideas, and cultural forms across Europe, Africa, the Americas, and the Caribbean—does not exist in the cloud or a spatial configuration within the Western metropoles. It is rather a zone that traverses continents and cultural configurations and favors what Gilroy

characterizes as "non-traditional-tradition" to describe a diasporic formation marked by hybridity, improvisation, and antiphonal (call-and-response) community-making (Gilroy 198).

Homecoming, more than any other contemporary African diasporic novel, enlivens Gilroy's theorization, largely due to the novel's scope, covering both sides of the Atlantic and over seven generations. What I wanted students to see in *Homegoing* is not so much a "hidden history" of slavery, but rather a reconceptualization of the history of the diaspora, wrenching its meaning from geographical attachment to seeing it as "an alternative culture of location and identification" (Iton 200). Here, as Richard Iton suggests:

> Instead of considering simply how African Americans interact with Ghanaians or blacks in Canada or the United Kingdom, we might also focus on the ways Charleston, Halifax, Accra, Marseilles, and Liverpool articulate with each other and, more generally, the ways the local can function as a site of diasporic rediffusion. (Iton 200)

I hoped that such a conceptualization of the diaspora would allow students to consider how the diaspora functions beyond its traditional articulation. In other words, they must confront a diaspora that moves "across, within, and against states" to embrace other configurations of the diaspora. The students, on their part, wanted to know whether other regions of Africa experienced slavery and whether Africa's population was impacted by slavery. While these questions were not directly related to Iton's theorization of diaspora, they opened space for a broader discussion of slavery. The questions were important to me as they pointed out how students tend to conceptualize the legacy of slavery in terms of social, cultural, economic, and political developments in present-day communities. In my response, I briefly historicized the Indian Ocean slave trade in East Africa but emphasized the difference between this trade and the trans-Atlantic slave trade. It occurred to me that perhaps teaching *Homegoing* to students outside Global Black Studies-related fields requires a more extensive background that explores different forms of slavery and how the trans-Atlantic slave trade's significance lies in the idea that approximately ten to fifteen million enslaved people were transported from western Africa to the Americas and that descendants of the enslaved people constitute a significant population of the Americas—still grappling with the legacy of slavery.

My most recent engagement with *Homegoing* occurred last year in my undergraduate course, "Africa and the Atlantic World," a topical course in the Global Black Studies major, but also open to all undergraduate students at Clemson University. Of the sixteen students who enrolled in the course, the majority were freshmen and sophomores drawn from different colleges on

campus. The focus of the course was to explore the forced migration of millions of Africans to the Americas via the transatlantic slave trade as foundational to the emergence of modernity. I wanted students to critically examine the period of European and African contact, emphasizing the global transformations in social, political, and cultural domains resulting from these interactions. Such exchanges facilitated the emergence of distinct new cultures. Indeed, the African diaspora was unprecedented in scale and character, frequently involving systematic planning and coercion, which significantly obscured historical linkages between the Old and New Worlds. Thus, the course aimed to deepen students' comprehension of the African presence in the Americas as an integral component of global historical narratives.

My initial challenge in this course was to figure out what works to assign to students who had not taken any class on Africa or the Black Atlantic. In addition to *Homegoing*, I assigned Simon Gikandi's *Slavery and the Culture of Taste* (2011). I presented the two texts as works that respond to Edward Said's advocacy for a contrapuntal reading—an approach that compels us to scrutinize canonical texts, and indeed the entire archive of modern and pre-modern European and American culture— to excavate and articulate what remains silent, marginal, or ideologically understated within these works (Said 1993, 66). Through this contrapuntal reading, Gikandi demonstrates how the culture of taste was constructed alongside and in opposition to the realities of slavery. He juxtaposes European art and intellectual life with the violence and exploitation of Africans, showing how they are intertwined:

> On one hand, we have the work of art endowing aura to some of the humblest subjects in a modern polity; on the other hand, we have these same people reduced to mere objects of trade . . . How could such elevated images of art exist in the same realm as the harsh world of enslavement and the slave trade? . . . And how do we read these two spheres of social life—one rooted in the realm of the aesthetic, civility, and taste, and the other in the political economy of slavery—in the same register? (Gikandi 3)

By juxtaposing these two poles—art's ennobling gaze and the brutal calculus of commerce—Gikandi compels us to recognize that European refinement and colonial exploitation were two sides of the same modern coin. This dialectical frame not only unsettles our assumptions about "high culture" but also prepares the ground for examining how material practices of power and taste shaped contemporary subjectivities.

Gikandi's exploration of slavery, consumption, and the culture of taste, all important conduits for understanding modernity, draws from the eighteenth-century European archive, notably visual culture. His chosen

period overlaps with part of *Homegoing*'s timeline, especially the eighteenth-century. Tejumola Olaniyan's "Teaching Notes on Simon Gikandi's *Slavery and the Culture of Taste*" explains the fundamental importance of the century in African literary and cultural studies, which ordinarily tends to overlook this period and its archive in the theorization of history and cultural formation. Olaniyan's lamentation finds voice in *Homegoing*, which does not shy away from the contradictions of this century—associated with modernity and ideals of Enlightenment but also engaging in slavery. For instance, Effia and Esi's different life trajectories, whereby Effia's life is sustained by the proceeds of slavery while her half-sister is in the slave dungeons in the Castle and then shipped across the Atlantic to an American plantation, exemplify Gikandi's argument that the European culture of taste, which celebrated civility and beauty was built upon the exploitation and commodification of enslaved Africans. Gikandi's double/paired description of Anna Margaretta Larpent—icon of social mobility in the culture of taste, writer of voluminous diaries, a woman attuned to the cultural sensibilities of her time—and Nealee—a faceless African woman slave in a coffle, bought for gold dust in a Bambara slave market, destined to die somewhere between Sego and the Gambia—catches the contrapuntal nature of Effia and Esi's lives (Gikandi 50). Larpent's sense of culture was important to her self-presentation in public space. This locates her at the center of a historical moment in which the rise of a culture of taste as the mediator of social position constituted an important mode of freedom—an important element of the age of Enlightenment (Gikandi 56). He notes that in roughly the same years that Anna Larpent was transforming herself into a subject of politeness and taste in London, Nealee was being held captive before she was sold to an African slave trader called Karfa, who put her on a coffle headed for the Atlantic coast on April 24, 1797 (Gikandi 64). This paradox of one life's commodification supporting another's social rise in the society of politeness is indeed a paradox of modernity—that period marked by the rise of Enlightenment values and the emergence of a new self-reflective, rational subject. As Gikandi and Gyasi clearly show, modernity excluded enslaved Africans from its vision of freedom and reason despite benefitting economically from their labor.

While Gikandi traces modernity's contradiction to account for slavery's omission from the discourse of taste, Gyasi is interested in showing that resistance is inherent in the power that constitutes Africans as slaves and slave traders. For instance, characters like Quey grapple with an internal conflict about their assigned role in the slave economy. While Quey does not succeed in extricating himself from the trade, his son, James, eschews slavery and becomes the first to escape his assigned role. James' final gift to his daughter, Abena, was the ancestral stone inherited from his lineage. He explained:

> My father [Quey] was a slaver, a very wealthy man. When I decided to leave Fanteland, it was because I did not want to take part in the work my family had done. I wanted to work for myself. I see how these townspeople call me Unlucky, but every season I feel lucky to have this land, to do this honorable work, not the shameful work of my family. When the villagers here gave me this small bit of land, I was so happy that I buried this stone here to give thanks. (Gyasi 153)

James was born in 1807, the year that Britain formally proscribed the transatlantic slave trade: "The year James was born, they told everyone in the Castle that the slave trade was abolished" (Gyasi 92). Yet, despite legal abolition, the mechanisms of human trafficking along the Gold Coast persisted, and intertribal raids continued to supply captives. James's moral awakening, however, was catalyzed by his encounter with Akosua, his eventual wife. Like James, Akosua repudiated the institution of slavery, but whereas James appeared resigned to his people's collective fate, Akosua yearned for self-liberation. She declares, "I am proud to be Asante, as I am sure you are proud to be Fante, but after I lost my brothers, I decided that as for me, Akosua, I will be my own nation" (Gyasi 99). James' desire to partake in this self-fashioned nation impelled him to forsake his customary first wife, Amma, and unite his destiny with Akosua's. While his actions are perhaps insufficient to alter the trajectory of the Gold Coast, he does demonstrate the complexity of slavery, making it difficult to trace pure lineages of villains and heroes. It seems then that Gikandi's preoccupation with the question of how one can tell the stories of lives and experiences that were structurally connected through the political economy of slavery yet conceptually and symbolically separated finds its response in Gyasi's *Homegoing.*

Conclusion: History as Storytelling

Effia's descendant, Yaw, is a history teacher obsessed with Ghana's history and historiography. He engages his students by asking if they know how he received his facial scar, prompting various responses. While readers are privy to the circumstances surrounding his scar, neither Yaw nor his students fully grasp its history. Yaw's scar functions on two levels—as the literal remnant of a household conflagration and as the manifest wound of a broader history that no one in his classroom can fully grasp. When Yaw invites his students to recount "the story of how I got my scar" (Gyasi 225), he immediately discovers that every boy has heard a different version. Some say he was "born of fire" (226), and others say his father's curse or his mother's visions most plausibly explain it. Yaw's students struggle to identify the true story accounting for his scar, ultimately admitting that they

cannot determine the correct version since none of them witnessed the event firsthand. Yaw's scar originates in the terrible night when his mother, known in Edweso as the "Crazy Woman" (Gyasi 197), succumbed to the terrible dreams that had haunted her since childhood. As an infant, Yaw slept alongside his sisters in their family hut while his mother, tormented by visions of a fire-made woman, "tried to fight sleep, but . . . set the hut on fire" in her sleep (Gyasi 240). His father, Asamoah the Crippled Man, managed to burst through the flames to rescue one child (Yaw) but could save no one else. The heat and smoke seared Yaw's left cheek, chin, and brow, leaving behind the raised, leathery map of his early survival.

Yaw's face embodies the single most important lesson he would teach all his students: that history is never simply facts but the stories that survive and those forever altered by the flames. These stories constitute the fundamental dilemma of history:

> We cannot know that which we were not there to see and hear and experience for ourselves. We must rely upon the words of others. Those who were there in the olden days told stories to the children so that the children would know, so that the children could tell stories to their children. And so on, and so on. But now we come upon the problem of conflicting stories . . . We believe the one who has the power. He is the one who gets to write the story. So, when you study history, you must always ask yourself, Whose story am I missing? (Gyasi 226)

The discussion in Yaw's classroom articulates the pedagogy of *Homegoing* itself, which repeatedly juxtaposes the visible legacies of the slave trade (the "scar" on both continents) with the shadowy, fragmented stories that survive. Yaw's pedagogical intent—to teach his students that "history is storytelling" (Gyasi 225) and that they must seek out silenced voices—encapsulates Gyasi's authorial strategy of tracing the intertwined lineages of Effia and Esi across generations and geographies. In both cases, the scar (on the body or in the national archive) stands as an undeniable wound everyone recognizes yet remains under-examined. By positioning Yaw's personal history as a teaching moment, Gyasi invites readers to confront how the transatlantic slave trade has left visible, embodied legacies—on bodies, on communities, in the classroom—and how, like Yaw's students, we often know only fractured, secondhand tales of that wound. The task for me as an instructor, then, is to press beyond familiar narratives to ask: whose version have we been taught, and whose remains untold? In linking Yaw's scar lesson to Gyasi's novel, we see pedagogy as an act of un-scarring: of piecing together the full, messy story until the wound itself becomes a source of collective understanding rather than mere spectacle.

One of the questions I posed to students was to discuss how cultures grappling with histories of violence, particularly slavery, and colonialism, employ literature and cultural productions as spaces for memory, mourning, healing, and even forgiveness. Their responses revealed that they do understand how scholars, artists, and people of African descent have used cultural productions, such as music, to explore the legacy of slavery. Gyasi's response to the above questions is *Homegoing*. The novel reimagines the trans-Atlantic slave trade, illuminating often-omitted histories within African, African diaspora, and Black Atlantic studies. For my students at Clemson, I thought the main lesson was to understand that the histories of slavery handed down to different generations are versions of the story of slavery and that grappling with the legacy of slavery must, of necessity, create space for new stories to emerge.

An important response that I would have perhaps brought to the attention of students—that I will include in future iterations of the course—is the public history projects exploring the legacy of slavery at Clemson and around the US. For instance, just as Yaw's scar in *Homegoing* lays bare a singular wound whose many competing origin stories prompt his students to reckon with how little they truly know of their own past, so too do recent projects, such as the Clemson Cemetery Project, invite us to acknowledge how our public landscapes conceal partial, contested histories of slavery. Between July 2020 and January 2021, ground-penetrating radar revealed over five hundred unmarked graves believed to be those of African American enslaved persons, sharecroppers, domestic workers, tenant farmers, convicted laborers, and their families on land whose layered narrative stretches from the forced removal of the Eastern Band of Cherokees through Scots-Irish settlement, plantation economies built on enslaved labor, Black sharecropping, and finally the rise of Clemson University atop Calhoun's Fort Hill Plantation. Scholars, descendant communities, and local members are working together to recover these stories—documenting the site, making its complexities publicly accessible, and holding a memorial that honors every life interred there. Like Gyasi's *Homegoing*, which refuses to let the "scar" of transatlantic slavery be reduced to a single, sanitized account, the cemetery project demonstrates that every historical narrative about this land is itself only one version of a larger truth and that we must continually open new spaces for the stories that remain unspoken. Gyasi's *Homegoing* is, then, a propitious novel for exploring the legacy of slavery.

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African Literary Culture and the Archival Stakes of Social Media

Ainehi Edoro-Glines
University of Wisconsin-Madison

Abstract: *This article argues for rethinking how we assign value to social media as a source of literary knowledge, with a focus on African literature. Drawing from media studies, archival theory, and African literary studies, it shows how social media platforms have become key spaces where the public life of African literary culture unfolds. Yet because this content often appears informal and ephemeral, it is rarely recognized as a legitimate site of literary knowledge. The article challenges that view, arguing that digital content deserves critical and archival attention.*

Keywords: African literature; social media; digital archives; platform studies; public literary culture; archival theory; media studies; epistemology

Imagine a scholar in the distant future trying to understand the world of African literature in our current historical moment. They are drawn to a curious feature of our time: how literature once lived within fast-moving streams of conversation, recorded on something called social media, and how different versions of this technology generated discourse around literary culture and, most importantly, captured the ephemeral noise surrounding books and reader experiences.

But most of what the scholar is looking for is missing. All they find are disjointed fragments: a viral reading list on African science fiction; a thread discussing Chimamanda Adichie's "We Should All Be Feminists"; an image of Abdulrazak Gurnah holding his Nobel medal, with its comments section long erased: a rag-tag pile of content that are barely traces of what used to be there. The platforms that once hosted these expanses of literary content are long gone. Other platforms and media tech have taken their place.

It's a strange paradox. The scholar can sense that the period they are studying produced an overwhelming amount of content on African literary culture—more than had been produced in the previous eras, but very little of it was saved in a meaningful way. How did a culture that lived so publicly, so visibly, leave so little behind?

The Archival Crisis of Digital Literary Culture

Every form of media carries its own structure of fragility. In oral cultures, knowledge was embedded in performance and social memory, carried by

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the voice, anchored to place, and transmitted across generations (Liu 5). Its fragility lay in its immediacy: the absence of the speaker made the transmission of knowledge precarious. Print culture, by contrast, stabilized knowledge on the page and gave it the appearance of permanence (Liu 8). But as Walter Benjamin observes in *One-Way Street*, the book encloses, systematizes, and in doing so, is always in danger of erasing (61–62). What cannot be indexed or folded into linear form is lost. The work of the collector, for Benjamin, was to rescue such fragments or remnants of experience flattened by the finality of the bound volume. Digital media inherit the fragilities of both orality and print and also introduce a new one. Platforms present themselves as archives, promising continuity, searchability, and infinite storage. But as scholars like Wendy Chun, Niels Brugger, and Abigail De Kosnik have shown, this promise is misleading. What appears to be an archive is often a surface engineered for circulation rather than preservation. Building on their insights into digital media as a problem of cultural memory and archival practices, this essay asks what such conditions mean for social media as a potential source for future literary historiography.

As founder and editor of *Brittle Paper*, I have overseen the publication of nearly 7,000 pieces of content, including literary news and original publications. Since its founding in 2010, the platform has documented everything from Adichie's Met Gala appearance to new issues of *Chimurenga Chronic* to Binyavanga Wainaina's coming out essay. Content was sourced from blogs, websites, and social media, recontextualized, and made available to readers as events and happenings in the life of African literature. The trajectory of many established authors today can be traced from when their early work was first published on *Brittle Paper*, through coverage of their rise in public culture, to their current status as anchors of the literary world. In this sense, *Brittle Paper* holds documents—in the form of fragments, episodes, and atmospheres—that are usable for producing multiple versions of the story of African literary culture in the twenty-first century, documents that might have otherwise been lost without this effort to gather and make them legible as an account of African literary life. The technical infrastructure behind *Brittle Paper* is modest: a WordPress CMS running on a paid server. It is not fail-proof. But its value lies in its epistemic stance: to treat African literary content on social media and the web at large as meaningful, to frame it as worthy of care, and to organize it as a space of cultural memory.

Social media platforms such as Instagram, Twitter/X, TikTok, and Facebook have become central infrastructures through which African literature is made visible. These platforms are no longer peripheral to literary culture; they now constitute a primary site for its public expression and

reception. But unlike libraries or archival institutions explicitly designed to preserve and transmit cultural memory, social media platforms are privately owned and commercially driven. They are also organized around algorithmically driven forms of engagement, by which I mean interactions measured by metrics like clicks, likes, and shares. Another issue to consider is that unlike literary canons, which provide frameworks for interpretation, define the questions we ask of texts, and structure our sense of innovation and tradition in literature, social media content has not yet been granted historical or epistemological weight in literary study. The issue is not whether social media should be canonized, but that social media content remains largely unreadable within existing literary methodologies. It has yet to be treated as a site of meaning-making that matters to how we study literature and its publics.

This raises a set of urgent, if still underexplored, questions. What is the archival status of social media posts, platform-native, born-digital content that increasingly constitutes the collective discourse on literature? To what extent can social media platforms be considered reliable repositories of cultural life? And beyond the question of platform reliability lies a broader epistemic challenge: what sort of scholarly investment is adequate to the task of rendering these digital materials legible, curatable, and accessible for future inquiry? Though focused on African literature, the problem addressed here is not uniquely African. Across literary studies, there remains a widespread reluctance to see social media content as material worth studying and teaching. The broader aim of this article is to highlight the importance of extending our archival imagination in order to see social media not as a distraction from literary life but as one of its key sites of expression and a foundation for how future literary histories will be written.

To explore these questions, this essay draws from digital media studies, archival theory, and African literary and cultural history to argue that what is ultimately at stake is the epistemological frame through which literature on social media is recognized as a site of knowledge. Put simply: What are the archival implications of seeing social media content as essential to the evolving story of African literature in the twenty-first century? In the sections that follow, I begin by examining how African literary culture has become entangled with the affordances and vulnerabilities of social media platforms. I then turn to the limits of platforms as archives, showing how their structures prioritize circulation over preservation and how this distinction creates epistemic blind spots within literary studies. Drawing from archival theory, I argue that what is needed are practices of consignation and care that treat social media content as historically and culturally meaningful. Finally, I propose a set of preliminary approaches

for preserving African literary discourse online. The main objective of this essay is to rethink the infrastructure of literary memory in the digital age and to imagine new forms of archival responsibility grounded in collective practice.

African Literature Lives on Social Media

The broader publishing ecosystem indicates the extent to which African literary culture depends on social media platforms for visibility. In major markets like the US and UK, which remain significant for African books, the industry's pivot to social platforms has been decisive. According to *Publisher's Weekly*, in 2024 alone, approximately 59 million print book sales were linked to BookTok-related content, and TikTok's #BookTok hashtag had amassed over 42 million posts and 200 billion views. Instagram's #Bookstagram hashtag now includes over 108 million posts. These numbers do not necessarily map cleanly onto African literature, but they indicate a terrain where visibility and market value are associated with books and authors increasingly depending on their presence on social media.

Many African authors, including those with substantial readerships and those who are lesser known, maintain some kind of online presence. Authors like Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie (with over a million Instagram followers and a celebrity presence) have become cultural nodes through which African literary discourse finds broader public attention. Across platforms, many established writers from diverse generations and regions of the continent, writers such as Rwanda's Scholastique Mukasonga, Congo Brazzaville's Alain Mabanckou, and Namibia's Remy Ngamije share content about their lives as authors. An army of emerging and aspiring authors use social media to share their writing and cultivate audiences. Institutions like the Ake Arts and Book Festival, Caine Prize, *Présence Africaine*, and African Poetry Book Fund curate online presences, while projects like Hana Baba's Sudanese folklore initiative and Nokokhanya Ntsaluba's Bookstagram page build literary community. Some, like Nnedi Okorafor, use social media as a central channel for engaging with readers. Across platforms like Facebook, Instagram, and X, she shares book announcements, commentary on literature and culture, weighs in on debates around generative AI, and posts about events and ideas in science fiction. For Okorafor, social media is a first line of contact with her audience. This reliance on social media reflects a broader shift in how authors navigate literary community in the platform age. A 2025 survey of 850 authors showed that over half used Instagram weekly, making it the second most-used platform for authors after Facebook (Derobert).

The forms of content generated around African literature on social media can be broadly grouped into three categories:

1. Book-centered content: Social media generates layers of media that surround and extend the lifespan of books. Authors, readers, publishers, booksellers, and influencers contribute to a steady stream of content that accompanies African books from early publicity to long after publication. This includes deal announcements, cover reveals, unboxing videos, and press tour diaries. Writers like Akwaeke Emezi use Instagram Lives to cultivate affective ties with their readerships. Tomi Adeyemi documents the writing process, creating a sense of shared stakes and personal investment among her followers, many of whom are aspiring writers. In this way, both the book and the author are nodes within a broader media ecosystem. Books are connected to memes, quotes, music playlists, photoshoots, fan art, and reader reactions. Central to the life of the book on social media is the role of the influencer or content creators. Bookstagrammers and Booktokkers create short videos, stylized photos, and personal reviews that introduce readers to books through reading challenges, mood-based recommendations, themed aesthetics, and dramatic reaction clips. Their content often focuses on how a book feels to read, using expressions of joy, heartbreak, or surprise, to make literature emotionally relatable and visually appealing. These practices transform the book from a static object into a dynamic constellation of media artifacts assembled from a constellation of digital content and social interactions.

2. Culture Infrastructure Content: This is a distinct layer of content that gathers around the institutional scaffolding of literary culture. Literary festivals like Ake Festival, Hargeysa International Book Fair, and Akada Children's Books Festival document their programming through behind-the-scenes content in addition to photographs and video clips from events. Publishers such as Cassava Republic, Masobe Books, and Jacana Media use Instagram to build brand identities, often centered around striking cover designs and author-forward promotion. Bookstores like Soma Nami in Kenya and Exclusive Books in South Africa curate their retail presence through social media, blurring the line between content and commerce. Residencies, awards, and literary organizations regularly post updates, archival materials, and calls for submissions. This kind of content highlights the behind-the-scenes work of African literary culture,

3. Paraliterary content: I define paraliterary content as social media material shared by writers, editors, and other literary figures that reflects aspects of their personal lives rather than their literary works. These posts are not explicitly promotional and are often unrelated to books or writing practice. Instead, they highlight moments of lived experience—romantic milestones, family events, lifestyle updates, wellness journeys, fashion choices—that circulate online and create various forms of intimacy between literary figures and their audiences. This category of content includes Nnedi Okorafor talking about cats, her Tesla, and the hummingbirds on

her feeder; Akwaeke Emezi sharing photos of their garden; Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie taking fans along on her MET Gala journey; Emmanuel Iduma and Ayobami Adebayo posting birthday love notes; Mona Eltahawy sharing workout videos; Tendai Huchu updating followers on his marathon runs; Bolu Babalola sharing photos of her engagement ring; Jane Igharo's pregnancy reveal post; Shirlene Obuobi reflecting on her divorce; Richard Ali posting about fatherhood; and Alain Mabanckou sharing a video tutorial on cooking fufu, reflecting on music, and frequently posting photos of his dogs.

While literary scholars have long drawn on private correspondence or retrospective accounts to understand authors' lives, there is something distinct about the scale, immediacy, and public-facing nature of this material. What does it mean that the literary public now expects, perhaps even demands, this kind of personal visibility? And what might this abundance of paraliterary content allow us to perceive (or obscure) about the construction of literary identity today?

While TikTok and Instagram now dominate the space, Twitter played a foundational role throughout the 2010s in building African literary networks. Authors like Zakes Mda continue to thrive in X (formerly Twitter) circles. More recently, platforms like Bluesky have begun making more niche, but no less essential, spaces for African literary culture.

This shift has led to what might be called an *artifactual turn* in literary public life. From the perspective of social media, African literary culture is now expressed through the continuous accumulation of diverse media objects. Though often described as a technology of connectivity, social media builds social relations through the production and circulation of reproducible content: videos, images, captions, and text fragments. As Nathan Jurgenson argues in *The Social Photo*, platforms transform even the most mundane expressions into media artifacts. A simple "hi" might take the form of a selfie, meme, GIF, or reaction image. In this way, sociality is both performed and documented at once. Readers and writers now connect through an unprecedented body of digital artifacts. Nowhere else in African literary history have we seen such a participatory and self-updating stream of materials.

But social media is not only composed of visible artifacts, as in the posts, images, videos, and captions that I have just surveyed. It also includes a second, less visible layer of data about how users interact with those artifacts. This includes behavioral traces (likes, follows, comments, watch time), metadata (timestamps, geolocation, device type), and the algorithmic processes that mine and circulate content based on these signals. Together, these two tiers, the expressive media and the data-driven infrastructure, create a dense, layered record of cultural life. It is striking that, for the first time in literary history, there exists a technology capable of

capturing and measuring a broad spectrum of reader interaction. Even if this information is often black-boxed or fragmented, its very existence marks a shift in what it means to document a literary culture as it is lived.

Despite the scale and breadth of information made possible by social media, it has yet to be fully integrated into the core methods and objects of literary study. Social media content remains a niche subject in journal articles and is more commonly studied in disciplines like media studies, communication, or journalism. Within English departments, social media is still often seen as peripheral, a domain of disposable or ephemeral content. This may be because, for scholars trained to interpret and engage with texts, the features of social media, its fragmentation and resistance to canonical framing, can easily be read as signs of disposability. Yet as Matthew Kirschenbaum reminds us, "effective preservation . . . must rest in large measure on the cultivation of new social practices to attend our new media (21).

If literary scholars have been slow to treat social media content as serious cultural material, part of the reason may lie in the nature of the platforms themselves. The issue is not only that social media feels too fragmented to analyze, but that it appears deceptively stable, offering the illusion of an ever-available archive. Platforms give the impression that cultural life is being continuously captured and preserved, ready for scholars to return to at any time. The next section examines the risks of relying on this false sense of security.

The Archival Fragility of Platform Content

This section traces two entangled problems at the heart of social media's archival crisis: the technical volatility of digital storage and the epistemological challenge of recognizing social media content as cultural knowledge worthy of care. At first glance, social media platforms appear to perform many of the functions of a traditional archive. Timelines simulate chronological order. Hashtags group content thematically. Search bars offer indexed retrieval. Content is stored, sorted, and endlessly scrollable. These features give users the sense that platforms are retaining cultural material or, for example, that a book review from five years ago, a tweet about a literary controversy, or a video of a panel discussion at a book festival is still "there," retrievable at any time. We imagine that the 23,000 pieces of content with the Instagram hashtag #ChinuaAchebe will always be there, continually expanding, preserved and transmissible through time.

Scholars and technologists have often held the assumption that digital culture guarantees permanence, that once something is online, it will stay there indefinitely (Mayer-Schönberger 91). Wendy Chun, in an early study of memory in digital media, calls this illusion the "always-thereness of

new media" (6), tracing it from Vannevar Bush's memory machine to early internet optimism that imagined "an ever-increasing archive in which no piece of data is lost" (7–8). But Chun insists this sense of continuity is misleading:

> Digital media is not always there. We suffer daily frustrations with digital sources that just disappear. Digital media is degenerative, forgetful, eraseable. This degeneration makes it both possible and impossible for it to imitate analog media. It is perhaps a history-making device, but only through its ahistorical (or memoryless) functioning, through the ways in which it constantly transmits and regenerates text and images. (13)

What appears fixed on screen is in fact continuously regenerated through a network of servers and scripts. Its presence is synthetic, dependent on infrastructural maintenance, and vulnerable to erasure. The sense of stability we associate with social media, such as its scrollable timelines, saved posts, and endlessly accessible images, is sustained by technical processes that can fail or be withdrawn at any time. Chun's work has been the foundation for more recent work on social media's archival issues. Building on this, Niels Brugger observes, in *The Archived Web* (2018), that "the web may not forget, but it is also constantly evolving, in most cases without leaving any traces" (75). Ella Klik, in "Ephemeral Design: Platform Capitalism and the Making of a Feature," shows how ephemerality is designed into social media monetization strategies through features that deliberately disappear content. Tamara Kneese's *Death Glitch* (2023) similarly details how platforms obscure digital decay by projecting an illusion of seamless continuity.

But there is another kind of crisis that is more epistemological than technical. Cultural memory requires more than the continued existence of files or media objects; it requires structures of recognition and interpretation. It requires an institution, a community, or a field to treat the material as something worth conserving. As Abigail De Kosnik argues in *Rogue Archives* (2016), the illusion that digital networks automatically preserve content, what she calls the myth of "the automatically archival Internet" (46), has obscured the human labor and cultural judgment involved in making memory possible. In reality, she writes, the internet "utterly fails as a memory machine" and only functions as an archive through the work of "techno-volunteers" (41, 46). These are self-appointed individuals and collectives who decide what is worth saving and take on the work of preserving it. She proposes a model of archival practice rooted in intentionality, community care, and what she calls "archival repertoire," by which she means a set of practices and habits passed between people, enabling

memory through sustained, often embodied, intervention (54). The crisis I trace in the digital life of African literature is not simply about disappearing files or decaying links. It is about a broader failure to recognize platform-native literary expression, as in tweets, memes, reels, caption threads, as objects of intellectual and cultural value. "It is evident," writes Brugger, "that the online web is not an archive itself, although it may appear to be at first glance; on the contrary, an individual, a group, or an institution has to collect and preserve it and make it available" (2). Unless scholars, critics, and communities take up the work of intentional curation and care, African literary culture on social media might not be made legible as a part of African literary history.

To be clear, I am not saying that social media is a chaotic expanse of media objects drifting without order or intent. While this essay emphasizes the structural design of platforms as corporate, extractive systems optimized for engagement rather than preservation, it is equally important to recognize that users often develop their own practices of care and memory within these constraints. Through curated grids of content in user profiles or features like Instagram highlights, saved posts, pinned tweets, and hashtags, users participate in informal systems of memory-making. These practices may be constrained by platform design, but they nonetheless reflect an impulse to collect. In some cases, creators and communities develop vernacular or grassroots methods of digital curation that challenge the ephemerality built into platform infrastructures. These practices complicate any binary opposition between platforms as anti-archival and users as passive.

Notwithstanding, these individual acts of memory and care differ from the kind of archival intervention I am attempting to identify. One way to articulate this difference is through Jacques Derrida's view of the archive as a structure of power and meaning. In *Archive Fever* (1995), Derrida argues that the archive is an act of consignation, by which he means the organizing, naming, and contextualizing of materials in ways that give them epistemic and historical weight. Following this, the crisis surrounding African literary content on social media is not only a technical one, neither is it the uncoordinated acts of collecting by individual users in their daily engagement with platforms. It is a failure of consignation. Platforms like Instagram create the conditions for visibility, but they do not, by default, perform the work of the archive in Derrida's sense. They do not establish what counts as cultural knowledge.

Take the hashtag #AbdulrazakGurnah, which currently holds over 5,000 pieces of content. The technical risk that all of it could vanish if Instagram were shut down is real. But the deeper concern, is that this content has not been contextualized in ways that would render it legible as historically valuable. Perhaps by generating discourse around it in the sense of

studying, teaching, or curating it, such content becomes part of the literary record and thus demands the interpretive labor routinely applied to other kinds of texts. Without that process, the hashtag remains a holding space merely. It is discoverable but remains unmarked and, therefore, inoperable within the broader and evolving canon of African literary formations.

The fragility I am identifying in social media is not entirely new within African literary history. Ashleigh Harris, drawing on the work of Chris Ouma, Bhakti Shringarpure, and Madhu Krishnan, highlights similar issues surrounding the little magazines of the twentieth century (*Penpoint*, *Black Orpheus*, *Drum*, *Grace*, *The Horn*), which were central to African literary formation (1). These magazines, often produced under precarious material and political conditions, were rarely systematically archived and are now more likely to be held in institutions in the Global North than in African national archives (3–4). Yet they played a foundational role in the development of African literature, offering an early platform for many writers who would go on to define the canon, writers such as Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o's early work in *Penpoint*, for example, or the many contributors who passed through *Black Orpheus*. This history reveals that African literary culture has always developed through media infrastructures vulnerable to neglect and dispersal. The fragility of social media content, in this sense, is, thus, part of a longer structural pattern of literary culture thriving in media forms that sit outside systems of stable preservation. Twenty-five years into the current century, it is necessary to reflect on what counts as a historical source, and to consider how the materials recognized or overlooked today will define what stories can or cannot be told about literary culture in this era.

Despite the universality of the problem, it may carry particular weight in African literary studies. Neglecting the curatorial possibilities of social media risks repeating patterns of archival dispossession that have long obscured African cultural forms. What is at stake is the capacity to define the terms on which knowledge of African worlds becomes legible now and for the future.

Toward Archival Care

To imagine preservation today is to imagine curation differently. As Swiss art curator Hans Ulrich Obrist reminds us, the curator's original task—*curare*, to care—has always been about more than selecting or displaying objects (24–25). It is about cultivating meaning amid abundance, about organizing fragments into shared memory. In the context of African literary content on social media, this ethos of care becomes especially urgent. We are not lacking material; we are awash in it. What is missing are the intentional practices that recognize such content as meaningful, worth gathering, and capable of shaping cultural history. Obrist's vision of

curation as a response to modern saturation, "a shift in the ratio of importance between making new objects and choosing from what is already there" (24), helps clarify the stakes. The task is no longer simply to celebrate African literature's visibility online, but to treat its digital traces as part of an evolving archive.

If curating is, as Obrist argues, a form of care shaped by selection, context, and intention, then the question becomes: Who is positioned to perform that care in the digital sphere? De Kosnik reminds us that archives are made by people who care enough to preserve (16), but we must also ask: *Who do we trust to preserve culture, and for whom?* Historically, archives have been stewarded by public institutions such as libraries, museums, and universities, designed, however unevenly, to serve collective access and long-term conservation. But today, the largest and most dynamic record of African literary life lives inside commercial platforms: Instagram, Twitter/X, TikTok, and YouTube. These companies are not accountable to any public, neither are they obligated to preserve, contextualize, or make accessible the cultural material they host.

In 2010, Twitter donated its archive of public tweets from 2006 to 2010 to the Library of Congress (LOC), initiating a project to preserve every public tweet moving forward. By 2013, the archive had grown to over 170 billion tweets. But the Library ultimately found the volume and complexity of the material unmanageable (Osterberg, "Update 2013"). In 2017, it formally narrowed the scope of the project, opting to preserve only select tweets deemed of significant historical interest (Osterberg, "Update 2017"). While the technological limitations were real, the deeper issue was epistemological: A print-era model of significance, rooted in thematic selection and bounded artifacts, was incompatible with the fluid, participatory, and high-velocity nature of social media content. For African literary culture, this failure is instructive. It reveals that institutional good will is insufficient without a corresponding shift in archival imagination. If even the Library of Congress, with its resources and national mandate, could not sustain a total archive of social media, we must acknowledge that preservation will not necessarily come from above. It must be built through collective strategies of care, adapted to the rhythms and aesthetics of digital life.

The Library of Congress's attempt to archive every public tweet illustrates just how complex, and often overwhelming, the preservation of social media can be. It is evidence that even the most well-resourced institutions, with the clearest preservation mandates, have struggled to translate good intentions into sustainable digital archiving. Despite its institutional authority and commitment to public memory, the LOC ultimately scaled back its ambitions, citing the sheer volume, structural complexity, and unmanageable velocity of the content. This example is

important not to discourage action, but to clarify that good intentions are not enough. Archiving social media is not simply a matter of collection. It requires new epistemologies, infrastructures, and practices attuned to the relational, performative, and unstable nature of digital content. My argument, then, is not a naïve call for total capture. It is a call for contextual, collaborative, and appropriately scaled approaches to preservation, built around the specific rhythms and forms of African literary culture online. What follows are preliminary models for what that might look like.

To address the archival precarity of African literary culture online, we must develop models of care that are both scalable and grounded in community expertise. Niels Brugger's distinction between macro- and micro-web archiving offers a useful framework (79–80). Macro-archiving (i.e., large-scale, systematic captures of vast web domains, such as The Internet Archive's Wayback Machine) is typically conducted by institutions. While such infrastructure does not yet exist on the continent at scale, we can imagine future collaborations where academic institutions or pan-African cultural bodies initiate regional web crawls. This could provide long-term preservation of the African literary digital sphere in aggregate. But given the volatility of platforms and the urgency of the problem, micro-archiving may be the more immediately viable and culturally responsive model. Literary journals, digital curators, and scholars might create targeted archives around specific events (e.g., the online reception of a major book prize), accounts (e.g., a writer's Instagram), or communities (e.g., Bookstagram networks). Projects like *Brittle Paper* already function this way through curating literary news content. These efforts could be formalized through partnerships with academic archives, ensuring long-term preservation.

And beyond institutional archiving, there is a pedagogical imperative to teach new forms of archival literacy attuned to digital life. Curation must become a learned, collective practice. Literary classrooms, reading communities, and professional networks like the African Speculative Fiction Society could build small-scale, participatory archives, training students, readers, and writers alike to identify, contextualize, and preserve the digital traces of their culture. Such projects need not be grand in scale to be meaningful. Even modest, classroom-based interventions, like curating a single author's Instagram, or documenting online reactions to a book launch, can reframe preservation as a shared, generative act. In this sense, pedagogy becomes a mode of cultural stewardship, a way of cultivating care for what is otherwise dismissed as fleeting and embedding archival consciousness within the very communities that produce African literary life online.

Of course, the work of digital curation is not without its risks. As scholars begin to engage with social media content, we must ask: When does archival care verge on extraction? As scholars like Sasha Costanza-Chock

have emphasized in *Design Justice: Community-Led Practices to Build the Worlds We Need* (2020), even well-intentioned acts of data collection can replicate extractive logics when they are not grounded in consent, equity, and community accountability. Public content is not always intended for institutional preservation, and emotional or aesthetic expressions, especially from grassroots communities, can lose context when removed from their original rhythms of sharing and reception. Ruha Benjamin, in *Race After Technology* (2019), extends this concern by showing how data systems often encode forms of racial hierarchy, reminding us that archival efforts, too, can reinforce power asymmetries if not critically reimagined. Attending to these kinds of risks is part of the larger work of understanding how technology transforms the nature of the object, the conditions of its creation, and the possibilities for its future legibility.

Social media presents a new kind of record. It is dense, participatory, affectively charged, and produced by platform logics that challenge our assumptions about what literature looks like and how it indexes itself as being of value. I am advocating a rethinking of the frameworks through which we understand the public life of literature. The task ahead is to imagine new curatorial practices attuned to the aesthetics, rhythms, and sociality of digital literary culture. This article has been an invitation to expand what counts as a literary document and what its usable record.

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Literature and the Advancement of Cultural and Intellectual Modernity in Africa and the United States: Daniel Simon in Conversation with Chibueze Darlington Anuonye

Chibueze Darlington Anuonye
University of Nebraska-Lincoln

Daniel Simon
University of Oklahoma

Abstract: *In this conversation, Daniel Simon and Chibueze Darlington Anuonye discuss the role literature plays in the advancement of the intellectual and cultural modernity of Africa and the United States.*

Keywords: African literature; African literary studies; American literary establishment; cultural and intellectual modernity

Introduction by Chibueze Darlington Anuonye

Daniel Simon and I have corresponded for three years, he as editor in chief of *World Literature Today*, I as a contributing author to the magazine, before we met on April 19 at the University of Nebraska-Lincoln as guests of the creative writing program to reflect on the role literature plays in the advancement of cultural and intellectual modernity in Africa and the United States. From the 1950s to the late 1990s, British publishers and literary prizes supported the emergence of African writing in the global literary scene. Heinemann, with its African Writers Series, spread African literature beyond Africa. Alan Hill, who co-established the series with Van Milne in 1962 to meet the intellectual demands of an expanding market of African readers that desired to study works by African authors after decades of colonial imposition of European literature, was first drawn to the literary quality of the works of writers like Chinua Achebe, whose debut novel *Things Fall Apart* Heinemann had published four years earlier under its general market imprint, William Heinemann. James Currey, an influential editor of the series, would have a cause in 2003 to celebrate Achebe's pioneering role as the series' first and most preeminent editorial advisor. Currey's remark that titles from the series dominated the list of "Africa's Best Books" published in 2002 highlights the impact of the

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literary project, an achievement that inspired Becky Clarke, Heinmann's African and Caribbean Writers Series' editor for twelve years, to describe the African Writers Series as an institution that conferred literary and cultural legitimacy on African writers and helped build the canon of African literature. Although the series suddenly stopped publishing new titles in 2003, it was recently relaunched as a collaboration between the Oxford-based Abibiman Publishing and the James Currey Society.

Since the turn of the twenty-first century, American literary institutions have been at the forefront of promoting African writing in a manner that surpasses the pan-African bond between mid-twentieth century African writers like Achebe and Wole Soyinka, and their African American counterparts, like James Baldwin and Toni Morrison. Beginning, perhaps, with the 2003 publication of Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie's *Purple Hibiscus* by US-based Algonquin Books, the relationship between African literature and the American literary establishment has been marked by a shared interest in the literary value of postcolonial writing and the economics of culture. For instance, the Iowa Writers' Workshop and the International Writing Program at the University of Iowa have hosted an impressive cast of contemporary African writers, including Nigerian poets Romeo Oriogun, a finalist for the 2023 National Book Critics Circle Award, and Okwudili Nebeolisa, author of *Terminal Maladies* and winner of the 2023 Center for African American Poetry and Poetics Book Prize. In prose, there are the Nigerians Ukamaka Olisakwe, author of *Ogadinma* and editor of *Isele Magazine*; Otosirieze Young-Obi, a former deputy editor at *Brittle Paper* and founder of *Open Country*; and in playwriting, there is Cheta Igbokwe, author of *Homecoming* and a former editor of *The Muse*. In the tradition of the African Writers Series, these writers are expanding African literature not just by publishing their own writing but also by promoting the works of other writers as editors.

America's interest in African writing extends well beyond Iowa. African writers are found in distinguished MFA programs in the US. Nigerian debut author Chukwuebuka Ibeh, whose novel *Blessings* has secured international translation and film rights, recently completed his MFA studies at Washington University in St. Louis. Dera Duru, a Nigerian finalist for the 2022 Commonwealth Short Story Prize, is in the Fiction program at Emerson College. Chisom Okafor, Nigerian poet and a finalist for the 2022 Brunel International African Poetry Prize, is in the Poetry program at the University of Alabama. Rwandan poet Alain Jules Hirwa earned an MFA at Texas State University, and Kenyan short story writer Idza Luhumyo, also a graduate of the MFA program at Texas State, won the 2022 AKO Caine Prize for African Writing, the 2021 Short Story Africa Prize, and the inaugural Margaret Busby New Daughters of Africa Award in 2020. Lincoln, Nebraska is emerging as a major center for African writing with the presence of Ugadan poet Ber Anena, winner of the 2018 Wole Soyinka Prize for Literature in

Africa; Nigerian fiction writer Uche Okonkwo, author of *Oprah Daily's* most anticipated book of 2024, *A Kind of Madness*; Nigerian novelist Chigozie Obioma, a two-time Booker Prize finalist; and Ghanaian poet and literary administrator Kwame Dawes, whose African Poetry Book Fund is largely responsible for the incredible global outreach of African poets writing and publishing in this century. By identifying talented young poets through the Sillerman First Book Prize for African Poets and providing publishing opportunities for them, the African Poetry Book Fund makes an enormous investment in African writing. In addition to the impressive number of African writers studying and teaching in various MFA programs in the US, US-based magazines promote African literature by publishing contemporary African writers. The Spring 2024 issue of *North American Review* features "Winter," a poem by South African writer B. D. Oliver, which celebrates the small, ordinary moments of life that can easily elude us in the shuddering coldness of winter. And Animashaun Ameen's eloquent poem "Gay Chicken" opens the Spring 2024 edition of *Rattle*.

African writers are not only beneficiaries of America's literary patronage but also guardians of America's literary culture. Nigerian writer Tobi Kassim serves as the associate poetry editor of *West Branch*, a magazine of the Stadler Center for Poetry and Literary Arts at Bucknell University. Elinam Agbo, who was born in Ghana and raised in Kansas, and who since August 2023 has been working as an assistant professor of English at Bucknell, is on the editorial advisory board of *West Branch*. Nigerian writer and lecturer in creative writing at Cornell University Chioma Iwunze-Ibiam serves as an assistant editor at *Epoch*. Nigerian poets Logan February and J. K. Anowe are respectively editor in chief and poetry editor at *Sycamore Review*, a publication of Purdue University. Nigerian writers Kanyinsola Olorunnisola, Iquo DianaAbasi, Chinecherem Obor, Ernest Ohia and Funmi Omo Moji are on the editorial team of *Black Warrior Review*, a semiannual journal published by the University of Alabama. Pemi Aguda, author of the story collection *Grassroots* and the novel *The Suicide Mothers*, forthcoming from W.W. Norton, is currently the Hortense Spillers assistant editor at *Transition*. This list is endless; the relationship is mutually beneficial.

The conversation reproduced here in an abridged version focuses on the literary relationship between African and the US. Although Daniel and I have different cultural backgrounds, we are connected by a scholarly interest in comparative literature and are drawn, by our work as editors, to the intercontinental cultural collaborations that enable African literature to assert itself in a globalized world, especially in North America.

Anuonye: Daniel, you have been the editor in chief of *World Literature Today* for more than two decades now. What does the term "world literature" mean to your magazine?

Simon: We probably most often think of David Damrosch's definition in *What Is World Literature?* He said there are "classics," mostly from the ancient world; and there are writings from the era of modernity to the early twentieth century, that everyone mostly recognizes as "masterpieces." And then today we have "*windows on the world*" (9). That is what he calls this new era in which we are multiplying our perspective in terms of cultures, genres, languages, gender, race, and trying to get a sense of what that broader republic of letters looks like. In honor of our conversation today, I brought a couple of recent issues of *World Literature Today* magazine focused on African literature. This, our March/April 2022 edition, *New African Voices*, is guest-edited by Mahtem Shiferraw, who is one of the poets in Dawes's African Poetry Book Fund project. Shiferraw brought together contemporary voices from all over Africa and the diaspora to feature them in the issue, including Nkateko Masinga, Famila Nkansa, Adedayo Agarau, Lena Bezawork Grönlund, Henneh Kwaku, Nour Kamel, Saba Sebhatu, Sherry Shenoda, Yalie Kamara, Vuyelwa Maluleke, Gathondu Mwangi, Safia Jama, Henk Rossouw, and Nadra Mabrouk. And in this January/February 2023 edition we featured Senegalese writer Boubacar Boris Diop, who writes now in Wolof, but mostly wrote in French throughout his career. I had the privilege of teaching a course devoted to Diop's work in the fall of 2022 when he came to Oklahoma to accept the Neustadt International Prize for Literature, which we sponsor. Neustadt is an anti-Nobel Prize in some ways because of its track record of being more diverse in its representation compared to the Nobel, which has gone in the last fifty years mostly to European writers. There is that attempt in our publication to manifest diversity and to look at it from the perspective of "today," in terms of what is most exciting to us as a team of editors trying to expand beyond that Eurocentric inheritance that challenges even us. We have had over the years to embrace writings from Asia, the Middle East, Africa, Latin America and beyond.

Anuonye: As someone who is involved in the processes of production, circulation and valuation of African writing in the United States, how would you appraise the positionality of African literature as a postcolonial entity?

Simon: I must admit that I find your question about the positionality of African literature as a postcolonial entity somewhat daunting, since postcolonial Africa is such a vast subject, and my own knowledge of the subject is framed by the constraints of my engagement as a translator, professor, and editor. As a translator, I have mostly translated Francophone Maghrebi writers, including Kebir Ammi, Abdellah Taïa, Boualem Sansal, Tahar Ben Jelloun, and Assia Djebar. As a professor at the University of Oklahoma, I have had the privilege of teaching essays by Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o, Abiola Irele, Binyavanga Wainaina, and Nasrin Qader, as well as Diop's seminal works: *The Knight and His Shadow*, *Murambi*, *Doomi Golo*, and *Kaveena*.

During Diop's visit to Oklahoma, we also premiered a dance film based on his prose poem "Black and Blues," from *Mediterranean: Migrant Crossings*, choreographed and co-directed by Marie Casimir and Jessica Karis Ray. The livestream version of that year's Neustadt Literature Festival drew participants from some forty countries worldwide, making the festival a truly global celebration of literature and the arts.

Perhaps my greatest influence in this regard has been in my role as the editor of *World Literature Today*, to the extent that I have been championing contemporary African literature on the pages of the magazine since 2002. Since then, we have published poetry, fiction, essays, creative nonfiction, numerous interviews with, and reviews of books by a few hundred African writers, including cover features devoted to the 2022 issue that Shiferraw guest-edited, and the literature of Equatorial Guinea in 2012, as well as cover portfolios dedicated to Diop, Alain Mabanckou, Meshack Asare, Mia Couto, and Maaza Mengiste. Just this week, *World Literature Today* published an essay on Wole Soyinka and a short story by Mahmoud Fikry in its July 2024 issue. I accepted a piece translated by Jonas Elbousty on the great Moroccan writer Mohamed Choukri; and we have forthcoming work by Nnamdi Oguike, Saliha Haddad, and Vonani Bila in our fall issues. What strikes me about the positionality of postcolonial African literature is the brilliance of so many contemporary writers who are shaping the broader currents of world literature in the diaspora as well as being in dialogue with artists, filmmakers, scholars, cultural centers, and more. My hope is that *World Literature Today* will continue to promote awareness of this flourishing for many years to come.

Perhaps you could talk about your positionality as an editor looking back home from abroad. I admire the care it took to curate and edit your forthcoming anthology of contemporary poetry, *Unbound*.

Anuonye: I do not even need to look back at Nigeria. I never left. You can hardly escape the country. I try to explain what Nigeria is to Americans. Most times they do not understand me, and it is not their fault. Nigeria brings itself to you, no matter where you are. The audacity is shocking because the things you see and read in the news are often cruel. From cases of human rights abuses to outright social violence perpetrated both by the political class and the people. My work is a witness to the insanity of the nation. What else is there to do? Well, I also celebrate the lives of ordinary people who thrive despite our madness. You are right, it took Nduka Otiono and I much thought and care to bring *Unbound* to life. The anthology comprises the works of eighty-three young Nigerian poets writing from the country and the diaspora. My generation inherited and continues to live with the trauma of the civil war that our parents experienced as children. Nigeria disintegrated from that point. *Unbound* is an account of our hope of

recovery and our determination to disinherit the silent violence of the afterwar. In the anthology, there are poems by writers, citizens, queer and straight alike, declaring their unbridgeable humanity. I imagine that one day I will travel to my hometown and someone will walk up to me and say: "What has your literature done for me?" I will share the story of how my edited anthology of African short stories *Selfies and Signatures* gave a woman who was in an abusive marriage for several years the courage to choose herself and the wisdom to leave her partner while she was still breathing.

Simon: I think of Wallace Stevens's "The Noble Rider and the Sound of Words," in which he talks about "the imagination pressing back against the pressure of reality" (36). Amazing work, Darlington. The idea that the literary imagination can effect change in the real world is something I think we all aspire to as writers and editors in some sense. I have similar hopes in editing *World Literature Today*. We have about 1.7 million readers on an annual basis in places that you would not expect. The Philippines and India are two of our largest overseas readerships. So, you never know what is going to evolve in this vocation that we choose as editors, but for me, it has just been a labor of love for all these years.

Anuonye: A wonderful thing about editing is that it grants us access to some of the finest thoughts and writings of our time, in their rawest, most incandescent forms. A few weeks ago, I was editing a drama text that reminded me of Nigerian playwright Esiaba Irobi's play *Sycorax*, a postcolonial adaptation and critique of Shakespeare's *The Tempest*. Since then, I have been reflecting on what Shakespeare means to Africa. I once jokingly told Stephen Buhler, a brilliant scholar of the global studies of Shakespeare, that we do not have Shakespeare in Africa. He said we did and went on to share Orson Welles's 1952 adaptation of *Othello*. Welles was a fine director and actor. But can we say that he escaped the racial crisis of this age in the production of *Othello*? Much of the work was shot in Mogador, North Africa, a place Welles described as "a condemned area" in his book of conversation with Peter Bogdanovich. I suppose he was generous enough to locate Othello's story in that part of the world deserted by God and bereft of civilization. The irony is glaring. Welles was both a victim and an enabler of White bigotry. That was perhaps why he could not find a worthy Black person to take on the role of Othello, or perhaps why he felt suitably qualified to be Othello and the director of *Othello*. As Othello, Welles is eloquent. But what does this eloquence inspire beyond the theatrical imaginary of a fictional world? Whether Welles was conscious of this or not, his role legitimized the orientalist illusion of the existence of the poor, voiceless "other," who should not only be represented but who must also remain thankful for that charity. Again, Welles lived and worked in an age that felt justified to speak for, and not even to, Black people. My insistence that Shakespeare is absent in Africa

is ideological. I am questioning the usefulness of how we adapt, dramatize, read and teach Shakespeare. I am not sure I would have thought so deeply about this had I not encountered the text I was editing then.

Simon: Growing up here in Nebraska in a rural setting, I assumed that the European migration narrative was the only story. Archaeological discoveries have mapped Native villages all along the river. For instance, la Rivière Platte, as the French named the Platte River, was an adaptation of an Oto word which means "flat water." So, the French explorers merely said, "This is flat water." And by that they assumed they had discovered the river. Seeing the dispossession that marks that legacy of conquest, the "unspeakable sadness" that David Wishart and other scholars have documented in our history, you have to confront that violence. In doing so, you realize that there are multiple stories about an event. For instance, the Oklahoma City bombing of 1995 is a legacy of hate, just like the Rwanda genocide of 1994. There is this "pyramid of hate" that has been documented by the Anti-Defamation League that exposes simple acts of bias and discrimination which lead ultimately to genocide. I think as writers, we have to wrestle with that violence. As editors, we have to think about what representation means on our pages in that broader sense and how we are complicit in that single story. Once, after talking about the pyramid of hate in my Diop course, my students came up with a "pyramid of love" that is built on knowledge, respect, empathy, inclusion, justice, peacemaking, forgiveness, and love. At one point, one of Diop's characters in *Kaveena* says, "Ça pèse quoi?"—what does it weigh?—in reference to the worth of a single life. This is a question we must ask ourselves again and again. And in his essay "Transforming Genocide into Art," Diop writes, "One might say the survivors and the dead silently commissioned us to write these texts" (8).

Anuonye: Speaking of justice and respect, just yesterday, an American associate asked me what I thought about Christianity, ending with this question: "Where does the soul go when we die?" I told him that in my culture, we do not die; we simply transition. The unborn, the living and the dead are united in the cycle of life. I wish I had recommended Ben Okri's *The Famished Road* to him. He needs to experience Azaro's world. He might end up describing Azaro's life as otherworldly, but the world Azaro lives in and represents is one that is familiar to many Africans who simultaneously reside in both the spiritual and secular realms of existence. I know that my response shocked my associate's Western, very American, imagination. There is so much religious madness going on in Africa now, and shamefully Christianity is at the center of this disease. We have more churches than schools in Nigeria. Achebe's *Arrow of God* tells us about the debasement of African spirituality by the violent agency of Christianity; Ferdinand Oyono's *Houseboy* accompanies us to witness the despoliation of

the bodies and minds of Africans by European Christians who are also caretakers of colonial spoils. In Soyinka's *The Trials of Brother Jero* and Ngũgĩ's *Petals of Blood*, we find that Africans have overtaken Europeans in the act of Christian exploitation. Adichie's *Purple Hibiscus* has a fanatical Roman Catholic character, Eugene, who abuses his family for his Christian belief. Christianity emboldens homophobia in recent books like Ibeh's *Blessings*, a story of queer identity and belonging in a heteronormative society.

My point is that I am a Christian, born in a radically and senselessly "Christian nation," which is why I am impatient with American evangelists who ask me if I had heard about Jesus Christ before preaching to me. Go ahead and tell me what Jesus has to say, but do not ask me if I know him. "Jesus is the sweetest name I know," that is the lyric of one of our most beloved Christian songs. We were colonized by Britain, and Britain was Jesus's only begotten child; now America has claimed that position. So, by colonial affiliation, Nigeria was also an only begotten child, even if begotten by affliction. Catholicism and Anglicanism tried to exempt themselves from their role in colonialism. When that proved impossible, they began the work of cultural pacification. This is why Catholic and Anglican churches in Africa today are trying to orient themselves towards the culture of the people. I told my American associate that White Christian missionaries came to Africa, alongside their relatives and friends who were colonial administrators and predators, and declared that we had no culture, no language, no modernity, and that we needed their help to become free from our nothingness. When it seemed that the aggression of the European empires and their religions were gradually declining, America helped spread Pentecostalism, a more insidious colonial structure, into Africa. Go to Olisakwe's *Ogadinma*, Oguike's *Do Not Say It's Not Your Country*, and see what has become of Christianity in Nigeria. We are now besieged by an incredible emptiness of being. In my writing, as well as in the works I curate, edit, and critique, I try to pay attention to how we can tell our stories properly as Africans without losing our humanity; how we can balance our stories, retrieve a civilization that was broken by colonialism, or at least acknowledge that we were something before Europe said we were nothing. The joy of that acknowledgment can keep us moving because the African writer may just be a spark away from madness.

Simon: Being a postcolonial writer of French expression, Alain Mabanckou talks about "becoming globalized without losing your mind" (64).

Anuonye: Dambudzo Marechera's *House of Hunger* opens with the insanely powerful confession, "I got my things and left." A semi-autobiographical novel, in which Marechera, "a black man who has suffered all the stupid brutalities of white oppression in Rhodesia," lets "his rage explode, not in political rhetoric, but in a fusion of lyricism, wit and obscenity." Those are

the words of Doris Lessing. Marechera was a tortured genius who fought colonialism and racism everywhere he went; at the University of Rhodesia (now the University of Zimbabwe) and Oxford University. In both institutions, he was expelled for his strong and often violent stand against all forms of colonial bondage. The world wanted to pacify Marechera by reminding him that he was an intellectual enjoying the education of the West, something many of his kind in Africa did not have. But Marechera spoke even more loudly because he was an intellectual, and he died for it. *House of Hunger* carries the language and temper of decolonization.

Simon: When I was teaching Diop, I asked my students to read Ngũgĩ's "The Language of African Literature," in which he talks about the African literature conference at Makerere in 1962, and how at that event the literature of Africa was seen only through the lens of English, even though there are over two thousand languages on the continent. After the Berlin Conference of 1884 divided up the continent into Portuguese, French, English, and Spanish colonial territories, the imposition of those languages on Africa followed. This had an effect on African writers that continued into the postcolonial era. But Ngũgĩ talks about language as a carrier of culture and explains how in his own work in Gikuyu—and for other writers like Diop writing in Wolof—there is an attempt to reconnect the tissue of culture beyond that postcolonial legacy they inherited.

Anuonye: In an earlier essay, "The Dead End of African Literature?" also written in response to the Makerere Conference, Obi Wali declared that African creative writers who write in English and other European languages were upholding the legacy of colonialism. But Achebe wrote "English and the African Writer," challenging Wali's verdict that African literature had reached its dead end. He made this reassuring pronouncement: "I feel that the English language will be able to carry the weight of my African experience. But it will have to be a new English, still in full communion with its ancestral home but altered to suit its new African surroundings." It is a dumbfounding cycle.

Simon: I understand, Darlington. This is why on the *World Literature Today* website, we publish poetry typically in bilingual or even trilingual versions, but most of what appears in the print edition of the magazine is in English. Translations probably are about 40 percent of what we publish, as we try to feature writers not writing in English. You may have seen in that Diop issue that Ted Kooser has a poem. So, we try to be as democratic as possible by featuring writers whose voices we think deserve to be heard. We are always interested in being good literary citizens, where we are in Oklahoma, representing the Native American, African American, Hispanic, African, and other voices. But absolutely, I am open to broadening

our literary geographical and ideological range by publishing more contemporary African voices.

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A poet, translator, essayist, **Daniel Simon** is assistant director and editor in chief of *World Literature Today* at the University of Oklahoma, where he also serves on the English, International Studies, and Judaic Studies faculty. The author of two previous verse collections, his third book of poems, *Under a Gathering Sky*, was published by Stephen F. Austin State University Press.

Chibueze Darlington Anuonye is the curator of *Selfies and Signatures: An Afro Anthology of Short Stories, co-editor of Daybreak: An Anthology of Nigerian Short Fiction* and *Unbound: An Anthology of New Nigerian Poets*, and editor of *Through the Eye of a Needle: Art in the Time of Coronavirus* and *Who Gave the Order?*

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New Directions in African Film Studies

Lizelle Bisschoff
University of Glasgow

Lokangaka Losambe, *Postcolonial Agency in African and Diasporic Literature and Film: A Study in Globalectics.* Routledge, 2022. Hardcover. $152.

Lindsey B. Green-Simms, *Queer African Cinemas.* Duke UP, 2022. Paperback. $27.95.

Matthew H. Brown, *Indirect Subjects: Nollywood's Local Address.* Duke UP, 2021. Paperback. $28.95.

This review essay examines three recent contributions to African film studies: Lokangaka Losambe's *Postcolonial Agency in African and Diasporic Literature and Film*, Lindsey B. Green-Simms's *Queer African Cinemas*, and Matthew H. Brown's *Indirect Subjects: Nollywood's Local Address*. Each book proposes a distinctive framework for interpreting African screen media, addressing questions of agency, subjectivity, and modernity. The essay explores how these texts expand the field's methodological and theoretical horizons—utilising concepts such as *globalectics*, *Afri-queer fugitivity* and *periliberalism*—to read cinematic form and reception across diverse contexts. Attention is given to the ways in which these authors reconsider the African film canon, foreground new archives, and offer innovative approaches to issues of visibility, indirectness, and cultural negotiation. The review situates these works within broader developments in African cinema, including recent trends in genre, distribution, and representation, and argues for a plural and flexible critical practice attuned to the evolving nature of African screen cultures.

Introduction: Reimagining the Postcolonial Screen

African cinema today is a field of remarkable vitality and complexity, having evolved beyond the ideological frameworks that defined its early post-independence iterations. If the pioneers of African cinema, such as Ousmane Sembene and Souleymane Cissé, viewed cinema primarily as a vehicle for political instruction or national consciousness, African cinema has grown into a dynamic and multifaceted field marked by thematic expansion, formal innovation, and regional differentiation.

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This vibrancy is mirrored by growing global attention, with African films becoming regular fixtures at international festivals such as Cannes, Berlinale, and FESPACO. Recent examples include *Dahomey* (Mati Diop, Senegal/France, 2024), a poetic reflection on colonial restitution that won the Golden Bear at Berlinale; *Goodbye Julia* (Mohamed Kordofani, Sudan, 2023), a drama of post-secession reconciliation in Sudan; *Banel & Adama* (Ramata-Toulaye Sy, Senegal, 2023), a lyrical love story rooted in Sahelian mythology; and *Sira* (Apolline Traoré, Burkina Faso, 2023), a feminist survival narrative set against the backdrop of Sahelian insurgency. Other recent standouts point to the growing genre range of African cinema: *My Father's Shadow* (Akinola Davies Jr., Nigeria/UK, 2025) is a political family drama set during Nigeria's 1993 election crisis; *Aisha Can't Fly Away* (Morad Mostafa, Egypt, 2025), explores migrant vulnerability and gendered injustice in Cairo; *Mami Wata* (C. J. Obasi, Nigeria/France/UK, 2023), awarded for cinematography at Sundance, reimagines West African folklore through mythic and feminist aesthetics. These films span documentary, thriller, speculative fiction, melodrama, and experimental cinema, underscoring the aesthetic and thematic diversity of the continent's current screen landscape.

These developments have catalyzed a vibrant scholarly response. Recent publications, such as Kenneth W. Harrow's *African Cinema in a Global Age* (2023), Boukary Sawadogo's *African Film Studies: An Introduction* (2023), and Alexie Tcheuyap's *African Documentary Cinema* (2024), map new terrain in the field, foregrounding themes such as global circulation, documentary ethics, and pedagogical shifts. The three-volume collection *African Cinema: Manifesto and Practice for Cultural Decolonization* (Martin and Kaboré, 2023) advocate decolonial methodologies, pushing beyond aesthetics of resistance to interrogate geopolitics, digital media, and genre experimentation. Another notable addition is *Contemporary African Screen Worlds* (Dovey, Agina, and Thomas, 2025), which explores the diverse infrastructures and everyday screen cultures shaping African visual life.

It is within this context that this review essay examines three further recent scholarly books that signal critical shifts in African film studies:

- Lokangaka Losambe's *Postcolonial Agency in African and Diasporic Literature and Film* (2022)
- Lindsey B. Green-Simms's *Queer African Cinemas* (2022)
- Matthew H. Brown's *Indirect Subjects: Nollywood's Local Address* (2021)

Each of these works interrogates African cinema from a distinct but complementary critical perspective. Losambe introduces *globalectics* to conceptualize postcolonial agency in film and literature across interconnected global systems. Green-Simms analyzes a broad archive of queer African

cinema often produced in anti-queer and homophobic environments, through her concept of *Afri-queer fugitivity*, describing how queer Africans attempt to escape objectification, evade oppression, and reimagine the past, present, and future. Brown theorizes Nollywood through the prism of *indirect subjects*, reframing how Nigerian screen media construct viewers and publics under conditions of *periliberalism*—a structural position of simultaneous exclusion from and complicity in global liberal modernity.

Together, these texts reflect important developments in the field. The authors examine how agency is negotiated through narrative, aesthetics, and reception, and they challenge binary frameworks such as tradition versus modernity or resistance versus co-optation, offering more responsive accounts of how African filmmakers operate within overlapping postcolonial, global, and local conditions. This review synthesizes their arguments to map broader developments in African film studies. In doing so, it underscores the relevance of African film to current debates in postcolonial theory, queer studies, and global media studies.

Postcolonial Agency*: Losambe's Aesthetic Politics*

Lokangaka Losambe's *Postcolonial Agency in African and Diasporic Literature and Film* (Routledge, 2022) offers a timely intervention into African cinema (and literature) by centering the notion of agency within a globalized postcolonial framework. Drawing on Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o's concept of *globalectics*, Losambe explores how African and diasporic films express aesthetic and cultural agency that negotiates both local identities and global systems of power. His approach moves beyond familiar binaries—resistance versus complicity, centre versus periphery, tradition versus modernity—by positing African cultural production as dialogic and relational.

Globalectics, as employed by Losambe, is a method of reading, thinking, and knowing that foregrounds global interconnections and challenges Eurocentric narratives. It advocates for decolonized, plural perspectives and uses dialectical reasoning across cultures to reconceptualize African cinema as deeply implicated in global modernity rather than in opposition to it or confined to national or regional frames. This theoretical lens enables new readings of both contemporary and canonical films, continuing early African film studies' project of defining African cinema on its own terms while situating it within transnational circuits of influence.

Among the films discussed are the classic African films *Sankofa* (Haile Gerima, USA/Ghana, 1993) and *Keïta: The Heritage of the Griot* (Dani Kouyaté, Burkina Faso, 1995), as well as the film *Belle* by British director Amma Asante (UK, 2013). These provide compelling lenses for exploring postcolonial African identity and cultural hybridity. For instance, *Sankofa* is read not just as a didactic film about slavery, but as a meditation on diasporic memory, African spirituality and historical trauma. The protagonist's

temporal dislocation becomes a narrative strategy for dramatizing recursive, layered postcolonial temporality—a concern echoed by scholars such as Achille Mbembe (2001), who identifies historical palimpsests and performative irony as core to postcolonial African life.

Similarly, *Keïta* subverts a simplistic opposition between oral tradition and modern education. Instead, it affirms the continued relevance of ancestral wisdom to contemporary identity formation. Losambe uses this film to challenge the persistent tradition/modernity binary in African cinema, arguing for a dialectical reading in which both are constitutive forces. In this view, African cinema participates in modernity on its own terms, without disavowing colonial legacies or the power of tradition.

Crucially, Losambe integrates African diasporic and African American experiences into a broader African framework. He contends that the legacy of the transatlantic slave trade and shared histories of racial and colonial violence necessitate a relational, rather than hierarchical or oppositional, reading of African and diasporic texts. In his analysis of *Belle*, set in eighteenth-century Britain, he shows how race, gender, and class intersect to illuminate global struggles for justice and identity across the Black Atlantic.

While conceptually rich, the book's strength in narrative analysis sometimes comes at the expense of formal cinematic critique. Films like *Sankofa* and *Keïta*, though audio-visually layered and complex, are discussed more for their symbolic and thematic content than for their filmic form—elements such as editing, sound design, and cinematography receive relatively little attention. Nonetheless, *Postcolonial Agency* makes a significant contribution by articulating a vision of African cultural agency that is neither reactive nor essentialist. Losambe's application of globalectics positions postcolonial cinema as a space for new ways of thinking and reimagining community, history, and identity, one in which African filmmakers generate fresh perspectives on the past and the present.

Queer African Cinemas*: Visibility, Performance, and Affective Tactics*

Lindsey B. Green-Simms's *Queer African Cinemas* (Duke UP, 2022) is a groundbreaking contribution to African film studies and queer theory. Positioned at the intersection of postcolonial critique, cultural studies, and film aesthetics, the book challenges dominant paradigms of visibility and identity politics by attending to the stylistic, performative, and affective dimensions of queerness in African cinema. Green-Simms offers both a corrective to the marginalization of queer narratives and a model for theorizing cinematic queerness beyond the usual Western frameworks.

Drawing on José Esteban Muñoz's (2009) notion of *queer futurity*, Green-Simms demonstrates how many African queer films gesture toward alternative, more liveable futures that remain provisional, imagined, or only

partially glimpsed. In *Rafiki* (Wanuri Kahiu, Kenya, 2018), for instance, vibrant colors, romantic excess, and pop aesthetics do more than advance plot—they create a fleeting utopian space where queer love is imaginable, even if not ultimately possible. Similarly, Green-Simms draws on Saidiya Hartman's (2019) concept of *waywardness*—everyday, improvisational acts of defiance or refusal—to frame how queer African characters navigate constraints not through direct confrontation but often through subtle acts of evasion, redirection, and opacity. These frameworks culminate in Green-Simms's own theorization of *Afri-queer fugitivity*, a term she introduces to capture the shifting, context-specific ways in which queer African subjects negotiate agency, visibility, safety, and desire. Unlike common Western tropes of resistance or identity disclosure, Afri-queer fugitivity is a mode of embodied survival that remains tied to familial, spiritual, and social networks. It offers a way of conceptualizing queerness as both relational and tactical, something lived not only in opposition to normativity but through the strategic use of ambiguity and silence.

The book's geographic and thematic breadth is another of its key strengths. Green-Simms draws on films from Anglophone, Francophone, and Lusophone contexts, paying careful attention to linguistic, religious, and cultural specificities. She analyzes both fictional and documentary works, as well as short-form and feature-length cinema, thereby expanding the archive of African queer film beyond a handful of festival-circulated titles. Her wide corpus is an important corrective to the dominance of gay male narratives at times critiqued in queer film studies and a recognition of the increasingly digital and transnational landscape of African screen cultures.

The film analyses are insightful and finely attuned to questions of cinematic form. Green-Simms explores how queerness is expressed not simply through narrative content but also through stylistic techniques. In *Stories of Our Lives* (The Nest Collective, Kenya, 2014), a series of black-and-white vignettes, Green-Simms shows how queerness is conveyed less through overt resistance than through moments of touch, stillness, and longing, offering a new visual language of queer pleasure, intimacy, and belonging. In *Karmen Geï* (Joseph Gaï Ramaka, Senegal, 2001), a musical reinterpretation of the opera *Carmen*, the performative energy of dance and costume becomes a medium for queering gender roles and erotic expression. *Dakan* (Mohamed Camara, Guinea, 1997), widely regarded as the first queer African film, is a tender gay love story between two young men negotiating homophobia, superstition, and parental expectation. Across these readings, Green-Simms shows that African queer cinema often communicates its most radical gestures through indirect forms of expression—through tone, suggestion, and visual style rather than explicit statement.

Methodologically, *Queer African Cinemas* blends formal analysis with queer theory, cultural history, and African-based scholarship. Green-Simms draws on sexuality scholars such as Sylvia Tamale and Zethu Matebeni to frame African queerness in its own epistemological and ethical terms, without defaulting to Euro-American models of coming out, rights discourse, or identity affirmation. She theorizes African queerness on its own terms, demonstrating how queer African cinema constructs alternative ways of seeing, sensing, and showing queerness. While Green-Simms does address questions of censorship, funding, and exhibition, these issues are secondary to the book's interpretive goals. This opens the door for further research about the conditions under which queer African cinema is made: who gets to make these films, how they are circulated, and who their primary audiences are.

Queer African Cinemas is a landmark text. It expands the archive of African cinema studies, introduces a new critical vocabulary for reading queer African aesthetics, and reframes agency not only as defiance or disclosure but as situated negotiation. The book invites scholars to attend not only to what queer cinema represents, but to how it feels and makes space for lives that are often precarious but never without dignity or complexity.

Indirect Subjects*: Rethinking Nollywood's Publics*

Matthew H. Brown's *Indirect Subjects: Nollywood's Local Address* (Duke UP, 2021) offers a conceptually rich and historically grounded analysis of Nigeria's video film industry. Rather than approaching Nollywood solely in terms of its representational content or ideological messaging, Brown is interested in how it forms cinematic subjects—that is, how viewers and characters are positioned within modes of address that are morally ambiguous, culturally embedded, and affectively complex. At the heart of his argument is the notion of the *indirect subject*, which he defines as both "ancillary thematic concerns, the subjects of narrative exposition and contemplation that operate at a slight remove from the primary subjects of screen media texts," as well as "imagined spectators, members of a theoretical public" who are invited to "participate in the process of subject formation," even if indirectly (Brown 1). His focus is on how subjectivity is constituted through layered and mediated forms of cinematic engagement.

Brown's use of "indirectness" draws on two overlapping references: the colonial strategy of *indirect rule*, whereby colonial authority was exercised through local intermediaries, and the literary technique of *free indirect discourse*, in which narration shifts fluidly between a character's inner voice and an external narrator. Drawing these together, Brown argues that Nigerian video films often employ a style of indirect local address, inviting viewers into unstable spectatorial positions marked by ambivalence

and implication. As he puts it, audiences are encouraged to "see with third-person eyes and hear with first-person ears" (Brown 6), to occupy morally complex and emotionally entangled perspectives. These communicative strategies, he argues, reflect the condition of *periliberalism*: a contradictory state in which Nigerian citizens are formally included in global liberal systems while materially excluded from their benefits. Nollywood, in this view, registers the textures of life under this regime not through direct critique, but through melodrama, moral friction, and narrative indirection.

A major strength of *Indirect Subjects* is its attention to television history. Brown situates Nollywood within a longer genealogy of Nigerian state broadcasting, especially the Nigerian Television Authority (NTA). Series such as *Village Headmaster* (1968–1988), *Checkmate* (1991–1994), *Things Fall Apart* (1987), and *Basi and Company* (1986–1990) helped shape the performance styles, ensemble structures, and narrative logics that Nollywood would later absorb. This media-historical framework positions Nollywood as part of a broader continuum of state and popular media.

Brown's close readings of canonical Nollywood films support this claim. In *Living in Bondage* (Chris Obi Rapu, 1992), often seen as the origin of Nollywood, he reads the story of occult wealth and spiritual debt as a reflection of masculine crisis and thwarted aspiration. In *End of the Wicked* (Teco Benson and Helen Ukpabio, 1999), spiritual warfare and moral panic become metaphors for generational and gendered anxieties. *Osuofia in London* (Kingsley Ogoro, 2003) uses humour to depict diasporic displacement, cultural friction, and class aspiration. These films construct indirect subjects who are implicated in, but not fully empowered by, the narratives they inhabit.

Brown perceptively categorizes the melodrama, a staple of Nollywood, into feminine and masculine modes. Feminine melodramas such as *Violated* (Amaka Igwe, 1996) and *Games Women Play* (Lancelot Oduwa Imasuen, 2005) revolve around romantic entanglements and the fragile ideal of the male breadwinner. These narratives often reveal the untenability of traditional gender roles. Masculine melodramas, including *Living in Bondage* and *Ashes to Ashes* (Andy Amenechi, 2001), focus on spiritual corruption and the high cost of personal ambition. Across both modes, Brown emphasizes that agency is rarely direct, it is negotiated, delayed, or fragmented.

Although the book's focus is Nigeria, its significance reaches across African media studies. Brown's theorization of the indirect subject offers a new language for thinking about screen audiences and postcolonial spectatorship. His method, combining film analysis, media history, and political theory, opens avenues for future work on how African cinema navigates modernity, informality, and moral discourse. As with the other books

under review, Brown returns to canonical texts not to affirm them uncritically, but to read them through the lens of subjectivity and mediated agency. His work insists that we take popular culture seriously, not as transparent or didactic, but as a dense field of negotiation between culture, history, and politics.

Convergences and Critical Directions

Taken together, the works by Losambe, Green-Simms, and Brown reflect a shared effort to reframe African cinema as a site of agency, cultural multiplicity, and formal experimentation. While differing in scope, case studies, and methodology, each book considers how screen texts engage viewers through indirectness, ambiguity, and partial visibility—whether through symbolic structure, mediated address, or visual strategy. These frameworks move beyond earlier paradigms grounded in oppositional politics or national allegory to theorize more situated and relational modes of postcolonial subjectivity.

Each scholar advances a distinct conception of the postcolonial subject and agency. For Losambe, postcolonial agency is formed through the dialectical tension between local tradition and global connection, articulated through the symbolic and relational framework of globalectics. Green-Simms foregrounds queer subjectivity and agency as precarious, improvisational and grounded in everyday gestures of survival and refusal—what she terms Afri-queer fugitivity. Brown's indirect subject, by contrast, is shaped through narrative implication and proximity, reflecting life under the contradictory conditions of periliberalism. In each case, agency is not framed as direct or heroic, but as an everyday practice of negotiation within structures of constraint—for filmmakers, their characters and their audiences.

The books also propose overlapping but divergent accounts of modernity and globalization. Losambe positions African cinema as an active participant in global discursive networks, dynamically shaping aesthetic and ethical responses to colonial and diasporic histories. Green-Simms approaches globalization through the lens of queer African aesthetics, highlighting how marginalized subjects imagine alternative futures that are partial, improvised, and shaped by the constraints of visibility, censorship, and reception. Her work challenges normative models of modernity by emphasizing forms of agency that are fugitive, mobile, and contextually grounded. Brown views Nigerian screen publics as simultaneously subsumed by global liberalism and structurally excluded from its benefits—a contradiction expressed through indirect address and formalized in his concept of periliberalism. These perspectives offer a textured understanding of how African screen cultures register global entanglements without risking homogenisation.

All three authors return to canonical texts of African cinema, but with a fresh critical eye. Losambe reads films such as *Sankofa* and *Keïta* not as static case studies of classic African cinema, but as productive sites for rethinking belonging, memory, and aesthetics. Green-Simms reexamines widely recognized and influential queer African films such as *Rafiki*, *Dakan* and *Karmen Geï*, not for their shock value or exceptionalism, but for how they articulate queer joy, desire, and political feeling. Brown analyses early Nollywood cult classics such as *Living in Bondage*, *End of the Wicked*, and *Osuofia in London* as paradigmatic of Nollywood's ambivalent moral world, shaped as much by state television as by informal capitalism. These works take a fresh look at the canon of African cinema, reinterpreting its significance through new critical vocabularies.

The trends identified in these books are echoed across a broader landscape of contemporary African filmmaking. Recent Francophone films such as *Félicité* (Alain Gomis, Senegal, 2017) and *Atlantics* (Mati Diop, France/Senegal/Belgium, 2019) use music, spirituality, and elliptical narratives to explore themes of loss, labour migration, and urban dislocation, resonating with Green-Simms's attention to non-linear storytelling and cinematic ambiguity. Lusophone works like *Air Conditioner* (Fradique, Angola, 2020) and *The Great Kilapy* (Zézé Gamboa, Angola, 2012) employ theatrical mise-en-scène and stylized symbolism to interrogate postcolonial memory and state power shaped by Portuguese imperial histories. More recent entries such as *Shimoni* (Angela Wamai, Kenya, 2024), a psychological drama about guilt and reintegration after imprisonment, and *Promised the Sky* (Erige Sehiri, Tunisia/France, 2025), which follows a priest aiding migrants across borders, continue to challenge generic expectations while foregrounding questions of morality, subjectivity, and marginalisation. These films exemplify the multiplicity of narrative and aesthetic strategies at work across African screen cultures and reflect many of the critical concerns explored in the books under review.

Methodologically, a number of shared tendencies emerge. One is a turn toward modes of analysis attentive to performance, moral ambiguity, and narrative indirection—central to Green-Simms's readings of queer visuality, present in Losambe's focus on symbolic structure, and in Brown's account of pragmatic and ethical spectatorship. Another is an emphasis on audience reception and circulation. Brown draws on media ethnography to explore how Nigerian viewers interpret and respond to screen texts, while Green-Simms considers how some queer creators navigate visibility through alternative platforms and minor media forms. Although not central to their arguments, the books collectively gesture toward broader shifts in the media landscape—where digital platforms, informal economies and transnational networks are reshaping how African films are made and received. These changes point to future directions in the field,

including the relevance of digital ethnography and social media studies for understanding emerging modes of spectatorship and circulation.

Together, these three books mark a welcome expansion of African cinema studies, paying attention to form as much as content, to indirectness as much as clarity, and to spectatorship as much as authorship. They advocate for a plural, dialectic, and flexible critical practice that reflects the changing nature of African screen cultures, and the conceptual demands of the postcolonial present.

Conclusion: African Cinema's Aesthetic Horizons

The three books reviewed in this essay each make vital contributions to the evolving landscape of African film and media studies and together they signal a broader, ongoing shift in African cinema scholarship to a more layered attention to form, address, and mediation. What emerges is a plural and dynamic account of how African screen cultures negotiate power, identity, and subjectivity across different sites of production and reception. As noted above, this pluralism is increasingly visible in the digital transformations reshaping African screen cultures. The rise of global streaming platforms has shifted both access and aesthetics. Netflix Africa, for example, has commissioned and distributed original content such as the series *Queen Sono* (South Africa, 2020), *Blood & Water* (South Africa, 2020–) and Nollywood feature *Aníkúlápó* (Kunle Afolayan, Nigeria, 2022), blending genre convention with high production values. While such platforms have expanded international exposure, they often prioritize English-language, urban and middle-class narratives. Platforms such as Showmax and Amazon Prime are beginning to support more regionally specific programming, while Disney+'s multi-country anthology series *Kizazi Moto: Generation Fire* (2023) signals a growing interest in African animation and speculative storytelling.

We can conclude that African cinema, broadly defined, is not a fixed object but a shifting and expanding horizon: a space of experimentation, negotiation, and ongoing theoretical renewal. The three books under review affirm this perspective through offering new methods, new archives, and new analytical vocabularies for interpreting how African filmmakers, viewers, and texts engage with global modernity, structural inequality, institutional pressures, and creative practices.

Future scholarship may add to this work by focusing on underexplored regions and languages, expanding engagement with digital and experimental forms, and continuing to develop inclusive frameworks that reflect the heterogeneity of African media worlds. Viewed as such, African cinema is not merely a reflection of postcolonial realities, but a generative site for imagining how subjectivity, collectivity, and creativity unfold in a changing world.

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Echoes of Empire: Unveiling Colonial Tendencies in Salman Rushdie's *Victory City*

Madhurima Nayak

Abstract: *This paper attempts to explore the representation of the Vijayanagara Empire and colonial tendencies in Salman Rushdie's historical novel* Victory City *(2023). Unlike conventional narratives entrenched in the colonial and postcolonial epochs, Rushdie embarks upon an audacious exploration of precolonial antiquity in the Indian subcontinent, traversing the ethereal realms of magic realism.* Victory City's *departure from the conventional epochs of colonial and postcolonial India, however, beckons inquiries into Rushdie's treatment of precolonial India and its historical consciousness. Employing a multifaceted methodology that intertwines literary analysis and historical criticism, this paper attempts to scrutinize Rushdie's rendition of the Vijayanagara Empire, interrogating its fidelity to historical records and its potential to subvert colonial narratives. By juxtaposing Rushdie's construction of an alternative archival narrative with established historical records, this paper evaluates the novel's contribution to India's cultural and historical identity. Ultimately, it offers a critique of Rushdie's portrayal, highlighting its purported neglect of India's multifaceted historical legacy, perpetuation of reductionist viewpoints, and attenuation of its global cultural contributions.*

Keywords: Victory City; Vijayanagara Empire; precolonial India; colonial; historical fiction; historical consciousness

This paper attempts to explore the representation of the Vijayanagara Empire and colonial tendencies in Salman Rushdie's historical novel *Victory City* (2023). Analogous to Rushdie's preceding historical ventures such as *The Enchantress of Florence* (2008) and his magnum opus *Midnight's Children* (2013 [1981]), *Victory City* unfolds within the enchanting realms of magic realism. It delineates the saga of Pampa Kampana, whose magical survival spans an astonishing 247 years to witness the birth and death of Vijayanagara Empire. In fact, the novel *Victory City* is written in the manner of an explanation of Pampa Kampana's epic narrative *Jayaparajaya*, which she wrote in the latter half of her life on the advice of her Portuguese great great grand-daughter Zeralda Li. The book, as Rushdie says, is "as long as the *Ramayana*, made up of twenty-four thousand verses" (3). Indian English historical fiction has predominantly centred on narrating stories from the

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secular, modern, and more recent past of the nation, primarily focusing on the colonial period and the immediate postcolonial era. Within this genre of historical fiction, a palpable hesitance emerges when one endeavours to traverse the corridors of India's remote precolonial antiquity—a period replete with the resonance of myths, legends, and oral traditions that irrevocably entwined with the spiritual and religious facets and invariably shunned the dominion of the rational and the verifiable. The aversion towards the precolonial period can be traced back to a broader tendency to shy away from worldviews based on myths and legends which, in turn, is rooted in the internalization of Enlightenment ideals of rationality, where "documentary evidence" is esteemed as the sole "usable evidence," and myths and oral narratives are relegated to the status of "suspect sources" (Quayson 49). Postcolonialism is not just a theory but also an epistemological construct—a modus operandi for the cultivation and generation of alternative knowledge. Historically, the colonial enterprise consistently endeavored to strip the conquered territories of their historical underpinnings. If postcolonial Indian English historical novels embark on the production of historical knowledge or archive about the supposedly ahistorical precolonial epochs, it would extend to this epoch the mantle of legitimacy and historicity that had hitherto been denied by India's former colonizers—the British. The act of articulating narratives of the precolonial Indian past transcends mere historiography; it emerges as a sacred "act of atonement," a reverent "ritual return and homage of a prodigal son" (Achebe 167) to the cultural and historical heritage that was systematically marginalized and obscured during the tumultuous era of colonial dominance. Salman Rushdie's *Victory City* does venture to traverse the labyrinthine annals of India's precolonial epoch of South India, but the question that arises here is: Does Rushdie's narrative of Vijayanagara Empire possesses the potential to revitalize forms of knowledge that have endured historical marginalization, repression, denigration, and denial at the hands of our erstwhile colonizers?

The research questions that this paper attempts to address include: How does Rushdie represent the precolonial Indian past, specifically the era of Vijayanagara Empire? To what extent does Rushdie's fiction adhere to historical fidelity in his imaginative reconstruction of the Vijayanagara Empire? What are the consequential ramifications thereof? Does the novel challenge, in the process, the charge of the lack of historical consciousness that was levelled against India by the British and legitimize the methods through which ancient India made sense of its past? Since fictions are generally regarded as alternative archives, does *Victory City* rises to the level of a decolonial archive or does it exemplify, what Thomas Richards has termed, the "imperial archive"? As far as the methodology is concerned, the paper adopts a multifaceted approach to answer this research questions. Firstly, a meticulous literary analysis is deployed, delving into the

novel's narrative structure, linguistic nuances, and stylistic configuration in order to unveil the intricate tapestry that interlaced historical events seamlessly into the narrative fabric. Concurrently the paper also engages with Historical Criticism for assessing the historical fidelity and veracity within the novel comparing Rushdie's interpretative choices with established historical records. This comparative dimension extends to the exploration of Rushdie's *Victory City* vis-à-vis Rushdie's antecedent historical novel dealing with precolonial India, namely *The Enchantress of Florence*. This comparative analysis unravels how Rushdie navigates colonial narratives regarding precolonial India and thereby also sheds light on the nature of the historical archive constructed by the novel.

I. Colonial Undercurrents and Representation of Vijayanagara Empire

(i) Unhistorical Vijayanagara and Salman Rushdie's Magic Realism

The novel is written in the manner of an account of the Vijayanagara Empire collected from Pampa Kampana's book which has helped in regaining the past after a passage of one hundred and sixty thousand days. As a result, "the Bisnaga Empire was reborn as it truly had been . . ." (3). The story of the Kingdom of Vijayanagar, which according to Rushdie "began and ended with a burning and severed head," has been retold "for the simple entertainment and possible edification of today's readers" (4). The novel begins with Pampa's mother Radha Kampana's sacrificial act of *jauhar*, precipitating Pampa's unwavering resolve to endure the vicissitudes of an ostensibly interminable existence. She was possessed by the goddess Pampa who prophesied that

> 'From blood and fire,' the goddess said, 'life and power will be born. In this exact place a great city will rise, the wonder of the world, and its empire will last for more than two centuries . . . and you will live just long enough to witness both your success and your failure, to see it all and tell its story, even though once you have finished telling it you will die immediately and nobody will remember you for four hundred and fifty years.' (8)

The novel gives an account of how the two Sangama brothers Hukka and Bukka were given a sack of seeds to grow a city and its population therefrom. The seeds had the potential to "grow generations, and bring forth a history, a new reality, an empire" (12–13). The "great sorceress," Pampa, gave them the "seeds of the future" (14), and therefore the Sangama brothers, Hukka and Bukka, became the unwitting architects of a civilization's genesis. The seeds were scattered and an entire city came up from them. The city came alive, but central to the narrative is the existential disorientation experienced by the nascent populace of the burgeoning city. Their

abrupt emergence into being, devoid of any tangible connection to a shared past, renders them adrift in a state of bewilderment. These people are without any sense of past and therefore the newly made kingdom appears more like a "[k]ingdom of subhumans" and the people here seems to be "as brainless as cows" (23). Tai, who represented mythical India (with no sense of time and past) in the *Midnight's Children*, was similarly described as brainless. According to Rushdie, Tai's "brain fell out with his teeth" (11). In a similar manner, these people who have no idea of their origins were considered similarly brainless. For Rushdie, historical amnesia has dehumanizing effects that render people intellectually vacant. Bukka describes: ". . . all these people, including all the grown-ups, are babies right now, and we just have to hope that they grow up fast, because we don't have mothers to care for them" (23). In this context, "mothers" represents the ancestral past—an enduring connection to earlier civilizations or ways of life that evoke a sense of situatedness within the historical continuum. Thus, the inhabitants of the Vijayanagara Empire are characterized as individuals without history. Hukka, the King, himself is uncomfortable with the "question of Origin" (20), deeming such matters as belonging to the realm of divine inquiry rather than human discourse. Rushdie's magic realism creates a narrative where people are without any sense of the past, and this lack of historical mooring imbues the inhabitants with a sense of existential vacancy, epitomized by Bukka's lamentation that they are an infantile race in need of nurturing guidance. The absence of a collective memory engenders a populace bereft of cultural legacy, casting them as quasi-human entities existing on the periphery of full personhood. The emergence of the Vijayanagara Empire from the seeds of destiny seems to symbolize the boundless possibilities of human agency. However, it also foregrounds an amnesia of the past—what Rushdie sees as a defining trait of India. In depicting the inhabitants of the empire as "subhuman" entities, lacking in historical consciousness, Rushdie offers a trenchant critique of societies, particularly India, that allegedly overlook the significance of historical consciousness.

Macdonell searingly remarked that "early India wrote no history because it never made any" (11). This dual charge of the lack of historical consciousness as well as of history itself has been agreed to by Rushdie when he necessitates the genesis of Vijayanagara Empire via fantastical means, notably through the sowing of magic seeds. Consequently, Rushdie's deployment of magic realism (which according to him, "expresses a genuinely 'Third World' consciousness . . . in which the impossibly old struggles against the appallingly new" [*Imaginary* 301]) ostensibly employed to infuse his narrative with allure and intrigue, paradoxically serves to denude the Vijayanagara Kingdom of its historical moorings, relegating it to a realm divorced from its temporal context and verisimilitude. Under

such circumstances it is imperative to question the ethicality of such magic realism which denies the historicity of an Empire in particular and of the nation in general affirming the colonial notion that India was an ahistorical land. Except from the story of Hukka (the historical King Harihara I) and Bukka's flight from the grasp of the Delhi Sultanate, returning to their homeland and eschewing the Islamic faith forcibly imposed upon them, the novel conveniently sidesteps the foundational historical underpinnings of the Vijayanagara Empire. Rather than portraying them as ambitious rulers driven by the desire to establish a formidable empire, they are depicted merely as individuals "looking for new directions in life" (12). This narrative omission diminishes the historical weight and complexity of Vijayanagara's origins, relegating its founding figures to a more simplistic characterization focused on personal growth and existential exploration. Burton Stein observed that the rulers of Vijayanagara were deeply aware of their empire's historical roots. They recognized that their dominion, established in the fourteenth century, continued the legacy of earlier South Indian kingdoms. They revitalized a preceding dominion of universal authority in Karnataka, akin to the Chalukyas of Badami. The Vijayanagara monarchs embraced the symbol of the Chalukyas, the varaha or boar, and conceivably emulated the architectural blueprint of the Chalukyan capitals such as Vatapi and Aihole from the sixth to eighth centuries (1). However, Stein further observes, Vijayanagara constituted a medieval realm in southern India, belonging to a cohort of approximately fifty dynasties whose epigraphs and assertions of sovereignty transcended the boundaries of multiple linguistic or cultural domains across the peninsula since the era of the Chalukyas of Badami (13). In his work *South India and her Muhammadan Invaders*, Krishnaswami Ayyangar delineated two distinct historical chronicles whose paths converged coincidentally in the establishment of Vijayanagara. One narrative delineated the disintegration of the Chola political structure in the thirteenth century, while the other chronicled the invasions by the Khalji and Tughlaq dynasties into the South during the fourteenth century (Stein 4). It would be suitable here to quote an excerpt from Stein to describe the ancientness of the Empire:

> The city was known by several names besides 'Vijayanagara,' which is hardly surprising since the earliest inscription from the place in Brahmi script dates from about the second century. From the eleventh to the thirteenth centuries, several other inscriptions are found, including one registering [the] gifts made to the temple of the goddess . . . These pre-Vijayanagara references make it clear that the future capital of the Vijayanagara kingdom was one of the many places in modern Bellary with a past history dating to Mauryan times

> when Ashokan edicts were inscribed within thirty miles of Hampi, along banks of the Tungabhadra. (31)

The novel's embrace of magic realism grants Rushdie the latitude to effortlessly eschew the burdensome trappings of historical minutiae concerning the Empire, allowing him to fashion a narrative akin to the whimsical enchantment of "fairy-tales" (13) describing it as a land without history thriving in the "richness of its fictions" with no "mothers" and asserting the fallacy inherent in the perception of its antiquity of India. Salman Rushdie, delves into the enigmatic essence of Bisnaga, elucidating it not as an artifact of history but as a construct born from the vivid imaginings of Pampa. Ursula Kluwick observes that in Salman Rushdie's magic realist fiction the natural and the supernatural are both inseparable and incompatible, with characters themselves losing the ability to clearly differentiate between the two. This narrative ambiguity underscores the collapse of rigid categorization, exposing an existential void in representation. Kluwick further asserts that Rushdie subverts the naturalizing tendencies of realism by juxtaposing it with magic, which challenges Western realist traditions. His project deliberately contrasts realist and non-realist interpretation of reality to challenge the reliability of representation (34). Primarily, Rushdie employs magic realism as a means of articulating non-Western perspectives, particularly in his endeavours to rewrite history (Kluwick 1). However, if realism is denied to the history of a nation, empire, tribe, or race, and its origins are rendered magical or supernatural, it doesn't generate any "ambivalence" in the established mode of representation which Kluwick thinks Rushdie's magic-realist fiction engages in, rather it devolves into historical negationism. Rushdie's magic realism becomes an instrument of historical negationism. Historical negationism entails the deliberate distortion or denial of historical facts, typically to serve ideological agendas. This phenomenon subverts the integrity of historiography by selectively omitting or misrepresenting evidence, thereby reshaping collective memory to align with pre-determined ideological agenda. The term historical negationism initially gained prominence in the context of Holocaust denial, where it specifically referred to the efforts of the Nazi regime to refute or downplay the reality of the systematic extermination of six million Jews and other marginalized groups by the Nazi regime during World War II. Originating in the mid-twentieth century, this form of negationism sought to exonerate Nazi culpability, often by disputing the existence of gas chambers, minimizing death tolls, or portraying the Holocaust as wartime propaganda. Historical negationism operates under the guise of scepticism, exploiting gaps or ambiguities in historical evidence to sow doubt about well-documented histories. Historical negationism is especially insidious in a postcolonial context, as historical fictions like *Victory City*

distort the reclamation of the indigenous past, erasing or rewriting the pluralistic histories of the precolonial era.

Given the presence of historical figures within the narrative fabric of the novel, which makes it a historical novel, the conspicuous neglect of the Empire's historical context raises legitimate concerns. Such a glaring omission of the Empire's historical moorings constitutes a departure from fidelity to historical accuracy, or rather, to be unequivocally blunt, a wholesale disavowal of the intricate web of historical forces that culminated in the genesis of the illustrious Vijayanagara Empire. This deviation from historical fidelity prompts a critical interrogation of Rushdie's interpretative inclinations. It beckons us to scrutinize the author's deliberate choices in foregrounding narrative elements over historical veracity, thereby inviting reflection on the tension between artistic license and responsibility that is inherent in the craft of historical fiction. Within Rushdie's literary framework, the interplay between magical elements and historical narratives engenders a dialectic wherein the former eclipses and subverts the latter, engendering an ontological disjunction that renders the historical fabric of the Vijayanagara Kingdom ephemeral.

(ii) Fictitious Oral Narratives, Unreal Oriental Historiographies and Rushdie's Devaluation of India's Historical Consciousness

Pampa Kampana whispered "the grand narrative of the city" (31) into the ears of the citizens in order to give them a sense of their past. This transformative act, catalysed by the power of storytelling, precipitated a collective evolution from infantile bewilderment to mature self-awareness. The seamless integration of these tales into the fabric of communal consciousness imbued the populace with a newfound sense of rootedness and continuity. The narrative's verisimilitude was such, Rushdie asserts, that incredulity found no foothold among the populace; indeed, the tales possessed a quality so indistinguishable from truth that scepticism remained an elusive spectre. Rushdie illustrates how there was a palpable aura of familiarity, as though each member of the community had traversed epochs within the confines of their immediate environs. Indeed, the adults, in their newfound maturity, appeared to have undergone a transmutative process, shedding the vestiges of infancy to embrace a profound sense of historical continuity:

> A whole city . . . blooming from the earth on the same day, such flowers have no souls, they don't know who they are, because the truth is they are nothing. But such truth is unacceptable. It was necessary, she said, to do something to cure the multitude of its unreality. Her solution was fiction. She was making up their lives, their castes, their faiths . . . writing the grand narrative of the city, creating its story now that she

> had created its life. Some of her stories came from her memories of lost Kampili . . . bringing back the old dead in the newly living; but memory wasn't enough, there were too many lives to enliven, and so imagination had to take over from the point at which memory failed. (31–32)

The whispering, which gave people a sense of their past, metaphorically represents nothing other than the oral narratives that were the only source of history for the people of India in ancient times. It must be pointed out here that "[a]ll oral sources do not constitute oral history. In order to qualify, the material must reveal an attempt to transmit an awareness of some common historical consciousness" (Henige 1976, qtd. in Thapar 92). Pampa's whispers, which imparted to the people a sense of their shared past and thereby a historical sense, can therefore be qualified as oral history. Rushdie's portrayal of Pampa Kampana as the arbiter of historicity of the people serves as a pointed critique of oral history, which constituted one of the most important elements of the oriental traditions of historiography. By foregrounding the fabrication inherent within these oral narratives, Rushdie seeks to destabilize the legitimacy of such oral tales and thereby delegitimize these oriental traditions of making sense of their past. Rushdie's novel categorizes the oriental oral traditions as a fantastical realm where the boundaries between reality and fiction blur, and where the act of storytelling serves as a potent remedy for the existential void and unreality afflicting the populace. The imagery of a city springing forth from the earth in a single day and the protagonist's assertion that the fabricated lives, castes, and faiths she weaves into existence are essential for curing the multitude of its unreality underscores the marvellous and otherworldly nature of existence itself in Vijayanagara Empire in particular and India in general.

In the crucible of colonial discourse, the early nineteenth-century intellectual landscape was marked by a concerted effort to denigrate India's rich literary and historical tradition. Foremost among these critics was James Mill whose scathing assessment underscored a Eurocentric bias that deemed India's cultural legacy deficient when juxtaposed with its European counterparts. Central to Mill's critique was the notion that in the absence of a coherent, rationalized, and verifiable historical account, India languished in a state of ahistoricity: "The wildness and inconsistency of the Hindu statements evidently place them beyond the sober limits of truth and history" (Mill 33). The colonial narrative, steeped in the rhetoric of civilizational superiority, posited the arrival of the colonizers as a watershed moment wherein the annals of historical prose were awakened from their slumber, before which there were only "a maze of unnatural fictions . . . wild and ungoverned imagination" (Mill 33). This teleological

perspective, rooted in the assumption of European cultural hegemony, served to legitimize the imperial project by casting the colonizers as purveyors of enlightenment amidst a landscape shrouded in darkness. Echoing Mill's sentiments, critics of Indian poetic tradition castigated the "Hindu" intellect for its purported indulgence in myth and fantasy. This reductionist perspective conflated poetry with falsehood, denigrating the rich tapestry of myth and legend that formed the bedrock of Indian oral tradition. Al-Biruni's lamentation regarding the Hindu predilection for "tale-telling" exemplifies this disdain for the supposed lack of historical rigor inherent within Indian cultural expression. Al-Biruni wrote: "Unfortunately the Hindus do not pay much attention to the historical order of things . . . and when they are pressed for information, and are at a loss, not knowing what to say, they invariably take to tale-telling" (11). Rushdie's novel reveals that the oral tales or narratives, which Pampa Kampana circulated among the people were only a fictional and therefore a suspicious alternative to the rationalized historical record. The city, Bisnaga, thrives not on the concrete edifice of recorded events but rather on the "richness of its [whispered] fictions," (37) blurring the lines between reality and myth. Rushdie paints a portrait of a populace whose very essence is intertwined with these whispered tales, where the lines between fiction and reality are blurred, and the distinction between historical accuracy and imaginative creation dissipates.

For Rushdie "the whispered stories . . . were no more than make-believe but they created the truth, and brought into being a city and an army with all the rich diversity of nonfictional people with deep roots in the actually existing world" (47). In Rushdie's text the whispered fictions, despite being born of mere imagination, possessed the potency akin to that of concrete histories, but they were only non-factual and non-rational historical narratives which provided the people with a false idea of their past and collective identity. Rushdie's categorization of the Indian oral tradition of history, which Pampa circulates among people, as "fiction" and "make-believe" (47) narratives make them stand at the opposite pole of the rational and factual occidental historiography. This positioning implicitly relegates ancient India in general and ancient South India in particular low down the ladder of civilization. This relegation arises from the historical use of 'rationality' as a crucial metric in the hierarchical categorization of civilization. Ernest Gellner observed that the "creed of Enlightenment philosophes was a kind of social programme, a vision of a rational order . . ." (86). The greater the perceived "rationality" inherent in a civilization and its historical trajectory, the more elevated is its stature in the global hierarchy of civilizations. In this context it would be appropriate to dwell briefly on Bernheim and Feder's classifications of oral narratives as they offer critical theoretical insights into the nature of the narratives the Pampa

Kampana circulates. Bernheim delineates a taxonomy of oral traditions which encompasses legends, anecdotes, proverbs, and historical stories. He discerns a critical disparity between firsthand narratives, grounded in eyewitness accounts, and second-hand reports, which he advises should be regarded akin to legends due to their reliance on hearsay (Vansina 3). For Feder this dichotomy was between authenticated and anonymous authorship within oral traditions. Within the realm of second-hand traditions identified by Bernheim, Feder identifies two distinct categories: one inclusive of rumours, anecdotes, historical proverbs, and aphorisms, and another encompassing antiquated account denoted as folk tradition or oral tradition in its purest form. While firsthand traditions carry a semblance of reliability, second-hand accounts necessitate utmost caution in their interpretation (Vansina 4). This distinction between firsthand and second-hand traditions of oral narratives is directly relevant for understanding the nature of the narratives Pampa Kampana circulates and its reliability (or lack thereof) in the context of historiography. The narratives through which Pampa Kampana bestows people their idea of themselves and their history belong to Feder's second group of oral narratives since they are primarily "spoken traditions and sagas" without any confirmed authorship. In Rushdie's narrative, people just received these stories in their dreams and are therefore suspicious with minimum reliability. Romila Thapar expounds upon the destiny of India's oral traditions amidst the epoch of British dominion. With the British colonial presence in India during the nineteenth century, there was a concerted effort to gather and interpret historical data. This endeavour was initially spearheaded by institutions like The Asiatic Society, often with the participation of colonial administrators. However, the approach to this data was heavily influenced by Western notions of history, which prioritized linear chronology and political events. Consequently, the rich bardic (oral) tradition of India, which relied on oral transmission over generations, was often marginalized and dismissed as unreliable folklore rather than legitimate historical records. This dismissal reflects a colonial bias that favoured written, Eurocentric forms of historical documentation over indigenous modes of storytelling and knowledge transmission. Such attitudes perpetuated a hierarchical view of knowledge, where Western epistemologies were privileged over indigenous ways of knowing, thereby obscuring important aspects of India's cultural and historical heritage. Salman Rushdie's delineation of the oral traditions of Indian history as "make-believe" elements betray the coloniality of his text. Any historical text—whether fiction or non-fiction, champions storytelling because both fictional and non-fictional historiography are intrinsically narrative-driven and therefore relies on storytelling as a mutual framework for meaning-making and this storytelling is invariably influenced by choice and ideological leanings, resulting in distinct narrative

trajectories. Fictional and non-fictional historiographies are not "naïve . . . not innocuous, they are not natural, they are a cultural product of their time, created to impose on the future a certain view of history" (Cerdeira 206). Rushdie's storytelling seeks to advance the "view" that Indian oral traditions of history are fictitious constructs, fostering an illusory sense of historical awareness due to their lack of empirical truth.

Pampa Kampana's *Jayaparajaya*, as observed by Rushdie, navigates the realm of historical recounting but diverges from factual chronicles by virtue of its poetic form. Rushdie astutely discerns that a poem operates within its own domain, wherein the parameters of reality intertwine with the tapestry of imagination: "a poem is not an essay or a news report. The reality of poetry and the imagination follows its own rules" (33). The Prelude of *Jayaparajaya* chronicles the fabled past of India, delved into ancient lore, narrating the saga of Kishkindha, the realm of simian sovereignty, once thriving in a bygone epoch steeped in mythic resonance. Within its pages unfolded a vivid portrayal of Lord Hanuman, the majestic primate monarch, endowed with the ability to assume colossal proportions akin to mountains and traverse vast oceans with effortless grace. Salman Rushdie's assertion that poetry "follows its own rules" in conveying reality is undeniably correct, as it acknowledges the unique aesthetics and creative freedom inherent in poetic expression. However, he erroneously believes that oriental poetic historiographies, such as *Jayaparajaya*, inherently maintain an "inevitable distance between the imagined world and the actual" (33). Rushdie highlights the strained relationship of poetic historiographies to historical truths. Rushdie frames Pampa's text in such a way that it does not use its "own rules" to delineate the "actual" but rather evades the "actual" altogether. Pampa's "Bisnaga," in *Jayaparajaya*, as a result, "belongs not to history" (33), that is Pampa's poetic rendering is detached from the historical reality of the Vijayanagara Kingdom. Rushdie's assertion owes its genesis to the Western predilection for prose as the preeminent mode of historiographical expression which found its roots in the Hegelian epoch where the sanctity of prose as the arbiter of truth was fervently championed by Western historians (Rao et al., 3). Vinay Lal further underscores this historical dichotomy, particularly in seventeenth and eighteenth-century England, where history was relegated to the realm of factual accounts, while poetry was revered as a realm for imaginative exploration. This division was exacerbated by the emergence of the New Science, which prioritized empirical knowledge over poetic fancy, thereby perpetuating the hegemony of prose in historical discourse (33). However, it is imperative to point out here that the selection of an appropriate medium for historical writing remains a contentious subject because the determination of the medium for historical representation does not depend upon its effectiveness as a mode of conveying historical truth but is rather contingent

upon the prevailing literary landscape. As posited by Rao et al., there exists a dynamic interplay between literary expression and historical interpretation, whereby societies navigate diverse modes to construct and convey their collective past. Indeed, historical narratives often mirror the prevailing literary conventions of a community. They observe: "If *purana* is the pre-eminent literary form, history will be written as *purana*; if *kavya* [epic poem] dominates, we will find history as *kavya*; if prose chronicles come to the fore, they too will serve history" (4). Pampa Kampana's *Jayaparajaya* is a literary reimagining of *Madhura Vijayam* or *Kampanaraya-charita* by the historical Gangadevi. (I make this connection between *Jayaparajaya* and *Madhura Vijayam* because in Rushdie's novel Vidyasagar, the great sage and statesman, gives the name of Gangadevi to Pampa at the initial stage of their meeting) The latter describes the conquest of Madhura (modern Madurai) by prince Kampana, "the story of her husband's accomplishments, his life as a king called upon to defend dharma" (Jackson 61). T. A. Gopinath Rao defines this poem as "a work of great historical importance . . . because it deals with a period of which little or nothing is satisfactorily known . . ." (1). However, Pampa's *Jayaparajaya* is disconnected from historical reality. While *Madhura Vijayam* sought to chronicle the history of its time, Pampa's *Jayaparajaya* actively rejects existing narratives.

At this point we can compare Rushdie's depiction of the unreality of life as well as unreality of historiographies of the Indian subcontinent in another of Rushdie's precolonial narrative, namely *The Enchantress of Florence*. *The Enchantress of Florence* offers a compelling parallel to *Victory City* wherein the veil of historical reality is likewise draped in the vibrant hues of poetic fancy. At the heart of *The Enchantress of Florence* lies the enigmatic persona of Qara Köz, a woman distinguished by her exceptional allure and intellect, purportedly the long-lost sibling of Babur, the grandfather of Akbar. Her son, Niccolò Vespucci, unveils the chronicles of his mother, Angelica, a Mughal princess of incomparable charm and a sorceress of unmatched mastery in alchemy and incantations, feared by all. Dashwanth, renowned as the preeminent illustrator during Akbar's reign, was entrusted with the task of conjuring the elusive princess Qara Köz into existence through his artistry: "Paint her into the world . . . for there is such a magic in your brushes that she may even come to life, spring off your pages . . ." (*Enchantress* 149). However, Dashwanth became ensnared by his own creation, blurring the boundaries between reality and fantasy. He was so engrossed in his portrayal of what would culminate in the final depiction of the so-called *Qara-Köz-Nama*, the Adventures of Lady Black Eyes, that people feared that "he is so deeply in love with the bygone woman that it would be hard for him to return to the present day" (*Enchantress* 156). Gradually Dashwanth completely lost his sanity and began to live behind the painted borders of his work:

> Dashwanth released into the only world in which he now believed, the world of the hidden princess, whom he had created and who had then uncreated him . . . Instead of bringing a fantasy woman to life, Dashwanth had turned himself into an imaginary being . . . (*Enchantress* 159)

The narrative arc of Qara Köz in Salman Rushdie's *The Enchantress of Florence* transcends mere historical recounting, evolving into a phantasmal entity that permeates the collective consciousness of Akbar's kingdom. She assumes multifaceted roles within the minds of the people—exemplar, lover, antagonist—embodying a vessel for the projection of their desires, aversions, and latent selves. Rushdie's portrayal paints a vivid tableau of India suffused with a pervasive embrace of the fantastical, where the boundaries between reality and the ethereal blur, and the past seamlessly intermingles with the present. This representation unfolds a historical narrative of India that is infused with a fabulist essence, a form of Indian history and historiography immersed in unreality and imagination. In Rushdie's portrayal, Mughal India is imbued with a profound longing for a veiled and enigmatic past, drawing it forth into the present and coexisting with it. By aligning his narrative with Orientalist paradigms, Rushdie insinuates a perspective wherein India falters in the construction of an authentic historical trajectory, purportedly ensnared within the bounds of the surreal and at the same time fabricates historiographies that veers towards the fantastical, submerging empirical reality within the realms of myth and imagination. Both the Vijayanagara and Mughal Empire, as depicted, are enveloped in a haze of fictionalized reality, blurring the demarcations between actuality and mythos in both lived experiences and historical accounts. Therefore, in these historiographies within historiographies such as *Jayaparajaya* and *Qara-Köz-Nama*, we encounter a narrative framework that not only elucidates the historical landscape of precolonial India but also serves as a meta-commentary on the nature of historiography itself. For Rushdie, Oriental historiographies, exemplified by the likes of *Jayaparajaya*, are bereft of tangible historical moorings, existing instead within the realm of the unhistorical.

European colonial endeavours were not merely acts of territorial expansion but were underpinned by a profound consciousness of history—a consciousness that bestowed legitimacy upon the conquest and subjugation of peoples deemed to lack historical awareness. The concept of "peoples without history" was a disparaging construct, disseminated by colonial entities, projecting colonized communities as intrinsically lacking in historical import or evolutionary progression (Prakash 353). Rushdie's portrayal accentuates this narrative of India as a realm bereft of historical substance with Domingo Nunes assuming the role of the active historian

in contrast to the Indians. He undertook the meticulous task of chronicling his experiences in Bisnaga imbuing his narrative with a fervour that sought to capture the essence of the region. He lived in an anonymous quarter of the city, "which he was filling with sheaves of paper on which he was writing his account of his time in Bisnaga" (64). His dedication to detailing the mundane aspects of the city, from its geographical features to cultural idiosyncrasies, reflected a profound fascination with the exoticism of his surroundings. However, his narrative, tailored seemingly for foreign readership, often bordered on the banal, with a penchant for enumerating livestock and produce, and depicted the temple dancers with a hint of sensationalism. When he was asked the reason for making such records he stated "I am merely making a record for my own interest . . . because the place is so marvellous, it deserves a proper chronicle" (65). Fernão Paes, another fellow Portuguese trader, adopted a more critical lens in documenting the Vijayanagara Empire, focusing on the rulers' debauchery and weaknesses. His accounts, while potentially skewed, offered a glimpse into the darker underbelly of the empire. Rushdie, through this juxtaposition, attempts to draw a dichotomy between the veracity inherent in the Portuguese chronicles and the fictionality of Pampa's *Jayaparajaya*, where the boundaries between reality and imagination blur into a seamless tapestry. The historical consciousness of the Portuguese travellers is therefore contrasted with the lack of it in case of Indians. The Portuguese chronicles, steeped in a commitment to factual accuracy, offer a lens through which historical events are perceived with a semblance of objectivity. Conversely, Pampa's *Jayaparajaya*, with its fantastical elements and mythical embellishments transforms into a fabric of fiction.

At another level of analysis, Salman Rushdie's historiography is in the magic realist mode, which is different from the realism of Western historiographies. In this sense, Rushdie himself can be seen as a counterpart to Pampa, crafting a female-centric version of history that was often silenced in traditional historical accounts. Therefore, what we find here is a palimpsestic layer of narration. The various levels of narration—allegorical, symbolic, realistic, and magical—enrich historiography by providing diverse entry points to interpret history. However, resistant historiography is not just about storytelling and palimpsestic narration. While various levels of narration enrich historiography by providing alternative perspectives, they must be complemented by critical engagement with historical power dynamics that perpetuate the dominant colonial narratives. Resistance requires engagement with tangible historical injustices, such as colonial exploitation, systemic oppression, or erasure of indigenous cultures. If the content of these injustices is overshadowed by the fascination with narrative technique, the historiography might fail to effectively address the core issues.

(iii) Disruption of Gyan Parampara *or the Intergenerational Continuum of Knowledge*

Romila Thapar in her book *The Past Before Us* illuminates the profound role of myth as a conduit that traverses the ethereal realms of celestial deities and the mundane sphere of humanity. She articulates that myth not only serves as a repository of sacred narratives but also evokes a temporal dimension, gesturing towards a primordial past whose vastness is seemingly boundless, stretching into the annals of eternity. In elucidating the dynamic interplay between myth and historical consciousness, Thapar observes that mythic narratives, in their portrayal of the past, contribute significantly to the construction of historical memory. This historical memory, she contends, is not a static entity but rather a fluid creation, perpetually shaped by the ongoing dialogue between past and present. Thus, while the past undergoes continual reinterpretation, it always serves as a reservoir of authority and legitimacy in the present epoch (Thapar 13, 51). Pampa, endowed with the remarkable longevity to endure nearly two and a half centuries while retaining perpetual youthfulness, epitomized the essence of mythical temporality. Her life and literary opus, *Jayaparajaya*, is woven with the threads of mythic narrative which enfolds within its folds the essence of a mythic South India. Rushdie, in the beginning of the novel, poignantly reflects upon the unveiling of the essence of *Jayaparajaya*, proclaiming it as the revelation of the concealed secrets of a mythical empire that had remained veiled from historical scrutiny for an astonishing span of one hundred and sixty thousand days. This mythic realm found its quintessence in Pampa's existence and creative output. However, with the audacious act of documentation, wherein Pampa's mythic era was immortalized in the pages of *Jayaparajaya*, her narrative was committed to the annals of history. This marked the denouement of her mythical epoch, heralding the inevitable denouement of Pampa herself. Thus, the demise of Pampa symbolized not merely the end of an individual life but the termination of an entire era suffused with mythic resonance.

Salman Rushdie refuses to assist a continuum between India's mythical antiquity and its historical epoch, positing instead that the India must forgo its mythical past before integrating into the chronicles of history. This deliberate disjunction between myth and history, disrupting the presumed continuum of knowledge, effectively dismantles the possibility of transmission of historical tradition. Thapar points out that historical tradition symbolizes the intergenerational continuum of knowledge which bears the weight of collective memory and fosters a profound connection to the annals of history (6). However, Rushdie's creation of a disjuncture between the mythical and historical epochs leads to the erosion of, what Thapar terms as, historical memory that impedes the cultivation of a cohesive historical consciousness. The disruption of the revered tradition of

gyan parampara, which mandates the transmission of knowledge "uninterrupted" through successive generations (Squarcini 21), precipitates a profound historical vacuum and undermines the legitimacy of the contemporary milieu. This rupture in the continuum of knowledge propagation not only engenders a lacuna in collective and nationalistic memory but also contributes to the erosion of historical authenticity, thereby engendering a destabilizing effect on the present sociocultural landscape. Salman Rushdie's portrayal of Krishnadevaraya, particularly his idiosyncratic endeavour to resurrect the mythical realm of Lord Krishna in Vrindavan, epitomizes a distorted rendition of the historical monarch's genuine appreciation for art and culture. By transmuting the royal zenana into a facsimile of Krishna's divine abode and handpicking daughters of the kingdom to embody royal gopis, Krishnadevaraya's actions are depicted as an attempt at creating a "simulacrum, a mimic life, a falsehood" (211). Rushdie's portrayal, characterized by caricature and accentuation of the "falsehood" inherent in revisiting the past, lays bare his palpable discomfort with the intrusion of any mythical past into the present epoch. This unease mirrors Rushdie's earlier sentiments in *Midnight's Children*, where he expressed disdain towards the encroachment of precolonial India's "ancient insanities . . . [which made one] believe the superstitions . . ." (357), the "diseased hours of the past" (340), and "fabulous antiquity" (341) into the post-independent Indian milieu. Rushdie's works underscore a persistent aversion towards the intrusion of mythic era into the fabric of contemporary reality. Neither Pampa, the representative of the mythical past, who keeps influencing the present, nor Qara Köz in *Enchantress of Florence* are seen as capable of providing "the basic self-understanding of a people and thereby operate as a kind of charter for the total cultural life" (Larson 314). Rather, Qara Köz's phantasmagorical presence, Pampa's whisperings (i.e. the oral history that shaped the historical consciousness of the people), and Krishnadevaraya's revisiting the mythical past are considered nothing other than "invented tradition[s]" that attempt to establish a "continuity with a suitable historic past," which are nevertheless "largely factitious" (Hobsbawm 1–2). Such invented traditions contribute either to madness, as seen in the case of the painter Dashwanth or a detachment from historical authenticity as evinced both in the case of Krishnadevaraya as well as for the people of the Vijayanagara Empire.

(iv) Perpetuating Colonial Distortion: Rushdie's Erasure of Vijayanagara's Literary and Cultural Legacy

At a deeper echelon of scrutiny, it becomes imperative to state that Rushdie's text presents a rather diminutive portrayal of the opulent literary milieu characterizing the epoch. Perusal of Rushdie's novel may inadvertently convey the notion that the era was primarily defined by the

dominance of oral traditions. The epoch of Krishnadevaraya is renowned as the zenith of the Vijayanagara Empire. Rushdie merely accords a fleeting allusion to the profound literary legacy emblematic of the period: "During his life and after his death his court poets celebrated him in three languages, and their portraits were uniformly laudatory, and there were many statues made of him and these flattered him too" (195). Srinivas Reddy astutely discerns that under the aegis of Krishnadevaraya, it was the erudite courtly bards and versifiers of Vijayanagara who veritably etched the empire into the tapestry of collective memory and the annals of historical chronicles. Hence, the oversight of the abundant literary production of the epoch aligns seamlessly with Rushdie's endeavour to craft an oral, non-literate and therefore an ahistorical Vijayanagara Empire. Reddy further observes that:

> The epicentre of Vijayanagara literary production was a great hall called the Bhuvana Vijayam, or World Conquest, designed to host poetry readings and contests of literary wit . . . The magnificent structure was metaphorically held up by the king's *ashta-dig-gajas*, or Elephants of the Eight Directions, great poets of the land whom Krishnadevaraya had invited to grace his court. (ch. 11)

Victory City does make a passing reference to Krishnadevaraya's magnum opus, *The Giver of the Worn Garland* (originally known as *Āmuktamālyada*), a poignant composition dedicated to the Tamil mystic Andal. However, the novel utilizes this mention not as a means to illuminate Krishnadevaraya's literary prowess but rather as a vehicle to depict his symbolic obliteration of literature itself. In a pivotal moment, when Krishnadevaraya, suspecting Pampa and his Prime Minister Timmarasu of conspiring against his son, inflicts blindness upon them, the sage Madhava Acharya admonishes the monarch, revealing that his literary homage to Andal inadvertently extolled the virtues of Queen Pampa Kampana. Since each facet of Andal's allure resonates with the resplendence of Pampa Kampana, the king's misguided act of blinding Pampa amounts to the symbolic blinding of Andal herself—an act that desecrates not only the very figure Krishnadevaraya sought to honour in his literary imagination, but also a profound desecration of literature itself. In this vein, Krishnadevaraya's act of blinding Pampa symbolizes not only a transgression against her but also a betrayal of his own literary integrity. Pampa, thus juxtaposed with Andal, the revered mystic poetess, serves as a poignant metaphor for Krishnadevaraya's inadvertent desecration of literature itself. According to Raghunadha Rao, Krishnadevaraya was furious when he discovered that his son has been poisoned by Timma, the progeny of his trusted Mahamantri Timmarasu, leading to the impulsive blinding of the father and son in a fit of rage (88). Rushdie, deviating from historical records, adjoins Pampa's blinding

within the novel solely to underscore Krishnadevaraya's symbolic dismantling of literature. Such a portrayal not only erodes the multifaceted literary milieu of the era but also tarnishes Krishnadevaraya's legacy as a revered patron of literature and culture. Another conspicuous indication of Rushdie's reticence towards acknowledging the literary milieu of the era is discerned through the bibliography provided at the end of the novel. Within this compilation, Rushdie includes several paramount sources pertaining to the history of the Vijayanagara Empire, yet conspicuously omits one of the most pivotal and renowned texts in this domain: Sakkottai Krishnaswami Ayyangar's *Sources of Vijaynagar History*. This critical work meticulously collates excerpts from diverse Sanskrit and Telugu literary compositions produced during the period of Vijayanagara Empire, from which a plethora of historical minutiae can be extracted. Ayyangar asserts that this non-historical literature significantly aids in rectifying discrepancies within Portuguese chronicles and imparts information crucial for crafting a more comprehensive historical narrative of the Vijayanagara Empire (1). Given that Rushdie cites two books in his bibliography—namely *Toward a New Formation: South Indian Society Under Vijayanagar Rule* by Noboru Karashima and *Raya: Krishnadevaraya of Vijayanagara* by Srinivas Reddy—both of which reference Ayyangar's work within their texts, it seems improbable that Rushdie was unaware of this seminal text. The inclusion of Ayyangar's work would likely have undermined Rushdie's assertion that the kingdom of Vijayanagara was bereft of a historical and literary heritage.

II. Fidelity to Historical Records and Historical Fiction as Alternate Archive

The literary genre of historical fiction emerges as a pivotal agent in the constitution of an alternative archive, a repository that effectively endows voice and significance upon those marginalized constituents and subjectivities that often languish dishonoured within the confines of conventional, state-sanctioned historical records. However, the alternative archive is as much a result of intention and perception as its official counterpart whereby the creators' designs or affiliation to decolonial or Eurocentric mindset invariably impart a discernible shape to the historical narrative and create a particular form of historical identity. This proposition resonates harmoniously with Lynch's seminal doctrine that the archive, be it official or alternative, transcends the state of being "raw" or "primary" (69), persistently susceptible to the imperatives and idiosyncrasies of its progenitors, thereby orchestrating the trajectories of subsequent scholarly inquiries. Archives act, Thomas Osborne points out, as a "centre of interpretation" similar to "courts of law, psychotherapeutic centres and departments of the humanities" (52). What the archive contains is already a reconstruction- a

recording of history from a particular perspective or as Derrida claims that "archivation produces as much as it records the events" (17). Rushdie's novel *Victory City* conspicuously contributes to the construction of what can aptly be delineated as an imperial archive of knowledge. This repository, imbued with Eurocentric predilections and reductionist vantages, conspicuously serves to fortify Western constructs about precolonial India whilst concurrently relegating and exoticizing non-Western cultures to the peripheries of discourse. Both fictional and non-fictional history writing grapple with the question: "What can truthfully be asserted about such events on the basis of the . . . admissible evidence?" (White 148). This interface between history and fiction is best realized in Alexander Solzhenitsyn's *The Gulag Archipelago: An Experiment in Literary Investigation*. While the text is fundamentally a historical account—chronicling the camp system and Soviet society as a whole—it is also a "literary experiment" (Oja 113). The work straddles the line between history and fiction. Solzhenitsyn's references are sparse, often based on anonymous testimony, and he frequently incorporates rumours and hearsay if they align with his arguments. His selectivity in sourcing and lack of even minimal objectivity highlights the subjective nature of his approach (Oja 113). On the other side, fictional writers cannot escape their dependence on written historical record. In historical fiction, history can be, as Ian McEwan points out, "novelistically realized but they cannot be reinvented" (qtd. in de Groot 172). Similarly, in the discourse of history "the past is not recovered, not redeemed, but represented as in a theatrical play" (Cerdeira 206). Or, as Duby says, "history is an art, an essentially literary art" (50). Since novelists and historians both stand on the same ground, if the historians can be accused of distorting facts, the novelists are equally culpable for the same transgressions. Although Rushdie correctly concedes that literature, including poetry, follows its own principles for articulating truths, in historical fiction those principles cannot absolve themselves of the duty to present narratives that remain anchored in historical fact and actual historical occurrences. Novelists bear the ethical responsibility to avoid reinforcing falsehoods or negating established historical truths under the guise of artistic freedom.

By proscribing the infiltration of India's mythical past into its historical present and obliterating, in the process, the continuum of *gyan parampara*, *Victory City* begets an ahistorical rendition of precolonial India, thus delegitimizing the traditional modes through which ancient India once carved out and preserved its historical fabric. *Victory City* not only repudiates the historicity of oral narratives of India but also effaces the historicity of the illustrious Vijayanagara empire under the guise of magical realism. Rushdie's conspicuous neglect of the bounteous literary tapestry woven by the Vijayanagara Empire and his depiction of India as a realm bereft of historicity perpetuates a reductionist panorama that diminishes the import of

India's cultural and intellectual bequest on the global stage. Indeed, beyond certain character portrayals, Rushdie deviates markedly from extant historical records, all of which amalgamate to impugn the integrity of Vijayanagara's and thereby India's historical identity. As discerning readers, it behooves us to approach Rushdie's *Victory City* with a critical discernment, acknowledging both its literary merit and its deficiencies in faithfully representing India's multifaceted identity and historical consciousness.

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NOTES ON CONTRIBUTORS

Sakiru Adebayo is an assistant professor of Black Anglophone literature in the Department of English at the University of British Columbia, Okanagan. He is also a research associate in the Department of African Literature, University of the Witwatersrand, Johannesburg. He is the author of *Continuous Pasts: Frictions of Memory in Postcolonial Africa* (published by the University of Michigan Press and shortlisted for the Memory Studies Association First Book Award). He is the winner of the 2022 Nigerian Prize for Literary Criticism and the 2023 Amilcar Cabral Prize. His papers have appeared—or are forthcoming in—in reputable journals such as *Parallax, Cambridge Journal of Postcolonial Inquiry, Postcolonial Text, Research in African Literatures, Journal of African Literature Association, Journal of Global Postcolonial Studies, Museum International, Journal of African Cinemas, Memory Studies* and so on.

Chibueze Darlington Anuonye is the curator of *Selfies and Signatures: An Afro Anthology of Short Stories*, co-editor of *Daybreak: An Anthology of Nigerian Short Fiction and Unbound: An Anthology of New Nigerian Poets*, and editor of *Through the Eye of a Needle: Art in the Time of Coronavirus and Who Gave the Order?*

Lizelle Bisschoff is professor of Film Studies at the University of Glasgow, where she specialises in African cinema, feminist film, and decolonial approaches to film research and education. With a PhD in film studies from the University of Stirling, her research foregrounds gender, digital culture, and postcolonial aesthetics in African filmmaking. She is the co-author of *Women in African Cinema: Beyond the Body Politic* (Routledge, 2019) and co-editor of *Stretching the Archives: Decolonising Global Women's Film Heritage* (Archive Books, 2025). Bisschoff is the founder of the Africa in Motion Film Festival (2006), Scotland's first African film festival. She has curated several high-profile film programmes, including *Africa's Lost Classics (2016-17), a programme of early African films which toured across the UK*. Her leadership in projects funded by the Arts and Humanities Research Council, British Film Institute and Screen Scotland underscores her commitment to cultural exchange, film education, exhibition and audience engagement. She regularly attends international film festivals and academic conferences nationally and internationally as invited speaker and jury member. An advocate for EDI (Equalities, Diversity and Inclusion) in higher education, Bisschoff has led initiatives on gender equality, anti-racism and inclusive pedagogy at the University of Glasgow.

Ainehi Edoro-Glines is a Nigerian literary scholar and assistant professor of global Black studies at the University of Wisconsin–Madison and is the founder and editor of *Brittle Paper*, a leading platform for African literary culture. Her writing has appeared in *PMLA, ELH, The Guardian, and BBC World News*. *Forest Imaginaries* is her first book.

Simon Lewis has been teaching African and World Literature at the College of Charleston since 1996. He has published two monographs, *White Women Writers and Their African Invention* (2003), and *British and African Literature in Transnational Context* (2011) with the University Press of Florida, and has published widely on South African writers, including novelists Olive Schreiner and Nadine Gordimer, and poets Ingrid de Kok, and Dennis Brutus. A longtime member of the African Literature Association, of which he is currently president, Lewis co-edited a special issue of the *Journal of the African Literature Association* as well as an e-book tribute to the late Chinua Achebe. Through his close association with the *Carolina Lowcountry and Atlantic World* (CLAW) program at the College of Charleston, Lewis has also co-edited four collections of essays on Atlantic World history.

Since 1985 he has edited and published some 30 issues of the literary journal *Illuminations: An International Magazine of Contemporary Writing*, a number of which were dedicated to South African, Zimbabwean or East African poetry.

Idrissou Mora-Kpai (Director/Producer)—An award-winning filmmaker, Idrissou Mora-Kpai is the recipient of the John Simon Guggenheim Memorial Foundation Fellowship and the Dutch Prince Claus Award. His socially relevant films, including *Si-Gueriki, The Queen Mother, Arlit, The Second Paris, Indochina Traces of a Mother, America Street, Border Life* have screened at prestigious festivals worldwide, such as Berlin, Rotterdam, Vienna, Milano, Busan, Marseille, and Sheffield, earning international acclaim and numerous awards. He has previously taught at Duke University, the University of Pittsburgh, and Ithaca College. He is currently an associate professor at Pratt Institute's School of Art in New York.

Dr. Madhurima Nayak holds a PhD in English from Banaras Hindu University, Varanasi, India. She has presented papers at numerous national and international conferences, and her work has been published in journals such as *Journal of Dharma Studies* (Springer) and *Journal of Comparative Literature and Aesthetics*. Her forthcoming paper, titled "*Critical Theory Needs Decolonization—and Neo-Vedanta Might Hold the Key*," has been accepted for publication in *Public Humanities* (Cambridge University Press). Her research interests include postcolonial studies, Indian writing in English, decolonial studies, Indian historiography, and literature.

Innocent Akili Ngulube holds a PhD in English from Rhodes University, South Africa. He is currently a lecturer in the Department of Literary Studies at the University of Malawi. He is also a research affiliate of the African Studies Association (ASA), the Institute for Humanities in Africa (HUMA) at the University of Cape Town, and the African Studies Center at the University of Leiden. His interdisciplinary research interests include Afrodiasporic literature, postmodernism, modernism, postcolonialism, African popular culture, African Literary Urban Studies, Pan-Africanism, China-Africa relations, 4IR/AI, African science fiction, digital humanities, magical realism, cultural studies, literary theory, and critical theory. His articles and book reviews appear in *Research in African Literatures, Critical African Studies, Nordic Journal of African Studies, African Studies Review, Mobility Humanities, and Matatu: Journal for African Culture and Society*. His book chapters feature in *Xenophobia, Nativism and Pan-Africanism in 21st Century Africa: History, Concepts, Practice and Case Study* (edited by Sabella O. Abidde and Emmanuel Matambo) and in *Pros and Cons of China and the Chinese in Africa* (edited by Sabella Ogbobode Abidde). He has recently completed the 2025 Cadbury Fellowship in the Department of African Studies and Anthropology (DASA) at the University of Birmingham from 19 May to 30 June. He has also been selected to participate in a 2025–2026 online British Academy Writing Workshop titled "Just Urban Transition in African Cities" led by Dr. Margot Rubin (Principal Investigator) from the University of Cardiff.

Vincent R. Ogoti is an assistant professor of English and Global Black Studies at Clemson University. He is a scholar of biopolitics, violence, and subjectivity. His research primarily focuses on African, African American, and Caribbean literature and culture. Dr. Ogoti's works have appeared or are forthcoming in the *Journal of African Literature Association, Journal of African Cultural Studies, Nordic Journal of African Studies, Matatu: Journal of African Culture and Society, and Brittle Paper.*

A poet, translator, essayist, **Daniel Simon** is assistant director and editor in chief of *World Literature Today* at the University of Oklahoma, where he also serves on the English, International Studies, and Judaic Studies faculty. The author of two previous verse collections, his third book of poems, *Under a Gathering Sky*, was published by Stephen F. Austin State University Press.

Brenda Tan is a PhD student in the English Department at Rice University. She studies Anglophone African and Afro-Caribbean literature, third-world Marxisms, peripheral modernism, postcolonial theory, and critical race theory.