

**Ancestral Trauma, Animist Poetics:
African Literature's Regenerative Death Drive**

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Abstract

In this thesis I ask, what kind of trauma theory is immanent to modern African literature? Informed by psychoanalysis and deconstruction, I explicate from African texts a form of collective trauma that I term *ancestral trauma* and a regenerative logic of survival that I term *animist poetics*. Ancestral trauma names the process through which colonial modernity ruptures the cosmological frame of reference upon which the cultural memory of a colonized people depends. Desecrating the very form of intergenerational remembrance, ancestral trauma operates beyond the purveyance of memory studies. So does animist poetics. Rather than representing traumatic memory, animist poetics regenerates desecrated ancestral ties by paradoxically ritualizing their erasure. Animist poetics is thus an aesthetic logic immanent to modernity, which challenges dichotomies between African animism and Western modernity. Operating beyond the therapeutic framework of recovery and the Manichaeism of postcolonial critique, animist poetics reinvents precolonial cosmologies as responses to colonized modernity—not historic redemption, but collective survival. Authors such as Yvonne Vera and Wole Soyinka craft such a survival by aesthetically ritualizing death, which leads to a new theory of the death drive. Freud's theory equates death with ontological stasis, but Vera and Soyinka posit an animist revision in which the deaths enforced by colonial and postcolonial regimes become transitions into new forms of collective life. This regenerative death drive at the heart of animist poetics both extends and overturns Freud's most radical insight. Thus, in this thesis, through offering a postcolonial trauma theory, I ultimately gesture toward a post-secular theory of time in which the living, the dead, and the unborn can, in response to an erasure of the past, inherit the possibility of a future.

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Introduction: On Ancestral Trauma, Animist Poetics, and the Regenerative Death Drive

Colonialism is not satisfied merely with holding a people in its grip and emptying the native's brain of all form and content. By a kind of perverted logic, it turns to the past of the oppressed people, and distorts, disfigures and destroys it.

Frantz Fanon, *The Wretched of the Earth* (169)

In contrast to the Jewish memory of the Holocaust, there is, properly speaking, no African memory of slavery; or, if there is such a memory, it is one characterized by diffraction. At best, slavery is experienced as a wound whose meaning belongs to the unconscious—in a word, witchcraft.

Achille Mbembe, "African Modes of Self-Writing" (259-60)

These epigraphs place the erasure of memory at the core of colonial trauma. As Fanon argues, postcolonial conditions emerge through the historiographic trauma of the colonial encounter. I do not use the modifier *historical*, experienced during an identifiable moment in history, but *historiographic*: at once historic and hermeneutic. The historic event of colonialism erases native access to the recollection and

interpretation of indigenous history, replacing this process with a new history, Fanon argues. He calls this erasure “the settler’s violence *in the beginning*,” casting colonialism as a violent (re)genesis of indigenous culture (73, my emphasis). As the colonizer becomes he who “makes history,” Fanon claims, he becomes “the absolute beginning” of the indigenous world (39-40). The “historiographic perversion” of colonization is also for Fanon cosmological.¹ As Ben Grant argues, through this historiographic process Fanon casts the colonizer as an ancestor who creates a new form of ancestry; more precisely, the colonizer takes on the structural role of the ancestor through the colonization of the ancestral itself. “It is not therefore the colonizer who all unknowingly wears the mask of ancestor,” Grant writes, “but the ancestors who henceforth cannot help falling into the place hollowed out by the colonizer, a place named Origin, Source, Author, etc. In other words, the ancestor is a colonizer, *by the self-definition of the latter*” (594). In this thesis I term this process *ancestral trauma*.

Unlike Marianne Hirsch’s influential theory of the intergenerational transmission of traumatic memory, postmemory, or Michael Rothberg’s influential theory of the cross-cultural transmission of traumatic memory, multidirectional memory, ancestral trauma is not only historical, but also, as Fanon implies, cosmological. Colonization severs the link between a colonized people and their ancestral tradition by rupturing the cosmological frame of reference upon which their cultural memory depends. This rupture functions to “abolish any idea of ancestry and thus any debt with regard to a past,” Mbembe writes (“African Modes” 269). By enforcing an alien frame of reference, colonial modernity makes an ancestral claim that paradoxically erases

¹ I borrow the term “historiographic perversion” from Marc Nichanian, who sees it as fundamental to modern genocide.

ancestry. Consequently, as Mbembe suggests, interpreting the events that historically inaugurated the everyday traumas of modern African life—the catastrophe of the global slave trade being a prime example—requires transgressing the concept of cultural memory undergirding scholarship such as Hirsch’s and Rothberg’s. The exigency of memory loses potency in a form of life that is itself constituted through forgetting and therefore cut off from remembering.² Thus, rather than Hirsch’s description of a generation, or for Rothberg a culture, creatively recollecting the memories of another, ancestral trauma names the process in which the colonization of an indigenous memory framework desecrates a social form of intergenerational, cultural remembrance.

In explicating these claims from Fanon and Mbembe, I am in one sense returning to well-trodden territory within postcolonial theory—namely its intersect with poststructuralism. We may recall Homi Bhabha’s argument that a primal scene of collective and unrecoverable forgetting, the “signification of a minus in the origin,” is precisely what “constitutes the *beginning* of the nation’s narrative,” for instance (230). But I am also pointing postcolonial theory in another direction. Mbembe’s quote proposes a fusing of such theory with vernacular forms of thought to produce an alternative to the discourse of memory proper. The “theoretical” language of the unconscious and the “vernacular” language of witchcraft both instate a logic of collective wounding and survival operating outside the logic of memorialization, he suggests.

My argument in this thesis is that so does African literature. On the one hand, African literature aesthetically represents ancestral trauma. K’s “story with a hole in it”

² Mbembe states this problem poignantly: “Various factors have prevented the full development of conceptions that might have explained the meaning of the African past and present by reference to the future, but chief among them may be named historicism” (238).

in J.M. Coetzee's *The Life and Times of Michael K* (110) and Nyasha "shredding her history book between her teeth" in Tsitsi Dangarembga's *Nervous Conditions* (205) are just two examples (amidst many) of characters embodying ancestral trauma. What is more, the inauguration of a poetics through which to recover from this trauma, opening the possibility of a new history—a postcolonial dispensation—is, I would suggest, the genesis of modern African literary form. In other words, in response to the ancestral trauma of colonization, African literature must operate beyond an aesthetics of representation, engaging instead with what Wole Soyinka calls "art as ritual process" ("Ritual" 7). While it may be true that literature represents cultural traumas, throughout this thesis I wish to explore the process through which literature creates new forms of collective life emerging through these traumas. African literature shares this affirmative, agential—indeed, ritual—act, Mbembe's quote implies, with witchcraft, or what I would call more broadly animism.³ In this thesis I will term African literature's aesthetic response to ancestral trauma, which moves beyond the process of historical representation and into the conjuring of a new dispensation, *animist poetics*. And I term the logic of collective survival *through death*, which is immanent to animist poetics, African literature's *regenerative death drive*. This drive, I will demonstrate, recasts the debate in postcolonial literary studies over the relation between the psychoanalytic theory of trauma and the cultural traumas informing postcolonial literature, allowing us to reject a certain Manichaeism plaguing this discourse. Before I contextualize my argument, I wish to first of all consider some examples of regenerative death from art and film, which will function as a point of departure.

³ Mbembe does not define "witchcraft." I prefer the term animism as to avoid conflation with the European figure of the witch.

Posthumous Transfigurations

Wanuri Kahiu's short film *Pumzi* (2009) depicts life in the Maitu Community, a post-apocalyptic, East African compound, 35 years after World War III. Asha, the protagonist, is an archivist in the Virtual Natural History Museum, which documents the natural pre-history of the outside world, now a barren desert. In the museum newspaper clippings detailing the earth's loss of water stand beside specimens of previous life forms, including the dead, charred roots of the earth's last tree. Upon discovering a mysterious box containing a soil sample, however, Asha dreams of another tree—hope, she interprets, of life outside the compound. Taking the soil and a seed labeled the Maitu Seed, Asha escapes the compound to journey through a radioactive desert in search of the tree she witnessed in her dream. She walks until she can no longer, discovering no sign of life. With her last remaining strength, she plants the seed, which has begun to sprout within the mysterious soil, watering it with her own sweat. Lying beside the seed, shading it from the sun, Asha dies. As the camera pans upward, her body transfigures into a tree. She sprouts through her decomposition the realization of her dream; the audience witnesses her, in becoming the Maitu Seed of her archive, become, through death, an archivist of future life: a prophet.

Similar prophecies abound in contemporary African art. In Wangechi Matu's animated short *The End of Carrying All* (2015), for example, an African woman undertakes a journey across a savanna while the basket on her head is increasingly filled with symbols of European, capitalist expansion: a bicycle wheel, a satellite dish, an oil rig. Upon reaching a single tree at the edge of a cliff, she, like Asha, collapses from

exhaustion. Transfiguring into molten lava, she is absorbed into the earth; the earth ripples, and the film begins again. Through this loop, Matu ritualizes Kahiu's vision of posthumous transfiguration, re-situating the process from a post-apocalyptic future to the cyclic foundation of history—that which has always animated existence. The trees in each film, symbols of a (re)genesis, cast each protagonist as a new Eve, a source of collective life. *Maitu* (mother), deriving from the Kikuyu roots *maa* (truth) and *itu* (ours), philologically suggests, like the biblical Eve, a primal germination of community. Deriving from the Arabic A'isha—"she who lives"—Asha denotes both life and, in English, ash. Through Asha's transfiguration into the Maitu Tree, then, *Pumzi* asks its audience to imagine a future form of communal life germinated in death, a life emerging through its own ashes, while *The End of Carrying All* suggests that this future form is somehow already immanent to life itself.

That both protagonists shed their differentiation from nature during their deaths, becoming a tree or molten lava, is vital to their shared vision of life. Indeed, losses of creaturely difference abound within artworks which share this prophetic vision. In Nandipha Mtambo's photographic composite *Europa* (2008), for instance, a black woman with a bull's head leans forward, gazing upon the viewer, seemingly roused by her newly acquired therianthropic form. Europa of Greek mythology was raped by Zeus disguised as a bull. Mtambo's *Europa* appears after the rape, transfigured by the experience. On the one hand, she embodies the association between the indigenous and the animal that Fanon famously places at the core of colonization. The "zoological terms" historically used by imperial regimes to associate indigenous people with "the bestiary" gestures beyond the rhetorical, he argues, revealing the political structure of

the colony (33). The colonial world is realized as it “dehumanizes the native” and “turns him into an animal” (32). This process of dehumanization realizes more than the colony, he argues. Since European progress comes “from the soil and from the subsoil of that underdeveloped world,” a “world which has been forced down to animal level by imperial powers,” for Fanon, “Europe is literally the creation of the Third World” *as animal* (76; 79; 81). Hence his mocking of European humanism in the conclusion to *The Wretched of the Earth*. “When I search for Man in the technique and the style of Europe,” he writes, “I see only a succession of negations of man” (252). Mtambo’s *Europa* embodies this dehumanizing humanism as the rape of her African, female body, but also depicts a future life emerging through this rape. Printed with archival ink on cotton rag paper, both used for preservation, the image archives the “social death” at the core of colonial—and indeed, European—history⁴; yet, like Kahiu’s and Matu’s protagonists, Mtambo’s subject becomes an archivist of life after the death of the (European) human. Flaunting a form of life neither fully animal, nor fully human, *Europa* sheds the legacy of her namesake by re-crafting the death Europe bestowed upon her into new life.

Critics largely interpret each of these artworks as examples of Afrofuturism. Blending generic conventions across science fiction, fantasy, and magic realism to reconfigure historical realities of the African Diaspora, Afrofuturism names a speculative aesthetic which imagines possible futures of black life. *Pumzi*, for example, reconfigures modernity as a post-apocalyptic dystopia in order to imagine a future beyond the subjugation of (black) life as the space of the political. Like Michel Foucault’s narrative of European modernity, inhabitants of the Maitu Community live in

⁴ See Orlando Patterson on social death

constant surveillance by “the council,” producing kinetic energy through mandatory exercise routines and water by filtering urine and sweat, ensuring the compound remains self-enclosed and self-sustaining. Dream suppressant pills keep inhabitants from imaging life outside their political structure, but Asha’s pills fail to stop her dream. The Maitu Seed and the unknown soil bear the promise, Asha believes, of a community no longer rooted in the political capture of life, but rather the natural regeneration of life in death. But this prophetic vision exceeds Afrofuturism, Kahi argues. Much like Asha, “my job is to be a seer, not just a historian,” she argues, which has always been the task of the African storyteller (“Afrofuturism”). Components of what critics now term Afrofuturism exist in all forms of African narrative, she claims: the solar system in Dogon cosmology, the prophecies of colonial conquest told by Mugo wa Kiburu, the presence of the spirit world in Ben Okri’s writing, even the stories told by her mother. For Kahi, *Pumzi*’s narrative of Asha becoming the Maitu Tree is a “continuation of storytelling” passed down from such sources (“No More”). According to this framework, *Pumzi*, *The End of Carrying All*, and *Europa* become archives of the future by becoming archives of their ancestral sources—recasting their Afrofuturist aesthetics as techniques of a broader logic: animist poetics.

Indeed, similar posthumous transfigurations abound in forms of African art not typically interpreted as Afrofuturist. In fact, they form something of a leitmotif within modern, African literature. They often figure a merging of the human and the land, such as the earth’s inheritance of Okonkwo’s curse at the end of Chinua Achebe’s *Things Fall Apart* (1958), passing on the need for “sacrifices to cleanse the desecrated land” (187). Bessie Head’s *A Question of Power* (1973) and Mia Couto’s *Sleepwalking Land*

(1992) both end by casting this desecrated union as regenerative. *A Question of Power*'s protagonist, Elizabeth, discovers a form of "belonging" within the land: "As she fell asleep, she placed one soft hand over her land. It was a gesture of belonging" (206). Likewise, in *Sleepwalking Land*, Kindzu's words themselves join this belonging, an image of the literary: "Then, one by one, the letters turn into grains of sand, and little by little, all my writings are transformed into pages of earth" (213). In other works, characters themselves transfigure, much like Kahiu's, Matu's, and Mtambo's protagonists. In the final chapter of Uzodinmna Iweala's *Beasts of No Nation* (2005), for instance, Agu the child soldier sits in a rehabilitation program dreaming of posthumous transfiguration:

I am wanting to lie down on the warm ground with my eye closed and the smell of mud in my nose [. . .]. I am wanting to feel how the ground is wet all around my body so that if I am sweating, I am feeling like it is the ground sweating through me. And I am wanting to stay in this same place forever, never moving for anything, just waiting waiting until dust is piling on me and grasses is covering me and insect is making their home in the space between my teeth. I am telling her that I am thinking one Iroko tree will be growing from my body, so wide that its trunk is separating night and day, and so tall that its top leaf is tickling the moon until the man living there is smiling. (176)

Agu dreams of dying like Asha, sprouting through his death a new form of life. Could these transfigurations, which imagine forms of collective life regenerating through death, offer a theory of trauma and survival through which we can interpret the everyday violence of postcolonial existence?

Trauma Theory in the Postcolony

In “Geopschoanalysis: ‘. . . and the rest of the world,’” Derrida critiques the Euro-American blindfold of psychoanalysis, asking us to consider what sort of global *polis* is imagined when psychoanalytic theory’s “ongoing worldification” ignores the majority of the globe, those spaces, mostly colonized spaces, where “*Homo psychoanalyticus* is unknown or outlawed” (66; 87). To push Derrida’s polemic further, “the rest of the world” appears within the psychoanalytic paradigm as a “dark continent,” to use Henry Morton Stanley’s infamous phrase, a phrase Freud himself employs in “The Question of Lay Analysis” to refer to female sexuality. As Ranjana Khanna convincingly argues, Freud’s use of Stanley’s phrase (in its original English)—the (non)translation of a geopolitical metaphor into the realm of sexual difference—reveals two regimes that historically produced the subject of psychoanalysis: patriarchy and empire. This pairing implies a question pertinent to trauma theory. If, after the influence of *écriture féminine*, sexual difference and thus the problem of phallogocentrism is an obligatory concern of psychoanalytically informed literary and cultural theory, what of the colonial relation and thus the problem of Eurocentrism?⁵

This problem is pertinent to the collective of comparatists who, during high theory’s “ethical turn” in the early 1990s, began to theorize trauma as the fundamental experience of twentieth century history as well as an ethically motivated mode of reading culture—the most influential of whom has been Cathy Caruth.⁶ In one of the

⁵ For an early example of the problematic relation between psychoanalysis and colonialism, see Wulf Sachs.

⁶ See also Shoshana Felman, Geoffrey Hartman, and Dominick LaCapra. For an introduction to the impact of this tradition within comparative literary and cultural studies, see Mary Jacobus’ edited “Trauma and

most debated phrases in contemporary trauma studies, Caruth posits that trauma offers the “possibility, in a catastrophic era, of a link between cultures” (*Unclaimed* 56).

Taking the contemporary state of literary and cultural studies as a litmus test, however, we must admit that, a couple decades in, the link produced by theory’s turn to traumatic memory is unequal. As the work of Giorgio Agamben, Roberto Esposito, Eric Santner, and others attest, the Holocaust—and perhaps more specifically, Auschwitz—has been cast as the primal scene of modernity. Forget the global slave trade; forget the entire history of colonization; it is not until we reach the Nazi death camp that, as Agamben famously puts it, the “*nomos* of the modern” is revealed (*Homo Sacer*). This tunnel vision is precisely the problem Derrida raises in “Geopsychoanalysis.” By leaving “the rest of the world,” to borrow the International Psychoanalytic Association’s words, “disremembered and unaccounted for” (124), to borrow Toni Morrison’s words, psychoanalysis, Derrida claims, faces a problem of futurity. He writes,

The size of these psychoanalytically virgin territories, in terms both of their physical extension and of their (present and future) demographics, as well as their cultural and religious foundations, means that they constitute a vast problem for the future of psychoanalysis. For that future is far from being structured like a space opening up ahead—a space yet to come, as it were, for psychoanalysis. (87)

In our globalized world, the future of psychoanalysis, Derrida argues, is not pre-given. Rather, it hangs upon the eclipse of Western worldification. In short, psychoanalysis must be decolonized.

Psychoanalysis” in *Diacritics*, Karyn Ball’s edited “Trauma and its Cultural Aftereffects” in *Cultural Critique* and Linda Belau and Petar Ramadanovic’s edited “Trauma: Essays on the Limit of Knowledge and Experience” in *Postmodern Culture*.

Rather than rejecting psychoanalytic thought in order to understand the multitude of traumas that emerge outside the narrow world of psychoanalysis, however, Derrida reads psychoanalysis against itself, arguing that the reality of disremembered traumas throughout the globe traumatizes psychoanalytic trauma theory, threatening its survival from an unknown future. As he puts it in “Autoimmunity: Real and Symbolic Suicides,” “A traumatic event is not only marked as an event by the memory, even if unconscious, of what took place.” He continues, “I believe we must complicate this schema (even if it is not completely false); we must question its ‘chrono-logy,’ that is, the thought and order of temporalization it seems to imply. We must rethink the temporalization of traumatism” (96). A traumatic event, he claims, temporally “proceeds neither from the now that is present nor from the present that is past but from an im-presentable to come (*à venir*)” (97). Such a temporal logic is, despite being pinned against psychoanalysis, the core of psychoanalytic trauma theory. How does one think this strange history? How does one interpret that which is not present? Such entangled historicity raised by the everyday, disremembered traumas of the postcolony is in fact the central concern, according to Derrida, of any serious theory of trauma.

Both Freud and Caruth, for instance, bring this concern to the fore. The most influential text undergirding contemporary debates on trauma across the theoretical humanities, Caruth’s *Unclaimed Experience*, begins with Freud’s analysis of a scene of haunting from Torquato Tasso’s *Jerusalem Liberated*. One of the most influential critiques of Caruth, Ruth Leys’ *Trauma: A Genealogy*, culminates in a conflicting interpretation of this scene. This dispute over a haunting (the interpretation of that which is not present) emblemizes the political debate currently presiding over cultural trauma

theory. In Tasso's epic of the First Crusade, Tancred accidentally kills his beloved, Clorinda. After the burial, Tancred enters a magical forest and slashes a tree with his sword. As blood streams down the tree, Tancred hears Clorinda's voice cry out. To Tancred's horror, Clorinda's spirit resides in the tree. In *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*, Freud interprets this haunting as a representation of the repetition compulsion. Like trauma victims who return to their catastrophes through dreams, Tancred returns to the scene of trauma, re-wounding his beloved against his conscious will.⁷

Caruth goes further, interpreting the scene as a parable of the ethics embodied in witnessing trauma. Tancred's trauma arises through his responsibility for Clorinda's death, and through this implication a haunting voice arises to address Tancred. Just as Clorinda's voice—or, more precisely, the voice of the wound, of Clorinda's absence—cries out to Tancred, Caruth suggests, trauma structurally opens new modes of being addressed by the other. Freudian trauma, in other words, substantiates Levinasian ethics.⁸ Leys, on the other hand, argues that through their universalizing interpretations, Freud and Caruth mistakingly represent Tasso, the perpetrator, as a victim. For Leys, Clorinda⁹ is the “undisputable victim of wounding,” not Tasso, and Caruth's mistake has larger consequences (294). Following Caruth's logic “would turn other perpetrators into victims too,” Leys writes, “for example, it would turn the executioners of the Jews into victims and the ‘cries’ of the Jews into testimony to the trauma suffered by the Nazis” (297). In sum, Leys replaces Caruth's poststructural conflation of subjectivities with a politically charged instantiation of bordered subject positions. Though extreme, Leys'

⁷ As Freud goes on to argue, this process challenges his previous theory of dreams as wish fulfillment and necessitates a restructuring of psychoanalysis from the pleasure principle to the repetition compulsion, out of which emerges his theory of the death drive.

⁸ On Levinasian ethics, see Simon Critchley's *The Ethics of Deconstruction: Derrida and Levinas*.

⁹ Clorinda, an Ethiopian princess, represents for Amy Novak “the female voice of black Africa” (32).

argument is emblematic of what has become the standard critique of psychoanalytic, deconstructive trauma theory. Lauren Berlant, Rob Nixon, Ann Cvetkovich, and Veena Das, for example, have each faulted the discourse for ignoring the ordinary violences of everyday life—what Berlant calls “crisis ordinariness”—be they economic, environmental, sexual, or racial. Each conclude that, in short, the theory of trauma brought into the spotlight by Caruth and her “Yale School” affiliates bypasses *realpolitik* for that late deconstructive nowhere-land, the ethical.¹⁰

In *Multidirectional Memory*, Rothberg intercedes in this debate, attempting to articulate a middle ground. Like Leys, he is predominantly concerned with the cultural politics of representing trauma, yet he recognizes a category mistake in Leys’ interpretation. The diagnostic category of trauma does not translate neatly into the legal/moral categories of victim and perpetrator, he insists (perpetrators often become traumatized, for instance); furthermore, Caruth’s conflation of subjectivities demonstrates the messy yet necessary process through which memories of cultural trauma (e.g., colonial expansion and the Holocaust) become entangled in the public sphere. I wish to suggest, however, that Rothberg’s most mundane point is also his most crucial: Clorinda cannot be traumatized because she is dead. “The dead are not traumatized,” he writes, “they are dead; trauma implies some ‘other’ mode of living on” (90). What if Leys is misguided in her conflation of trauma and morality, political justice and stably bordered identities, but correct (perhaps unwittingly so) in her claim that dead people, as Fanon implies in the epigraph with which I began, can be

¹⁰ Berlant writes that while “trauma theory conventionally focuses on exceptional shock and data loss in the memory and experience of catastrophe, implicitly suggesting that subjects ordinarily archive the intensities neatly and efficiently with an eye toward easy access,” in reality the experience of “[c]risis is not exceptional to history or consciousness but a process embedded in the ordinary that unfolds in stories about navigating what’s overwhelming” (10).

traumatized? In this thesis, I wish to move beyond the secular premise of trauma studies, which has hitherto constituted what Rothberg dubs our “victim-perpetrator imaginary,” while simultaneously contributing to the decolonization of the discourse (“Trauma Theory”). As I have indicated, I will embark on this task by exploring the relationship between *ancestral trauma* and *animist poetics* in African literature. The posthumous transfigurations I briefly examined, I wish to suggest, demonstrate a re-crafting of the Tancred and Clorinda parable around a regenerative death drive central to modern African literature—from which I wish to explicate a trauma theory that both takes into account “the rest of the world,” in Derrida’s polemic and, perhaps more enigmatically, the agency of spirits.

Animist Poetics

Since E.B. Tylor’s *Primitive Culture* (1871) and James Frazer’s *The Golden Bough* (1890), animism has typically been conceptualized as pre-monotheistic religion of spirits. More recently, anthropologists, philosophers, and theologians have returned to the animism first envisioned by colonial anthropology, seeking to transgress the categorical violence of the post-Enlightenment paradigm, which rendered animism primitive, as in Freud’s association of children, neurotics, and indigenous people. Graham Harvey terms this return the new animism: a positive exploration of indigenous modes of being-with non-human subjects. This recent interest in indigenous epistemologies and ontologies should be interpreted, I would add, in dialogue with contemporary theory’s turn away from the legacy of European humanism, be it through post-humanism, new materialism, thing theory, object-oriented-ontology, ecocriticism,

or animal studies. All of these discourses could be conceptualized as attempts to craft through Euro-American theory Nurit Bird-David's description of animism: a *relational* epistemology.

While these connections are productive, the focus of my inquiry is literary form and theory—specifically the impact African literature's animist poetics can make within the discourse of trauma theory.¹¹ One of my influences in interpreting the texts under discussion is, however, the anthropology of spirit possession. Explicating the structure of shamanic healing rituals, anthropologists such as Michael Taussig and Paul Stoller have drawn out the postcolonial critique immanent to possession rituals. Commenting on the West African Hauka spirit possession rituals, in which participants become possessed by the spirit of historic, European colonizers in hopes of capturing through their performances the historic power of the European, Stoller argues that the animist experience of “spirit possession is a site of mimetic production and reproduction, which makes it a stage for the production and reproduction of power” (37). In their performances of colonial power relations, Stoller claims, the “Hauka embody difference,” a difference, or alien spirit, that “generates power” in the possessed (12). This power is, as Taussig explains, the work of mimetic representation-as-production—similar to the mimetic faculty that Walter Benjamin famously theorizes. “As the nature that culture uses to create second nature,” he writes, “mimesis chaotically jostles for elbow room in this force field of necessary contradiction and illusion, providing the glimpse of the opportunity to dismantle that second nature and reconstruct other worlds”

¹¹ For introductory explorations of animism from religious and philosophical perspectives, see Philip M. Peek's edited *African Divination Systems: Ways of Knowing*, Emmanuel Eze's edited *African Philosophy: An Anthology*, Jacob Olupona's *African Religions: A Very Short Introduction* and his edited *Beyond Primitivism: Indigenous Religious Traditions and Modernity*.

(*Mimesis* 71). In other words, the subject of postcolonial spirit possession, who is already possessed by the trauma of colonial history, what I am calling ancestral trauma, crafts a form of recovery through a reworking of that history, a new way of becoming possessed and animated by that history. As Taussig sums up Putumayo shamanism, “From the represented shall come that which overturns representation” (*Shamanism* 135). In this framework, ancestral trauma as collective possession is both trauma and recovery, determined and creative.¹²

All of the literary texts I explore assume a world shaped by ancestral trauma; however, like Taussig’s and Stoller’s interpretations of shamanic rituals, each text creates a vision of collective survival by subjecting the traumas represented to creative recraftings of animist cosmologies. Chapter one, for instance, focuses on Aminatta Forna’s *The Memory of Love* (2010) and Delia Jarrett-Macauley’s *Moses, Citizen & Me* (2005). Both novels are set in post-Civil War Sierra Leone and narrate failed attempts by Western protagonists unversed in local cosmologies to help an internally displaced person and a child soldier. Although the novels attempt to narrate indigenous modes of healing, neither proposes a return to the precolonial, indigenous past. Instead, they aesthetically represent indigenous cosmologies which are necessarily implicated in—or, distorted, disfigured, and destroyed by, as Fanon claims—colonial modernity. In fact, none of the literary texts I explore assume frames of reference which preexist the ancestral trauma of colonization; rather, their animist cosmologies emerge as responses to this trauma.

¹² Fitz Kramer’s *The Red Fez*, Terrence Ranger’s *Violence and Memory*, Donald Cosentino’s *Defiant Maids and Stubborn Farmers*, and Jean and John Comaroff’s *Modernity and its Malcontents* and “Occult Economies and the Violence of Abstraction” are a few examples of other helpful socio-anthropological approaches to possession rituals.

I am here building on claims made by Sam Durrant and David Lloyd. In one of the first studies to place the theoretical turn to trauma partially opened by Caruth in dialogue with postcolonial literature, *Postcolonial Narrative and the Work of Mourning*, Durrant demonstrates a formal relation between theories of post-traumatic mourning in Freud, Derrida, and others and the historiography envisioned within postcolonial literature. Contra claims made by many postcolonial critics of trauma theory (which I will later summarize), Durrant locates within postcolonial literature a primary, irrecoverable act of forgetting silently operating as that which constitutes the pre-historic foreclosure through which the colonized subject historically emerges *as traumatized* (5). Moreover, the writings of each of these authors, Durrant suggests, function as acts of mourning this trauma and thus aid in postcolonial recovery. In “Colonial Trauma/Postcolonial Recovery,” Lloyd, in accordance with Durrant, argues that such recovery cannot be conceptualized as the “retrieval of a lost self or lost culture” because colonial trauma erases the past self, constituting a new “subject whose very condition is a transformation” (215). Despite this transformational erasure, or traumatic subject formation, Lloyd argues, there lurk “melancholy survivals” of pre-colonial, pre-capitalist forms of collective living scattered through the postcolonial present (219). A “non-therapeutic relation to the past, structured around the notion of survival or living on rather than recovery” should therefore “ground a different mode of historicization” for postcolonial critique, he claims (219-20). In other words, if fragments of the pre-colonial past haunt the postcolonial present from which they have been excluded—spectrally surviving despite being erased—then postcolonial recovery

paradoxically founds itself on a refusal to heal, a continuous openness toward being haunted by the past from which it has been severed.

In response, Durrant writes, “Lloyd in effect reverses the formula that he sets out to question in his title; instead of postcolonial mourning as the cure for colonial trauma, the ‘living on’ of colonial trauma disrupts the therapeutic culture of postcolonial modernity (“Undoing” 96). Durrant thus recognizes that what Lloyd calls postcolonial recovery requires a rethinking of history as the temporality of traumatic survival, a rethinking for which Durrant already laid the groundwork in his theorization of a postcolonial aesthetic of critical mourning. By way of the terms “recovery” and “mourning,” then, Lloyd and Durrant perceive the connection between the psychoanalytic concept of trauma and postcolonial theory to be the challenge of crafting out of an irrecoverable erasure a form of living on, surviving otherwise. Like Lloyd’s and Durrant’s recovery and mourning, animist poetics is a logic of survival. As an aesthetic logic immanent to modernity, animist poetics challenges dichotomies between the indigenous and the modern, Africa and the West—or, as I will suggest, African literature and Euro-American theory.¹³ I will thus challenge both the therapeutic framework of recovery and the Manichaeism of postcolonial critique throughout this thesis. In doing so, I will demonstrate that animist poetics reinvents (rather than recovers) precolonial cosmologies as responses to postcolonial modernity—not historic redemption, but collective survival.

While Forna’s writing of such survival is emblematic of realism, Jarrett-Macauley’s writing demonstrates what Harry Garuba calls animist realism. Animist

¹³ Nicole Rizzuto’s *Insurgent Testimonies* helpfully demonstrates that postcolonial literature cannot be grasped by the historiography of periodization, which neatly separates texts from each other, often assumed in literary and cultural studies—most notably within the discourse of “world literature” (4-5).

realism is an aesthetic tactic which performs a “*continual re-enchantment of the world*” disenchanted by Western modernity (“Explorations” 265). As Garuba argues, this tactic challenges what Max Weber, borrowing a term from Friedrich Schiller, famously describes as Western modernity’s “disenchantment of the world” (Weber 155). Weber’s historical narrative of secularized rationalization proves useful for analyzing the public sphere which emerges with capitalism and consequently colonization, Garuba admits. This framework, however, misses the other rationalities, such as animist epistemologies, he claims, which flourish despite the modernization of the so-called third world. In *The Memory of Love*, for example, the internally displaced Agnes is subjected to the disenchanted language of the *Diagnostic and Statistic Manual of Mental Health Disorders*; while Adrian the British psychologist believes she has dissociative fugue, many locals believe her to be caught in between “this world and the spirit world” (129). In *Moses, Citizen & Me*, the British-raised Julia is unable to help her cousin Citizen, a former child soldier in the Revolutionary United Front, heal. When a shaman begins to visit Julia in her dreams, however, she learns healing rituals to help Citizen, whose name suggests that he represents the cultural trauma of his whole nation, Sierra Leone. For Jarrett-Macauley, then, creatively reinventing animist cosmologies for the present opens, in Garuba’s words, “avenues of agency for the dispossessed in colonial and postcolonial Africa” (“Explorations” 284).

Moreover, much like Taussig, Garuba reads Karl Marx’s concept of commodity fetishism, the process by which material objects are endowed with spiritual power, as a critique of the disavowed animist structure of capitalism. If, in Wendy Brown’s words, “material life is always already fetishized,” (qtd. in Garuba, “On Animism”), then

animism is not only a mode in which the Empire “writes back,” to use Bill Ashcroft et al.’s phrase, but, as Garuba writes, “animism is the spectral Other that simultaneously constitutes and haunts the modern. Rather like Giorgio Agamben’s reading of the status of the *homo sacer* of ancient Roman law, it is always already included by its exclusion” (“On Animism”). Animist realism thus assumes a political philosophy of animist materialism, Garuba argues, a postcolonial critique of capitalism as, despite its disenchanted appearance, animistic. Such a critique is fruitful, but ultimately, I will suggest, this aesthetic is limited in its affirmative possibilities.

Here I also build on claims made by Durrant. In “Life after Necropolitics,” he argues that to become animist, Garuba would be better off conceptualizing art as “transformational rite, as *identification with*, rather than *representation of*, the world” because representational aesthetics is a fundamentally Western, Platonic construct. In accordance with Durrant’s assessment, I suggest that ultimately, the modern, capitalist, colonized world of ancestral trauma can only be represented and critiqued by Jarrett-Macauley’s animist realism. The texts I explore in chapters two and three, however—Yvonne Vera’s *The Stone Virgins* (2002) and Soyinka’s *Death and the King’s Horseman* (1975)—cross this threshold, demonstrating the differentiation between Garuba’s theory of animist realism and my theory of animist poetics. These texts demonstrate an affirmative, agential process of ritual, not only in their representational content, but through their literary form.

Here I build on Caroline Rooney’s *African Literature, Animism and Politics*. Alongside an array of philosophical and literary texts, she explicates the ontology assumed in Birago Diop’s poem “Breath”:

Listen more to things
 Than to words that are said.
 The water's voice sings
 And the flame cries
 And the wind that brings
 The woods to sighs
 Is the breathing of the dead
 And repeats each day
 The Covenant where it is said
 That our fate is bound to the law,
 And the fate of the dead who are not dead
 To the spirits of breath who are stronger than they. (427)

Translated most often as “Breath,” (though Langston Hughes opts for “Forefathers”), Diop’s *“Souffles”* (Breaths/Spirits) is, in Soyinka’s words, a “poetic exegesis of animism” (*The Burden* 171). This exegesis is not, Soyinka argues, a “manifesto in verse-form,” but a glimpse of the “quiet enthusiasm of the initiate, the sharing instinct of the votive who has experienced immersion in a particular dimension of reality and calls out from within his spiritual repletion” (*Myth* 131). The poem appears in the short story “Sarzant the Madman.” Upon returning to his village from serving the French in WWII, Sarzant intends to bring European rationality to his people. Sarzant becomes possessed by ancestral spirits, however, who voice the poem through his voice. These spirits urge the reader to listen more to Things (*Choses*) than Beings (*Etres*). The ancestors speak through rivers, trees, and fire, they explain, as well as the breasts of women and the

noises of wailing children. We could interpret the above designated things as natural phenomena and even living beings, which implies that the thing/being difference in the poem is not related to any conceivable difference between the cultural and the natural or the living and the non-living. In fact, the logic that produces these differences is the logic against which Sarzan's ancestral spirits warn.

Rooney thus argues that the poem suggests a philosophy of death at odds with the metaphysical concept of absence, a philosophy described in the poem as "The Covenant." The poem perceives death as a process of "succumbing to stronger *living forces*—rather than succumbing to non-being—and [. . .] the dead, whilst losing their own breath, live on as part of the on-going stronger forces of life," Rooney writes (22). Central to Diop's animism is thus the belief that, because the dead are not dead, non-existence is non-existent. Death is thus regenerative, a transition into a new form of life. What is more, like Derridean deconstruction, Diop's animist poetics, Rooney argues, points beyond metaphysical ontology. Since the animist ontology assumed in the poem does not define being in opposition to non-being, the binaries of metaphysical ontology such as presence/absence do not hold a sovereign position, Rooney argues. Instead, "being," for lack of a better word, is at its core "a question of movement" posed by a subject caught in a network of mutually constitutive life forces (1).¹⁴ Following Diop's vision of a world of spirits as one "living text that creates itself in a writing-voicing of being," Rooney pins the animist concept of being against the being of metaphysics (21). The latter relies upon its opposition to non-being, as Martin Heidegger and Derrida have both influentially argued, while the former envisions being as creative movement: the

¹⁴ Placide Tempel's *Bantu Philosophy* influentially places being-as-force (or being-enforced) at the core of ontology for Bantu-speaking cultures. For an insightful response to Tempel's project, see V.Y. Mudimbe's *The Invention of Africa*.

“writing of being in a living world that must necessarily continue to be written or inscribed” (23). However, Rooney does not pin African animism against Euro-American theory—namely psychoanalysis and deconstruction—but in a productively agonistic relation to such theory.

If within the world of Diop’s poem non-existence is non-existent, casting the world not as an economy of individual beings but as a regenerative interplay of mutually enforced being-as-movements, we may then ask, is animist reading a step ahead of deconstructive reading? Rooney narrates such a distinction through a parabolic encounter between two theorists of the human, one European and one African:

The Western anthropologist might say: ‘Where you see and speak of other ‘living creatures’ or ‘spirits’ as other beings, even other *subjects*, so to speak, we sometimes speak of ‘non-being’ or ‘ghosts’.’ While the African anthropologist (not native informant) might say: ‘Where you talk of ‘non-being’ or ‘ghosts’, we speak of spirits or the actuality of other being, of subjects, so to speak, beyond your the one-and-only subject.’ (81)

In this parable of an encounter between the metaphysician and the animist, two hermeneutic schemes are demonstrated. The metaphysician interprets the world according to what Derrida calls the “onto-hermeneutic presupposition”: there is a one-and-only subject (*Spurs* 113). The animist interprets, as Garuba puts it, through the re-enchantment of the world—the endowment of spiritual subjectivity to what has been desubjectivized within metaphysical ontology. What the metaphysician deems non-being or ghosts are, as Derrida describes in *Specters of Marx*, memories of that which haunt the presence/absence binary producing the illusion of the sovereign subject: the

presence of absence that reveals the subject's *absence of presence*. What the animist deems spirits are those other-subjects who live within a regenerative interplay of forces differently than you and I. The animist reader does not therefore disagree with the deconstructive reader, but nonetheless, according to Rooney's parable, reads the world differently: why deconstruct the European myth of sovereign subjectivity when one can re-enchant the worlds this myth disenchanted through colonial expansion? Consequently, if Derrida famously calls the deconstructive reader to learn to live with ghosts, Rooney calls the animist reader to (re)inscribe the world with spirits.

As I will demonstrate in chapters two and three, Vera's and Soyinka's texts perform this (re)inscription, thus moving beyond the fundamentally representational aesthetic of animist realism. More specifically, they frame colonial and postcolonial trauma—Nigerian colonization and Zimbabwe's *Gukurahundi* Massacres—as both possession-rites and death-rites. When Vera's Sibaso becomes possessed by the spirit of a spider, he rapes and murders the villagers he is meant to liberate. When Soyinka's Elesin becomes possessed by the spirit of his colonizers, he desecrates a Yoruba death-rite, initiating through his untimely death a desacralized world of colonial possession. Both authors, however, view their texts as rituals—for Vera, a burial rite, for Soyinka, a tragic rite—each of which craft, through the social deaths written, a regeneration of collective life. *The Stone Virgins* ends with an image of coming “deliverance,” *Death and the King's Horseman* an image of “unborn” hope. Each envision a new form of transsubjective life shared by “the living, the dead, and the unborn” (Soyinka, *Death* 3), a new ancestral relation emerging through ancestral trauma. In this thesis I explore the impact this (re)inscription of new life emerging in death can make within the discourse

of trauma theory, particularly the contested relation between the psychoanalytic, deconstructive trauma theory championed by Caruth and the conceptualization of cultural trauma immanent to postcolonial, African literature.

Interpreting Trauma: A Literary Review

Trauma is, at its core, a hermeneutic phenomenon. Prior to its status as a psychic experience, trauma's origination is interpretive, which is to say that any theory of trauma is necessarily a hermeneutics, or theory of interpretation. The word *hermeneutics* derives from Hermes, the messenger of the gods, and the interpretation of an overwhelming message is precisely what is at stake in a traumatic experience. That certain survivors of horrific events are forever shaped by their experience while others move on means that no event, no matter how violent, is itself traumatic. Any experience, from the most extreme act of violence to the most quotidian aspect of modern life, has the potential to be or not to be traumatic. The decisive factor, according to psychoanalysis, is the gap between experience and interpretation. Freud makes this point in *Moses and Monotheism* when he claims that the "quantitative" nature of trauma implies a certain relativity:

If we may assume that the experience acquires its traumatic character only as a result of a quantitative element—that is to say, that in every case it is an excess in demand that is responsible for an experience evoking unusual pathological reactions—then we can easily arrive at the expedient of saying that something acts as a trauma in the case of one constitution but in the case of another would have no such effect. (316)

Here Freud conceptualizes trauma as the experience of an event that overwhelms the subject, but may not overwhelm others, casting trauma theory as a *comparative* hermeneutics. If “What does this experience mean?” is the question that, in its unanswerability, shapes an experience into trauma, then the theorization of trauma requires an examination of the various and often contradictory frameworks through which subjective experiences take on meaning—in a word, cultures.

In literary criticism, trauma studies has for the past two decades focused on this cultural aspect. Divorcing itself from psychoanalysis, however, the discourse has mostly neglected the problem of interpretation. As Petar Ramadanovic describes,

[T]he MLA database lists over twelve hundred works published after 1999 with the term “trauma” in the title, most of which are applying the simplest of formulas—“trauma in X,” where X can be anything from a Shakespeare tragedy to Native American hip-hop. The newfound ubiquity of trauma does not, however, imply that the very basic concepts of this theory are well understood, including issues like how trauma is present in a work of art or who is traumatized exactly. Is it the character? The audience? The author? To complicate matters, with the work of Jacques Lacan [. . .] psychoanalysis stopped psychoanalyzing literary characters and authors and moved beyond reading narratives as representations. After his seminar on Edgar Allan Poe’s short story “The Purloined Letter,” Lacan defined a whole new task for analysis that concerned the nature of interpretation and consisted of investigating the structure of meaning, the role of the signifier, and so on. (“The Time” 1-2)

As Ramadanovic laments, most critics working within trauma studies “apply” psychoanalytic terms to literary and social texts in hopes of diagnosing certain socio-historically situated moments of individual trauma (rape, death of a loved one) or collective trauma (WWII, September 11th), typically represented by a traumatized character (Septimus Smith, Paul D), author/artist (Fyodor Dostoevsky, Marguerite Duras), or basic narratological techniques (non-linearity, the flashback). Even skeptical critics follow this formula: “apply” psychoanalytic terms to literary and social texts in order to demonstrate this application’s failure and thus argue that certain socio-historically situated individual and collective traumas (domestic abuse, structural racism, subaltern genocides) are underrepresented by theory.¹⁵

This common practice has by and large severed trauma studies from Lacan’s turn to “the nature of interpretation,” as Ramadanovic puts it. Just over the past few years, for example, edited collections exploring the contemporary state of discourse (*Contemporary Approaches in Literary Trauma Theory*, *Contemporary Trauma Narratives*, *Trauma in Contemporary Literature*) as well as its future (*The Future of Memory*, *The Future of Trauma Theory*, *The Future of Testimony*) have been published in swarms. With notable exceptions, most essays in these collections and elsewhere are motivated by the belief that art functions as a diagnostic representation of the social

¹⁵ Two indicative and relatively early examples of this formula—from a believer and a skeptic—are Eleanor Kaufman’s “Falling From the Sky,” one of the first employments of Caruthian trauma theory, and Greg Forter’s “Freud, Faulkner, Caruth,” an influential critique of Caruthian trauma theory. Kaufman perceptively reads Caruth, but does so in order to interpret a literary text as a diagnostic representation of a socio-historically situated trauma. The motif of falling in Georges Perec’s *W*, she argues, functions as “a particular emblem for one form of postwar trauma—and here specifically post-Holocaust trauma” (45). Forter perceptively reads William Faulkner, and does so to demonstrate the failure of what he calls Caruth’s “punctual” theory of trauma to account for the mundane traumas of patriarchy and racism (260; 281).

reality of trauma.¹⁶ As John Mowitt argues, by fencing its thought within this logic of diagnostic representation, trauma studies ultimately extinguishes its political potency. In a compelling analysis, Mowitt contextualizes cultural criticism's widespread draw to trauma within what Wendy Brown's *States of Injury* charges as critique's complicit support of liberal identity politics. If critique is limited by what Brown dubs the "wounded attachments" suspiciously authorizing its struggle for radical democracy, it follows, claims Mowitt, that bids for subject positions are voiced through the "forensic strategy of comparative trauma calculation" (283): the wound that shapes my identity is worse than yours!—what Friedrich Nietzsche calls the narcissistic logic of *resentiment*. Trauma has come to name the enviable wound that "produces moral authority" in the empowered victim who implicitly operates as the subject of cultural studies, Mowitt argues (282), transforming the post-Caruthian "trauma industry" (277) into a handmaiden of identity politics.

Many critics, however, remain skeptical of the category of trauma. Responding to the widespread appeal of trauma within cultural criticism, Leys calls for a Foucauldian "genealogical approach" to the subject (8). According to Jeffrey Alexander, this approach helps overcome the "naturalistic fallacy" tethering trauma theory to wider cultural obsessions with witnessing and memorializing trauma. These obsessions have induced *zeitgeist*-titles from cultural critics such as our "trauma culture," (Kaplan), our "post-traumatic culture" (Farrell), or our "musealizing culture" (Huyssen). For Didier Fassin and Richard Rechtman, scholarship should respond to this *zeitgeist* by "denaturalizing trauma and repoliticizing victims" (xii). As they document, following

¹⁶ Durrant's "Undoing Sovereignty," Lyndsey Stonebridge's "That which you are denying us," and Pieter Vermeulen's "The Biopolitics of Trauma," all contained within *The Future of Trauma Theory*, offer more insightful critiques of the limits of Caruthian trauma theory.

the post-Vietnam implementation of PTSD into the West's cultural lexicon, the concept of trauma has morphed into our era's "central reality of violence" (22). Allan Young dubs this perceived reality a "harmony of illusions," which has become "glued together" through the "practices, technologies, and narratives" of modernity (5). Similarly, Roger Luckhurst describes trauma as a "knot" of "hybrid assemblages" arising from the practices of a "statistical society" attempting to calculate the modern "accident" (14; 25). These critiques are all attempts to combat a cultural shift—what Fassin and Rechtman describe as the reshaping of our "moral economy" into a "politics of trauma"—through the de-universalizing tactic of genealogy (7,8).

On top of genealogy, many critics attempt to combat this shift through social contextualization. Pushing Judith Herman's germinal study of the relation between trauma and female experience further, for instance, Laura Brown influentially argues that to conceptualize trauma as an *extraordinary* experience is to ignore the "normative, quotidian" (*Cultural* 18) traumas of minorities that structurally sustain the ordinary, non-traumatic life patterns of "white, young, able-bodied, educated, middle-class, Christian men" ("Not Outside" 101). In other words, because normality is ideological, the phenomenological, event-based focus of trauma as a disruption of the normal—single blow trauma theory—ignores the traumas of those denied subject positions on the stage of the normal. Moreover, it misses the ongoing political forces that, by producing ordinary experience and thereby defining what counts as an extraordinary experience, constitute trauma (invisible or not) in the first place.

Both the genealogical and contextual critiques set the stage for the debate in which my thesis intervenes. Building on both of these forms of critique, Stef Craps and

Gert Buelens' edited collection, "Postcolonial Trauma Novels," helped usher the task of "decolonizing trauma studies," to use Rothberg's phrase, into literary criticism. To redeem its lack of diversity, critics argue, trauma theory must turn toward "discursive intersections of trauma, gender, and neocolonialism" (Novak 48), toward "non-western, non-Eurocentric models of psychic disorder" (Visser 280), toward "vernacular representational practices" (Bennet and Kennedy 11), toward "local, non-western concepts of suffering, loss, and bereavement" as well as "recovery and healing" (Whitehead, "Journeying" 15), etc. Most critics making these claims believe they require distancing trauma studies from Euro-American theory, most notably psychoanalysis and deconstruction. For instance, as Greg Forter charges in "Colonial Trauma, Utopian Carnality, Modernist Form," a deconstructive, psychoanalytic approach to colonial trauma (his example is Durrant's *Postcolonial Narrative and the Work of Mourning*) mistakenly "*analogizes* the social with the psychic," which, he claims, hinders any real social or psychic change after trauma (71). More explicitly than Forter, Kali Tal argues that the focus on "Euro-American thinkers and scholars" such as Freud, Lacan, and Derrida coinciding with a neglect of the ways trauma has been theorized by other traditions demonstrates trauma theory's core problem: the discourse is "complacent within a racist structure" that "stand[s] in opposition to the very principles (of humanity, of cross-cultural connection) ostensibly espoused by critics concerned with trauma."¹⁷ In this view, a postcolonial trauma theory must "link the phenomenal and the epiphenomenal dimensions of the trauma of colonialism" by way of a diversification of theorists and texts (Ifowodo 2).

¹⁷ Such a critique ignores the fact that Derrida explicitly pins *Of Grammatology* against the West's "most original and powerful ethnocentrism" (3).

Craps agrees that the prevalence of Euro-American theory blockades the prospect of a postcolonial trauma theory, but he rightly argues that the decolonization of the discourse cannot be realized by simply broadening the canon of trauma studies. Because examining global traumas from a Western vantage point repeats the categorical violence of colonial anthropology, Craps writes, “Breaking with Eurocentricism requires a commitment not only to broadening the usual focus of trauma theory but also to acknowledging the traumas of non-Western or minority populations *for their own sake*” (*Postcolonial Witnessing* 19, my emphasis). This acknowledgement means not merely representing subaltern subjects but taking seriously subaltern epistemic frameworks. Ethan Watters describes this problem to a popular audience in *Crazy Like Us: The Globalization of the American Psyche*. “Indigenous forms of mental illness and healing are being bulldozed by disease categories and treatments made in the USA,” he writes, including the category of trauma—and Craps’ project could be conceptualized as an attempt to right this wrong through literary criticism (3). For Rothberg, like Craps, taking a “multidirectional” stance which considers both Western and non-Western frameworks fosters a “comparative thinking that, like memory itself, is not afraid to traverse [. . .] borders of ethnicity and era” (*Multidirectional* 17). The most influential postcolonial critics working within trauma studies rightly call for diverse representation paired with active engagement between subaltern ways of seeing, being, and consequently experiencing trauma—a step in the right direction, but a problem persists.

Although Craps calls for the theorization of subaltern traumas on their own terms, throughout his influential *Postcolonial Witnessing*, he never steps foot down this path. Instead, through diverse literary case studies (South African, British-Caribbean,

Indian), Craps points out the incongruous relation between Eurocentric and “other” conceptions of trauma. His achievement is therefore the articulation of a failure, the failure of Caruthian trauma theory to live up to its ethical-political desire, but the articulation of this failure is the limit of his argument. Thus far, the postcolonial critique of trauma theory has been just that, a critique, not an active engagement with any subaltern epistemology.¹⁸ This critique assumes what Ricoeur calls “hermeneutics of suspicion,” but one that falls short of the radical hermeneutics of his three masters of suspicion—Marx, Nietzsche, and Freud—all of whom, as Paul Ricoeur famously argues, “begin with suspicion concerning the illusions of consciousness,” but “far from being detractors of ‘consciousness,’ aim at extending it” (34). In its suspicion of high theory, the postcolonial critique championed by Craps demystifies, but does not encounter anything new, and therefore can never move beyond the problem it identifies: the categorical violence of the colonial gaze. Consequently, the limit of what could be termed postcolonial trauma studies has thus far been the elaboration of a politics of difference, affirming Mowitt’s charge.

If a traumatic event is traumatic not because of the horrific essence of the event itself, but because of its non-position within an interpretive framework, its act of undoing a hermeneutic field from without, then a properly postcolonial trauma theory can only be realized through comparative hermeneutics—that is, by actively engaging with incongruous ways of meaning making, such as indigenous epistemologies, as Craps rightly argues but does not practice. In this thesis I attempt just that by placing deconstructive, psychoanalytic trauma theory and African literature in dialogue. One of

¹⁸ Abigail Ward’s recent edited collection, *Postcolonial Traumas: Memory, Narrative, Resistance* further confirms this limit.

my wagers is that the theoretical critiques of sovereignty assumed in the relational subjectivities envisioned by both Freud and Derrida share a formal relation with the animist critiques of Western sovereignty envisioned in the African literary texts I examine. Contra many critics of trauma theory, I take as a given that psychoanalysis and deconstruction are both critiques of Eurocentricism, not Eurocentric thought itself. By reading Euro-American theory alongside African authors who incorporate animist cosmologies into their literary form—Soyinka and Vera being my prime examples—one of the implications of my thesis will be that psychoanalysis, deconstruction, and African literature are three convergent traditions of what Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o calls decolonizing the mind. What is more, African literature ultimately gestures beyond the confines of Euro-American theory, I will suggest, not because it is less Western or more critical, but because rather than demystification, it performs a ritual re-enchantment of a world demystified by, to employ Derrida's term again, Western worldification.

This *beyond* of theory leads us to the problem of political theology, a problem that will take a prominent role in the end of this thesis. For now, I will raise this problem as a question: what if the myth of the sovereign subject that is traumatized by theory—wounded by Freud, deconstructed by Derrida—no longer held its sway on our imagination? Although critiquing sovereignty has its place, it also has its limit, and the only way to transgress this limit is to enter a new hermeneutic field. As Achebe explains in “Chi in Igbo Cosmology,” for the Igbo world-view, “Wherever Something stands, Something else will stand beside it. Nothing is absolute. *I am the truth, the way, and the life* would be called blasphemous or simply absurd, for it is well known that a man may worship Ogwugwu to perfection and yet be killed by Udo” (161). Likewise, Soyinka

describes a “harmonious will” at the center of Yoruba tragedy, a will that “accommodates every alien material or abstract phenomenon within its infinitely stressed spirituality” (*Myth* 146). What would a hermeneutic field that incorporates *every* alien phenomenon look like? Freud’s hypothesis of the “receptive cortical layer [. . .] suspended in the middle of an external world charged with the most powerful energies,” the breach of which constitutes trauma, would no longer apply (*Beyond* 298). The breakdown of sovereignly bordered subject positions would not be trauma, but fact. Moreover, what would an infinitely stressed spirituality look like? A cosmology without a sovereign subject, as Achebe suggests?

Interpreted through demystifying, disenchanting hermeneutics of suspicion, questions like these fall on deaf ears, yet these questions are central to my placement of trauma theory and African literature in dialogue. If psychoanalysis and deconstruction both in their own ways observe the moment in which the demystifying, disenchanting hermeneutic scheme of the sovereignly bordered subject of metaphysics breaks down, animist poetics attempts to re-enchant the world, the text, and the subject otherwise than sovereignly. Furthermore, if animist cosmologies do not operate according to metaphysical calculations, could animist poetics help us articulate forms of life beyond the limit of deconstruction, beyond the threshold of mourning at the eclipse of metaphysics to which the late Derrida remained tethered? I am not so naive as to believe I can speak outside the grasp of metaphysics simply by reading African narratives in this thesis, but what I am suggesting is that placing these hermeneutic frameworks together may help us articulate new hermeneutic possibilities, perhaps new ontological possibilities. As long as postcolonial studies operates purely as ideology critique,

however, such possibilities will remain unrealized. One of the implications of my argument throughout this thesis is therefore that postcolonial criticism must read not only to expose neocolonial ideology, but to form a new hermeneutic framework: a hermeneutics of re-enchantment.

Caruthian Trauma Theory in the Postcolony

Caruth consistently advances three hypotheses. First, deconstruction and psychoanalysis can together craft a historiography rooted in the logic of traumatic temporality and literary language. Both discourses foster a “rethinking of reference” that allows “*history* to arise where *immediate understanding* may not,” she claims (*Unclaimed* 11). More specifically, an unconscious, traumatic (un)knowledge of non-referential historicity arises at the intersect between the “psychoanalytic theory of traumatic experience” (3) and the “enigmatic language of the literary” (*Literature* 90), that space “between knowing and not knowing” (*Unclaimed* 3) that deconstruction and psychoanalysis both explore. In *Literature in the Ashes of History*, this project shifts from the question of how to articulate non-referential historicity to how to conceptualize history as disappearance. Although this shift demonstrates a transition from the de Manian language of rhetoric (semiology) to late Derridean language of ashes (ontology), Caruth remains focused on the same problem: how can we inaugurate a hermeneutic scheme through which to conceptualize history beyond the metaphysical trope of the self-presencing sovereign subject who uses language to directly signify historical reality? This question is far more pertinent to the trauma of colonization than critics have perceived. If Freud’s temporality of trauma casts the traumatic blow as never

historically locatable in the past, but always in the differed/deferred space/time of the repetition compulsion, the temporality of *Nachträglichkeit* that Caruth (like Derrida) takes to be Freud's stroke of genius, then this form of trauma theory may provide a language useful for conceptualizing the constitutive erasure of cultural memory Fanon places at the core of colonization. What has been deemed "canonical trauma theory" by postcolonial critics such as Craps is, I am suggesting, more useful for my project than what has thus far constituted the decolonization of trauma studies.

Second, Caruth argues, this rethinking of reference and history around trauma implies a politics of being-implicated that, although cut off from conscious understanding, is universally experienced as part of our collective historic corporeality. If one's history always emerges through the traumatic temporality of the repetition compulsion, and if this emergence always takes place with others, then "history, like trauma, is never simply one's own"; rather, "history is precisely the way we are implicated in each other's traumas" (*Unclaimed* 24). Such is the context of Caruth's promise of the "possibility" of a "link between cultures" (56). If, to paraphrase *Hamlet*, trauma doth make subjects of us all, then trauma is our most primary link, the origin of culture, which means that trauma theory is also a theory of the very possibility of a cultural link. Here Caruth precedes Judith Butler's turn to the politics of vulnerability. For Butler, it is not that the human is vulnerable because she or he exists in community, but rather that vulnerability, susceptibility to traumatic loss, is the precondition of community, which requires a rethinking of politics through ontological vulnerability. In "Undoing Sovereignty," Durrant takes Butler's project in *Precarious Life* to be the political horizon of trauma theory. "Against the normative, psychoanalytic account of

mourning as a reconstitution of the subject's borders, a withdrawing of the ties that bind or bound us to others," he writes, "Butler argues that traumatic losses are occasions for a kind of ethical growth, whereby we come to understand that 'we' were never simply ourselves but were always part of others" (92). In other words, when Butler celebrates traumatic subject deformation, becoming re-implicated through loss, she affirms Caruth's contested traumatic link: trauma reveals our implicated existence ordinarily hidden by our culturally bordered subject positions.¹⁹

Third, Caruth argues the first two wagers are best grasped through the act of close reading. Geoffrey Hartman recognizes this exegetical dimension of what he terms trauma theory's "feverish quest" for knowledge of the "first encounter." In an early response to the then emerging discourse, he acknowledges its return to "an older question: what kind of knowledge is art, or what kind of knowledge does art foster?" (537) More specifically, trauma returns us to "basic literary questions," he claims: "'Why is interpretation necessary?' or, 'Why are there texts?' or, 'Why literature, story, and not just events, history?'" (541). These questions raised by both trauma and literature, he argues, "produce their own mode of recognition," and it is the task of trauma theory, like literary theory, to inherit this epistemology, which operates outside the logic of our currently inherited hermeneutic scheme of text-history (i.e., word-world) referentiality (545).

Thus, Ramadanovic correctly takes the task of trauma theory to be the "study of the constitutive limitations of knowledge and experience" ("Intro"), reminding critics

¹⁹ Michelle Balaev takes this productive nature of trauma to be central to the form of the novel. A "traumatic experience disrupts the previous framework of reality and the protagonist must reorganize the self in relation to this new view of reality," she writes, which necessitates a departure from considering trauma simply as fragmentation but rather as a reorganization of the modern subject as decentered (*The Nature* 40).

that the goal of the discourse is not to provide models of representing trauma, but theories of aesthetic encounter. “Caruth’s [. . .] arguments are about interpretation and how we might define theory and its epochal role of breaking with the past,” he writes (“The Time” 19). He argues that by asking what it would be like if “shattered frameworks and discontinuities are a permanent feature of the interpretive process,” the goal of trauma theory is not only a clarified understanding of how trauma has been experienced and represented, but the more arduous goal of “defining a new aesthetic that itself would offer a way to create a different kind of reality, a new kind of culture that can exist despite the disruption of the frame of reference, and a new kind of theory of history” (18).

While my inquiry is influenced by this Caruthian trauma theory, I do attempt to venture beyond its purveyance, which follows the narratological movements of *awakening* and *falling*. The former is the most cited motif in the body of criticism on Caruth and is expounded in her reading of Lacan’s interpretation of “the dream of the burning child” from Freud’s *The Interpretation of Dreams*, which I will discuss in more detail in chapter one. In this passage a father is haunted in his sleep by his dead son, during which the father awakens from bordered ipseity into relational existence—an awakening that provides a ghost-narrative form to the Levinasian ethics Caruth finds embedded in the act of witnessing trauma. Less cited is Caruth’s insistence that this awakening from ontology to what Derrida terms hauntology in *Specters of Marx* takes the form of the Fall, a concept Caruth inherits from Paul de Man. *Unclaimed Experience*’s boldest claims emerge in Caruth’s interpretation of de Man’s rhetoric of falling, through which she casts her trauma theory as an attempt to catch up with de

Man's intervention in the history of Western philosophy. As she puts it, "the history of philosophy after Newton could be thought as a series of confrontations with the question of how to talk about falling," and after de Man, this problem becomes a problem of reference, Caruth argues, rewriting the question of how to linguistically refer to historical reality as "*how to refer to falling*" (76). This movement elucidates the productive agonism inherent to my placement of Caruthian trauma theory and African literature in dialogue. This elucidation, however, requires an understanding of the contingent nature of the de Manian fall Caruth theorizes.

Near the end of de Man's influential reading of Heinrich von Kleist's "On the Marionette Theatre" as an allegory of aesthetic form, de Man claims that "by falling (in all the sense of the term, including the theological Fall), gracefully, one prepares the ascent" (*The Rhetoric* 287). He insists that this falling as ascending, or ascending as falling, is something like an indeterminable phenomenology of aesthetic form. "Rather than speaking of a synthesis of rising and falling," he goes on to write, "one should speak of a continuity of the aesthetic form that does not allow itself to be disrupted by the borderlines that separate life from death, pathos from levitation, rising from falling" (287). Justifying not quite a formalism but a certain experience of falling into the movement of form, de Man argues that as the rhetoric of aesthetics ignores metaphysically erected borders (e.g., living and dying), his proposed implicated phenomenology of falling, which somehow enables an ascent, is the *modus operandi* of literature. Literary interpretation, in sum, pushes the reader from the ontological world of truth claims into the hauntological world of aesthetics.

Trauma theory, Caruth suggests, is a theory of, a giving words to, this epistemic fall, what de Man elsewhere describes as the crisis inaugurated by the advent of literary theory. He writes,

Well-established rules and conventions that governed the discipline of criticism and made it a cornerstone of the intellectual establishment have been so badly tampered with that the entire edifice threatens to collapse. One is tempted to speak of recent developments in Continental criticism in terms of a crisis. (3)

In this early proclamation (1967), reproduced in *Blindness and Insight*, de Man describes an interpretive crisis resembling trauma. We can no longer interpret the process of interpretation through our inherited interpretive frameworks, he argues, which is why literary criticism during the rise of theory “occurs in the mode of crisis” (8). Roland Barthes’ dead author and Foucault’s proverbial sandman erased by the sea are just two contemporaneous images of the force of the questions de Man pursued in “The Crisis of Contemporary Criticism,” and Caruth takes this force to be literary criticism’s twentieth-century trauma. It is thus striking that, despite the fact that the deconstructive severance of the speech act from the illusion of direct reference into the free fall of literary form is *the* philosophic trauma Caruth claims to be invoking, what Eleanor Kauffman dubs Caruth’s “serendipitous fall” remains largely untouched throughout the critical reception of Caruthian trauma theory (49). The overlooked core of Caruth’s argument is, then, this: psychoanalysis and deconstruction together enable an epistemic fall, which is also an awakening, from the metaphysical world of direct

reference into the world of “ghostly transmissions,”²⁰ hauntology, a world in which the subject is not sovereignly bordered but infinitely implicated.

Infinitely implicated subjectivity is, however, a state in which one awakens or falls into only if one begins with the (European) tradition of metaphysical ontology from which to awaken or fall. Therefore, the de Manian form of Caruth’s project does not neatly translate outside the European tradition. In making this claim I am not repeating the battle cry for postcolonial Manichaeism made by many critics of trauma theory. Instead, I am calling for a more nuanced, comparative criticism, the likes of which would recognize the historical tradition in which Caruth situates her trauma theory—the deconstruction of the metaphysical ontology at the core of Western philosophy—and attempt a departure from this epistemic situation into other (in the case of this thesis, animist) cosmologies.

To illustrate this comparative departure, I wish to briefly consider the subject envisioned in the novels of Amos Tutuola, a canonical figure of animist poetics in African literature. Infinitely implicated subjectivity is within Tutuola’s fiction not a state into which one awakens or falls. In fact, *The Palm-Wine Drinkard* (1952) begins with relational, or implicated existence, which, if we follow Caruth’s Eurocentric plot, is the horizon of trauma theory. The narrator, who is the novel’s drinkard, can only be a drinkard through his economic relation to the palm-wine tapster. Since his sole task, his lifework, is to drink “from morning till night and from night till morning,” when his tapster dies, not only does the narrator’s quest to find the tapster’s spirit begin, but the narrator’s subjectivity is itself at stake, severed from its original relationality and forced

²⁰ For Stephen Frosh, psychoanalysis perceives two forms of haunting. The subject is haunted vertically (temporally), as in the intergenerational transmission of trauma (e.g., the work of Nicolas Abraham and Maria Torok) as well as horizontally (spatially), as in transference or projective identification (5).

into a bordered existence out of which he continuously and briefly morphs (191).²¹ That which animates the novel's narrative movement is therefore a fall from implicated existence into the ill-fitting illusion of sovereignly bordered subjectivity. This falling movement is not only the inverse of Caruthian trauma theory, but the structure of colonial subjection: being thrown into an illusively bordered, European form of life, severed from one's ancestral history. Tutuola's narratives thus begin always already beyond sovereign authority—yet traumatically dragged within its grasp: both beyond yet within the purveyance of Caruthian trauma theory.

This beyond-yet-within leads us to the centrality of the death drive to the animist poetics I explore in this thesis, which, I will suggest, both affirms and overturns Freud's infamous theory. In a well known passage from *The Palm-Wine Drinkard*, Tutuola gives us a glimpse of an animist death drive in the form of a parable. He describes a woman trailing a beautiful and "complete gentleman" she finds at the market, only to discover he is not actually "complete":

As they were travelling along in this endless forest then the complete gentleman in the market that the lady was following, began to return the hired parts of his body to the owners and he was paying them the rentage money. When he reached where he hired the left foot, he pulled it out, he gave it to the owner and paid for the rentage. (203)

²¹ Throughout his series of encounters with strange forms of life—"Invisible Pawn" and "half-bodied baby," for instance—the protagonist and first person narrator of *The Palm-Wine Drinkard* and *My Life in the Bush of Ghosts* morphs into elements, natural phenomena, and creatures: air, rain, a stick, a bird, a fish, to name a few examples. Sometimes the narrator quickly morphs back into human form—for instance, by his boss: "In the presence of these guests, my boss was changing me to some kinds of creatures," the narrator describes, "First of all he changed me to a monkey, then I began to climb fruit trees and pluck fruits down for them. After that he changed me to a lion, then to a horse, to a camel, to a cow or bull with horns on its head and at last to my former form" (36).

The woman observes the gentleman she mistook as absolute returning his body parts to those from whom he rents, culminating in his reduction to a skull—severed not only from ipseistic beauty, but from life. Yet the skull somehow lives on. Although the myth of sovereign subjectivity may be alluring, Tutuola warns us not be tricked, for life has no owner; the “I” is pastiched together by rented body parts of others. As Rooney succinctly puts it in her interpretation of the passage, “life in its totality is composed of temporarily leased forms.” She continues,

[W]e might just see here a shuttling between living and dying where death is not the *final* form. Rather, out of a minimal form of existence new life is woven in an increasing combination of forms or body parts until a final or complete form is attained. Once this has been attained, this final stage of a life form, there can only be a process of de-composition towards re-composition because at no point can there be a cessation of life which is a necessarily ongoing process. (*African Literature* 84)

This eternal de-composition/re-composition cycle of a life that is briefly composed of parts of other lives symbolizes what I am calling the *regenerative death drive* at the core of animist poetics.

This drive demonstrates both my influence by and departure from Freud. Tutuola’s novel (unapologetically “plagiarizing” Yoruba folk-tales and even D.O. Fagunwa’s earlier *Forest of a Thousand Daemons*) narrates what Soyinka calls the Yoruba “cyclic concept of time and the animist interfusion of all matter and consciousness” (*Myth* 145). In such a cosmology, all matter matters—trees, creatures, and corpses resound with agency—and the ongoing process of subject

formation/deformation/reformation ritually operates through a “disintegrating process within the matrix of cosmic creativity” (153). While what has been termed “canonical trauma theory” celebrates the death of the post-Enlightenment sovereign subject (rightfully so), Tutuola’s animist poetics, I wish to suggest, narrates the perpetual regeneration of collective life beyond this death. Formally, we could speculate, Tutuola is post-deconstructive, which opens a path for a rereading of Freud’s most radical insight.

The Regenerative Death Drive

In his restructuring of psychoanalytic theory from the Oedipal structure of the family to the traumatic structure of subjectivity, *Beyond the Pleasure Principle* (1920), Freud thinks through the seemingly oppositional life and death drives. Ontologically, the former plots the evolution of matter into subjectivity: nothing becomes inorganic material becomes organic material becomes animated by subjective life. The life drive thus pushes the subject forward in a Darwinian movement for survival, while the death drive plots this movement’s inevitable collapse back into non-existence. If we take the pleasure principle to be that which dictates psychoanalytic theory, Freud reasons, then we must interpret these oppositional drives toward life and death as partners of the pleasure principle, laws that, despite contradictory appearances, work together to bring the subject pleasure. Through its Darwinian narrative the life drive fits more clearly within the pleasure principle (all forms of life desire the continuation of life), but the death drive can also fit within this framework.

The latter drives the subject simultaneously backward and forward (backward by way of forward); the subject is driven toward death through a desire for that state before he or she experienced life and consequently the possibility of death. Following again the Darwinian narrative, every subject, Freud argues, wishes to return to the state before nothing became the inorganic became the organic became the subject. As he puts it, the subject wishes to “*restore an earlier state of things* which the living entity has been obliged to abandon” (308). Thus, just as the life drive, by way of plotting the survival of the species, fits within the pleasure principle, so does the death drive, by way of throwing the subject toward the ultimate Sabbath, or pleasurable rest from the struggle of existence. We could thus conceptualize the death drive as a materialist reformulation of the Augustinian *felix culpa* (a reformulation Caruth’s “serendipitous fall” rewrites in relation to deconstruction). For Augustine, the fall into sin is a “happy fall” insofar as falling from paradise produces the conditions through which the narrative of redemption, the return to paradise, is able to take place. Though less “happy,” for Freud, like Augustine, falling into life—the universal trauma of “being thrown” into existence, as Heidegger later articulates it—enables the narrative of return, a return to the paradisiacal stasis of inorganic matter in which subjectivity becomes non-existent. In sum, through Freud’s materialist-theological metanarrative, the subject is unconsciously driven toward a postlapsarian transubstantiation of the material body into a prelapsarian state of static, inorganic matter, before life (and therefore death) existed, thereby negating, after the fact, death.

But ultimately, Freud argues, the death drive points toward a new foundation for psychoanalysis: the repetition compulsion. Here the phenomenon of trauma becomes

vital. Freud notes that many victims of “severe mechanical concussions, railway disasters and other accidents involving risk to life” survive an unexpected accident only to return, through recurring dreams, flashbacks, and images, to the scene of the accident, despite their wishes (281). This claim seems to contradict Freud’s earlier theory of dreams as wish fulfillment, a contradiction which, he reasons, undermines the pleasure principle. Despite the subject’s desire for pleasure, traumatic repetition captures the subject, a capture he terms the repetition compulsion. The death drive is itself an expression of the repetition compulsion—we repeat a way of being that is not being, return to a time that is not time—recasting subjective life as operating through the form of traumatic neurosis. The subject is driven to repeat the experience of a lost origin, an origin of nonexistence, that time when we were not, that is itself nonexistent—if we were not, this time did not exist—and so, in a sense, this origin is not really an origin, but only an origin through its relation to our time of existence. The death drive consequently assumes through its ontological repetition compulsion a temporality emerging through its own negation, a time that is not, but is, precisely because of that fact that it is not; put differently, our origin does not exist apart from our lack of it, yet we desire to return to it, which is why “*the aim of all life is death*” (311).

In *Moses and Monotheism* (1937), Freud transposes this compulsion he first observes in victims of traumatic neurosis, defying wish fulfillment and transgressing the pleasure principle, culminating in the death drive, into a theory of collective subjectivity, or culture. He interprets the historical development of Judeo-Christian monotheism—and by implication the nomological structure of Western culture—through a framework of trauma. In chapter one I will examine this text in more depth,

placing Freud's Moses in dialogue with the West African oral narrative of Musa Wo (Little Moses). For now, I only wish to point out that according to Freud, Moses was an Egyptian. More specifically, he was an Egyptian murdered by his Jewish followers, and over time another Moses, a Jew, came to embody the memory of the murdered Egyptian's deeds. For Freud, then, Judeo-Christian monotheism has no fixed, historical point; the "origin" is rather a primal, violent confrontation between cultures resulting in a web of memories emerging only in relation to each other, in latent repetition. In sum, for Freud, the collective subjectivity passed on by the Jewish tradition—as well as Christianity's reworking of this tradition—is, in its very form, traumatic. In other words, Freud views the nomology of Western culture inherited from monotheism as animated by ancestral trauma.

In *The Wretched of the Earth*, Fanon conceptualizes the colonized *polis*, as well as the possibility of a postcolonial *polis*, in a similar manner to Freud. As I have previously described, he theorizes colonization as a traumatic (re)genesis of indigenous culture, which recasts the colonizer as a new type of ancestor: "For it is the settler who has brought the native into existence and who perpetuates his existence," he writes (28). However, Fanon continuously stresses the possibility of the colonized creating a new "violence in the beginning," a "cleansing force" through which through which to "change the order of the world" inaugurated by colonial modernity (73-4; 27). The goal of this new, traumatic (re)genesis named "decolonization is quite simply the replacing of a certain 'species' of men by another 'species' of men," Fanon writes. "Without any period of transition, there is a total, complete and absolute substitution" (27). This substitutionary, generative violence—in many ways similar to what Benjamin terms

“divine violence,” yet stripped of any divinatory origin—requires, Fanon argues, the death of the colonizer. “For the native,” he writes, “life can only spring up again out of the rotting corpse of the settler” (73). This claim resembles Freud’s plot of the primal patricide in *Totem and Taboo*, which raises the problem of agency in relation to ancestral trauma. In Freud’s prehistoric plot, a group of jealous sons together murder their father and eat his corpse. Despite his physical death, the father lives on as a structuring concept, Freud argues, becoming stronger by transfiguring into the very idea of “the father,” or sovereign authority, making possible the organization of society, morality, religion, etc. As Julia Kristeva writes, the sons “replaced the dead father with the image of the father, with the totem symbol of power, the figure of *the ancestor*” (12, my emphasis). If one implication of this argument is that rebellion can never lead to agency, then what of Fanon’s calls for decolonization? If primal patricide must be the foundation of decolonization, as he claims, does this “cleansing violence” reconstitute the colonizer as, once again, the new ancestry of the modern?

This conundrum leads to the political importance of what I am calling the regenerative death drive. Freud explicitly embeds the death drive within a metaphysical framework in which death is equated with stasis. In one of the more famous passages of *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*, for example, he writes, “If we are to take it as a truth that knows no exception that everything living dies for internal reasons—becomes inorganic once again—then we shall be compelled to say that ‘*the aim of all life is death*’ and looking backwards, that ‘*inanimate things existed before living ones*’” (310-11). First, the subject dies sovereignly, Freud claims, for internal reasons (an ironic claim, considering the fact that the traumatic structure of collective subjectivity Freud

posits exposes sovereign subjectivity as a myth, replacing it, as Caruth recognizes, with radically implicated subjectivity). This claim is the first in an intricately woven logical sequence. Next, sovereign death, death due to internal reasons, is aligned with a return to inorganic matter; this return reveals the death drive, which suggests, Freud concludes, that inanimate matter precedes animated life. Ultimately, then, this sequence of claims builds an argument centered around the relation between the animate and the inanimate:

1. The animate subject dies solely due to internal reasons.
2. Through this death, the subject returns to inorganic matter, which is inanimate.
3. In life, the animate subject, who is driven toward death, desires to return to an inanimate state.
4. Therefore, inanimate matter precedes animate matter, and thus subjectivity.

But this logic only works when inorganic matter is equated with stasis—the ontological Sabbath of non-existence toward which Freud’s subject is driven.

If all matter is “vibrant,” as Jane Bennett has recently claimed—and animist cosmologies have claimed long before new materialist critique—then Freud’s argument reformulates itself into a drive toward death which regenerates into new life. What if stone, for example, is not static, but enforced with agency—as suggested by Vera’s depiction of the sacred caverns of the Gulati Hills in *The Stone Virgins*, the subject of chapter two? What if death is not an entrance into non-existence, but a threshold into ancestral life—as suggested by the horseman ritual in *Death and the King’s Horseman* I will examine in chapter three? If Freud’s subject is driven toward death in order to return to a state of inorganic matter and therefore enter ontological rest, the animist subject is driven toward death in order to experience a transfiguration of subjective life.

The regenerative death drive at the heart of African literature's animist poetics—a drive of which we have seen glimpses in the *Pumzi*, *The End of Carrying All*, and *Europa*—thus both extends and overturns Freud's theory of the death drive. This extension/overturning allows us to return to Freud's four claims above in light of the animist decentering of subjectivity and observe them tell a different metanarrative, in reverse order:

4. Inorganic matter, organic matter, human and non-human life (including past lives and unborn lives) all resound with agential subjectivity.
3. In life, the animate subject, who is driven toward death, desires regeneration—not a return to stasis, but a transfiguration of the form in which the animation of subjectivity happens.
2. Through death, the animate subject returns to inorganic matter, changing form, yet remaining animated.
1. The animate subject dies neither internally nor externally.

If the jump between the last (or first) two claims is difficult to follow, that is because Freud's argument, which I am formally following, assumes a leap, which is never stated, between the hypothesis of static matter and the hypothesis of death for internal reasons. In my reversal of his argument, I am formally following and therefore logically reversing this jump. Freud's conception of sovereign death, death for internal reasons, falls apart when we conceptualize all matter as mutually animated. If there is no animate/inanimate binary, but rather a world in which all matter is mutually enforced, then the the human subject—animated organic matter—is no more sovereign over his or her animation than inorganic matter. The internal is animated by that which animates the

external, or the internal is externally enforced just as the external is internally enforced.²² If the internal is always already enforced by the external, then nobody's death is sovereignly crafted, as Freud hypothesizes.

No wonder Freud continuously wards off what he calls the "mystical impression" of the death drive and the resemblance of the repetition compulsion to a state of being "possessed by some 'daemonic' power" (*Beyond* 292). In his restructuring of psychoanalysis, Freud ventures dangerously close to what he deems the animism of primitives, children, and neurotics, which he associates with narcissism. As Rooney explains,

Although Freud struggles with and evades the question of what the force or energy of this [death] drive would be, he tells us, however, that (what could be termed) the *motivation* of the death drive is the desire to return to an original inanimate, inorganic state of death, an original state of non-existence. But what if we were to affirm: 'The world is all that is the case.' In other words, what I am trying to get at is: if all that there is, is all that there is, then how can we think of something that is *originally non-existent*? This original non-being could well create the mystical impression that Freud wishes to evade. What *on earth* would this original death 'be'? It would just not be; 'being' only a gap or lack without content that could be seen, but only retrospectively, to have strangely anticipated what comes to be in a being for this death. The way in which I tend to read Freud's account of the death drive is that it serves to deny or negate other-being

²² This concept is immanent to the materialist critique laid out by Louis Althusser, whose theory of interpellation casts the subject as hailed into being by the external force of ideology, itself always tied to materiality, yet internal to human subjectivity.

as opposed to non-being at the origin, a question of foreclosure. Or, it negates a being with other being at the origin. (*African Literature* 136)

To return to the Augustinian form of Freud's materialist theology of the subject, Rooney points out the unintentional "mysticism" in Freud's insistence that the subject returns to non-existent stasis, a paradise lost and regained. This insistence takes the difference between being and nonbeing as the structuring principle of ontology (i.e., a metaphysical claim), thereby foreclosing any interaction with cosmologies that could be deemed *animist* and consequently associated with children, neurotics, and primitives.

If, however, there is no non-existence, but only forms of being-animated-with, including the animation of inorganic matter—that is, if we take seriously animist cosmologies—then we could follow Rooney in claiming that the death drive and the repetition compulsion should be reconsidered in terms that Freud continuously attempts to avoid: possession. Being possessed or animated by a spirit implies that a force external to the subject has become internal to the subject—the subject is hailed from without—which is precisely what happens during an event of trauma. Out of nowhere, an event happens, so unexpectedly, that it can't quite be experienced, at least not in the mythic time of teleology. The subject is thrown into the temporality of the repetition compulsion, in which he or she obsessively memorializes what Jacques Lacan terms the "missed encounter," realizing (as in making real) the trauma, through latent performance (dreams, flashbacks, enactments, etc) (55). The subject becomes animated, enforced, informed, possessed by the spirit of the missed encounter. If subjectivity, both individual and collective, is structured traumatically, as Freud claims in *Beyond the Pleasure*

Principle and Moses and Monotheism, in this thesis I wish to go a step further and cast life itself as a form of possession.

Jean Laplanche gestures toward this animist form of psychoanalysis, associating (with and against Freud) the psychoanalytic theory of the subject with possession. Freudian phrases such as “internal foreign body,” “reminiscence,” or “the unconscious as an alien inside me, and even one put inside me by an alien,” illustrate that, “[a]t his most prophetic, Freud does not hesitate over formulations which go back to the idea of *possession*,” he writes (66, my emphasis). He consequently asks,

Would it not be possible, then, to maintain that the unconscious has a close link with the past, the past of the individual, *while at the same time abandoning the psychological problematic of memory* with its intentionality aimed at *my* past, but also its retrospective illusions and its ultimately undecidable nature? For Freud neglects here the innovative core of his own initial formulation: hysterics suffer, not from memories, forgotten or not, but from ‘reminiscences’. The term could, of course, be reduced to memory—a memory cut off from its context—but it could equally be allowed to bear the value of *extravagance* [. . .]: something which returns as if from elsewhere, a pseudo-memory perhaps, coming from...the other. (72)

For Laplanche, psychoanalytic theory operates as what Mbembe deems witchcraft in the second epigraph of this introduction—a discourse of trauma beyond memory, trauma as possession.

Yet, this discourse of possession is already immanent to Freud’s theory of ancestral trauma in *Moses and Monotheism*. It is thus this text, I would suggest, that

influences Fanon's use of the primal patricide plot in *The Wretched of the Earth*, which leads us back to the problem of postcolonial agency. As Grant argues, Fanon reformulates this plot to open new forms of indigenous agency:

[W]hen Fanon says that 'the native never ceases to dream of putting himself in the place of the settler', he immediately qualifies this with: 'not of becoming the settler but of substituting himself for the settler' [. . .]. A clear distinction is thus drawn between a desire to become the settler, and a desire to take his place, which is reinforced when Fanon goes on to say that what the natives 'demand is not the settler's position or status, but the settler's place' [. . .]. The colonizer will be, well and truly, dead, and the natives will not, after his death, be compelled to respect his prohibitions, since they feel no remorse. In this way, Fanon rejects the implicit political logic of Freud's myth, namely that decolonization is impossible, because by killing him the figure of authority, become ancestral, will be rendered stronger than ever. (599)

If the sons in Freud's plot kill their father and thus constitute their ancestor, the colonized in Fanon's plot kill not only their colonizer, but his reconstitution of the ancestral, thereby (re)introducing modes of co-presence between the self and the ancestors stifled by the colonial paradigm of sovereign authority. "Fanon rewrites as he interprets Freud's narrative," Grant claims, "founding a new man and a new society on the rotting corpse of the Freudian father" out of which the "decolonization of the ancestral as such" takes place (608; 596). Grant perceives within Fanon's call for decolonization a regeneration of ancestral co-presence through the death of the ancestral. What Grant misses, however, is that similar avenues of agency are already

contained in Freudian psychoanalysis. As I will suggest in chapter one, Edward Said's reading of *Moses and Monotheism* allows us to see the text not as a mere repetition of Freud's earlier plot of the primal patricide and thus the constitution of sovereign authority (as René Girard, among others, has influentially argued), but rather the undoing of this sovereignty and thus the emergence of the possibility of a new form of community.

The Limit of Memory Studies

In response to the regenerative death drive and the concept of subjectivity as traumatic possession I have briefly sketched, I would like to conclude by further differentiating my project in this thesis from memory studies—particularly Rothberg's influential call for multidirectional memory studies. In *Multidirectional Memory*, Rothberg influentially pins his project against a form of liberal politics he calls “competitive memory.” Competitive memory, claims Rothberg, assumes boundaries of collective memories of trauma equate to boundaries of identity, the public sphere is a pregiven space on which to demarcate these boundaries, and this act of demarcation results in winners and losers in a struggle for identity recognition. At its core, assuming a real estate development model, competitive memory treats the theorization of collective trauma as “zero-sum struggle over scarce resources” with which to construct a publicly recognized identity (3). Rothberg's argument is that multidirectional memory, contra this real estate model, assumes collective memories of trauma are “subject to ongoing negotiation, cross-referencing, and borrowing” (3), the public sphere is a

discursive space upon which this negotiation mutually produces memory and identity, and this process fosters a rethinking of justice in a globalized world (20).

To arrive at this final point, Rothberg uses Richard Terdiman's notion that memory is not the past but the past made present as a pathway through which to realize Nancy Fraser's notion of three dimensional social justice for a post-national, globalized world. In *Scales of Justice*, Fraser argues that although global capitalism breaks the nation-state frame, the left's calls for cultural recognition and economic redistribution remain rooted in the public sphere framed by the nation-state. Effective social justice must therefore incorporate a representational dimension of framing that, much like Butler's *Frames of War*, shifts the problem of justice from how to equalize subject positions to who in the first place counts as a political subject in the global *polis*. Rothberg's political gambit is that Fraser's globalized social justice can be theorized as a question of collective memory. Conceptualizing memory as an ongoing negotiation outside the boundaries of territorially bordered representation, Rothberg argues, lays the groundwork for a politics beyond the limit of multicultural nationhood. More specifically, following Hannah Arendt's placement of the nation as the synergist between the entangled histories of colonialism and totalitarianism, Rothberg asserts that decolonizing our understanding of traumatic memory necessitates moving beyond the representational tactics of the Keynesian-Westphalian nation-state performed in competitive memory debates. Structural multidirectionality is therefore Rothberg's escape map out of liberal multiculturalism, and a post-nationalist theory of social justice is his hope.²³

²³ Thus, pinning multidirectional memory against competitive memory casts Rothberg's project as, in his words, a "multidirectional alternative beyond the universal/particular opposition" that limits the politics of

However, I wish to suggest that Rothberg's resolute focus on the representation of memory tethers his project to the *form* of the competitive politics of identity and difference he seeks to transgress. Rothberg seeks a structural transformation of the public sphere, yet roots this transformation in the identitarian claims that structure competitive memory debates, albeit through an ongoing, productive struggle. Rothberg's alternative to identity politics is consequently an identitarian struggle within the public sphere in which participating subjects are critically aware of the contingent and productive nature of their struggle. He effectively replaces identity politics with a certain neopragmatism—identity politics robbed of faith in identity—and therefore unconsciously traps himself within the liberal pluralism he seeks to transgress. While I agree that representations of collective memory function as barometers for cultural politics, against Rothberg, I wish to posit that theorizing a postcolonial *polis* requires a politics operating beyond the process of memory representation. I am not arguing that Rothberg is wrong, but that he does not go far enough. The framework of multidirectional memory limits cultural trauma theory by, despite Rothberg's political vision, tethering the discourse to the competitive politics of cultural difference as an intransgressable form of productive struggle and therefore reproducing the political structure of liberal pluralism.²⁴

My query with Rothberg is thus similar to what I have already described as the limits of Garuba's animist realism. If the cultural work of African literature is, following

cultural trauma theory to liberal pluralism (27). That traumatic memory is culturally contingent is, for example, according to Rothberg's argument, an obvious fact; its elaboration does not lead to postcolonial politics, as many critics assume, but risks entrapment in an endless identitarian struggle to be recognized.
²⁴ This limit is one reason the deconstructive, psychoanalytic form of Caruthian trauma theory, despite its Eurocentric plotline, leads us closer to a postcolonial theory of trauma than memory studies—be it Hirsch, Rothberg, Craps, or others.

Garuba, to re-enchant the colonized world, then the political horizon of this literature cannot be a critique of modern capitalism, as Garuba would have it, but, more radically, a transformation of its structure. What I am calling animist poetics ventures beyond the mode of representational critique uniting Rothberg and Garuba, bringing us into the transformative experience of ritual. For this reason, the progression from chapters one, two, and three in this thesis will also be a progression from trauma theory to political theology, or a theory of that which animates the *polis*.

Influenced by Benjamin, especially his digressive use of Carl Schmitt's jurisprudential theory, philosophers such as Jean-Luc Nancy, Agamben and Derrida have brought the theological foundation of modern political subjugation to the forefront of critical theory.²⁵ This discourse bears implications on trauma theory with which literary criticism has not quite caught up. For Schmitt, modernity is not "disenchantment," as Weber argues, but rather a reconstitution of theocracy's structure within the nation-state. As he famously puts it, "All significant concepts in the modern theory of the state are secularized theological concepts" (36). As I have previously suggested, Freud makes a similar claim by casting the nomology of Western culture as a Judeo-Christian inheritance formed around the concept of sovereignty, particularly the trauma of being subjected to a sovereign—be it the father, or, more effectively, the idea of the father.²⁶ This inheritance bears implications for conceptualizing the work of

²⁵ See Benjamin's "Critique of Violence" for an example of what I am calling his digressive use of Schmitt—that is, his utilization of the structure of Schmitt's jurisprudential theory in order to subvert jurisprudence itself. See also Nancy's "Deconstruction of Monotheism," Agamben's *Homo Sacer: Sovereign Power and Bare Life*, and Derrida's *The Beast & The Sovereign Volume 1*.

²⁶ As Derrida writes in *The Beast & The Sovereign*, "The sovereignty of the people or of the nation merely inaugurates a new form of the same fundamental structure. The walls are destroyed, but the architectural model is not deconstructed—and will [. . .] continue to serve as a model and even as an international model" (282).

African literature as a response to colonial modernity. If the colonized African *polis* is structured around this discursive formation of sovereignty, the task facing African literature is not quite re-enchanting what has been disenchanted, but, more enigmatically, re-enchanting-otherwise-than-sovereignly.

This transformative task informs Benjamin's appropriation of Schmitt—for instance, through his concept of divine violence: a generative rupture of political sovereignty, which opens new modes of being-together beyond the subjugations structuring modern life ("Critique"). As I will argue in chapter three, it also informs Soyinka's concept of the "creative-destructive principle" in Yoruba aesthetics. In each chapter, I will suggest that articulating life beyond the sovereign-subject relation inherited from monotheism, which oversees post-Enlightenment, Western culture and thus the plotline of Caruthian trauma theory, is not primarily a task of memory representation, but of spiritual imagination. The co-presence of generations envisioned in Diop's ancestral life and the catastrophic production of new subjectivities envisioned in Tutuola's "temporarily leased" life, for instance, do not operate through the archival logic of memory cumulation, but a regenerative logic of ritual. Diop and Tutuola are in this sense less interested in critically representing the colonized *polis* than imagining a transition into a new *polis*. Theorizing these imaginative transformations would, I will suggest throughout this thesis, reframe the political task of decolonizing trauma theory from the latent liberalism animating memory studies toward the invention of new political-theological structures beyond the monotheistic inheritance of sovereignty. Like Diop and Tutuola, for example, Vera and Soyinka are less interested in representational critique than transformational ritual, transitioning the colonized subject into what

animist cosmologies envision as polytheistic forms of being-in-common. Put somewhat differently, animist poetics does not only unmask the traumatic structure of modern, political life, which at its root assumes a secularized theology of sovereign authority, but, like Benjamin's "divine violence" and Fanon's "cleansing violence," opens the possibility of a political theology of that which is not, but could be: an imaginative, ritualized inauguration of a post-sovereign political community yet to come, what Nancy calls the "deconstruction of monotheism."

Chapter 1

Realism, Animist Realism, Ritual: Imagining Alternative States in Delia Jarrett-

Macauley's *Moses, Citizen & Me* and Aminatta Forna's *The Memory of Love*

And the LORD said furthermore unto him,
Put now thine hand into thy bosom. And he
put his hand into his bosom: and when he
took it out, behold, his hand was leprous as
snow.

And he said, Put thine hand into thy bosom
again. And he put his hand into his bosom
again; and plucked it out of his bosom, and,
behold, it was turned again as his other
flesh.

Exodus 4.6-7

So this woman dropped the machete on her
knee, and a boy jumped out. He was
completely grown, and he had a beard. She
asked, "hey, child, what's your name?"

"My name is Musa Wo."

Mama Ngembe, recorded by Donald
Cosentino ("Midnight Charters" 23)

After encountering the voice of God in a burning bush, Moses doubts the Hebrew slaves will believe what he has seen and heard. God responds to Moses' doubt with two signs. First, God commands Moses to throw down his staff. When Moses obeys, the staff transforms into a serpent—an uncanny figure, considering Satan's embodiment in Eden. God then commands Moses to grab the serpent, and when Moses obeys, the serpent transforms into a staff. The staff undergoes a metamorphosis into a serpent—a reminder of the prehistoric (structural), Edenic origins of historic Egyptian slavery, the Fall—then undergoes a metamorphosis back into a staff, the staff that will part the Red Sea, reconstituting a group of slaves as the Jewish people and solidifying the legacy of monotheism. Simultaneously pointing backward and forward, this metamorphosis prophecies the historic event of the Exodus by placing it within the cosmic history envisioned within the biblical narrative. This prophecy is repeated in God's next sign, the first epigraph. In verse six, Moses' placement of his hand in his bosom strikes his body with leprosy, figuring the Hebraic body politic as diseased within Egyptian enslavement. Curiously, in verse seven, Moses' leprous body is healed while repeating the poisonous act. Repetition, for Moses, is poison and cure, a mutuality figured in the form of the divine sign itself. The staff and hand signs simultaneously reference a pre-historic Fall, the historic now of enslavement, and an approaching historic event of liberation, and in doing so demonstrates a particular mode of historical reference. The staff of the serpent and prophet, the hand of the leper and healer: together these signs signify both the satanic and the divine, enslavement and liberation, neither of which can be referenced apart from their mutual implication within a history embedded

between structural and historical traumas (the Fall, slavery) and an event(s) to come (the Exodus, the Messiah).²⁷

The second epigraph describes the birth of another Moses. The Mende²⁸ people of Sierra Leone tell of a trickster-hero named Musa Wo, which translates into English as “Little Moses.” In contrast to the biblical Moses, the giver of the law, Musa Wo is a prophet of chaos, he who endlessly overturns the foundations of the law. As Donald Cosentino explains, Musa Wo is born full grown, with a beard in some stories (such as the version he records from Mama Ngembe), parthenogenetically, from his mother’s thumb or knee. In some renditions he swallows and births his own mother, beginning his tricks early by negating the physiological foundations of his own birth (27). He befriends animals, who help him in his violent adventures, including a crocodile who eats Musa Wo’s enemies and a magic turtle whose farts awaken the dead (27). Upon birth, Musa Wo’s crimes quickly build up, some serious—the killing of his father’s subjects and chief’s wives—and some humorous—urinating on a mourning chief’s head, or castrating a stag (28). Musa Wo’s first struggle is against his father, but after outsmarting his father, the storyteller takes Musa Wo into a new context, which typically ends in someone’s death, only to birth a new story, a new trick, a new death.

Performers consistently take the oral epic in new directions—one trick leads to another; one context becomes another—so that any trick Musa Wo pulls results in another need to pull another trick. Thus, “the Mende say that a Musa Wo tale can never be ended,” Cosentino writes (22). This narrative form explains the Mende proverb *Musa Wo Domeh*, which, as Paul Mocalair and Mike Charley explain, translates as “It’s like a

²⁷See Dominick LaCapra on structural and historical trauma.

²⁸ The Mende are one of Sierra Leone’s largest ethnic groups. They reside mostly in the Southern and Eastern parts of the country.

Musa Wo story,” or “There’s no end to it”—or, colloquially, “It’s just one damn thing after another!” (133). Musa Wo tales in this manner contrast with most of Mende oral tradition, which upholds an intricately woven order of the social, so that Musa Wo celebrates the chaos underneath a carefully treaded tightrope of social balance. As Cosentino explains,

Like Hegel and his German followers, Mende narrators bind their world view to a rigorous system of dialectics. It is perhaps not surprising then that in the creation of the hero, they too would seek the *Übermensch*—someone who transcends or even smashes the careful constructs of the social world to proclaim himself the absolute hub of his own moral universe. If the thesis of Mende social life is the balance of discrete social units, then its antithesis must be sought in the continuous and the unbalanced, which precisely describes the structure and narrative content of a Musa Wo tale. (30-31)

Could these two Moses figures be any more different? One establishes the law. The other abolishes it, embodying Gilles Deleuze’s theory of repetition as ontological transgression, that which places being-as-“law into question,” denouncing its “nominal or general character in favour of a more profound and more artistic reality” (3).²⁹

Read with Freud, however, these two characters become more akin than first meets the eye. During his final months, responding to the anti-Semitism within the mass psychology of the Third *Reich*, Freud searched for the origin, and thus the essence, of Judaism. In a letter to Lou Andreas-Salomé, he calls this origin the “historical truth,” as opposed to the “material truth,” of monotheism, which is revealed, Freud argues, by unraveling the unspoken yet foundational truth of the biblical narrative: Moses was not a

²⁹ See Deleuze’s *Repetition and Difference*.

Jew (qtd. in Santner, “Freud’s *Moses*” 4). As Freud admits in his opening sentence of *Moses and Monotheism*, aiming such a depropriative act at a prophet is risky, but necessary. “To deprive a people of the man whom they take pride in as the greatest of their sons is not a thing to be gladly or carelessly undertaken,” he writes, “least of all by someone who is himself one of them. But we cannot allow any such reflection to induce us to put the truth aside in favour of what are supposed to be *national interests*” (243, my emphasis). Instead of defending Jewish cultural purity, Freud exegetes from the biblical narrative an original impurity, symbolized in the staff and hand incident as the entanglement of sin and redemption, disease and health, and emblemized for Freud by Moses’ position as both a gentile and the first prophet of the Jews. Contra the Nazi insistence on Jewish impurity to which he is responding, however, Freud celebrates this lack by pinning the universal “historical truth” it reveals against the desire for purity within the mass psychology of fascism and, in the quote above, the nation-state. This celebratory depropriation, in other words, casts the form of Jewish monotheism as the revelatory tradition of humanity’s shared ontological lack, demonstrating a foundation for a community beyond the parameters of nationalism.

As Edward Said points out, Freud’s argument is profoundly anti-Zionist. “[I]n excavating the archeology of Jewish identity,” Said writes in his late essay titled *Freud and the Non-European*, “Freud insisted that it did not begin with itself but, rather, with *other identities*”—better yet, with an Arab (44). This view of “Moses as both insider and outsider” (16), Jew and Arab, suggests, Said writes,

[T]here are inherent limits that prevent [community] from being incorporated into one, and only one, Identity. Freud’s symbol of those limits was that the

founder of Jewish identity was himself a non-European Egyptian. In other words, identity cannot be thought or worked through itself alone; it cannot constitute or even imagine itself without that radical originary break or flaw which will not be repressed, because Moses was Egyptian, and therefore always outside the identity inside which so many have stood [. . .]. (54)

Freud consequently points toward a “diasporic, wandering, unresolved, cosmopolitan consciousness of someone who is both inside and outside his or her community,” Said claims (53). Consequently, for Said, Freud leaves us with urgent questions that reach beyond the Israel/Palestine debate: “[C]an so utterly indecisive and so deeply undetermined a history ever *be* written? In what language, and with what sort of vocabulary” (55)?

Such questions speak directly to the context of Musa Wo tales. Long before the invention of Israel as a modern nation-state, a similar experiment was attempted in West Africa. Poor blacks who fought for England during the American Revolutionary War and newly liberated slaves from the North America were sent to the Province of Freedom, now known as Freetown, a name symbolizing the West’s liberation of an exiled people as well as the West’s intervention to return this people to their lost homeland (Fyfe, Harris). Like contemporary Palestine, however, indigenous people already called this land their home. For the eighteenth-century settlers of the Province of Freedom, their pre-Zionist return to the homeland found its immediate representation in the figure of Moses, as well as his people, Israel, a people bound to dwell in their Promised Land. As Christopher Fyfe explains in his influential *A History of Sierra Leone*,

[W]hen the people first landed, their pastors led them ashore, singing a hymn of praise, to a cotton tree . . . There[,] like the Children of Israel[,] which were come again out of the captivity[,] they rejoiced before the Lord, who had brought them from bondage to the land of their fore-fathers. When all had arrived, the whole colony assembled in worship to proclaim to the dark continent whence they or their forebears had been carried in chains— ‘The day of Jubilee is come; Return ye ransomed sinners home.’ (36-37)

In the settler’s praises, the experience of collective healing and the act of returning to a homeland are synonymous. Today, after the Civil War,³⁰ which left over 50,000 people dead and 2.5 million displaced, it is still common to find Sierra Leoneans praying before the old Cotton Tree, which, standing near the Supreme Court and National Museum, represents the prosperity of the nation-state itself (LeVert 18).

Read against this backdrop, the West African “Little Moses” illustrates a lesson similar to Said’s. Put differently, Said compels us to read Freud’s Moses as both Moses and Musa Wo, he who establishes and transgresses the law (of community) through what Freud terms the repetition compulsion. As Jacqueline Rose puts it, Freud’s atheology of “divine election [is] established . . . not in one unanswerable moment of recognition between the people and their God . . . but twice” (78). What psychoanalysis and Mende folklore both propose, then, through Moses (as a double of himself), is that subjectivity emerges in repetition—and Musa Wo makes explicit the creative, albeit catastrophic, aspect of this repetition. According to Lacan’s perhaps no less legendary mirror stage, for instance, when I was a child, someone held me up to a

³⁰ The Civil War (1991-2002), was mainly waged between the Sierra Leone Army (SLA) and the rebels, the Revolutionary United Front (RUF).

mirror, a ritual act, repeating what was once done to them, and in this act of repetition, I saw a reflection, a visual repetition, of my own body. This mimetic reflection did not simply reveal to me a truth that I did not yet know (that I am a body); rather, my gaze into the reflection created something that was not yet there: *myself*. In this scene, much like the scenes of Moses and Musa Wo I have described, creative mimesis animates subjective life. For Moses, the divine power of signification that is both repetition and creation (as in the staff incident); for Musa Wo, the horrific, comic violence of transgression that is both repetition and creation; for both, a new reality. In other words, in both Moses' and Musa Wo's acts of repetition we can explicate an animist ontology—a form of existence emerging through acts of creative ritual.

Moreover, Freud and Mende folklore both associate Moses with a wandering, unresolved consciousness, which, as Said argues, disrupts the the boundaries of the nation-state hinging on the assumed *a priori* existence of sovereignly bordered entities. Freud's Moses and Musa Wo are, in different manners, instances of sovereignty's excess, that which cannot be incorporated into the nation-state. This may be why Musa Wo is said to be banished from his home, exiled to a life of cyclic wandering—much like Moses, of whom it is written, “but no man knoweth of his sepulchre unto this day” (Cosentino 27; Deut 34.6). If, as Said argues, Freud's theory of collective subjectivity as trauma proposed in *Moses and Monotheism* challenges us to rethink community beyond the sovereignly bordered identities making up the modern nation-state, and, if, as I have proposed, the Mende's Musa Wo offers a similar challenge, a question remains: *how are we to conceptualize this form of community?*

Moses, Citizen & Me

This question is the driving force of Delia Jarrett-Macauley's Orwell Prize winning novel, *Moses, Citizen & Me*. Set in post-Civil War Sierra Leone, the novel is about a family attempting to survive the aftermath of the war. Citizen is an eight-year-old boy who became a soldier during the war. Moses is Citizen's grandfather and recent caretaker, a photographer whose wife and children died during the war, leaving Moses and Citizen the only surviving family members in the country. The "Me" in the title is Julia, Moses' niece and Citizen's cousin, the novel's narrator and protagonist. She is an independent, adventurous Londoner in her thirties, whose search for her own subjectivity casts the novel as a type of inverted *Bildungsroman*: Julia, a Westernized, individualized daughter of an immigrant, awakens, through her relation to her traumatized African relatives, to her implicated, vulnerable subject position.³¹

In this awakening from the myth of sovereign subjectivity to the fact of implicated subjectivity, Julia performs the plot of psychoanalytic trauma theory. As Freud argues in *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*, trauma is, in short, an overwhelming experience. By "overwhelming" I mean an experience outside of and incompatible with the subject's frame of reference, which thereby produces a new, "posttraumatic" subjectivity. Freud imagines this phenomenological experience of the unknown

³¹ "Loss and vulnerability," Judith Butler writes, "seem to follow from our being socially constituted bodies," which means that we are ontologically "attached to others, at risk of losing those attachments, exposed to others, at risk of violence by virtue of that exposure" (*Precarious* 20). Although I pragmatically call this subject deformation an inverted *Bildungsroman* (insofar as the protagonist undergoes an awakening-out-of-age), I admit this phrase is a pleonasm. The best *Bildungsromans* have always inverted themselves, revealing the position of sovereignty into which the protagonist steps to actually be a position of implicated subjectivity: Robinson Crusoe, for example (though he is a pre-*Bildungsroman* protagonist) becomes the self-made man only through his encounters with alterity, revealing the fact that he is, as Butler would have it, vulnerable, precarious. For the formal relation between the *Bildungsroman* plot (and its inherent inverse of itself) and the plot of human rights law, see Joseph Slaughter.

“outside” breaking “inside” biologically, through his hypothesis of a living vesicle in the subject’s brain that functions as a self-sacrificing, “receptive cortical layer [. . .] suspended in the middle of an external world charged with the most powerful energies” (229). According to Freud, since to exist is to be constantly subjected to alterity, the “outside,” the subject needs a wall of protection between the “inside”—that is, consciousness—and the “outside”—that is, infinite, external stimuli. A traumatic experience consists of external stimuli breaking through this barrier—alterity entering subjectivity—thereby shattering the subjective frame of reference protected by that barrier. “Freud’s Masterplot,” to use Peter Brooks term, is therefore the breakdown of the post-Enlightenment illusion of sovereign subjectivity. An encounter with trauma reveals the fact that “I” am not who I thought I was, but am bound in relation to others; or, trauma demonstrates that we are not sovereign, but are always already, in Caruth’s words, “implicated in each other’s traumas” (*Unclaimed* 24). As Sam Durrant accordingly notes, “The end of trauma theory (its purpose, future, utopian horizon) is something like a shared consciousness of our common corporeal vulnerability,” and Julia’s movement towards this consciousness is the plot of *Moses, Citizen & Me* (94). Though at the beginning Julia believes herself to be sovereignly bordered from “West African politics,” as she describes it, her family shatters that border, aligning the “end” of the novel with not only the “end” of trauma theory, but the wandering consciousness of *Moses and Monotheism* described by Said.

The small amount of published criticism on the novel thus far has focused on its configurations of childhood, rights, and gender. David Rosen and Anne Whitehead, for instance, both critique the novel for its use of the symbolic figure of the child soldier.

For Rosen, Citizen embodies the thin, stereotypical images of child combat experience circulated by Western media (“The Child Soldier”). Similarly, Whitehead argues that the novel erases Citizen’s responsibility for the violence he perpetuated by proposing an ideology of childhood innocence (“Representing the Child”).³² As Annie Gagiano writes, however, “Jarrett-Macauley has objected to her novel being read as primarily or exclusively concerned with the fate and fact of Sierra Leonean (and other African) child soldiers.” Like Gagiano, Z’étoile Imma finds politically productive complexities within the novel which Rosen and Whitehead ignore. For her, through Citizen’s process of recovering alongside his family the novel offers “complex constructions of African masculinities in intimate spaces” in order to “produce a counternarrative to challenge hegemonic discourses on memory”—particularly the public memory model assumed by the internationally funded Sierra Leone Truth and Reconciliation Commission (SLTRC) (131). Building on Imma’s insight, I wish to suggest that one way in which the novel challenges hegemonic frameworks of memory, specifically cultural memories of trauma, is by placing psychoanalytic trauma theory in dialogue with its own invented animist theory of recovery. In the remainder of this chapter I wish to trace this dialogue through the novel’s inverted *Bildungsroman* plot (which I will first contextualize by placing it in dialogue with another inverted *Bildungsroman* set in Post-Civil War Sierra Leone, Aminatta Forna’s *The Memory of Love*), suggesting that Jarrett-Macauley’s narrative

³² In *No Future: Queer Theory and the Death Drive*, Lee Edelman argues that since political discourse as we know it is always future-oriented, the figure of the universal Child, which floods every form of media as an image of the innocent subject of the future, “invariably shapes the logic within which the political itself must be thought” (2). Therefore, all political discourse only counts as political discourse insofar as it promises to secure the safety of this imaginative Child who embodies “the telos of the social order,” by acting as the imaginary subject “for whom that order is held in perpetual trust,” and, consequently, functions within the polis as the “prop of the secular theology on which our social reality rests” (11-12).

proposes a cross-cultural theory of trauma and survival in the form of what Harry Garuba calls animist realism.

The prologue sets up the novel as a parable of postcolonial trauma theory. It describes prewar Freetown as a prelapsarian, Edenic city full of linguistic diversity and friendship:—"some say 'Indireh,' others 'Buwa,' occasionally you might get a 'Bonjour,' and many people just say: 'Mornin, ma'"—followed by the phrase "but war came" (1). Vultures and darkness descend, signifying the "end of an era" (1). This Fall from Paradise transitions into a description of a "bulky shape, twisted and distorted, strange in colour and horrific to smell": the corpse of Adele—Julia's aunt, Moses' wife, Citizen's grandmother (2). To make matters worse, it was Citizen himself who murdered Adele. The prologue therefore establishes a familial trauma that is linked to the cultural trauma of war-torn Sierra Leone. The end of the era epitomized by multicultural greetings coincides with the end of Moses and Citizen's era of domestic stability, and, as the prologue states, "the end of an era for the hapless niece of an old man": Julia (1). Adele's death is the knot that ties the collapse of these eras together, and her dead body mirrors the body politic of Sierra Leone. Both are "twisted and distorted" and, like the cultural dynamics of civil war, Adele's bodily distortion is produced from within the family unit itself, by her own grandson (2).

Both the state and the family collapse from the inside, but this collapse is both terrible and creative, dialectically producing both suffering and new subjectivities. Because Adele's corpse represents the end of the era of Julia's distance from Africa, it also represents the opening of new family relations. As Julia states, "*It was death that had made [Moses] call you back, . . . death and loss and loneliness*" (101). Adele's

death brings both loss and newness, a symbol of the traumatic state of postwar Sierra Leone itself—twisted, distorted, yet forging new relations—as well as a symbol of the “end” of trauma theory. Julia’s journey from a Westernized, allegedly sovereign subject to a transnational subject conscious of her implicated position in communal trauma—the novel’s base plot—is intertwined with the end of familial and national “eras,” suggesting the posttraumatic emergence, by the end of Julia’s plot, of a new “era” of personal and collective subjectivities; the “end” of Julia’s story, which represents the “end” of trauma theory, produces a new, relational framework through which to conceptualize transnational subjectivity.

This dialectic, which unites Moses, Citizen, and Julia, reflects Caruth’s already commented upon claim that trauma can provide the “possibility, in a catastrophic era, of a link between cultures” (56). In fact, the establishment of this link is the dramatic plot of the novel itself. In the first chapter, after receiving a call from her uncle Moses’ neighbor, Anita, who asks Julia to visit Moses in Sierra Leone since his wife, Adele (Julia’s aunt), has recently died, Julia flies to Freetown. Anita calls on Julia to be the healer, a position that is Julia’s because, as Anita puts it, she is “somebody distant, somebody from far away” (20). Julia’s trip therefore plots a response to the postcolonial critique of trauma theory. The core question throughout the narrative is, can Julia, the Westernized subject, establish a meaningful connection with Moses and Citizen, her traumatized African relatives, and, perhaps more importantly, can she help young Citizen heal? Julia’s conundrum in this way reflects the conundrum of contemporary trauma theory: can a Eurocentric discourse establish meaningful connections in a postcolonial, globalized world, and, perhaps more importantly, can it aid in cultural

survival? In other words, by asking *how can Julia help her family?*, the novel implicitly questions how trauma theory can live up to its promise of intercultural engagement when trauma is itself a psychic category invented by Europeans to make sense of overwhelming experiences through a Eurocentric framework.

As Imma argues, this question is highly pertinent in post-Civil War Sierra Leone, where international human rights initiatives such as the Conventions of the Rights of the Child (CRC) and the TRC have for years conflated the healing of children such as Citizen with collective healing of the “failed” nation-state.³³ As Susan Shepler argues, for the UN and the majority of NGOs in Sierra Leone, the primary means of healing is the process of what is called “sensitization,” a model of public health that implies both community awareness and social marketing—raising awareness through jingles, posters, T-shirts, radio-programs, community meetings, and the like (200). She reports that in Sierra Leone “sensitization is proposed as the solution to almost every problem in society,” and this process of “sensitization” is spread through Sierra Leone by humanitarian workers in a pedagogical process of power/knowledge, reflecting Michel Foucault’s model of modern governmentality (200). Commenting on her experience with community meetings and humanitarian work in Sierra Leone, she writes, “In regards to the techniques and technologies involved in educating people about the rights of the child, such promotion [i.e., sensitization] was typically top-down, the assumption apparently being that Sierra Leoneans were ignorant about child rights and simply needed more knowledge” (201). This knowledge that locals allegedly need in order to heal their fractured state is tied to Western ideas of psychological health. Shepler

³³ *Moses, Citizen & Me* can in this regard be conceptualized as what John Marx terms “failed-state fiction.”

describes going to community meetings where humanitarian workers introduced Sierra Leoneans to English words such as “psycho-social” and “trauma,” through which locals are expected to interpret their experiences of war (203). When locals used the right vocabulary, they were acknowledged by aid workers and were rewarded with support; thus, for Shepler, “sensitization seemed to be all about power, rhetoric, and pedagogy” (204). In other words, internationally supported aid in Sierra Leone operates as a biopolitical *dispositif* through which Western conceptions of health and therefore subjectivity are spread into the “third world.”³⁴ The political question that humanitarian work in Sierra Leone raises is, then, *how are we to conceptualize trauma and healing in Sierra Leone without taking part in neoliberal subject formation?*

“An Alternative State”

Jarrett-Macauley is not the only author to plot this question in novelistic form. This same question is the impetus behind Forna’s *The Memory of Love*. Early in Forna’s novel, Dr. Adrian Lockheart, a British psychologist volunteering with mental health

³⁴ The Foucauldian *dispositif*, most often translated into English as *apparatus*, names the channels through which social normativity is produced and sustained. When asked to define this term, which is central to his theory of subject formation, in his 1977 “The Confession of the Flesh” interview, Foucault states, “What I’m trying to pick out with this term is, firstly, a thoroughly heterogeneous ensemble consisting of discourses, institutions, architectural forms, regulatory decisions, laws, administrative measures, scientific statements, philosophical, moral and philanthropic propositions—in short, the said as much as the unsaid. Such are the elements of the apparatus. The apparatus itself is the system of relations that can be established between these elements. (194) In “What is an Apparatus?,” Giorgio Agamben expands Foucault’s definition, writing, “I shall call an apparatus literally anything that has in some way the capacity to capture, orient, determine, intercept, model, control, or secure the gestures, behaviors, opinions, or discourses of living beings. Not only, therefore, prisons, madhouses, the panopticon, schools, confession, factories, disciplines, judicial measures, and so forth (whose connection with power is in a certain sense evident), but also the pen, writing, literature, philosophy, agriculture, cigarettes, navigation, computers, cellular telephones and—why not—language itself, which is perhaps the most ancient of apparatuses—one in which thousands and thousands of years ago a primate inadvertently let himself be captured, probably without realizing the consequences that he was about to face. (14)”

services in Freetown, finds himself unable to help his patients, even with his bookshelf full of the latest psychiatric trauma theory: “He came here to help and he is not helping. *He is not helping*” (64). Amidst his failure, Adrian becomes obsessed with a certain patient, an internally displaced person (IDP), named Agnes. After witnessing her husband beheaded by rebels and fleeing to a refugee camp, Agnes survived the war to return to her now married daughter. Horrified, Agnes recognizes her new son-in-law, JaJa, as the rebel who murdered her husband. In a response that would anger most most therapists, Agnes stays silent, refusing to disclose her knowledge and pain, regularly slipping into alternative states of mind in which she leaves the home she shares with JaJa to wander in what seems to be an aimless, dreamlike state. As Adrian becomes convinced Agnes suffers from a rare case of dissociative fugue stemming from PTSD, he incarnates the Western trauma theorist critiqued by critics such as Stef Craps, as I explained in the introduction to this thesis (127-28, 168, 218).

Another major character, Dr. Kai Mansaray, a Sierra Leonean orthopedic surgeon, performs surgery on countless maimed victims of the war, whose bodies are linguistically cast as domestic objects in need of repair: “Kai gained hundreds of hours of experience in repairs, stitching layers of muscle, sewing skin, patching holes with pieces from elsewhere. Surgical housekeeping” (121). Healing and home are here associated at the level of descriptive language, an association I will later explore in *Moses, Citizen & Me*. Yet this association becomes geographically and historically complicated when Kai and a team of surgeons practice the Krukenberg intervention, a healing technique borrowed from European medicine in the First World War. The doctors find themselves “fashioning out of the muscles and two bones of the wrist a pair

of blunted pincers: a hand. Ugly, it was true. But Kai had seen a man once again able to hold his own penis when he pissed, a mother place a nipple into her child's mouth" (122). Insofar as the bodies of Kai's patients represent the body politic of Sierra Leone,³⁵ rather than condemning the import of Western healing techniques, here, Forna depicts a stark yet beautiful scene in which a European form of healing is borrowed and utilized by Sierra Leoneans to construct postwar subjectivity: ugly, yes, but a woman can once again nurse her child. Forna's depiction of the implementation of Western concepts of trauma and healing is thus, throughout the novel, ambivalent.

Forna does, however, overtly critique humanitarian aid. In response to Adrian's obsession with Agnes, Kai categorizes Adrian with other humanitarian workers: "Modern-day knights, each after his or her trophy, their very own Holy Grail. Adrian's Grail was Agnes" (219). Kai sees Adrian's desire to diagnose Agnes as inseparable from his ego. As a child, Adrian "read and reread" stories of shell-shock from the First World War, listened to his mother's memories of the Second World War, and, as a medical student, inspired by a gas leak near the Aberdeen coast, wrote a paper arguing for the place of psychiatric trauma care in disaster relief, which won "modest acclaim" (64-65). Reading and responding to transnational narratives of trauma has, from childhood to adulthood, formed Adrian's subjectivity. Further, pragmatically speaking, diagnosing Agnes could be Adrian's big break: "To prove the existence of fugue in a population would be a professional coup. But if he could also demonstrate a clear link to post-traumatic stress disorder? Well, that could make his name" (168). Adrian's humanitarian libido is, therefore, ambivalent. Kai is not the only local doctor jaded to humanitarians. Attila, head of the mental hospital, tells Adrian about a foreign medical team's six week

³⁵ One deformed patient is named Foday, a reference to the leader of the RUF, Foday Sankoh.

study, which concluded that ninety-nine percent of Sierra Leone suffers from PTSD (319).³⁶ Attila then rhetorically questions Adrian: “When I ask you what you expect to achieve for these men, you say you want to return them to normality. So then I must ask you, whose normality? Yours? Mine? [. . .] This is their reality. [. . .] You call it a disorder, my friend. We call it *life*” (319). This conversation takes place while Attila pulls over his car so Adrian can see the slums in which locals live. Healing, Attila demonstrates, always assumes a home, a state of normality to which the subject must return.

Although the novel harshly critiques international intervention, Adrian’s unorthodox diagnosis of Agnes³⁷ is left open for debate. Strangely enough, in late nineteenth century France, Adrian’s diagnosis would not be considered unreasonable. In *Mad Travellers*, Ian Hacking excavates late nineteenth century France’s brief, small-scale yet highly contested fugue epidemic. To summarize, the 1880s-90s were “two decades in which impulsive uncontrolled traveling, with confused memories, was deemed to be a specific mental disorder in France,” writes Hacking, but today, in the era of the refugee, according to Hacking, the fuguer is no more: “Today he is just a mixed-up illegal immigrant,” minus the previous neurological malady (77; 79). Fugue was, in short, “pathological tourism,” but, like madness in the age of reason, fugue was an indispensable component of the age of travel, especially the complications of French travel. The late Victorian era was, of course, an era of exploration, travel writing, and the rise of tourism. Caught up in the *zeitgeist*, young Englishmen could up and leave to

³⁶ In a parody of humanitarian capitalism, the researchers also concluded that they needed 150,000 dollars to continue their study (319).

³⁷ “With no single case of fugue identified for decades a small lobby within the profession was arguing for it to be recognised for what it was—a hoax perpetrated by cowards and shirkers which ought to be removed from the official classification of mental diseases” (128).

the New World, young American men could walk out their front door into the ever-expanding West, but, according to Napoleonic law, French citizens needed passports to even leave their region of France (61-62). For the working class Frenchman, then, fugue was the “medical entity of peace, boredom, and dull regimentation” amidst a culture of biopolitical surveillance (62). Like the infamous female hysteric, the fuguer—always poor, male, and urban—performed a “bodily expression of male powerlessness” that mimed a popular image of prestige: the well-travelled man (49).

In 1887, Philippe Tissié published *Les Aliénés Voyageurs*, which featured the world’s first fuguer, Albert Dadas, who is mentioned in brief in *The Memory of Love* (127). Albert began his fugue states at the age of 12 when he deserted his apprenticeship at a gas factory in Boudeaux to wander, dreamlike, to La Teste, where his brother found and woke him, but Albert’s fugue states soon became unstoppable. He would hop on trains, ships, or simply walk, seeing the world—Paris, Frankfurt, Vienna, Algiers, Constantinople, Moscow—and experiencing a variety of jobs—working in vineyards, selling umbrellas, waiting tables—but, because Albert would always lose his paperwork (as if he unconsciously desired to lose his identity), his escapades would eventually be stopped by the police (Hacking 135-63). Adrian sees a resemblance between Agnes and Albert, which influences his diagnosis, and Forna suggests that an unspoken resemblance exists between the two doctors: Adrian’s relation to Agnes, in many ways, reflects Tissié’s relation to Albert. Both doctors become enamored by their subjects, and Adrian even considers trying hypnosis (169), a technique Tissié frequently used on Albert, as Hacking explains. But in twenty-first century Sierra Leone, Forna asks her readers, is dissociative fugue a valid diagnosis?

The psychogenic structure of Albert's fugue does influence the plot of Forna's novel. Adrian's copy of *A History of Mental Illness*, for example, narrates the fuguer's unconscious in language that mirrors the sociocultural questions immanent to the post-Civil War setting of the novel:

Fugue. Characterised by sudden, unexpected travel away from home. Irresistible wandering, often coupled with subsequent amnesia. A rarely diagnosed dissociative condition in which the mind creates an alternative state. This state may be considered a place of safety, a refuge. (325)

This description traces both the novel's plot and Adrian's position as the protagonist. In a fugue state, after catastrophe, the unconscious creates an "alternative state," a "refuge"; in Sierra Leone, after the catastrophe of the Civil War, can anyone (*such as myself*, questions Adrian throughout the novel) create an "alternative state," a "refuge" for Agnes (herself an IDP) and millions like her?

The novel never gives a positive or negative assessment of Adrian's diagnosis, but some Sierra Leonean characters (including Agnes herself) reject it, favoring indigenous paradigms of psychic life. Throughout the novel, however, a similar language can be found in both "European" and "African" paradigms. Take, for example, the way the head nurse, Salia, explains to Adrian a local diagnosis of Agnes: "[S]ometimes a person may be able to cross back and forth between this world and the spirit world. [. . .] And when they are in between the worlds, in neither world, then we say they are crossed. This woman is travelling between worlds" (129). Despite cross-cultural disagreement, in the same way that Adrian's copy of *A History of Mental Illness* functions within the novel to associate dissociative fugue with the relation between the

postwar state and the IDP, this indigenous diagnosis casts Agnes' symptoms as a matter of being "in between worlds, in neither world," not possessed—by a spirit or, for that matter, a nation-state—but, rather, crossed: in between worlds and thus in none (129).

To return to the nineteenth-century European origins of Adrian's diagnosis, Albert's pathology, Hacking argues, cannot be separated from the mass marketed desire to travel, to be in between worlds.³⁸ From being jailed in Moscow as a nihilist to waking in a hospital to discover his fiancée had married another man, Albert's desire wrote itself like an adventure novel in parodic style, and, to some extent, what Albert was to his biopolitical space, Agnes is to her necropolitical space.³⁹ In each case, the subject's illness takes the form of an inverted *Bildungsroman*. As Hacking writes, "Albert's obsessive and uncontrollable journeys were systematically pointless, less a voyage of self-discovery than an attempt to eliminate the self" (30). Likewise, Agnes, rather than coming-of-age to her subject position within the *polis*, performs her own non-existent position within that *polis*. In her strange wandering, Agnes demonstrates what Hannah Arendt calls the "abstract nakedness" of the state of being stateless, a subjectivity she insightfully recognizes as, in Giorgio Agamben's words, the "paradigm of a new historical consciousness" ("We Refugees" 114).

Toward the end of the novel, Kai ends up diagnosing Agnes. Thinking back on the mutilated survivors of village attacks, Kai considers, "[I]f you had asked any of the survivors how they had managed it, they would not have been able to tell you. It was as if those days in the forest, the escape to the city, had passed in a trance. *The mind*

³⁸ He embodied this desire as a sexual desire, argues Hacking: Albert was known to masturbate several times a day, often to fantasies of embarking on a trip with a woman (Hacking 24)

³⁹ See Achille Mbembe's "Necropolitics."

creates an alternative state” (326). Survival is phenomenologically produced as the experience of an alternative state. As he explains,

Agnes isn’t searching for anything. She is fleeing something. She is running away from intolerable circumstances. Escaping the house, her daughter, most of all, escaping JaJa. The difference between Agnes and the injured people who arrive at the hospital is that for Agnes there is *no possibility of sanctuary*. (326, my emphasis)

For Agnes, returning home is not a cure, but a repetition of trauma. Her domestic conundrum in this manner reflects her position as an IDP: she is internally displaced from her home and nation. Inspired by his recognition, Kai takes away “the book on the table,” Adrian’s copy of *A History of Mental Illness*, rejecting the epistemic violence of Adrian’s clinical paradigm with a gesture symbolic of the movement of the novel itself (326). Yet a key lesson of *The Memory of Love* is that this rejection of Adrian’s paradigm is not a rejection of psychoanalysis (as Craps’ reading of the novel in his essay “Beyond Eurocentrism” suggests), but, rather, an open-ended position toward both European and African psychic paradigms—what Rothberg terms multidirectional memory.⁴⁰ *The Memory of Love* thus plots the postcolonial problem of trauma theory within the context of Post-Civil War Sierra Leone, proposing an epistemic

⁴⁰ As Zoe Norridge points out, despite Forna’s critique of Eurocentrism, Kai himself finds healing through psychoanalysis, and, I would add, not only through successful group sessions. In an odd scene towards the end of the novel, Adrian hypnotizes Kai, and afterwards, the reader finally discovers Kai’s traumatic memory. Although Forna criticizes psychiatry throughout the novel, here, she extolls classical psychoanalysis. Themes such as the sharing of dreams (325) and the aesthetics of loss (260) further establish the novel’s proximity to psychoanalytic trauma theory. Craps thus overstates his argument against Norridge that the “unresolved ambivalence about the applicability and viability of Western treatment methods in post-Civil War Sierra Leone” outweighs the “few apparent success stories” of psychoanalysis (“Beyond Eurocentrism” 57). Although he is right in claiming that this ambivalence is unresolved, I would claim that Craps falsely places psychoanalytic trauma theory within the category of Western treatment methods. As Forna reveals, psychoanalysis provides an epistemic challenge to Western treatment methods, which is why psychoanalytic theory becomes a formal component of the novel.

multidirectionality which places psychoanalysis in dialogue with indigenous paradigms of trauma and survival. What emerges through this dialogue, Forna suggests, is a psychosocial theory of a posttraumatic “alternative state” (326). As an IDP, Agnes symbolizes a certain excess of the postcolonial nation-state, a subject for whom “there is no possibility of sanctuary,” as Kai puts it. Forna suggests that through becoming “crossed” between this world and the spirit world, Agnes dissociates herself from her constitutive dissociation from her nation-state, “creating an alternative state,” in Kai’s words, by entering a “dissociative fugue state,” in Adrian’s words. Forna in this way transforms Agnes’ trauma into a logic of survival. Like Freud’s Moses and Musa Wo, Agnes, as the excess of postcolonial sovereignty, becomes a symbolic embodiment of an imagined state emerging through yet pointing beyond the postcolonial nation-state. In the end, Forna uses Agnes’ embodiment of this alternative state to discourage the reader from placing “Western” and “indigenous” paradigms at odds. But ultimately it remains an *alternative* state: a phenomenon to be conceptualized. As a realist novel, *The Memory of Love* represents the possibility of, but does not construct, a new community. As I now wish to suggest, through *Moses, Citizen & Me*, an *animist realist* novel, Jarrett-Macauley attempts to go a step further by ritualizing her own theory of postwar recovery and creating the alternative state toward which *The Memory of Love* points.

Searching for Home

Moses, Citizen & Me begins to plot a similar intercultural trauma theory as envisioned in *The Memory of Love* through each main character’s search for a home, that which for Agnes remains an impossibility. The first chapter begins in Heathrow

airport, a liminal space that Julia calls “a place of infinite outcome,” casting her existence as transient (4). Julia is on her way to Freetown, and although she has not been to Sierra Leone since she was a young girl, she refers to her flight as a trip “‘home’ from London” (1). The word *home* is placed in quotation marks, raising the possibility of an African home for this British raised woman, but questioning its actuality. Citizen is also in search of a home. Julia claims that he and the rest of Sierra Leone’s child soldiers are not “trigger-happy snipers [,] but half-naked kids, shrieking with fear because there was nowhere called ‘home’” (67). Anita tells Julia that when Citizen was discovered suffering from malnutrition, she knew “the only chance to help him was to take him home” (109). She also explains that Citizen’s parents (Moses’ daughter and son-in-law) were killed along with their entire village—the community they called home—on market day, a massacre Anita calls “invisible deaths, endings that left their imprint like DNA” (81). Indeed, Citizen’s loss left its mark. As a soldier, Citizen was part of “number-one-burn house unit,” in which he spent his days burning down other people’s homes, a repetition of the loss of home that led him into the position of a soldier in the first place (58).

Throughout her life, Julia never accepted England, or anywhere, as a home, and her transient identity stands in opposition to Moses’ desire for a stable African home. Julia’s mother, who migrated from Sierra Leone to England in the sixties, was highly critical of the political situations of West Africa and viewed England as her new home, which angered her brother, Moses, during some of his visits, as Julia recalls in some of her many flashback narrations of her childhood (71-72; 101-02). In contrast to her African-turned-British mother and resolutely African uncle, Julia, from childhood to

adulthood, remains transient, which is exemplified by their different accents. Julia describes Moses' accent as "deep, purely African and resonant" in contrast to her mother's "Anglicized, posher" accent, and, in contrast to both, Julia admits, "I sounded as if I had come from nowhere in particular" (70).

Julia's transient identity and Moses' idealization of African identity kept the two from speaking for decades before Julia's trip to Freetown, a trip that reunites Julia and Moses and provides a backdrop for Julia's exploration of both of their pasts. As Julia recalls, as a young adult, upon finishing school, she moved to Paris with a friend in hopes of making a new home "in the creative world" (103). Julia's life before the novel's time of narration therefore followed the standard *Bildungsroman* form, which brought tension between her and her family. Since Julia's mother did not support her adventurous lifestyle, Julia wrote to her uncle Moses, hoping for encouragement from a fellow artist. Instead, Moses wrote Julia back asking her to move to Africa. "You will have the satisfaction of contributing to the development of your home," he wrote, and, making more clear his desire for a permanent African home, he added, "Think of how your ancestors would feel in their resting place" (104). According to Moses, the ancestors desire a familial stability to counter the colonial and postcolonial traumas to which their familial line has fell victim, but Julia's transience threatens this stability. Moses' past disapproval of Julia's transience and Julia's past refusal to make Africa her home therefore produce a tension between the two characters—they barely speak for Julia's first few days in Freetown—that slowly dissipates as the novel unravels.

Julia's narration continuously draws attention to Moses' conception of home, which opposes her own sense of homelessness. Though Julia holds tight to her

transience, she is drawn to Moses' drive for domestic stability, which is embodied by his farmhouse in Freetown. "What I loved most about that house," Julia claims, "was the sense of permanence" (94). Upon first seeing Moses' photography studio, Julia compares it to a house (9), and by contrast to Moses' neighbors' house, Julia is impressed that Moses' actual house remained standing through the chaos of war, further imputing the family farmhouse with an aura of permanence. "We were lucky," she claims, "The whole of Uncle Moses' house was still standing" (10). Even Moses' everyday activities reveal his drive toward domestic stability, from keeping decades-old *Good Housekeeping* magazines strewn across the table to keeping categorized photographs of mundane, household items (11, 43). As pictures of items that adorn a home as well as captured memories of the past, these photographs reveal Moses' desire to produce a home *in time*, a home with a stable history. But his photographs of household items, like his abundance of British domestic magazines, do not relate to any "African" sense of home or history, despite his conscious desires. For instance, Julia discovers detailed photographs of her mother's house in England: the messy carpet, kitchen cupboard, Kellogg's cornflakes, Corona, teapots, the washing machine, etc (43). Though Moses does not approve of his sister becoming British, he memorializes images of the smallest details of her British home, reflecting the ambivalence of his desire.

Moses is blind to this ambivalence. He steadfastly grounds his hope in his "African" farmhouse while unconsciously modeling this home on England. In his ignorance, Moses believes that his home can protect his family from war. As he tells Julia, his response to the sound of gunshots on the morning Adele was killed was simple: "I said, 'Let us all stay in this house together'" (13). His unconscious desire for

a Eurocentric Africa explains Moses' hopeless obsession with proper temporality, symbolized by his broken watch: "He had looked at his watch," Julia explains, "It had stopped. He had shaken it. 'It does not work well'" (11-12). Likewise, Citizen looks both young and old. After killing Adele, his hands stopped growing, leaving him with "baby-sized hands and fingers," yet, when Julia first sees Citizen, she claims that the eight-year-old boy looks like a "Cuban plantation worker more than twice his age" (219, 7). Like Moses' broken watch, Citizen's growth is "broken," each reflecting the entangled temporalities of the postcolonial nation-state.⁴¹ Citizen recognizes this deformity and attempts to overcome it by measuring himself on a tree in the backyard (15). Along with Citizen, Moses fights to untangle their temporalities. As Julia observes Moses and Citizen interact, she describes Moses' attempts at "putting the clocks back" to when his grandson was "the antebellum Citizen" (of Sierra Leone) (78). Julia also joins Moses' and Citizen's struggle. When Anita asks Julia to help her family, she replies, "Please give me *time*" (20, my emphasis).

The Time of Trauma

Moses' desire for a "proper" temporality is a product of his traumatic existence. To return to Freud's proposition that human consciousness is protected from external stimuli by a vesicle-barrier, it follows that the conscious experience of time is protected by that barrier, which means that trauma, as a rupture of that barrier, is a rupture of temporality. As Caruth explains, trauma is caused by "a shock that appears to work very

⁴¹ I am thinking here of what Mbembe in *On the Postcolony* calls the "labyrinthine entanglement" of experienced time(s) in the postcolonies: "*time as lived*, not synchronically or diachronically, but in its multiplicity and simultaneities, its presence and absences, beyond the lazy categories of permanence and change beloved of so many historians" (8).

much like a bodily threat but is in fact a break in the mind's experience of time" (*Unclaimed* 62). For Freud, this temporal rupture is what animates the repetition compulsion. Because the subject does not experience the trauma *in time*, the subject returns compulsively to (re)experience the trauma. Throughout *Moses, Citizen & Me*, however, the historic origin of Moses' repetition compulsion, the moment of trauma in which temporality ruptures, is impossible to place. Even his memory of finding Adele dead, for example, does not exist in a positive, spatial location within a narrative of the Civil War. Rather, Adele's death unexpectedly repeats another memory from Moses' childhood. As a child, Moses was rejected by his mother and given away to his aunt, while, as Julia explains, Moses' mother was obsessively devoted to her firstborn daughter:

She would look intently at her daughter's face for hours, for fear of missing a change in it. Suddenly, the little girl's face would change, arrange itself differently, reveal something new, sometimes achingly so. Her mother watched every change and relished the bond with her daughter. Moses created his own private world and while his sister was full of maternal adoration, he went hungry. (14)

In this description, Moses' mother is obsessed with the passing of time as revealed in her daughter's face, which brings both of what will become Moses' obsessions—home (as signified by the mother's bond with her daughter) and temporality (as signified by the mother's focus on change)—together in a maternal trauma preceding the war-torn context of the novel. In other words, Moses is traumatized and is in search of a stable home, in time, before Adele's death and before the Civil War. Moses thus experiences

the catastrophe of Adele's death as an uncanny repetition of his rejection from his mother, and his obsession with his farmhouse and photography after Adele's death is a repetition of the trauma in which he has been caught since childhood. Since the prologue blends the collapse of Moses' family's and nation's "eras" of stability as signifieds of Adele's corpse, insofar as Adele's death blends Moses' childhood trauma of maternal neglect and adult trauma of war into a catastrophic history of repetition, her corpse points towards a conflation of the traumatic histories of Moses' childhood, adulthood, and the nation-state of Sierra Leone. These entangled traumas disrupt any sense of chronological temporality through which a singular event of trauma could take place, throwing Moses, and by implication Sierra Leone, into the traumatic time of the repetition compulsion. Like Walter Benjamin's interpretation of *Angelus Novus*, the novel's history is "one single catastrophe" ("Theses" 257).

No wonder Moses is a photographer. Like Benjamin's modern subject—whose attempts at "overcoming the uniqueness in every situation by reproducing it" ("Brief History" 184) render modernity an epoch in which "[e]very day the urge grows stronger to get hold of an object at very close range by way of its likeness, its reproduction" ("Work of Art" 223)—Moses' photography is tied to a crisis in his subjectivity. "The photography studio was as big as the neighbour's house," Julia claims, associating Moses' photography with his drive for domestic stability (9). Throughout the majority of Julia's stay, Moses works on organizing and arranging his photographs, a constant attempt to construct a chronology of the past, not only his personal past—Julia finds him arranging family photographs, "poring over a set of old family photographs of Adele with their daughter Agnes," for instance—but also Sierra Leone's colonial past (42).

Moses is an admirer and avid collector of colonial era photography from Sierra Leone, especially the photographers J.P. Decker and Alphonso Lisk-Carew, both of whom are mentioned multiple times and both of whom are historic, Creole photographers from Sierra Leone. By blending his collection of personal photographs of his family and home together with his collection of Sierra Leone's colonial photography, Moses archives his own history within the temporality of his nation-state.

Moses' studio therefore houses his repetitive, compulsive attempts to construct a home *in time*, which is why Julia describes the studio as "both a shrine and a workplace" (9). Through his familial and national photography collection, Moses ritually attempts to squeeze his history into the homogeneous, empty temporality that is, as Benedict Anderson famously argues, assumed by the modern nation-state. Moses' acts of devotion are therefore, unbeknownst to him, reproductions of the Eurocentrism from which he desires to escape. His aesthetic hero, J.P. Decker, for example, was a man who documented British colonial headquarters throughout Africa. Decker's photographs are "primarily of government buildings and military quarters": the *home* of colonial hegemony (Viditz-Ward 37). Despite his desire for an "African" identity, Moses models himself, or, more precisely, models the way he captures himself (*via* the photograph), on Western imperialism.

However, if like Adele's corpse, Moses' photography collection signifies the tie between the family and the nation, unlike the corpse, Moses has authorial control over the contents and arrangement of his collection and therefore, he believes, the narrative it tells. Moses could not save Adele from death, but he can narrate the past; he could not keep his family or his nation from collapsing, but he believes he can produce a stable,

historic narrative. The novel, however, demonstrates that despite Moses' attempts at archiving a linear history, this history always emerges as trauma. During a conversation with Julia, for instance, Moses admits, "I knew a child would come and disrupt my life," an enigmatic statement that he later explains (100). According to his story, through a personal connection to the Sierra Leonean playwright Thomas Decker, Moses is offered a job to take government photographs. Although the job is clearly corrupt (117), the idea of helping to make his nation a "success" and the prospect of success as a photographer are enough to convince Moses to accept it (115). Moses' developed photographs of the president of Sierra Leone, however, turn out differently than he expects:

[Moses] saw a faintly sketched figure hovering over the head of the president. It was the figure of a small boy holding a gun. In each print the figure appeared—distinct but soft like a breath. [. . .] He thought they were both the most fantastic and the most winning images he had ever taken. The truth appeared as a shadow on the print. Then a surge of fear swept through him, a fear that they would hold him accountable for the shadow. [. . .] He looked again at the shadow; a small child barely recognizable, rising as a bruise must in response to a blow, scar tissue to a wound. (119)

Moses' photographs portray a truth he is unable to see with his naked eye, a "shadow" of the future imprinted upon the past. The imprint of the boy soldier in Moses' photograph further disrupts Moses' temporality. Not only does his watch not work; his photographs do not capture a stable image of the past. Through the same medium he uses to arrange his personal and political history, a horrific trace of his personal and

political future is revealed: the political corruption of Sierra Leone will lead children to war, and Moses' own grandson will embody this "shadow" of the future.

This unintentional prophecy is one way in which the novel critiques the linear memory framework assumed in the development narrative espoused by the CRC, the SRTRC, and the many "sensitization" projects described by Shepler. By "re-enchanting" time in post-Civil War Sierra Leone through casting Moses' photography as prophecy, *Moses, Citizen & Me* becomes a prime example of what Garuba terms animist realism. This genre is not quite the same as magical realism, he argues. The "representational and linguistic practices underwritten by an animist conception of the world are much larger in scope and dimension than the concept of *magical realism* could possibly describe," he writes. They are sometimes "individual instances within certain texts" (his examples are Sagoe's concrete drink lobes in Wole Soyinka's *The Interpreters* and the tobacco tin lodged in Paul D's chest in Toni Morrison's *Beloved*). Elsewhere they function as "the organizing principle of the entire narrative," he writes, as is typical in magical realist texts. For Garuba, however,

[M]agical realism as developed by the Latin American writers and theorized by its foremost critics possesses an urban, cosmopolitan aspect (from the perspective of the writers) and an ironizing attitude, which are not necessarily elements of the animistic narrative or its writers. It is in recognition of this limitation that I have [. . .] employed the term *animist realism* to describe this predominant cultural practice of according a physical, often animate material aspect to what others may consider an abstract idea. Animist realism, I believe, is a much more encompassing concept, of which magical realism may be said to be

a subgenre, with its own connecting charactersites and its formal difference.

(“Explorations” 274-75).

In *Moses, Citizen & Me*, prophecy becomes materialized, as Garuba describes, by Moses’ photographs, which demonstrates another aspect of animist realism.

Crucially, for Garuba, animist realism offers a historiographic critique of modern rationality. By “reinscribing the authority of magic within the interstices of the rational/secular/modern” (“Explorations” 271), animist realism thinks beyond the “boundaries, binaries, demarcations, and linearity of modernity” (“On Animism”), gesturing instead toward a spiritual historiography of “subaltern time” (“Explorations” 281). Crafted “between two simultaneous/contemporaneous *presents*, one premodern and traditional and the other modern,” animist realism “opens up a whole new world of poaching possibilities, prepossessing the future, as it were, by laying claim to what in the present is yet to be invented. It is on account of this ability to prepossess the future that the continual re-enchantment becomes possible” (“Explorations” 280; 271). Moses’ photographs in this sense emblemize the formal act of the animist realist novel: they poach, or prepossess, the future of Sierra Leone—and this drive toward prepossession is precisely what formally differentiates *Moses, Citizen & Me* from *The Memory of Love*. As I will later suggest, moreover, by imagining a ritual through which to respond to this prophecy and heal post-Civil War Sierra Leone, Jarrett-Macauley ultimately uses the novel to seek a different historiographic poaching possibility.

Prepossessed, Citizen, like Moses, is unable to author his own history. Called the “silent boy” due to his refusal to speak after the war, Citizen harbors traumatic memories severed from his conscious understanding, which lead him to enact strange

rituals that demonstrate a search for interpretive closure, like wandering around a tree “as though searching for some precious item” that he cannot find (7), or burying a dead bird under the tree on which he measures his growth (12). He also suffers posttraumatic flashbacks embodied as spirit possessions:

Without warning [Citizen] jumped to his feet, shouting into the air, hitting and punching in a way that suggested combat with several ghostly enemies. Sounds emerged from his lips but nothing we could make sense of, no actual words—just noises and grunts that until that moment had been pinioned beneath his tongue. Alone, he battled, then cautiously straightened, as though in fear of being hit back. Finally he was done and gave up, slumped on the floor. Released from his nightmarish fight, he was still breathing heavily, emitting a *guff, guff* noise, the sounds of a voiceless or wild creature. (41-42)

In his bodily enactment of that which he cannot register in language, Citizen “watche[s] his own tongue shoot out wordlessly” (42). Like Adele’s corpse, Citizen’s murderous acts and voiceless condition represent the collapse of both the family and, as his name suggests, the nation. Furthermore, Julia describes how the voices of his mother, killed in the war, and grandmother, murdered by Citizen himself, remain within his face, casting his body as a spirit medium for those whom he killed, a harbor of the ancestral trauma he inflicted: “[U]nconfined, the voices of his mother and his maternal grandmother echoed, distinctly calling their own son” (79). What Julia does not recognize is that she also harbors this legacy.

Since Moses' sister, the object of his mother's affection and devotion, is Julia's mother, Julia is implicated within Moses' traumatic history from her very birth. This bond is deepened through Julia's own memory of her past, in which her conception of herself is intricately bound up with her memories of Moses' visits to England. The first chapter of the novel, for example, ends with Julia reminiscing on her memories of Moses' visits. "I was never in fragments when he was there," Julia admits (26). When Moses went back to Sierra Leone, however, Julia's sense of self returned to its fragments: "Inside me was a hole that was dark and brown. It was a place I recognized from before but could not yet name. It made me thirsty and tired. It told me that I did not just miss him, I missed myself" (29). Julia's subjectivity is bound to her relationship with Moses, and his absence from England, resulting in her fragmented sense of self, constitutes the transience in which she exists at the beginning of the novel. Moses and Julia's relationship, however, may be darker than first appears.

Although the memories Julia recounts of Moses' visits are joyful, they bear traces of a hidden trauma, perhaps hidden to Julia herself. She admits, for instance, that when Moses stayed with her and her mother, "It was a strange time, an exciting one. Although I was still a little girl I was discovering that there was more woman in me than before," a phrase that raises the possibility of a sexual relation, which does not occupy a narrative space within Julia's memory, but comes back to surprise her in adulthood (25). When Julia looks through Moses' photographs of her childhood home, she finds pictures of herself: "Pictures taken when we were out. Taken naked. My mother would not have liked that and I'm not sure I liked it either" (43). Julia quickly disregards these photos: "Perhaps it did not matter. I had imagined there would be more. My mother and I had

assumed Uncle Moses would have some” (43). Since these photographs were taken when “[they] were out,” the novel, *via* this phrase, associates the photographs with Julia’s cherished memory of her day trip with Moses to a butter-cup field, which bears the marks of traumatic memory. “Moses pointed his camera towards me,” Julia explains, “and I smiled, grinned, pulled faces. *Whirr* went the camera, then silence again” (27). Silence: a blank space within her narrative memory. Julia also finds photographs of “a childhood bedroom with its matching cotton bedspreads,” presumably hers, amidst Moses’ plethora of photographs of household items (43). Julia’s rupture of narrative memory—her memory of silence—while being photographed, as well as her disassociation from her bed, if we assume that the photograph is of her old room (the bedroom belongs to an unnamed child), point towards a repressed memory.⁴²

The novel does not further explore this aspect of Julia and Moses’ relationship, but Julia’s discovery of the photographs does make explicit her and her uncle’s (unwilled) bond through their shared, traumatic history. Through this scene, then, Jarrett-Macauley does not moralize the narrative, but rather emphasizes the entangled nature of Moses’ and Julia’s traumas. Julia is given life from the one who took Moses’ mother’s affection, casting Julia as a product of Moses’ trauma. Moses’ nude photographs of Julia demonstrate his attempts to master this trauma (through exploitation) and assimilate it within the chronology of his life and the nation-state of Sierra Leone he is attempting to organize in his studio through his personal and historic photography collection. Julia’s transience arises from the fragmented self produced by what she believes is Moses’ departure back to Sierra Leone, but very well could be a

⁴² For the physiological process in which traumatic memory is dissociated from conscious memory, see Bessel van der Kolk.

fragmented self produced by the trauma of sexual molestation experienced during Moses' visit to England. It is Adele's death, described in the prologue, which reunites Julia and Moses after decades apart, a death that brings intertwined traumatic histories together, and since it is Citizen who murders Adele, Citizen is also actively intertwined in this familial trauma.

This traumatic entanglement brings up another point that trauma theory tends to underemphasize: the gendered, phallic structure of trauma. Caruth is, for example, an astute close reader of Freud, but there is a minimization of sexuality, which is persistently present in Freud's *oeuvre*, within her work. Implicit in Caruth's interpretation of Freud is the idea that since, in Freud's late work, the repetition compulsion takes the throne as that which structures ontology, a position that once belonged to the male libido, late Freudian psychoanalysis, insofar as it articulates mutual implication rather than the pursuit of pleasure, becomes a proto-feminist discourse. While this line of thought is correct in recognizing the challenge to the male libido that the repetition compulsion poses, it misses the fact that Freud never quite positions the repetition compulsion *beyond* the male libido, which is demonstrated in the persistence of the Oedipal narrative even after Freud's restructuring of psychoanalysis *beyond* the framework of pleasure. According to Freud, for example, when his grandson plays *fort/da* in *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*, he is not only performing his implication in the trauma of modern history, as Caruth explains, but also performing his Oedipal anxiety constituted by the departure of his mother. Likewise, in *Moses and Monotheism*, Freud argues that the repressed murder of Moses is not only a performance of collectivity as latent repetition, but also a (re)performance of the primal horde's

repressed murder of the Father. Consequently, the repetition compulsion—and therefore Freud’s trauma theory—are framed by Freud as (re)enactments of the Oedipal act, performing a *beyond* that never quite reaches *beyond* the domain of the male libido. Of course, we could read Freud against himself, claiming that despite Freud’s phallocentrism, his trauma theory reveals the manner in which his assumption about the libido deconstructs itself. Given the de Manian bent of Caruth’s reading, I suspect this exegetic tactic is the reason she underemphasizes the role of sexuality in trauma. Although this reading against the grain is necessary for a critical psychoanalysis, there is an Oedipal elephant in the room of trauma theory that *Moses, Citizen & Me* helps address.

Furthermore, this multi-layered, gendered traumatic condition explains Julia’s description of Moses lying on the floor, sleeping, as if in the womb, when Julia first arrives in Freetown: “*When he wakes in the morning, he will remember they said Adele is dead. Then he will remember how. He will return to the shape of a foetus in vain*” (10). Adele’s death explodes Moses’ attempts to construct a stable sense of home and temporality through which he hopes to construct a subjectivity sovereignly bordered from his trauma, which is itself an uncanny repetition of his childhood exclusion from the maternal bond, but, despite his best efforts, Moses cannot construct this “home.” His failure pushes him into a traumatic state between sleeping, waking, forgetting, and remembering, while his body, lying on the floor in the shape of a foetus, signifies an attempt to return to an existence before his experience of life, death, and the passing of time—a state of perpetual maternal care within the womb. Julia Kristeva’s argument in *Black Sun* that the trauma of being severed from the maternal bond through the

formation of subjectivity in language animates life itself helps illuminate Moses' condition. In a passage that could be a description of Moses, she writes, "The child [. . .] becomes irredeemably sad before uttering his first words; this is because he has been irrevocably, desperately separated from the mother, a loss that causes him to try to find her again, along with other objects of love, first in the imagination, then in words" (6). Like Kristeva's theory, Moses' body demonstrates his desire to crawl back into the womb of his mother, to experience the antithesis of her neglect, to escape all of the hybrid traumas in which he, Citizen, and Julia find themselves caught. It is simultaneously a bodily enactment of his constant desire for a stable home, his battle with the entangled temporalities of postcolonial existence, his childhood experience of neglect, his adult experience of the loss of his wife, and the horror of his nation at war with itself. In short, Moses' body signifies his drive to return to a pre-temporal state of womblike existence, what Freud calls the death drive: the "*urge [. . .] to restore an earlier state of things*" (*Beyond* 308). As I will later suggest, in the novel's conclusion Jarrett-Macauley reworks this drive into a collective, regenerative death.

Moses and Monotheism

What Moses therefore desires is to no longer be Moses—at least not the way Freud conceptualizes Moses. Considering Said's recognition of the wandering, unresolved consciousness within *Moses and Monotheism* that is upheld as the wandering, repetitively unresolved memory of the father of a nation, the creator of a people, it is significant that in *Moses, Citizen & Me*, Julia, the insider and outsider, daughter of an immigrant, at home nowhere, "somebody distant," as Anita claims, is

bestowed with the responsibility to reconstitute the community of her family after the catastrophe of the Civil War. Unlike Uncle Moses, the Moses of *Moses and Monotheism* finds his home within his own lack, creating a community precisely through the traumatic origin from which Uncle Moses attempts to escape. While Uncle Moses seeks to escape his trauma, Freud's Moses accepts trauma as that which forms community, that which is our ontological home and thus that which may constitute an "alternative state," as Agnes demonstrates in *The Memory of Love*. With Uncle Moses busy in his obsessive, failed attempts at constituting a teleological home to cover his traumatic origin, Julia must become the Moses that Uncle Moses is not.

At the beginning of the novel, Julia is unable to connect with Citizen or get him to say anything more than the word "no" (9). After visiting a rehabilitation camp with Citizen, however, Julia describes "a bridge between" her "awakening self and the children at the camp" (38). This bridge is produced through Julia's realization that her own subjectivity is tied up in Citizen's posttraumatic condition. Sitting near Citizen on her ride back to Freetown, she declares, "I moved closer to him; I moved closer to myself," a phrase reminiscent of Julia's past recognition that her subjectivity is also tied to her memories of Moses: "I did not just miss him," she acknowledges, "I missed myself" (38; 29). Upon recognizing her implicated position, that night, Julia begins what she calls her "awakening."

After returning to Moses' home, Julia has her first moment of connection with Citizen: bathing him. Julia notices a mark on Citizen's skin, the symbols "439K cut into his back"—his identity as a child soldier (46). Julia rubs ointment into the scars, gives Citizen a hair brush shaped like a hippo, and puts him to bed—maternal acts that, as the

rubbing of ointment on the scar displays, physically connect Julia to the name of Citizen's traumatic past. Afterwards Julia is awakened by a breeze from a window she accidentally left open. Unsure of whether she is actually awake or if she is dreaming, Julia notices a light coming from Citizen's room. She opens the door to find that Citizen's room is on fire. Citizen is sleeping, and though flames cover the room, nothing burns: "There was no crackle of burning wood, no sign of ash, no hissing of fire. The fire made no impact on the room" (49). Julia then thinks, "*A child's bedroom is adapted to his life, his imaginings, his dreams*" (49). Since Citizen was a member of "number-one-burn house unit" during his time as a soldier, his room adapts, in Julia's words, to emulate his traumatic experiences of burning down houses throughout Sierra Leone, itself a traumatic repetition of Citizen's own loss of home in a rebel raid (58). Furthermore, the description of the fire within the room that does not physically burn the room is an allusion to the burning bush narrative in Exodus, in which Moses approaches a bush that is on fire but does not burn. This biblical allusion makes explicit Julia's connection to Uncle Moses by placing her in the position of the biblical Moses. As the viewer of the burning room, like Moses viewing the burning bush, Julia becomes a prophetess, the one who must lead her traumatized family on an exodus.

Julia's awakening from this dream (if it was a dream) is an ethical awakening. The next morning, recognizing the ethical call that her implicated position within her familial trauma bestows upon her, Julia tells Anita that Citizen's condition "involve[s] me. I need to take it in properly and learn more; only then can I see what I can do to make a difference. [. . .] Help me to

see, Anita” (50). Julia therefore enacts Jacques Lacan’s rereading of Freud’s interpretation of “the dream of the burning child,” a psychoanalytic case that has, following Caruth’s reading, become exemplary of the ethical claims of trauma theory. In *The Interpretation of Dreams*, Freud records the story of a man who sleeps near the room containing the corpse of his recently deceased son. The dead son visits the father in a dream, grabbing his arm and asking, “*Father, don’t you see I’m burning?*” (652). The father wakes up to find that his dream is true: a candle has fallen on the corpse. Starting with the assumption that there is no clear-cut distinction between the fiction of dreams and the reality of waking existence, for Lacan, “The question that arises [. . .] is—*What is it that wakes the sleeper?* Is it not, *in the dream*, another reality?” (58). The son’s address within the dreamworld, Lacan argues, carries “more reality” than the falling candle in the external world: “Is there not more reality in [the dream] than in the noise by which the father also identifies the strange reality of what is happening in the room next door? (58). Thus, in Lacan’s rereading, the father awakens, still within the dream, to the relational constitution of his subjectivity, the fact that his life is, as Caruth claims, “no longer simply his own,” but implicated in the memory of his deceased son (*Unclaimed* 102). In Julia’s “dream of the burning room,” she has a similar awakening: the “reality” revealed by the “awakenings” from these “dreams” is an ethical imperative.

Next, in a somewhat clunky scene, Anita twists Julia’s hair in cornrows, performing a “hairdressing ritual” that transforms Julia’s head into “a map of Sierra Leone,” allowing Julia to finally “see” (51). Here, Julia’s “slippery self,” as she calls it, transforms, through both biblical and indigenous ritual: in the burning room, Julia is called to lead Citizen to healing, and through Anita’s hairdressing ritual, Julia’s head

takes on the landscape of Sierra Leone, the land she has been called to heal. Through her awakening, Julia therefore takes on the roles of both biblical prophet and indigenous spirit medium. For the rest of the novel, she holds spiritual powers, giving her insight into Citizen's life. She immediately sees Citizen's past, filled with other child soldiers. One girl calls to Julia to follow the children, leading Julia's "slippery self" through a "door to another world" (54). The rest of the novel switches back and forth, not only between Julia's present stay in Freetown and her and Moses' recollections of the past, but also between her dreaming experience of Sierra Leone and her waking experience of Sierra Leone. Julia's dream of Citizen's burning room therefore awakens, through a biblical script, an ethical connection between herself and Citizen, a connection that, with Anita's help, awakens within Julia, through an invented indigenous script, the ability to see through her dreams what she is unable to see with her eyes. Both outside and inside the biblical script and the indigenous script, Julia conjures the wandering, unresolved power of the Moses of *Moses and Monotheism* as her *Bildungsroman*, through its inversion, becomes animist realism.

Bemba G's Ritual

Although at the beginning of the novel Julia assumes herself estranged from her extended family, as her inverted *Bildungsroman* unravels, she gradually recognizes her familial role. After the hairdressing ritual, every time she sleeps a shaman named Bemba G teaches her how to become the healer her family needs. Bemba G's dream visits thus model Jarrett-Macauley's response to the question raised by postcolonial critiques of trauma theory: how are we to theorize trauma and survival beyond Eurocentrism? For

Jarrett-Macauley, much like Forna, the answer is to take animist cosmologies, epistemologies, and memory systems seriously—which is, in sum, Craps’ unperformed argument. Bemba G embodies the possibility of an animist psychoanalysis. Every night, Julia enters the Gala Forest in her dreams, near the Liberian border, where the RUF initiated Citizen and other children as soldiers. Here, Julia encounters Citizen and the group of child soldiers with whom he lived. Bemba G, who lives off the land and speaks in proverbs and narratives, takes it upon himself to heal the child soldiers, or, more accurately, to teach Julia how to heal Citizen by demonstrating his healing ritual within Julia’s dreams. This healing ritual brings us back to the repetition compulsion incarnated by Moses and Musa Wo in the beginning of this chapter.

One of Freud’s most fascinating examples of the repetition compulsion is his account of his grandson playing *fort* and *da*, “gone” and “here.” The child tosses a wooden spool attached to a string and declares “o-o-o-o,” which Freud interprets as an attempt to utter *fort*, “gone,” and when the child pulls the spool back, he declares *da*, “here” (*Beyond* 284). Freud associates the game with the child’s loss of his mother, casting the game as at once traumatic repetition and, oddly enough, play. Set alongside examples of war neurosis, train collisions, and the trauma of being thrown into existence, resulting in the death drive, the child’s game is yet another example of the repetition compulsion at the core of subjectivity, a compulsion that necessitates crossing the threshold of the pleasure principle in order to comprehend. Here, though, in contrast to the nightmares of the trauma survivor, the child is *playing*; in other words, this *fort* and *da* is both compulsively repetitive and creative—like a Musa Wo tale.⁴³

⁴³ See Donald Winnocott’s *Playing and Reality*.

A similar phenomenon takes place in some shamanic rituals. Writing on Putumayo shamanism, in *Shamanism, Colonialism, and the Wild Man*, Michael Taussig argues that shamanic healing rituals are invented in negative dialectic relation to the form which was conjured through colonialism: terror. Historic terror and historic healing therefore share an uncanny relation, he argues, and the shaman's postcolonial animism emerges as a symbolic performance of this uncanniness. For Taussig, the shaman creates forms of healing by recrafting forms received from history (for example, symbols of capitalism and Christianity are often used within rituals he examines), and the shaman's magic is therefore the magic of mimesis, the sorcery of history itself. In *Mimesis and Alterity*, Taussig extends this argument, highlighting the sensuous, embodied element of shamanic practice, which functions like an indigenous performance of Benjamin's dialectician, who, in recognition of the power of the mimetic faculty, thinks with the "winds of world history in his sails" (qtd. in Taussig 70). This relation to history challenges both essentialism and constructivism, Taussig argues, in that the animistic dialectics of the shaman creates new reality through the *essence of constructed* reality:

I want to assert that in a terribly real sense, the practice of mimesis in our day, inseparable from imaging and thinking itself, involves the rehearsal of the practices of the body associated with primitivism. As the nature that culture uses to make second nature, mimesis cannot be outside of history, just as history cannot lie outside of the mimetic faculty. Here we take odds with the fashionable theses of construction, that nature itself is a social construction, just as we take odds with the converse, that history itself can be reduced to an essential nature. As the nature that culture uses to create second nature, mimesis chaotically

jostles for elbow room in this force field of necessary contradiction and illusion, providing the glimpse of the opportunity to dismantle that second nature and reconstruct other worlds. (70-71)

Shamanic mimesis, “the nature that culture uses to make second nature,” casts history as both poison and cure (70).

Taussig’s studies of shamanic rituals suggest there is more to Freud’s association of children with so-called primitives than Freud’s racism. Like the shaman, Freud’s grandson *plays* with history. In Jarrett-Macauley’s novel, like Freud’s grandson, Bemba G plays with history. In fact, his healing ritual is exactly that: playing with history through a historic play. Like Taussig’s shamans, Bemba G’s “indigenous” healing ritual is a translation/interpretation of a European text. Bemba G carries a book “with the solemnity of the Bible,” which he claims he will “feed” to the children (136). The book holds two plays: *Julius Caesar* by William Shakespeare and *Juliohs Siza* by Thomas Decker. Decker is both a character in the novel (Moses’ connection to his government job) and a historical Krio scholar who published *Juliohs Siza*, a Krio translation of *Julius Caesar*, in the late sixties. Teaching the children this play is Bemba G’s shamanic rite, his healing technique. Considering the importance of history to the shamans of Taussig’s studies, this technique is no surprise.

Summarizing the historical importance of Decker’s Shakespeare translation, Tcho Mbaimba Caulker writes,

The very act of translating the English of Shakespeare’s *Julius Caesar* into the Krio adaptation of *Juliohs Siza* was both (1) an act of linguistic and political independence done at a pivotal time in history when formerly colonized Africans

were attempting to assert their own respective national sovereignties apart from England, and (2) an attempt to deliver an important political message to the new nation on the subject of governance through the example and representation of a once noble servant of the Roman people turned hubristic emperor. (209)

This second point is continuously emphasized in Decker's translation, which overtly politicizes the play, casting the narrative as "didactic," as Caulker writes, and "the message to its national audience is one that sings the praises of democracy, while offering a stern warning to the nation that strays from the path of democracy" (212-13). For example, the soothsayer, rather than warning Caesar to "beware the Ides of March" (Shakespeare 19), exclaims, "Teyk tem Mach midul-mohnt," which, as Caulker explains, is "literally a call to Siza to halt his progress on the path to tyranny," "Teyk tem" being "similar to the call of concern that a parental figure would offer to warn a young child headed for a dangerous fall that could cause potential injury" (216).

In sum, then, Decker's translation is at once an act of sovereignty and a warning against acts of sovereignty. It is no coincidence that Decker was translating Shakespeare's play about a hubristic emperor *en route* to reshaping Roman democracy into a one-man state and hubristic revolutionaries who, in their attempts to defend democracy, reproduce tyranny, during a time when the newly postcolonial Sierra Leone was heading towards a one-party state (Caulker 219). The shared irony of Shakespeare's and Decker's plays is that by killing Caesar/Siza, imperialism is established. In translating Shakespeare, Decker himself took on the role of the soothsayer, and, like Shakespeare's soothsayer, his warning was ignored. Four years after the publication of *Juliohs Siza*, Sierra Leone became a one-party state (Caulker 222). Furthermore, since

the historic Julius Caesar led the first invasion of Britain during the Gallic Wars, he can be interpreted as a pre-colonial, archetypal colonizer, colonizing the land that would later colonize Sierra Leone. Decker's soothsayer act of translation thus warns a new nation against the perils of entering a long history of tyrannical sovereignty, and Bemba G takes up Decker's call. Upon meeting him, Julia refers to Bemba G as a soothsayer, suggesting that he embodies the very role he is teaching (86). Though the play is a healing ritual for the children, it is also for Julia herself, whose name is the feminine form of *Julius*.⁴⁴ Bemba G's healing ritual is therefore an act of playing with history through a historic play directed at subjects implicated in this history.

Some may claim that a Shakespearean rite is too Eurocentric to be a properly postcolonial response to trauma—repeating instead the epistemic violence of canonical trauma theory.⁴⁵ Such a critique misses the fact that postcolonial animisms emerge as responses to colonial modernity. Like Taussig's studies, the performers of *Julios Siza* produce a new reality out of the "Eurocentric" symbols that the history of colonialism has handed them. In a rite structured similarly to the rituals Taussig describes, Bemba G leads the former child soldiers through Shakespeare's/Decker's script.⁴⁶ Bemba G teaches the children their roles in the play, leading them through their lines and bodily motions. Julia describes the children "learning to combine words with actions—standing tall with arms raised, 'Friends, Romans, countrymen, lend me your ears,' and bending down palms open and outstretched, 'I come to bury Caesar, not to praise him'" (145).

⁴⁴ It is worth recalling that Shakespeare begins *Julius Caesar* with a scene in which, because the "signs" of social roles are obscured, nobody is "home" (1.1.1-5). The first line of the play therefore speaks directly to the character constellation of *Moses, Citizen & Me*, as does the play's obsession with time.

⁴⁵ Given the role of Shakespeare in Freudian psychoanalysis, this example is pertinent.

⁴⁶ Thus, while Craps argues that trauma theory needs diverse content analysis, Bemba G demonstrates instead a postcolonial rereading of inherited forms.

Specific attention is drawn to the way the children learn proper bodily movement:

“Bemba G started to move Hinga’s arms and bend his legs, changing the boy’s shape. In front he placed one arm, next adjusted a leg, then the other arm up in the air. Again another position, then movement. We all watched for several minutes as this operation went on” (150). Likewise, Bemba G teaches the children choreographed “stage fighting” to oppose their “bush fighting” (151). The children learn a script that is followed in both language and bodily movement, and soon the children grow into their performative roles as if they are obtaining new subjectivities. Peter, for instance, the boy who plays Caesar, begins to distrust the other boys (157). In his performance of history, he becomes possessed, or, as another child puts it, “Caesar has gone to his head” (174).

Moreover, the ritual takes place in the Gola Forest, already the space of another ritual and stage of another drama. As Paul Richards (whom Jarrett-Macauley cites in her acknowledgments) explains, during the war, the RUF’s *sowo*, “sacred groves for the initiated,” provided a stage in the Gola Forest on which the RUF enacted a “drama of state recession” (81, 32). Here, inspired by the Poro and Sande secret societies of West Africa, the RUF initiated children denied political agency into sacred agency as warriors. Since this forest was once a space of refuge for Africans fleeing the slave trade, the RUF’s rituals enter a mimetic relation with colonial history; by miming the RUF, so does Bemba G’s play. These sacred groves in which the children were initiated as soldiers become the sacred groves in which the children are initiated, through more ritualized performance, out of their roles as soldiers. Moreover, since this performance is figured as spirit possession—much like Citizen’s posttraumatic flashbacks and Agnes’

entrapment between worlds—Jarrett-Macauley’s animist realism *and* Forna’s realism cast both trauma and recovery as forms of being-possessed. Julia explains,

Call it an ending of amnesia, if you like, or some collective unconscious that I did not know existed. But the child soldiers got it, meeting themselves in the play. They understood their place in the scheme of things. I suddenly felt that we could not be alone in this: Bemba G and thirty-five child soldiers and me. The ancestors must be looking on—the generations of men, women and children who had led us to this place, this moment. I shouted out: ‘We are not alone, there are other people here watching us, listening—can’t you feel them?’ The child soldiers had stopped, frozen in their positions. A long time had passed since they first completed that scene but if I closed my eyes, I would find them in the same places, timeless human sculptures against the purplish night sky. (159)

According to Julia, performing *Juliohs Siza* becomes a type of timeless ritual, freezing the children like sculptures perfectly positioned in relation to their ancestors and acutely aware of “their place in the scheme of things” (159). In their possessed state, the children are free of their possession by war, and the ancestral trauma they embody is recrafted into ancestral life.

Bemba G’s healing ritual is the antithesis of Uncle Moses’ reproduction of colonial history (and historiography) through his photography collection—and, moreover, the RUF. It is no coincidence that Foday Sankoh, leader of the RUF, was, like Uncle Moses, a photographer. The RUF were known to photograph their atrocities, capturing images of the maimed bodies of their victims within their revolutionary frame of reference (Rosen, *Armies of the Young* 61; Junger). Like Moses, the RUF’s acts of

representation are caught up in a complex entanglement of repetitions reminiscent of the eighteenth-century settlers of the Province of Freedom: the return to an African origin, the return *home*, is produced with bloody violence that uncannily mirrors the violence of colonial history. Writing against the “new barbarism” thesis in which the Sierra Leone Civil War embodies Africa as the chaotic beast Achille Mbembe references in his introduction to *On the Postcolony*, Richards argues that behind the appearance of barbarism, the revolutionary warfare of the RUF is a discursive performance of a complex cultural theory:

The problem of understanding the basic political aims of the RUF is sometimes exaggerated. The leaders have made few *published* statements of their aims, but in large measure the political aims of the movement are manifest in its actions. RUF threats and acts of violence are dramatized messages to the people about its view of the world, as well as military tactical ploys. Burning of houses and cutting off of villagers’ hands and fingers inscribe, on the landscape and bodies of village people, a set of political messages rather more firmly than if they had been spoken over the radio. (6)

In their dramatized messages, Richards suggests, the rebels perform violence as responses to colonial history. For instance, in contrast to the rigid, uniformed marching of the military of the postcolonial nation state, so desperately attempting to reflect the properness of colonial powers, “[t]he cross-dressing, horror-comic-helmeted, young teenage rebel fighter was . . . brilliantly recapitulating an inventive pre-colonial tradition, where dress served to disguise and protect, rather than express, the true character of the warrior” (56). But this repetition of indigenous practices produced the

very atrocities that constitute the traumatic setting of *Moses, Citizen & Me*. Unlike Uncle Moses' obsessive acts of mimetic reproduction and Foday Sankoh's reproduction of colonial violence through his much-photographed guerilla warfare, Bemba G's play mimetically (re)produces new subjectivities.

For Bemba G, however, this invented animist ritual requires more performers: a global audience. The children thus perform *Juliohs Siza*—within Julia's dream—in front of an international audience. Though, at first, the thought of the children performing before an international community makes Julia nervous, she claims, “We needed this international community with us and there was no going back” (202). Bemba G introduces *Juliohs Siza* to the audience as a “true story” about “people in this same forest who have been plotting to bring down our rulers” (203). The “true story” of the play is the children's performance itself, and Bemba G speaks of a plot to bring down “our ruler” to an international audience, implying that the play's “truth” extends beyond the borders of Sierra Leone. As Julia observes the Western spectators, she describes a “tingly recognition that what was passing in this compound was the horror of their own civil war” (205). In the eyes of the audience, the Western world is implicated in the responsibility, guilt, and ownership of the Sierra Leonean Civil War. The audience members—international “readers” or “spectators” of African trauma—therefore perform, in response to the children's performance, Julia's inverted *Bildungsroman*: an audience who thought themselves sovereignly bordered from the traumas of West Africa awaken to their implicated positions. Moved by what they see onstage, the audience joins the child soldiers chanting “Peace, Freedom, Liberty! Peace, Freedom, Liberty!” (205).

This imagined community—or alternative state, to use Forna’s rather than Anderson’s term—becomes the hope of the novel, and the global chanting of “Peace, Freedom, Liberty!” its climax (205). “Whatever happens,” Julia, shocked by the audience, tells herself, “this performance will not last forever” (209). Though audience members from Africa, Europe, and North America join the stage, performatively constructing some sort of global community of ritualized possession, Julia recognizes this alternate universe—she claims that world becomes “ruled according to reverse laws, with reverse atoms coming from above” (209)—as provisional. In this provisional performance through which the foundations of liberal democracy (peace, freedom, and liberty) are spread from the Western world into Sierra Leone, does Macauley fall into the neoliberal dream of global interpellation? Can a more blatant picture of humanitarian ideology be imagined?⁴⁷

This scene is similar to the end of the film *Blood Diamond* (released a year after the novel) in which Solomon Vandy, a Mende fisherman, recently reunited with his son, a former child soldier of the RUF, stands before an international audience in Kimberly, South Africa. This scene, which looks like any U.N. meeting, represents a historic meeting in 2000 that led to the Kimberly Process, a scheme inaugurated to stop the international trading of conflict diamonds. By addressing a Western audience as the source of Sierra Leone’s problems—the film continually points out that American women desire the diamonds fueling African warfare—and by ending on this scene of globalized liberal democracy, the ambivalent message of *Blood Diamond* is that Western intervention in Africa is both poison and cure. Unlike *Blood Diamond*,

⁴⁷ I am reminded of Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri’s claim that “humanitarian NGOs are in effect (even if this runs counter to the intentions of the participants) some of the most powerful pacific weapons of the new world order—the charitable campaigns and the mendicant orders of Empire” (36).

however, *Moses, Citizen & Me* signals its own failure. After all, “Peace, Freedom, Liberty!” is what the conspirators, following Brutus, chant after murdering Caesar, hands freshly bathed in his blood, effectively laying the foundations of imperialism (Shakespeare 3.1.110). Bemba G’s international performance therefore testifies against its own agenda. Like *Julius Caesar*, the defenders of democracy are guilty of that which they seek to destroy. As a scene of auto-critique, the novel shifts the locus of the “problem” of postcolonial trauma theory from the texts being interpreted to the interpreters themselves.

Since Julia’s position as “somebody distant” who must intervene in a posttraumatic situation structurally places her, like Forna’s Adrian, in a similar situation as the contemporary trauma theorist (though unlike Adrian, Julia has Sierra Leonean “roots” to which she connects through her hairdressing ritual), her awakening, paired with the international audiences’ awakenings, to the fact of *being implicated*, is not only the plot of trauma theory, but an indictment. Like Julia and her dream audience, Jarrett-Macauley suggests, trauma theory itself must become traumatized, displaced from its position as sovereign interpreter of global violence, awakened to its status as a discursive formation, which may be guilty of that which it seeks to alleviate. Here Jarrett-Macauley comes close to the critique of trauma theory emblemized by Craps. Since the idea of trauma, which emerged under the rise of modern biopolitics, as Roger Luckhurst argues, is currently policed by contemporary power structures (e.g., the university), Pieter Vermeulen argues that trauma theory systemically “functions as a technology that sustains and optimizes” biopolitical power relations, which means that trauma theory must be not only be a critical framework, but an object of critique (143).

In a similar vein, Rothberg claims that in response to the violence of global capital we must refocus trauma theory on the “implicated subject—neither simply perpetrator nor victim, though potentially either or both at other moments,” and he identifies cultural critics as “implicated subjects, beneficiaries of a system that generates dispersed and uneven experiences of trauma and wellbeing simultaneously” (“Beyond” xv). But like Forna, Jarrett-Macauley does not ultimately endorse Craps’ call for theorizing trauma outside of Eurocentric terms. Through Bemba G, Jarrett-Macauley attempts to conceptualize wounding and survival animistically, but rather than this animism being a purely “indigenous” framework, it is mined from a “European” text—and this type of reading is precisely what the critique of psychoanalytic, deconstructive trauma theory summarized in the introduction to this thesis misses.

An Unfinished Conclusion

Soon after the international performance of an alternative state within Julia’s dream, the novel ends with Julia daydreaming in Freetown. “Here was the gift of a daydream that could shape our lives,” she claims, “Follow it and there would be a home for Moses, Citizen and me, and the night dreams could be surrendered. Follow it and see how the veil thins between one world and another, one person and another” (225). In a move that is equally psychoanalytic as it is shamanic, through *dreams*, Julia explains, she has found the path toward the home that her and her family have been searching for, a home where borders between worlds and people dissolve, a home of mutually animated subjectivities, a home beyond sovereignly bordered consciousness and thus with no need of Freud’s imagined vesicle-barriers: the “end” of trauma theory.

Julia then, in the midst of this daydream, confesses a dream from the night before—a retelling of a dream within a dream—in which she takes Citizen to a swim match in England, followed by dinner and apple pie: a noteworthy ending considering the presence of apples throughout the novel.

During one of the novel's many narrations of the past, for example, Julia and Moses discuss the memory of an apple. One morning, while Moses was washing dishes, Adele called his name from outside, startling him and causing him to cut his hand on some glass. Julia explains,

Outside, Adele was sitting in the yard holding a pink apple in the palm of her hand. It had an odd shape, with three protruding heads like a hydra. He looked and smiled. It was strange. Then he remembered his hand and he remembered his anger: 'What, you call me out here to look at fruit? Don't be so silly!' 'Don't be so cross,' she answered back and put the hydra apple in the pocket of her full apron to show to her grandson. When he saw the apple he would laugh. She would give it to him. (196)

Moses then stops, unable to finish his story. Although this narration of the past begins as Julia's narration of Moses' past, written with the pronoun *he* rather than *I*, it ends as Moses' narration of his own past; the story stops because "Uncle Moses stopped, unable to go on" (196). The narrator is therefore simultaneously Julia and Moses—*he* and *I*. Since Julia and Moses are co-narrators of this memory, the apple is framed by intergenerational, transnational narration—(a blending of Marianne Hirsch's postmemory and Rothberg's multidirectional memory). Furthermore, the apple has "three protruding heads like a hydra," a symbol of the family: Moses, Citizen, and Julia

(196). Thus, not only the narration of the memory, but the framing of the family within this memory, reveals that the post-traumatic conditions plotted throughout the novel lead to a familial experience of self-regeneration.

Biologically, the hydra embodies the hope of Macauley's novel. With the capacity for self-regeneration, if cut in two, the hydra can reconstitute itself as an entirely new animal. Its mythic namesake also bears regenerative abilities. In "The Acquisition and Control of Fire," Freud argues that the Lernaean Hydra—the many-headed sea monster and guardian of the Underworld, whose heads, if chopped off, perpetually reconstitute themselves—represents the phallus that, in facing the castration complex, exhibits a persistence of libidinal drives. To state this claim another way, trauma is generative of new life. Consequently, at the end of the novel, when the daydream of apple pie leads Julia into a poem about apples, the regenerative death symbolized by the hydra, which is the inverse of Moses' wish to return to a maternal state of non-existence, becomes mapped onto the plot of the novel itself:

Apples green and red and unashamed, like everything in primary school.

Apple trees in the garden.

Apple blossom - pink and fulsome - springing. (226)

The red apple of the first line is associated with childhood, that which was traumatically taken from Citizen. It is described as "unashamed," like the prelapsarian Adam and Eve (Gen 2.25) and thus the Edenic, multicultural Freetown in the novel's prologue. The trees in the garden of the second line accordingly represent the Fall from this paradise, the fruit of Civil War that severed this family and their nation from their relations. The pink apple of the third line is, however, the memory of the hydra apple, which was pink,

“springing” into postlapsarian life (196). Like Julia, who becomes both biblical prophet and spirit medium, this apple, which represents the traumatized family, cloaks this family, through this poetry, in both biblical and pagan languages of regeneration. Moses, Citizen and Julia together “spring” into new, post-traumatic life together, and Jarrett-Macauley envisions this regeneration through an overlapping of dispersed—perhaps incongruent—epistemic frameworks of wounding and survival.

Thus, much like Forna’s realist narration, Jarrett-Macauley’s animist realist narration of collective trauma and survival ultimately fits within Rothberg’s framework of multidirectionality. Consequently, I would suggest, the limit Forna’s realism is also the limit of Jarrett-Macauley’s animist realism. Although she attempts to venture beyond Forna’s realism, ritually crafting Agnes’ alternative state, the limit of Jarrett-Macauley’s novel is revealed in the prose-poem with which it concludes:

Cox’s Orange Pippins that sound like an up-and-coming couple in a Dickens novel.

Apples - Sierra Leone apples - pink plentiful soft fruits - no biting required -
surrender to the light juices trickling down your throat.

Surrender

Surrender[.] (226)

The Dickens reference associates the apples of the first line with the *Bildungsroman* plot, but, when eating the pink, Sierra Leonean apples of the second line, one asserts no agency—not biting, just surrendering. The movement from the first to the second line thus represents Julia’s inverted *Bildungsroman* from sovereignly bordered to awakened, implicated subjectivity. This family’s hydraic self-regeneration is achieved, Jarrett-

Macauley thus suggests, when Julia trades her current form of subjective life for another, transsubjective form—a trade she achieves within her dreams. The poem’s lack of an end mark, and thus the novel’s lack of an end mark, implies that Julia’s act of surrender is, outside of her dream life, unfinished. In the end, like Agnes, Julia dreams of an alternative state.

As an animist realist novel, *Moses, Citizen & Me* “re-enchants” the postcolonial world it represents, I have suggested, through its configurations of shamanism, prophecy, and ritual. In doing so, Jarrett-Macauley attempts to transform the alternative state experienced by Forna’s Agnes into a transsubjective community—a transformation which lies beyond the grasp of Forna’s realism. But the novel’s representation of an invented ritual through which to heal Sierra Leone is ultimately a representation, one the narrator explicitly deems “provisional,” not a performance of ritual at the base level of the text itself. In other words, the novel does not perform the ritual it represents, and in this sense animist realism is, formally, *realism*. Thus, the novel—unlike the texts I will examine in the following chapters—is addressed *solely to the living*. Since the form of its narration of ritual is not itself ritualized, *Moses, Citizen & Me* cannot engage with the ancestral traumas of the shattered cosmologies it represents. In another context, Durrant has argued that such an entrapment within representational aesthetics hinders Garuba’s theory of animism. As he puts it in “Life after Necropolitics,” “There is something problematic about turning animism into an epithet that qualifies a Western, ultimately Platonic, conception of what art does. If literature is really to be part of a movement to reenchant the world, it surely has to do more than represent it.” Unlike Garuba, Jarrett-Macauley, I would suggest, recognizes this limit, which is why the unfinished poem

concluding the novel suggests that readers must finish what the narrative has started. In the next two chapters, I will read two authors who go beyond the representational aesthetics of animist realism through which Jarrett-Macauley “re-enchants” and “awakens” her readers by depicting an invented ritual. Yvonne Vera’s *The Stone Virgins* and Wole Soyinka’s *Death and the King’s Horseman*, I will suggest, are themselves rituals, examples of what I term animist poetics—which are addressed not only to the living, but to the dead and even the unborn.

Chapter 2

Re-enchanting the Archive: Yvonne Vera's *The Stone Virgins*

If we dig up history, then we wreck the
nation.

Robert Mugabe (qtd. in Alexander, et.al.
258)

History has never been fixed.

Yvonne Vera ("Shaping the Truth" 79).

It is estimated that the *Gukurahundi* massacres left somewhere between 10,000 and 30,000 people dead, but considering the fact that victims were often burned, buried in mass graves, or dropped in abandoned mine shafts, a numeric count remains impossible (Alexander, et. al.; Catholic Commission; Ranger, *Voices*). To provide some context to this claim, in 1980, under Robert Mugabe's leadership the Zimbabwe African National Union (ZANU) won Zimbabwe's first democratic election. Mugabe sensed an immanent threat of resistance, however, especially from Zimbabwe People's Revolutionary Army (ZIPRA), the armed wing of Zimbabwe African People's Union (ZAPRA), led by Joshua Nkomo. This threat motivated Mugabe to sign an agreement (that same year) with North Korean President, Kim Il-Sung, to train a special brigade for ZANU's armed wing, Zimbabwe National Army (ZANLA). Organized groups of so-called "dissidents," former ZIPRA guerilla warriors disillusioned to Mugabe's post-

independence Zimbabwe, camped throughout Matabeleland and parts of the Midlands—a region boasting a largely Ndebele speaking population. Since Nkomo was Ndebele, the region marked itself as an area of potential resistance, posing a threat to Mugabe’s dream of a single-party state. In 1982 Mugabe sent the Fifth Brigade to combat the “dissidents” in Matabeleland and parts of the Midlands, and throughout this unofficial civil war the rural population was subjected to genocide. For years, the Fifth Brigade—which bypassed military command structures, answering directly to Mugabe—enforced curfew and surveillance and perpetrated mass tortures and killings throughout Matabeleland; concurrently, “dissidents,” while combatting the Fifth Brigade, regularly raped and killed civilians. This mostly state sanctioned, but partially “dissident” inflicted genocide formally ended in 1987 with the Unity Accord signed by Mugabe and Nkomo, which dissolved Nkomo’s ZAPRA into Mugabe’s ZANU (renamed ZANU-PF).⁴⁸

Mugabe’s government actively suppresses cultural memory of the *Gukurahundi* through what Terrence Ranger terms the widespread movement of “patriotic history.”⁴⁹ Functioning as an ideological state apparatus in Zimbabwean media, education, and the public sphere at large, patriotic history is “different from and more narrow than the old nationalist historiography,” Ranger writes, “which celebrated aspiration and modernization as well as resistance. It resents the ‘disloyal’ questions raised by historians of nationalism. It regards as irrelevant any history which is not political. And

⁴⁸ For the authoritative report on the genocide, see the Catholic Commission for Justice and Peace in Zimbabwe’s *Breaking the Silence*. For the genocide’s historical context, see Terrence Ranger’s vast work, particularly *Voices from the Rocks* and his co-authored (alongside Jocelyn Alexander and JoAnn McGregor) *Violence & Memory*.

⁴⁹ Ranger, on whose work I base much of my knowledge of the historical sources of *The Stone Virgins*, greatly shaped Vera’s approach to Zimbabwean history, and *vice versa*, so much so that Vera’s novel *Butterfly Burning* is dedicated to him.

it is explicitly antagonistic to academic historiography” (“Nationalist” 220). Mugabe’s Zimbabwe, in other words, strategically curates cultural memory to forget the massacres he sanctioned. Consequently, when Yvonne Vera depicts the *Gukurahundi* in her final novel, *The Stone Virgins* (2002), thereby narrating a genocide placed outside of national memory, she responds to a question as political as it is historiographic: how does one write of that which cannot be archived?

To claim Mugabe’s government actively suppresses cultural memory of the *Gukurahundi* in the present is true, but also risks missing a spiritual perversion fundamental to this genocide. As Ranger explains in his lecture “From Spirit to Body: Approaches to Violence and Memory in Zimbabwe,” according to traditional burial rites throughout Matabeleland, the dead must be properly buried in order to become ancestral spirits. For the largely Ndebele population who fell victim to the *Gukurahundi*, then, what marks the massacres as a genocide is not only physical death, but the radical perversion of death in which burial rites are profanely passed over and mourning prohibited. Through such prohibitions, victims of the *Gukurahundi* are denied access into history—not only repressed from cultural memory in the present, but also *erased* from the future field of ancestral agency. In this framework, the *Gukurahundi*, by blocking its victims’ access into the afterlife, erases its own cosmological traces at the very moment of its happening. When the Catholic Commission for Justice and Peace in Zimbabwe released their report on the genocide, Mugabe publicly responded with the epigraph beginning this chapter, which demonstrates a merging of this spiritual perversion with patriotic history. His response not only suppresses cultural memory of

the *Gukurahundi*, but grants the victims' absence from history a constitutional status: their erasure, he declares, sustains the nation.

In *Archive Fever: A Freudian Impression*, Derrida explores this historiographic structure of simultaneous erasure and emergence, which, he claims, is fundamental to the "great holocaust tragedies of our modern history" (57). When confronted with the responsibility of writing after an event which, like the *Gukurahundi*, "leaves no monument" or "bequeaths no document of its own," Derrida argues, we face the difficult, seemingly impossible task of conceptualizing an "archive without foundation" (22). Put another way, if the "instant of archivization" happens, paradoxically, during the "originary and structural breakdown of the said memory" (14), then the primal moment of the archive, its genesis, is, non-intuitively, "the very ash of the archive" (62). By the end of *Archive Fever*, however, we are left with an unanswered question: how does one write of this ash, and, more fundamentally, as Cathy Caruth asks in *Literature in the Ashes of History*, "What does it mean for history to be a history of ashes?" (76). In other words, how does one narrate a history that is not repressed and in need of recovery—as in classical psychoanalysis—but, more obtusely, erased, burnt to ash, at its very emergence?

A similar question, I wish to suggest, influences Vera's writing. As director of the National Gallery of Zimbabwe, Vera was no stranger to the problems surrounding the construction of a national archive. Nevertheless, *The Stone Virgins* narrates the *Gukurahundi* while explicitly bypassing important names, specific dates, and overall historical precision (Mugabe and the *Gukurahundi* massacres, for instance, are never mentioned by name). Such omissions may warrant the objection that Vera is complicit

in the official forgetting of the *Gukurahundi*, furthering its undocumentable status by placing its narration outside the scale of historical writing. Maurice Vambe, for example, claims Vera's writing follows a dehistoricizing aestheticism which, through its mythologizing impulse (what Kizito Muchemwa likewise charges as Vera's essentialism), unintentionally ignites tribalism, ethnic division and thus fails to venture beyond the nationalism she critiques. On the contrary, I wish to suggest that this historiographic problem demonstrates Vera's impulse to write history beyond the apparatus of the archive—an apparatus too often assumed as natural within cultural memory studies.

More specifically, in this chapter, using the questions raised by Derrida's *Archive Fever* above as a point of departure, I will read *The Stone Virgins* as a latent burial rite for the victims of the *Gukurahundi*, Vera's attempt to write an *ancestral* history beyond the parameters of *archival* history. Through the work of museological structuring, archival history documents the death of the past; through the work of sacred ritual, ancestral history creates the possibility of a future by weaving a living relation between the living and the dead. Thus, in contrast to an act of bearing witness through documenting memories of the *Gukurahundi*, I suggest that *The Stone Virgins* is Vera's attempt to, in response to the *Gukurahundi*, recreate a desecrated ancestral union through a literary ritual. As she writes in her preface to *Opening Spaces: Contemporary African Women's Writing*, the female writer in Africa must learn to “invent new gods and banish ineffectual ones” (1). In doing so, the writer becomes a “witness” in a “seemingly impossible birth” (5). For Vera, the African female writer such as herself bears witness not to memories of past traumas, but to the promise of new life to come

(5). In *The Stone Virgins*, I will argue, Vera bears witness to new life—or, put differently, writes prophetically—by narrating *ritualized dispossessions of agency*, which *re-animate from the ashes of the past the possibility of a future*.

The Caves of Gulati

Vera inscribes the ancestral history she creates onto the very landscape of the genocide. In the scene revealing the title's "Stone Virgins," for instance, Sibaso, an idealistic student turned guerilla warrior (a "dissident" targeted by Mugabe's 5th brigade) beholds an ancient cave painting hidden in the Matapos Hills in Matabeleland. Although the painting is being "eaten by time," leaving some of the ink "blotted out" (104), Sibaso notices a group of "[d]isembodied beings" with "legs that branch from their bodies like roots" (103). These beings form a circle like "wavering strokes of blood-lit tendrils on the rock" (104). According to Sibaso, these ancient beings with arboreal form vanishing into the cavern roof under the passing of time possess some kind of power. Noticing the "empty," "fragile" thighs of the "thin" women, Sibaso interprets, "They are virgins who walk into their own graves before the burial of a king" (103). Standing in a circle near their own burial site, awaiting the ritual of their own death, these women are depicted at the moment just before they "die untouched" (103). A rare moment: an embrace of finitude, an embrace of death. Sibaso wonders if the ceremony depicted in the painting is a suicide or sacrifice, "or both?" (103). The answer, he suggests, is the former: "Suicide, a willing, but surely a private matter? Sacrifice means the loss of life, of lives, so that one life may be saved. The life of rulers is served, not saved. This, suicide" (103-04). In the ritual before the king's burial, the virgins do

not save another out of a self-sacrificial act of love, but rather die in the service of a sovereign. Thus, this sacrificial rite, Sibaso concludes, is in actuality a politically enforced collective suicide.

Sibaso's distinction casts the search for an act of true sacrifice as an important theme in the novel. As I will later explain, Sibaso is the perpetrator of the novel's central trauma, the murder of Thenjiwe and rape of Nonceba—whom he views, during his perpetration, as sacrificial virgins. Cephas, I will later demonstrate, becomes the novel's protagonist by learning a form of loving, self-sacrifice, which counterpoints Sibaso's murder and rape. While Sibaso repeats the patriarchal sacrifice, which is in actuality enforced suicide, depicted in on the cavern walls, Cephas learns to sacrifice his patriarchal role as he forms relationships with Thenjiwe and Nonceba. But in this scene Sibaso also finds hope in the paintings. Despite having death enforced upon them, by becoming works of art—such San paintings are some of the oldest art in human history, revealing a glimpse of the origin of the aesthetic—the virgins know they will live on in some form of “ecstasy” (103). Catching a glimpse of this ecstasy, Sibaso speculates, “Perhaps they have been saved from life's embrace. Not dead” (104). Indeed, the painted women assert a certain vitality. Sibaso observes the painting come to life as the “women float, moving away from the stone” (103). Through the blotted, fading ink that gives form to their last moment in this life, the virgins continue to assert their agential presence in the afterlife, advancing out of the rock to reveal, in Birago Diop's words, “the fate of the dead who are not dead” (427).

Another group of women is depicted on the cavern roof. Tall, “long-breasted women” stand alongside antelopes (103). They “bend like tightened bows beneath a

stampede of buffalo” while other women “spread their legs outward to the sun” (103). They participate in another ritual through which huntresses unite themselves with the sun and the animal kingdom. According to Sibaso’s interpretation, the buffalo huntresses are on a greater hunt:

Even now, as I speak, they are there hunting something else beyond the buffalo, something eternal. What is it that they hunt? They move past the lonely herds. Are their arrows raised against time, these keepers of time? Beyond the rock, there is nothing but light. The women raise their arms against the light. Perhaps their arms welcome the light falling from the curve of the rock, a light indelible; each stroke carries a thousand years of disbelief. (103)

The huntresses both struggle against and embrace time. As “keepers of time,” they raise their arrows against time. Their arms also fight against and welcome the light, which carries within every stroke the passing of a millennium, thereby causing the inked huntresses to fade, vanishing with time into the stone. This embracing struggle with the passing of time, which both bestows and steals agency, is also performed by the virgins, whom Sibaso begins to touch, channeling their temporal experience. “I place my hand over the waist of the tall woman, on an inch of bone, yet forty thousand years gather in my memory like a wild wind” (104). And again, “I open my palm against the belly of the woman on the rock, the one with outstretched arms. The space between her knees, shafts of light” (104). Like the huntresses, time—millenniums in the first touch, the light that fades ink, producing a vanishing effect that stretches through time in the second touch—is, for the virgins, a movement against which to struggle (through death) and with which to embrace (through entering the “ecstasy” of the afterlife).

The hills in which Sibaso discovers these painted rituals provide the setting for a common Shona narrative on the genesis of water, which, I would suggest, influences Vera's writing of this scene. As Herbert Aschwanden tells it, according to the Karanga, God long ago sent a messenger, Mudzanapabwe, to Matabeleland armed with only a bow, some arrows, and a red needle. When Mudzanapabwe entered the then arid country devoid of life, he remembered God's enigmatic promise that "there is life in the big rocks" (11). Mudzanapabwe thus shot an arrow into the sky, hitting one of the towering rocks above him. The rocks turned black and the heavens began to violently shake. He then shot another arrow, but to his surprise, God's red needle had sewn the rocks to the land, securing them from the shaking heavens. The heavens then burst with rain, causing a flood. Confused, Mudzanapabwe shot another arrow into the sky, further separating earth and the heavens, which stopped the rain. The stitch marks left by God's red needle, tethering the rocks to the earth, became rivers, nourishing the once dry, lifeless region. In this Karanga myth, water and consequently vegetation, growth (indeed, life itself, human or otherwise), began in these hills. Life began with a rupture, both ecological and theological, a pre-human trauma out of which humanity emerged. Depicted on the walls of the very caverns which birthed humanity, the buffalo huntresses Sibaso discovers, by pointing their arrows with and against time, respond to Mudzanapabwe's primal act. With his arrow he severed the heavens and earth, laying the foundation for the passing of seasons and therefore time while simultaneously creating water and therefore life. By raising their arrows, the huntresses both struggle against and embrace this passing of time they experience as a necessary component of the life bestowed on them by Mudzanapabwe.

We should also note that the caverns of the Matapos Hills, such as the one in which Sibaso discovers the paintings, are shrines, home to the cult of the High God, Mwali. They are considered to be both source of all life, as the Mudzanapabwe myth suggests, and the current mouthpiece of God. According to Ranger's vast fieldwork, interviews, and archival research in *Voices from the Rocks* it is believed that long ago lions used to guard Mwali's oracular caves, which to this day hide perennial ecosystems containing trees, rocks, and pools. Now, however, priests are inducted as cavern guardians and mediators through austere rituals. Sitwanyana Ncube, several times chief priest, tells Ranger that his induction ritual included living in a cave harmoniously with a lion, leopard, baboon, and snake, whom he talked to, for three months (23). The seed test, reportedly still practiced, determines who will become shrine guardian. Thenjiwe Lesabe explains to Ranger this esoteric experience:

A number of those who claim to be possessed are put together in a house. Certain words are pronounced . . . and they are each given rapoko seed to hold in their hands. They must not open their hands. There are men who are put to guard, actually guarding like a soldier guards the king, on twenty-four hours guard, that these people don't open their hands. [. . .] In the morning there are certain things that happen. This man is heard screaming, whatnot, and when they open his hand they find the rapoko is germinated. This is the person who takes responsibility for the shrine. (23)

As both rituals demonstrate, priests enter a mediatory state between all of Mwali's subjects, whether human, animal, or plant.

As mediators, priests learn to dwell between the domain of the human and the non-human. Possessed by cult spirits, they sweep the cavern shrines with their hands and use stone tools to cut the grass, rejecting the technology of the modern, human domain, yet, since they continue to use tools, not fully rejecting the category of the human (23). This mediatory role produces a sometimes frightening power within the priest. As another one of Ranger's interviewees explains, priests adorn themselves in "leopard skins and stay in the hills with the leopard"; furthermore, the interviewee claims, a priest "should not cut his hair. When you look at him you'd think he was a madman. He should be able to patrol the Matopos and leopards wouldn't touch him. Even the baboons he could control" (23). As Ranger argues, the priests' transgression of the frontier of the human—what the interviewee above describes as the power of the leopard skinned "madman"—allows him or her to "guarantee the prosperity of agriculture" by delivering commands from Mwali, who is fundamentally an ecological God (23).

In such an arid climate, to be an ecological God is to be the source of water, of rain (hence the Mudzanapabwe myth). Thus, before surrounding communities begin planting, they call on both their *isitunywa*, seed bearer, and their *hosana*, shrine messenger, to perform a fertility ritual. As Ranger explains, the *isitunywa* collects seeds from everyone in his or her community and takes them to the *hosana*, who transports the seeds to a shrine, such as the one where Sibaso encounters the paintings, where they are soaked in the sacred pools (24). Aschwanden writes, "When people in the Matopos pray for fertility the seed is sprinkled with water from the cave. It is water of life, they say, for *it comes from the rock, and so from God*" (217, my emphasis). As this logical move,

assuming a direct relation between the rock and God, demonstrates, Mwali, though conceptualized as the Supreme God, is also conceptualized as imminently part of the landscape. M.L. Daneel notes this ambivalent space between transcendence and immanence that Mwali occupies, producing a theology that is “almost pantheistic” in its lack of demarcation between God and creation (17). For Daneel, this ecotheology also explains Mwali’s transgendered existence. “[M]erged in the pool with its darkness and mystery of fertility,” he writes, Mwali is the feminine “*God of below*” (the most common praise name for Mwali among those approaching the sacred caves is *Dzivaguru*, “the great pool”); on the other hand, Mwali is also the masculine “Father of creation who manifests Himself in lightning or the shooting star *from above*” (16). Mwali exists as both God and subject of the land, creator and creature, male and female, thus endowing the land with divine agency and God with terrestrial agency.

Throughout *The Stone Virgins*, Vera refers to the Matopos Hills as Gulati, a local term that signifies the ecological aspects of Mwali theology. Deriving from a Karanga term that means “The Voice from the Rock,” Gulati is one and the same with Mwali’s voice. This connectedness endows the human, like the land, with divine agency and likewise brings Mwali into the realm of human culture—and the cave shrines demonstrate this connectedness. As Ranger writes, they “represent a quintessential natural *source* of culture,” the domain of the human, casting nature and culture as inseparable, “so that human society bears no meaning without the rocks and pools and caves” (i.e., the source of life and voice of God), “and they in turn are given meaning only by the residence among them of human beings” (*Voices* 4). Mwali and humanity

are thus mutually constitutive or, as the priestly translators of Mwali's voice put it, "God is language" (25-26).

As both creator and creature, Mwali prefigures the ecstatic dispossession of being through which the virgins and huntresses Sibaso discovers in Mwali's cavern shrines assert a new form of collective life. Creatures of a patriarchal order, the virgins become through death symbols of a form of posthumous vitality. Vera's San art in this way depicts a dialectic of ontological trauma and cosmological transience. The painted women are subjected to a patriarchal violence symbolic of yet extending beyond the genocidal setting of the novel. As an example of the origins of art, this violence may be said to be foundational to being as such. On the other hand, they also embrace an ecstatic beyond of this being—a new, collective form of being paradoxically crafted through their dispossession of being. As Annie Gagiano notes, moreover, San art precedes the Shona and Ndebele "ethnic division" fueling the *Gukurahundi*, which Sibaso is in this scene attempting to escape ("Reading *The Stone Virgins*" 73). Named after this painting, *The Stone Virgins* embraces its dialectic of ontological trauma and cosmological transience as a response to the *Gukurahundi*. By fusing Sibaso's aesthetic encounter with Mwali theology, Vera uses the cultural legends and rituals surrounding Gulati as a framework through which to interpret the origin of art—and a framework through which to approach her novel.

Intersubjective Movement, Transsubjective Life

The novel begins with a series of vignettes set in Bulawayo, the largest city in Matabeleland, during Rhodesian, white minority rule. Throughout these vignettes, an

unnamed force animates intersubjective movement throughout the city. As this movement becomes synchronized, uniting the land and its inhabitants, I wish to suggest, *The Stone Virgins*' intersubjective movement animates an emerging form of a transsubjective life—that is, life in which agency is gained precisely as it becomes lost within a collective subjectivity. In the first vignette, as Sarah Nuttall writes, “Vera maps out the very idea of colonial city space” (“Inside” 188). Its movement begins on Selbourne Avenue heading towards the National Museum, where signs of colonial history are ever present. “Jameson Road (of the Jameson Raid),” Wilson Street, “recalling those who died in the Wilson Patrol” (3), “Sir Willoughby’s Douslin House (he was among the first pioneers with the British South African Company) (4-5), and streets “[n]amed after English poets” (5). Bulawayo’s urban structure—“built on a grid” (10) and “revolv[ing] in sharp edges” (11)—reflects the colonial paradigm evoked in its street names, becoming a “metaphor for the colonial gaze itself” (Nuttall “Inside” 188). This metaphor is demonstrated in the way Selbourne Avenue shapes its pedestrians’ field of vision. Much like Rhodesian racial division, the “straight and unbending” (5) street, “proud of its magnificence” (3), offers a “single solid view, undisturbed” (5).

As Meg Samuelson points out, the structure of city in this opening scene fuses Edward Said’s concept of geographical violence with Michel Foucault’s theory of subjectification—a relation Vera explores through African prison writing in her PhD thesis—so that the geography of the colonized city “operates as a disciplinary technology of surveillance” (“Yvonne Vera’s Bulawayo” 23). (We should note that Bulawayo infamously banned black Rhodesians from walking on its pavements).⁵⁰ Furthermore, I would suggest, by beginning the novel with movement towards the

⁵⁰ See Samuelson’s “Yvonne Vera’s Bulawayo” (27).

National Museum surrounded by colonial names haunting Bulawayo's racially divided urban structure, and by including English poets within these names, Vera casts her act of writing the novel (in English lyrical prose) as a response to the problem of constructing—after colonization, after Rhodesian white minority rule, after the *Gukurahundi*—a Zimbabwean national archive. Can this novel, Vera asks, write a Zimbabwe and thus imagine a political community beyond the nation's stratified, archival structures of inherited violence?

To answer this question, Vera turns not to precolonial, colonial, or postcolonial history, but to the eternal movement of nature throughout the violent, human structuring of history. Alongside the historical power structures embedded in Bulawayo's architecture, the land itself asserts agency. Scattered throughout the city, cassias flower in a "resplendent yellow" that contrasts the "concrete and sandstone" cityscape (4). Likewise, the route to the National Museum is saturated in "dahlias, petunias, asters, red salvia, and mauve petrea bushes" (3). Past the plaque commemorating the deaths of Wilson Patrol grow "eucalyptus trees, redolent, their aroma euphoric," offering an alternative to the monumental history, to employ Friedrich Nietzsche's phrase, asserted by the colonial plaque (3). At the center of the city emerge "purple jacaranda blooms. Vibrant," which "bulge off the earth where they meet rock, climb over, then plunge under the ground" (3). This vibrant, environmental movement is not quite indifferent to the colonial architecture of the scene. As the non-native plants, products of colonial history, demonstrate, Bulawayo's history constitutes an agonistic relation between the life envisioned by the colonial design of the city and the life asserted by the colonized land. As Samuelson puts it, "[T]he city has now taken root, has become part of the

African reality, just like the Jacaranda trees that decorate its streets. [. . .] The city [. . .] is presented not as a European enclave in Africa, but as a space of flux, movement, infusion” (“The City” 250).

The stakes of this agonistic relation can be conceptualized, I would suggest, by following Derrida’s fusing of psychoanalytic historiography with Walter Benjamin’s political theology in *Archive Fever*. Responding in part to the widespread scholarly “fever” which constitutes the compulsive archiving of historical violences, Derrida points to the “violence of the archive itself” (12). He asks us to imagine the figure around which cultural memory debates conceptualize the remembrance of history as caught up in its own, and thus our own, “archival violence,” which reflects the primal, generative violence Benjamin finds at play in jurisprudence. In “Critique of Violence,” Benjamin influentially complicates the relation between lawmaking and law-preserving violence. There are laws, and there is the Law, and although we may assume that laws use violence to protect the Law, in actuality, Benjamin argues, the Law is already, at its very origin, violent: “Lawmaking is power making, and, to that extent, an immediate manifestation of violence” (295).⁵¹

⁵¹ Benjamin writes,

For the function of violence in lawmaking is twofold, the sense that lawmaking pursues as its end, with violence as the means, *what* is to be established as law, but at the moment of instatement does not dismiss violence; rather at this very moment of lawmaking, it specifically establishes as law not an end unalloyed by violence, but one necessarily and intimately bound to it, under the title of power. (“Critique” 295)

In the Hebrew Bible, for example, we may read specific priestly rituals for the Levites, but these laws exist within the Law, the Torah, which they protect, often by violence as a means. For Benjamin, however, this relation is more complex. The passage in which Aaron’s sons Nadab and Abihu break their priestly code by offering “strange fire” to God and are thus devoured by holy fire may illustrate this complexity (Lev 10:1-2). According to Benjamin’s schema, to argue that the passage demonstrates a utilization of violent legal punishment to protect the non-violent Law misses an important factor: the Law is itself the originary, violent carving out, the structuring (politicizing) of reality, by God’s voice, which means that violence originates with the Law which the violence of laws sustain.

Similarly, Derrida argues that structurally, the archive is not simply *a* political concept, but *the* political concept. With words that could form the creed of Mugabe's ideology of patriotic history, he writes, "*There is no political power without control of the archive*" (11). More fundamentally, the figure of the archive itself enables the very categories of politics and control. Cultural memory debates thus often fall prey to missing the political structure within which they are produced and for which they serve. This inescapable politics of the archive is signified, Derrida suggests, in the word itself. Although the root *arkhē* signifies origin, commencement (what Freud often calls the primitive) in an ontological sense, the archive also refers, Derrida claims, to "*arkhē* in the *nomological* sense, to the *arkhē* of the commandment" (9). The archic is, in other words, patriarchic. As both ontological commencement and violent, Oedipal commandment, the archive is that which enables as well as politically structures the act of "gathering together" (10). In other words, Derrida's archive is Benjamin's Law: the violent "origin of the *common*" (30).

Vera's turn to assertions of agency which emerge through and exceed colonial Law—i.e., plant life growing through human power structures—is thus a gesture towards life beyond the apparatus of the archive. Amidst human acts of violently carving out historical, archivable meaning, life beyond human meaning is always *there*, Vera reminds us, vibrantly asserting agency. Though beyond the domain of the human, for Vera, such agency is not beyond human cooperation. For example, the jacaranda leaves "create a deep festive haze" on Selbourne Avenue, steeping the street with a "dizzying scent" as a wedding party, surrounded by petals, poses for a photograph (4). Here the opening vignette becomes reminiscent of Virginia Woolf's writing, which is

similarly oriented toward a transsubjective agency animated by an intersubjective force extending beyond the human domain. Lizzy Attree has pointed out Woolf's influence on Vera, specifically Woolf's epiphanic technique, in which a fleeting moment is seized—much like a photograph—in order to capture eternity.⁵² Attree has not, however—nor has any other critic—pursued the intertextual relation between Woolf and Vera (a relation that is especially present in *The Stone Virgins*) any further.

In the last chapter of *A Room of One's Own*, for instance, Woolf's narrator, gazing upon London from her window, observes a falling leaf. Like the jacaranda leaves of Vera's Bulawayo, this sight interrupts what Woolf calls the "rhythmic order" imposed upon the cityscape, becoming a "signal falling, a signal pointing to a force in things which one had overlooked"—a force beyond historical, structural meaning (72). For both Woolf and Vera, this force beyond meaningful signification exceeds yet incorporates human movement. The leaf falling, observed by Woolf's narrator as a "signal falling," draws together a man and woman in a cab, animating a "union of man and woman" through yet somehow beyond the signification of meaning (74). In this gathering every subject, the narrator claims, is collectively "swept on by the current" of a vibrant force which cannot be contained by the historical structures shaping the narrator's and readers' frameworks of meaning making (74). Similarly, Vera's leaves drift and "land in the sky," connecting the earth with the heavens, while synchronically connecting the bridal party to this movement; the marriage thus becomes symbolic of a form of agency extending beyond the domain of the human while the party circles a fountain as if dancing alongside the land's agency (4). Like Woolf, Vera responds to

⁵² For the influence of photography on Vera's writing practice, see her in her interview with Jane Bryce entitled "'Survival is in the mouth.'"

(colonial) modernity by envisioning a vibrant life force arising through the urban geography of the modern, yet extending beyond the structures of meaning constitutive of the modern.

As this land asserts a life force beyond the life envisioned by Bulawayo's colonial organization, and as urban subjects participate in the movement of this force, Nuttall argues, drawing on Bill Brown's "thing theory," that Vera depicts "the ways in which urban subjects and objects mutually constitute each other" as a "fragmentary if unified assemblage" ("Inside" 177; 178). More fundamentally, though, I would argue that Vera is simultaneously drawing on Woolf's modernist narrative form and Mwali's ecotheology to challenge the "single solid view" that Bulawayo's urban structure offers to pedestrians (5). In response to the sovereign position occupied by the colonial paradigm assumed in the monumental history of Bulawayo's urban landscape, Vera envisions an animist cosmology in which all life is endowed with divine agency and, simultaneously, the divine itself is collapsed into the terrestrial. Thus, while I partially agree with Arlene Elder's argument that Vera finds hope after the *Gukurahundi* in "ecofeminist concepts of modern, inclusive communalism," I would further specify this category (95). Vera does articulate a certain ecotheology, but it should also be conceptualized as a transsubjective modernism.

The Woolfian aspect of Vera's opening vignette paired with the theology surrounding the Gulati Hills from which Vera draws inspiration raises the question of the relation between (allegedly) European modernism and African animism, a relation which permeates all of Vera's writing. In contrast to the Manichaeism that pins psychoanalytic, deconstructive trauma theory's privileging of Eurocentric, high

modernist aesthetics against the supposed social realism of postcolonial literature (see my introduction), Vera responds to the trauma experienced in Matabeleland with a form of writing which never differentiates its animist and modernist techniques. For the culturally ambidextrous Vera, modernist formal experimentation is not a game of apolitical high theory any more than animist ritual is a game of apolitical spirituality. Vera's use of these complex and protean traditions is united by her political impetus, which she immediately demonstrates by extending the intersubjective force present in the novel's opening pages—what we may call the Voice of Mwali⁵³—beyond the borders of Bulawayo.

“Selborne carries you straight out of the city limits and heads all the way to Johannesburg like an umbilical cord; therefore, part of that city is here,” the narrator declares (5).⁵⁴ As Samuelson argues, although Vera's depiction of Bulawayo's layout encloses the African subject, restricting black movement, it also opens “patterns of mobility”—e.g., Bulawayo and Johannesburg (“Yvonne Vera's Bulawayo” 25). Streets and plants, earth and sky, black miners migrating between cities in which they work, yet

⁵³ One way of conceptualizing this transsubjective force is through Jane Bennett's conception of vibrant materialism. Bennet argues that materialism needs to recognize a force beyond its anthropocentrism, yet still immanent to matter, what she calls “Thing-Power: the curious ability of inanimate things to animate, to act, to produce effects dramatic and subtle” (6). What makes Bennet's vibrant materialism especially relatable to Vera is Bennett's acceptance that this form of materialism, which grants inanimate “things” the power to animate, is inherently theological. In a parody of the Nicene Creed, Bennet writes,

I believe in one matter-energy, the maker of things seen and unseen. I believe that this pluriverse is traversed by heterogeneities that are continually doing things. I believe it is wrong to deny vitality to nonhuman bodies, forces, and forms, and that a careful course of anthropomorphization can help reveal that vitality, even though it resists full translation and exceeds my comprehensive grasp. I believe that encounters with lively matter can chasten my fantasies of human mastery, highlight the common materiality of all that is, expose a wider distribution of agency, and reshape the self and its interests. (122)

Although Vera's and Bennett's engagements with the non-human bear some similarities, Vera may take the active agency of Mwali's voice too seriously for Bennett's atheism—and she is certainly more interested in human subjectivity. While Bennet, like many new materialists, wish to displace the problem of subjectivity from the center of critical theory, Vera's novels use non-human agency to articulate a form of transsubjectivity.

⁵⁴ For Lily G.N. Mabura, the umbilical-chord relation between Zimbabwe and South Africa in the novel cuts across ethnicities, demonstrating an inclusive philosophy of “hunhuism” (109).

from which they are politically excluded—everything in *The Stone Virgins*’ opening pages is vibrantly moving towards forms of transsubjective contact in spite of—or, more precisely, through—the colonial past and racially divided present suppressing such movement and contact.⁵⁵ In Ranka Primorac’s words, “In a Vera novel, movement is synonymous with resistance” (“Crossing” 91). The intersubjective movement in the beginning of *The Stone Virgins* reveals, I would argue, a vision of a form of political community which not only resists colonial and postcolonial national structures, but which attempts to resist what Benjamin and Derrida take to be the foundational violence that constitutes human collectivity. This movement, in other words, resists the very fundamental structure of the archival apparatus animating both colonial and postcolonial/“patriotic” history. This resistance emerges, I will suggest in the next section, as a song.

Climb On

In the next vignette, “anonymous” migrant workers return from “Jo’burg” to the black side of Bulawayo (6). “Home is Bulawayo,” the narrator explains, “This side of the city, not the other, their own side separated” (6). Caught up in the intersubjective movement sweeping through the city, these anonymous workers—much like the cassias and jacarandas decorating Bulawayo—craft themselves a home amidst oppression. For Vera, this agonistic assertion of agency, performed alongside the land, is at its core *playful*. The workers adorn themselves in dangling “Slim Jim ties,” exuberantly paired with “cobra-skin belts and elephant-skin hats” (6-7). They stroll to a soccer game at the

⁵⁵ Samuelson calls this movement produced through the suppression of movement Vera’s “restless urban subjectivity” (“Yvonne Vera’s Bulawayo” 23).

aptly named “White City Stadium,” where they use their flamboyantly decorated bodies to perform a “gum-boot dance, some knuckle-ready sound, some click song” (7).⁵⁶

The scene shifts to the next vignette set in a dark, dank storage room in a hotel “where only the black workers descend” (7-8). After midnight, the space is reshaped into a makeshift bar filled with the melancholic yet hopeful sounds of kwela music. In *Butterfly Burning*, Vera associates kwela—a form of Southern African street jazz played with pennywhistles and often makeshift instruments—with the aesthetics of her novels. “Within this music they soar higher than clouds; sink deeper than stones in water,” she writes, “This is Kwela. Embracing choices that are already decided. [. . .] Kwela means to climb into the waiting police Jeeps” (*Butterfly* 6). As Samuelson writes,

Kwela takes its name from the injunction to ‘climb up’ into the police van, an injunction often consequent on infringements of pass laws and influx control regulations—in short, of restrictions of mobility; it suggests [. . .] the desire for mobility born of, and partially contained within, prohibition and geographical violence. [. . .] Fashioned out of the debris of modern, urban life (children playing in the streets of Makokoba produce its melodies out of abandoned bottles

⁵⁶ This playful “click song” is reminiscent of what Frantz Fanon calls Negro *jabber*. In *Black Skin, White Masks*, he writes,

It is said that the Negro loves to jabber; in my own case, when I think of the word *jabber* I see a gay group of children calling and shouting for the sake of calling and shouting—children in the midst of play, to the degree to which play can be considered an initiation into life. The Negro loves to jabber, and from this theory it is not a long road that leads to a new proposition: The Negro is just a child. The psychoanalysts have a fine start here, and the term *orality* is soon heard. (26-27)

While Fanon rightfully critiques classical psychoanalysis for associating “primitive,” oral cultures with children, he also highlights a similarity between black and child subjects: the role of play in subject formation. In *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*, for instance, Freud’s grandson crafts himself agency within his subordinate subject position by playing with a cotton-reel. To make this structural association between the black subject and the child is not to cast the black subject less intelligent than the white subject; rather, it is to accept the blatant fact that the black subject is faced with the daunting task of crafting agency for him or herself in a world defined by whiteness, which bears a structural similarity with the manner in which the child must craft a subject position for him or herself in a foreign world. For Vera, like Fanon, following Freud, play functions—for both the child and the black subject—as “initiation into life” (27).

and cartons), kwela speaks of the acquisitive force of African urban modernities.” (25-26)

For Vera, kwela speaks of hope born when arrested Africans climb into police jeeps *with style*—that is, a paradoxically resistant embrace of captured life, which reshapes colonial subjection into a space in which agency can be crafted on the fly—a hope she infuses within her novels. For Vera, “Kwela is a metaphor for the transformative power of language,” Attree argues, “which is capable of reproducing or redefining experience in limitless ways, facilitating transformation by making moments of life bearable”: even being arrested, as the injunction “climb up” suggests (73-74).

Unlike in *Butterfly Burning*, in *The Stone Virgins* kwela is not mentioned by name. Rather, Vera narrates kwela scenes as instances of what Paul Gilroy would call a black Atlantic vernacular. As Samuelson and Ashleigh Harris each point out, however, rather than demonstrating the influence of black American jazz in Southern Africa, Vera narrates the inverse (a dynamic Gilroy largely ignores). In the storage room turned bar, men reminisce about Louis Armstrong’s historic visit to Rhodesia, which led to his cover of August Musarurwa’s kwela tune “Skokiaan.” Armstrong took “their song, their song [. . .] from their mouths” and let it “course through his veins like blood, their blood. The enduring wonder of it. The love of it” (7). The bandleader hears. “Did you say Louis . . . Louis Armstrong?,” he asks, “He rises. He plays a trumpet. Plays his “Skokiaan” with Louis before his eyes, as far as he can imagine to the left, under that dimming lamp and the smell of kerosene light. And everyone agrees that yes, he played with Louis; there is no doubt about that. He is Satchmo” (9). A state of mutual possession is imagined between Armstrong, famously nicknamed Satchmo, and the

residents of Bulawayo. In this state a political economy beyond ownership, an economy conjured in song, is imagined into being. A black Rhodesian tune once entered Satchmo's bloodstream, and now, in a dirty storage room where black Rhodesians pass around drinking glasses improvised from old beer bottles cut in half, a man can conjure Satchmo, become Satchmo, by playing *their* song.

Commenting on the musical creativity of slaves in North American plantations, Achille Mbembe writes, "Breaking with uprootedness and the pure world of things of which he or she is but a fragment, the slave is able to demonstrate the protean capabilities of the human bond through music and the very body that was supposedly possessed by another" ("Necropolitics" 22). Similarly, here, bodies possessed by an oppressive state use kwela music to reconstitute their state of possession. But much like the epiphanies experienced by Woolf's characters such as Mrs. Ramsay or Clarissa Dalloway, this movement is ephemeral, immediately broken by the brute reality of black life in Bulawayo: "He is Satchmo—so what, can he play upstairs in the President's Room? The country is landlocked, bursting. The war is in their midst" (9). As soon as the anonymous band leader conjures Satchmo, his musical state of possession is interrupted by his political state of dispossession.⁵⁷ This briefly euphoric movement between ways of being possessed—from unwilled possession by a state that dispossess black bodies to willed possession by a swinging rhythm that possesses black bodies, then back again—fills the room. With the reality of war inescapable, "[n]othing is

⁵⁷ Interestingly, a similar interruption takes place in Armstrong's recording of "Skokiaan." About halfway through the song, the band abruptly stops its instrumental rhythm, jolting the listener out of entrancement. The music then begins again in a different key, this time with Armstrong singing lyrics about the exotic, sensuous pleasure of living in a "jungle bungalow" in "happy, happy Africa." Though Armstrong's song allows listeners to become rhythmically enchanted by a transatlantic, jazz aesthetic, this enchantment is short lived, abruptly morphing into an ode to the exoticization of Africa, reminding listeners of the political reality surrounding jazz reception.

permanent” in this cobbled-together jazz club, reflecting the unstable architecture of the nation, “just swinging” music inspiring synchronic human connections “as short-lived as the moth wings squashed under their feet” (8).

Outside, a man sweeps Main Street—a monotonous, repetitive, rhythmic activity—with kwela style:

Only his fingers are moving. Tapping. Quietly. On the broom. Lovingly. The cars drive past. One by one. They drive quickly past. He moves away as though from his own shadow, steps from the tarmac onto the pavement. He is now on elevated ground under the raised balcony, close to the wall of the building, no longer completely on Main Street, not quite on Selborne either. Standing here, at this corner, his body is softly disturbed. (11)

Though distant from the storage room-jazz club, this man creates music with his broom. While tapping, he reaches “elevated ground”—unlike the underground bandleader who is unable to “play upstairs”—and enters a liminal space, not quite on Main or Selborne, where the novel began. Like the bandleader conjuring Satchmo, this man plays with the architecture of his oppressive state in order to craft a fleeting state of liminality. Vera herself joins these Rhodesians’ short-lived swings, acts which briefly interrupt their political reality, with her syntax. Consider the jazz rhythm embedded in Vera’s prose directly after the bandleader’s trumpet is interrupted by the fact that blacks are not allowed upstairs: “All they want is to come and go as they please. At independence, they just want to go in there, and leave, as they please, not to sneak or peep, but to come, and go, as they please. They would stay gone if they could establish this one condition, to come and go, as they please. Satchmo” (10). Through the melancholic, rhythmic pauses

and repetitions of *coming* and *going* in her prose, which circle the phrase *at independence*, Vera swings alongside the bandleader's conjuring of Satchmo; thus, although the bandleader is cut short by the political reality Vera is narrating, the form of her narration itself continues the rhythm and, by emphasizing *independence* through its idiosyncrasy in the stanza, asserts, *climb on*.

These fleeting, repetitive, rhythmic assertions of collective agency are also crafted through encounters at *ekoneni*, the street corners in Bulawayo where strangers, potential lovers, meet:

Ekoneni is a rendezvous [. . .]. You cannot meet inside any of the buildings because this city is divided; entry is forbidden to black men and women [. . .]. Here, you linger, ambivalent, permanent as time. You are in transit. The corner is a camouflage, a place of instancy and style; a place of protest. *Ekoneni* is also a dangerous place, where knives emerge as suddenly as lightning. Death can be quick and easy as purses and handbags are snatched, discarded, and pockets are emptied. (11-12)

Like climbing into a police van with resistant embrace, characters *do not enter* the buildings from which they are forbidden *with style*, casting the *ekoneni* as a “place of protest.” The right angles at the edges of buildings hide strangers on both sides until the corners are crossed, making *ekoneni* a place of risk. Will “you” (Vera begins to address the reader as a subject of *ekoneni*, casting these concrete spaces as figurative scenes of subject formation) encounter your lover or your murderer?

Two scenes of encounter are described. In the first, a man is left “hug[ging] the ground with a frail body” while his companion vanishes: (12). In the second, a man and

a woman each lean against their side of the building, curling their fingers around the corner to touch each other, a hopeful test before one takes the risk of stepping forward to meet the unknown other (13). The protest of asserting agency in a *polis* structured around your invisibility is always, like Armstrong's jazz, an act of improv, like the steps towards the edge of *ekoneni*, a sensuous risk of self-disclosure, and like both, ephemeral. It is through this seemingly contradictory experience of becoming-ephemerality, however, that the strangers of *ekoneni* gain, for moments, livable subject positions. Like kwela aesthetics, agency is crafted without knowing what is around the corner, lost, then crafted again—a melancholic rhythm:

What they both know fully by heart are contradictions. They both recall lost chances like warm fires—with fondness. They nurture risks like tenderness; they love uncertainties the way they love the drumming of a brief rain on zinc roofs, the way they love the pale silence after church bells. They love the vanishing quality of things: a woman breathless. (15)

The vanishing quality of life allows for acts of self-fashioning “between the cracks” of the colonized city, as Nuttall puts it, and these “small moments of freedom,” Harris argues, work together to fashion a collectivity.

The first chapter ends with a bus leaving from Bulawayo to Kezi, a township village about 60 miles south, the focus of the second chapter. This bus continuously moves back and forth between the city and the village, extending the intersubjective movement which began in the opening pages and following the swinging, back and forth rhythm of the first chapter (19). The land and sky in Kezi meet and are said to become inseparable, echoing the marriage scene of the first chapter (18-19). Likewise, detailed

descriptions of the rural landscape—paths to the river, granite boulders, thornbushes, a large marula tree, huts with grass roofs—like the description of the jacaranda blooms in the first chapter, embed the land with agency. A thatch roof, for instance, can be more vibrant than a person: “After the rain, the top layer of wet, partly decomposed thatch is the softest scent of living things there is—it is life itself” (17).

What *ekoneni* is to Bulawayo, a green telephone booth missing its handset, rendering it, like all those who live nearby, voiceless, economically useless, is to Kezi. At night, lovers squeeze into the broken booth and whisper messages to one another. They hold “hands where the handset should be, having sought the mouthpiece, the hearing piece, and found none. Having sought the telephone cord that would link them to the city center [. . .] and found none. Having sought the directory with all their names listed, and found none of their own” (22). Through the repetition of “having sought . . . but found none,” Vera’s prose here continues the swinging aesthetic of the makeshift jazz club scene. This “tantalizing contraption left in their midst to mock their lack, to rouse their want,” reflecting each resident of Kezi’s own lack of a mouthpiece, a hearing piece, a name in the *polis*, is reshaped into an apparatus of subject formation (22). Locals attempt to transform their silence as they “insert disused Rhodesian coins, copper pennies and silver shillings, and try different voices, which they whisper close to each other’s ears—an angry pitch and nuance when they call for Ian Smith or call Geneva and Lord so-and-so” (21). Staging calls to the president of Rhodesia, to Geneva (where, in 1976, a British organized conference attempted, and failed, to intervene in the Bush War), locals use an apparatus which renders them invisible and voiceless to conjure visible, hearable subject positions.

The swinging rhythm and ephemeral quality of this conjuring act reflects both the sounds of Satchmo and the erotic encounters described in Bulawayo:

Their voices more temporary than the darkness, they swing toward each other, having retrieved their halfpennies, to secure touch, their knees holding, their lips tender, moving toward each other in order to ponder their proximity, to match their own voices, in synchrony, breathing in and out at the same pace, syllable for syllable, inhalation, pulse to pulse, wondering how long they can be this silent and this discreet, wondering if they can fulfill all those other promises that require daylight in order to be true [. . .]. (22)

Like the vibrant movements of the land, lovers synchronically move towards each other, wondering if tomorrow their conjured subjectivities will still exist, but, like “Skokiaan,” which takes flight only to be rudely interrupted by political reality, these assertions of agency are fleeting. After the euphoria of telephone booth conjuring, these lovers “offer each other what is easy and achievable”: fiction—more specifically, novels the missionary school confiscates and recycles for cooking fires, but which “these hungry few have retrieved, salvaged, wanting to possess anything that is printed and can be read out around a fire, *something that is not a birth certificate*” (22, my emphasis). This line is telling. Apparatuses of the state—a dirty storage room for black workers, a poor man’s broom, the sharp-edged architecture of a colonially constructed, racially divided city, a township supply shop, and a broken telephone booth—are all reshaped into apparatuses of fiction—a jazz club, a musical instrument, lovers’ corners, a central meeting space, a direct line to the president. In these spaces of fiction, the people of Matabeleland narrate themselves through reading themselves in a genre that briefly

enters the euphoric *beyond* of the interpellating violence of the nation-state's sovereign power, represented by the Rhodesian birth certificate. However, like the Woolfian transience and kwela-esque swinging embedded in Vera's prose style, these narrative acts of agency are ephemeral, always interrupted by political reality and thus always in need of repetition.

Transsubjective Agency

As the novel's first two chapters consist of vignettes describing—through sensuous, rhythmic impressions—the collective movement of Bulawayo followed by the collective movement of Kezi, read together as a chiasmus, they introduce the novel with a long, transsubjective dance in which subjects transiently emerge from and fall back into anonymous, collective movement (no character is thus far named). Chapter 1 begins with the vibrant environment of Bulawayo (the streets, plants, buildings, etc) out of which anonymous subjects, through encounters with each other, begin to emerge (the wedding, the jazz club, *ekoneni*). The chapter then ends with a return to the movement of the environment (streets, hills, rocks, etc). This chiasmic structure emphasizes the ephemerality of these subjects by placing their hopeful encounters between narrations of intersubjective movement. Moreover, by ending with a description of the bus route from Bulawayo to Kezi, chapter 1 metaphorically transitions itself into chapter 2, which narrates Kezi through similar chiasmic structure. Chapter 2 begins with the vibrant environment of Kezi (the rocks, sky, river, etc) out of which the anonymous subjects of the green telephone booth emerge. When the Shoeshine Bus arrives at the end of the chapter, however (by the same route with which chapter 1 ends), the intimate contact

within the green telephone booth is contrasted with the collective movement of a crowd “whisper[ing] about the hills of Gulati,” their surrounding environment (30). Chapters 1 and 2 are therefore, like the city and village of their content, fused together: movement-subjective emergence-movement followed by movement-subjective emergence-movement.

This back-and-forth swings alongside the kwela music and Woolfian transience of chapter one and, furthermore, raises the problem of agency within Vera’s writing. All of Vera’s novels deal with the realities of violence and rape in Rhodesia and Zimbabwe, subverting the patriotic narrative of liberation by plotting the everyday traumas of patriarchal culture inherent to both the colonial and postcolonial eras. Her “female protagonists are introverted, inarticulate, desperate,” “traumatized [. . .] and inarticulate women” (Shaw 25; Zeleza 14). As Elleke Boehmer argues, by narrating the lives of such women, Vera both moves beyond the patriarchal, heroic narrative of Zimbabwean emancipation and attempts to “open spaces” for queer modes of agency. Most critics agree, focusing on either Vera’s attempts to craft livable female subject positions (e.g., Willey, Lopez, Ogbazi, Krishnan) or more reciprocal gender relations (e.g., Gagliano, Elder). However, caught in a “discourse of instrumentalization, where the sacrifice of the feminine form serves to underwrite the authority of the masculine,” Vera’s protagonists’ searches for agency outside the realities of patriarchal violence seem to never be fulfilled (Krishnan 81). What Boehmer describes as the yearning, objectless, open-ended desire within Vera’s protagonists—a desire for the “recovery of the repressed discourse of women” (Muchemwa 3)—nearly always ends in suicide. As Grace Musila argues, however, Vera writes these suicides as paradoxically life-

affirming. Trapped in a life founded on the exclusion of black women from agency, death becomes the only stage on which Vera's protagonists can perform small, fleeting acts of agency. Indeed, in all of Vera's novels, death is both determined by a colonial, patriarchal culture and generative of the possibility of life otherwise.

It is no wonder, then, that critics often point to Gayatri Spivak's "Can the Subaltern Speak?" as the theoretical companion to Vera's novels (e.g., Boehmer, Primorac, Samuelson, Krishnan, Bady, Kostelac). Often these interpretations filter Vera's texts through a framework focused on the politics of representation. Aaron Bady, for instance, writes that a Vera protagonist necessarily "fails to represent herself, but Vera succeeds in representing her unrepresentation" (161). By focusing on representation—*via* its failure—such interpretations often fall prey to what Caroline Rooney takes to be one of the main problems of Vera criticism. "Vera's work tempts feminist critics to impose an identity politics upon it when it actually constantly makes us aware of the incommensurability of self-referential identity and liquid life," she writes. Vera's "female characters are used to portray both social individuals and to signify, in a poetic way, a femininity beyond the individual male or female" (*Decolonising* 153). In other words, although the yearning for queer agency Boehmer explicates from Vera's novels may be crushed by the colonial, patriarchal culture which places black women under a crisis in self-representation, the deeper challenge Vera bestows us is to inherit the new form of collective agency, beyond this crisis, rooted in her poetic narratives. The micro and macro level chiasmus of *The Stone Virgins* opening chapters, I would suggest, introduces what is to come by ritualizing a form of transsubjective agency as a swinging, back-and-forth dance to kwela music.

Out of this ritual emerges an encounter. Thenjiwe Gumede, a Kezi local, walks towards the Thandabantu Store. She is swallowed by the crowd from Bulawayo, which spills out of the Shoeshine Bus and crams the store's doorway. Unperturbed, Thenjiwe "absorb[s] the melody, if not the dance" of the swarm (31). The words "melody" and "dance" function as a reminder of the Bulawayo jazz club, casting this scene as yet another *ekoneni*. Sure enough, when Thenjiwe notices a man sitting alone, desire is sparked. Much later in the novel—the sixteenth chapter—we learn that this man's name is Cephas Dube, but here he is unnamed, just a stranger who sits "swinging, swinging" as Thenjiwe walks by (32). This doubled verb, recalling the swinging rhythm of "Skokiaan," is repeated, with difference, by Thenjiwe: "the swing in her walk places a claim on the entire earth. He is part of that earth" (35-36). In her repetition of his swinging, Thenjiwe adds her own element, which is said to claim the earth and thus Cephas. Thenjiwe's swing is then repeated, with difference, by Cephas, who builds on Thenjiwe's claim to the earth: "Swinging, swinging his knees and whistling a wicked and irresistible tune, casting his glance this way and that, and holding the earth still" (46). Thenjiwe and Cephas thus swing their bodies in a type of call-and-response exchange, like one of Satchmo's many duets, becoming instruments that together produce both sexual desire and existential hope.⁵⁸

⁵⁸ In Armstrong's 1927 tune "Hotter Than That", he performs a canonical call-and-response exchange with guitarist Lonnie Johnson. Armstrong, who played an important role in popularizing the technique of scatting, scats two-bars; Johnson then humorously mimics Armstrong's voice in a two-bar guitar riff. This call-and-response continues, becoming more complex and stylized. The voices of Armstrong's body and Johnson's instrument thus join—playing with the boundaries between the internal and external—in a series of creative repetitions. This important moment in the construction of the transatlantic jazz aesthetic thus resembles the narrative form of the Musa Wo tale (see chapter 1). Similar call-and-response solos span Armstrong's *oeuvre*, but, considering the sexual desire present in this scene, Thenjiwe's and Cephas' swings are most reminiscent of the duets between Armstrong and Ella Fitzgerald in the 1956 album *Ella and Louis*.

This call-and-response is both playful and delicate. Like Bulawayo's *ekoneni*, the question of who will "extend a hand in greeting in the presence of so much uncertainty" is thick in the air (33). Riding this anticipation, Thenjiwe and Cephas dare not disturb their rhythm by directly acknowledging the other, whether by extending a hand or casting an obvious glance. Thenjiwe swings by, restraining her desire to stop and address Cephas, who, sitting on a metal can, becomes their drummer. "Unable to be still," Cephas taps his feet, still whistling to their "hollow rhythm" (33). Like one of Satchmo's solos, Cephas' whistle seems to be "about himself" (33). This self-disclosure, however, though not "musical or agonized," is, like the restraint in Thenjiwe's movement, "not disinterested" in the other (33). Despite the facade that Thenjiwe "does not care for much but her own motion, her own breath" (34), her swing is fueled by the "desire sparkling" in her limbs when Cephas' whistle, despite the same facade, "penetrate[s] the air and move[s] in her direction" (34). In the movement through which she reveals herself, Thenjiwe "catches and holds" the whistle through which Cephas reveals himself, both of which discretely address the other (34). Thenjiwe and Cephas therefore swing, tap, and whistle in an easy, understated rhythm—what jazz musicians call "playing in the pocket"—that stylizes the self in duet. Each act of self-disclosure depends upon a self-disclosure from the other.

As an act of self-disclosure byway of a non-sated but indispensable relation to a stranger, Cephas' participation in the duet unearths memories vital to the self being disclosed, thus placing his immediate, phenomenological experience of the duet in relation to the fragmented memories of oppression housed in his unconscious. Thenjiwe and Cephas' game of call-and-response is, therefore, as psychoanalytic as it is playful,

as political as it is erotic. Thenjiwe's swing first strikes Cephas' body—"She stills his knees"—and then his memory: "He smiles a broad, even smile that has everything to do with her but nothing to do with his own past, his cautious memory, calm and hidden" (32). This substitution of Cephas' personal history "hidden" in his unconscious with the history of the sensuous present displayed before his eyes continues:

She walks by and takes over the corner in his mind where some thought is trapped, some useless remembrance about fences with NO TRESPASS signs and NO WORK signs. A remembrance, of persecutions and possible agonies, of bold urgencies. Some hopeless memory hangs on a lone nail somewhere in his mind and disturbs him. (32)

Cephas' present, phenomenological experience of Thenjiwe begins to replace the space in his mind where "signs" of Rhodesia's racist structure hang like home decor, haunting the house of his unconscious. Furthermore, like Cephas, Thenjiwe "has a lot to forget," so, in a desire to experience a similar replacement of memory, she "takes the stranger home" (36). Her sexual offer is, in keeping with their rhythm, understated: "He has been sitting at Thandabantu Store, watching her, and when she notices and does not look away but looks right back, he understands that she has offered him her hips, her laughter, her waiting thighs. What he does next is spectacular and welcome: he follows her home like a shadow" (38).

Thenjiwe and Cephas' erotic process of playing with their unconscious' racially marked archives, however, affects Cephas' present, sensuous experience of observing Thenjiwe's movement. This, in turn, resurrects another memory of oppression, adding a piece of the past to his swing in the present. "Now something else

in him is swinging, swinging”: this doubled verb grows more complex as the duet continues (32). As Thenjiwe steps, Cephas is “remembering. His eyes trace the motion of this memory. The whip raised high up, knotting the sky. The whip strikes ribbons of air behind her” (32). Though, for a moment, a present memory of Thenjiwe acts as a substitute for “hidden” memories of oppression, planting in Cephas a smile unrelated to his own history, the memory of a whip beating emerges, striking the air behind Thenjiwe. This process of transference and the return of the repressed disturbs Cephas “like that paper he once saw as a child as it floated on water in the Nyanyani River, the ink spilling off the words, the paper thinning, transparent, tearing, the words vanishing” (32). This memory is a symbol of historical emergence. History, moving like ink in water, stains the past, present, and future. Furthermore, history, like vanishing words on wet, inked paper, inscribes itself on the subject, paradoxically, through its own disappearance. Cephas is a subject written by this historiographic ink, resembling the questions raised by Derrida’s *Archive Fever* with which I began this chapter, thereby linking him to the catastrophe of the *Gukurahundi* soon to come.

Thenjiwe and Cephas’ encounter also raises the problem of memory in Vera criticism. Although some have critiqued Vera’s historiography as mythologizing essentialism, the majority of Vera criticism sees within Vera’s “poetic histories” a productive “mistrust of conventional historiography” through which she “decenters” the “archival history” of historians (Zezeza 15; 16). As Ranger puts it, Vera views “academic History as a burden or as an obstacle” to overcome through literature, where she can more adequately engage with “the weight of the past and how to bear it” (“History” 204). Through this aesthetic engagement with the past, Mandivavarira

Maodzwa-Taruvinga and Robert Muponde, argue, Vera offers an alternative to “the nationalistic, patriarchal master narrative of heroic acts,” which Muponde elsewhere claims, in accordance with Ranger’s description of patriotic history, functions as “the closed circle that Zimbabwean history has become” (xi; “The sight” 123). Vera’s alternative to this history, critics nearly unanimously agree, is what Primorac calls the “space-time of memory”: the fundamental chronotope of Vera’s writing. As Primorac explains, in Vera’s writing “memory represents non-physical movement into the past, against the flow of chronological time. [. . .] [S]uch movement is not conceptualized as going back, but as an act of advancing into another dimension, only describable in terms of space. In all of Vera’s novels, such movement is somehow linked to physical trauma” (87).

Like traumatic memory, as Dorothy Driver and Meg Samuelson further suggest, *The Stone Virgins* reveals how histories of violence always invade the present in which they have been forgotten (for instance, Thenjiwe and Cephas’ encounter). Vera thus prompts her readers to remember and mourn that which has been banished from the national consciousness of Zimbabwe, and through such mourning, they claim, construct an “inclusive national history” (108). “Enacting the gestures of mourning, while marking the process of healing as yet incomplete,” they write, “Vera’s language not only transforms the dead past into a living past but also allows the past to call insistently to the present for the continual re-interpretation of both” (116). Samuelson elsewhere dubs this process re-membering. “The past”, she writes, “urgently needs to be ‘re-membered’ in the radical and double act suggested by Toni Morrison’s *Beloved*”: being

both “recalled and re-configured” (“Re-membering” (94).⁵⁹ For Gibson Ncube and Gugulethu Siziba, this “process of re-membering has the potential to critique the dominant discourses and thereby create and make possible alternative narratives of Zimbabwe’s history and national identity” (243).⁶⁰ Although each of these claims are in many ways correct, they also miss a fundamental impetus within Vera’s writing.

Namely, they each remain rooted in the archival apparatus Vera seeks to overcome. In other words, Vera criticism largely interprets *The Stone Virgins* as an attempt to construct a more inclusive archive—an open-ended, multidirectional memory of Zimbabwe. In “History Has Its Ceiling,” Ranger explicitly states this assumption. *The Stone Virgins* “is not a book that establishes a deeper truth through myth and invented ritual,” he writes, “It is a book that confronts the reality of History and which transcends that reality by means of confrontation” (206). I disagree. Through invented ritual—indeed, I would argue, Vera writes the novel as itself an invented ritual—*The Stone Virgins* moves beyond the apparatus of the archive, offering readers not a more inclusive memorialization but instead *ritualized dispossessions of agency in prophetic time*. While the opening chapters ritualize a certain dispossessed, anonymous, transsubjective agency animated by intersubjective movement, Thenjiwe and Cephas’ encounter interrupts this movement with two, separate subjects bearing distinct bodies, memories, thoughts, etc. Vera ends up suggesting, however, that Cephas and Thenjiwe must learn to join the ritual of dispossession with which the novel began, thereby gaining a transsubjective agency.

⁵⁹ For a helpful reading of Vera in dialogue with Morrison, see Harris’ “Toni Morrison and Yvonne Vera: An Associative Fugue.”

⁶⁰ See Nana Wilson-Tago and Nathan Moyo and Jairos Gonye for similar claims.

Love, Possession, Liberation

At the brink of genocide, Thenjiwe and Cephas' encounter constitutes the possibility of a new beginning, the writing of a new history. They meet at the threshold of a new season. "Winter, June and July" has passed, and "rain time, from November to January" is approaching (a reference to *Gukurahundi*, a Shona word signifying "the rain which washes away the chaff before the spring rains.") (34). More specifically, the scene takes place in "October. Hot and dust-ridden, saturated with the steadfast intensity of a season almost over. Steady, like the resolve of this man" (i.e., Cephas) (36). Suggesting a new beginning, Thenjiwe, walking by Kezi's marula tree, becomes a new Eve, as Driver and Samuelson recognize, casting her and Cephas as the novel's "originary couple":

She sees a single spotted plume dive down from the marula tree and land in her path. She feels naked and wonders if he, too, has noticed that glittering plume.

She wants to pick it up but does not. That would be a risk. She has no confidence that she could bend her knees that far down, stretch her arm, and still be able to come up for air. (34)

Like the biblical Eve, Thenjiwe enjoys the fruit of her village's central tree, which fills the air with the "intoxicating smell of marula seeds falling everywhere," awakening her to her nakedness before the other, Cephas (37-38). Unlike Eve, however, Thenjiwe does not succumb to her temptation, but the fact that her object of desire is a decorative feather rather than a fruit raises a more important difference. Adam and Eve adorn themselves with animal skins after the Fall, hiding their newfound vulnerability, but for Thenjiwe, this adornment is the temptation rather than the cure. This difference suggests

that Thenjiwe and Cephas' encounter begins with vulnerability, not as a consequence of sin, but as an ontological *a priori*, and the possibility of a re-genesis constituted by their encounter does not cure this nakedness, this perishability, but rather, intensifies it: "She would perish, for sure, with him watching, with him able to blow her ashes off the ground with a single breath" (34). In this romantic encounter during which Thenjiwe and Cephas begin a new history, *ashes* are not the remainder of the past burned away, but rather, the the genesis of a future emerging during a loving, vulnerable, radically contingent encounter.

Such a perishability as genesis rather than lapsarian consequence is what Derrida calls the "secret" of the archive—"there can be no archive" (62). In the same way that Thenjiwe's genesis is the vulnerable pile of her own ash before Cephas, the arch of the archive is its own ash. The novel demonstrate that such a "secret" requires the conceptualization of an entirely different memory system, a historiography outside the symbol of the archive. This new historian of the secret, the archivist beyond the archive, is, I would argue, the same utopian figure Derrida points towards in *Specters of Marx*: the "'scholar' of the future" (177). In *Specters*, Derrida argues that the traditional scholar has never believed in ghosts because metaphysics has drawn a distinct line between being and non-being, past and present, thereby enclosing scholarship within the illusion of empty, homogenous time (11). In contrast, the post-deconstructive "scholar of the future" takes as a given the fact that time is, as Hamlet famously laments, "out of joint," which means that the past and present, living and dead, being and non-being, are intimately entangled, co-dependent categories (176; 18-19). Accepting every passing moment as contingent upon every other moment—the "*non-contemporaneity with itself*"

of the living present” (xx)—this scholar takes his or her “disadjustment” (18)—which is to say relational, implicated existence—as the very condition of ethics (19-20). If we dwell “between life and death,” but wholly in neither category, justice arises, Derrida argues, as we “learn to live *with* ghosts” (xviii). Such a “being-with specters” amounts to a new “politics of memory” (xix), he claims. Or, as he puts it in *Archive Fever*, a further attempt to articulate this relational theory of cultural memory and consequently ethics outside the self-presencing, sovereign subject of metaphysics, “the structure of the archive is spectral” (54).

However, to move from historical to historiographic experience, which is to move from trauma to epistemic symptom, our repetitive encounters throughout the past century with cultural traumas that erase their origins, according to Derrida, at their very moments of origin have constituted our current compulsive obsession with historical origin *via* the discourse of cultural memory symbolized in the figure of the archive.⁶¹ Following the form of the repetition compulsion, this fever—our “compulsive, repetitive, and nostalgic desire for the archive”—arises in response to our experience of encountering, through an epoch of global traumas, the disappearance of archivable history (57). Cephas demonstrates a similar “fever” as he witnesses Thenjiwe’s vulnerability before the marula tree. In response to this vulnerability, Cephas shapes his erotic desire into a longing for possession, a mode of ownership that represses this vulnerability. As he follows Thenjiwe, “he places his foot where she has left her imprint on the soil, wanting to possess, already, each part of her, her weight on soft soil, her

⁶¹ To clarify, the historiographic is the framework in which the historical emerges as history. But the historical traumas of the twentieth-century, Derrida argues in *Archive Fever*, have produced their own historiography, which he terms “archive fever.”

shape. He wants to preserve her in his own body, gathering her presence from the soil like a perfume” (38). For Vera, however, Cephas must learn to love beyond possession.

This love, Vera suggests, is sacrificial, symbolized by an insect ritual.

Underneath the ground to which Thenjiwe’s swinging steps lay claim scurries a multitude of *amavimbandlebe*, insects burrowing the earth in hope, like Thenjiwe and Cephas, of a new beginning (36). Next month, when rain beats down upon Kezi’s enormous anthills, flattening the landscape for a new season (35), the *amavimbandlebe* will fly, yet they will fly toward death:

Amavimbandlebe—a multitude of tiny insects, winged, blind, dashing themselves against each drop of rain, splattering into a white paste on the ground, dizzy and without wings, a multitude of insects rising like glory, ready to die in order to lose their wings, to be buried in the rain. The greatest freedom—to shed the possibility of flight. They descend, brown, scattering to the ground. The birds swoop and fall on them; they emerge within each tip of a wing, each arched dive restless, without wings. *Amavimbandlebe*—the multitude that brings a silence to the ears—their journey is silence, their numbers, their sudden release so surprising, so much that they bring blindness not to the eyes but to the ears. They banish hearing, not sight, for sight is a trance. They are unable to resist the journey of flotation and suicide, the descent into darkness. So one sense aids another, suffers for another, deafness for sight. She is thinking rain time, thinking November, as the man follows her, from Thanadabantu Store way past the marula tree, so suddenly. (35)

In this passage, which could be a self-contained prose poem, the sign “*Amavimbandlebe*—” marks the beginnings of two sections. The first section, which interprets the multitude’s death flight as an act of freedom, focuses on the viscous details of the insects’ splattering bodies. The second section, which interprets the death flight as an act of instinct, a death drive, focuses on the human experience of observing the multitude’s movement. What is designated agency in the first section is, therefore, in the second section, designated the product of an unwilled, instinctual drive, and this categorical shift is accompanied by a shift in the passage’s subject of reference. Though the passage begins by articulating the insect multitude, it shifts into an articulation of the human observer. Moreover, these categorical and subjective shifts are accompanied by losses. In the first section the multitude loses its wings, and in the second section the observer loses the function of her or his ears, which become temporarily blinded—not deaf, but blind ears.

Next, the subject of the passage shifts again. Although at first, the human observer, surprised at the “sudden release” of the multitude, experiences blindness of the ears, the text shifts focus back to the multitude, whose hearing, during their flight that is also a “descent,” is banished in order to strengthen sight. Rhetorically, unlike the transition from this passage’s first section to second section, the subjective shift in the second section is not accompanied by a categorical shift. Here, in opposition to the previous shift from agency to unwilled instinct, whether the focus is on the multitude or the human observer, ears remain blinded. Thus, both the multitude and the human observer seem to experience blindness of the ears, implying that the passage is not about separate subjects—human and insect—but rather about a certain transsubjectivity

symbolized by the entire scene of the *amavimbandlebe*'s death-flight. The last sentence further associates the human observer with the insects. Thenjiwe thinks about November, when the *amavimbandlebe* take flight, as she—and Cephas—take flight. Moreover, Since the concept of blind ears emphasizes the process through which hearing is sacrificed in order to preserve sight—"one sense aids another, suffers for another, deafness for sight"—the scene of the death-flight recalls the scene in which Sibaso explicates the painting of the sacrificial virgins in the Gulati cavern. Since the virgins' deaths do not save anyone, but rather preserve order, Sibaso reasons, their sacrifice is not actually sacrificial. As Thenjiwe and Cephas meet, however, Vera inserts a poetic glimpse of the self-sacrificial, regenerative death-flight of the *amavimbandlebe* through which life is ritually dispossessed and agency paradoxically found through loss, suggesting that Cephas and Thenjiwe's relation may reverse rather than repeat the stone virgins' fate.

More specifically, as the male in the novel's "originary couple," Cephas, Vera suggests, must learn to sacrifice possession, an inversion of the fate of the virgins who were sacrificed as possessions to an ancient patriarch. Cephas quickly falls in love with every part of Thenjiwe: her heels, fingernails, blood, fingers, but most of all, her bones (37). Touching Thenjiwe's waist, Cephas declares, "as though she is a new creation, 'This is a beautiful bone'" (37). Cephas' allusion to Adam's "bone of my bone" poem,⁶² like Thenjiwe standing before the marula tree, casts their encounter as a new genesis. Vera is also alluding to the protagonist of her first novel, *Nehanda*, who famously prophesied that her bones will rise to enable political revolution. Since Nehanda's

⁶² "And Adam said, This is now bone of my bones, and flesh of my flesh: she shall be called Woman, because she was taken out of Man" (Gen 2:23).

prophecy became a nationalist symbol justifying the violences Vera attempts to counter, by pairing it with the “bone of my bone” allusion, she suggests that Zimbabwe needs something deeper than liberation, a state which can only be obtained through a (re)genesis of the very structure of community.

Cephas bathes Thenjiwe in milk, consecrating their encounter. Yet, rather than (re)writing a genesis which, as Thenjiwe standing before the marula tree implies, begins with ontological vulnerability, Cephas endows Thenjiwe with a certain prelapsarian sovereignty:

When I strip wet bark off a tree and it slides off distinct and separate like skin, the soft space between the bark and the stem is so pure, I could lick it. No single fleck of dust has ever been near, and it has never breathed the sun, never breathed day; no one has ever laid eyes on it but me. I feel like that when I look in your eyes. Nothing has ever been but your eyes. Nothing. (44)

For Cephas, beholding Thenjiwe’s beauty becomes an experience of creation *ex nihilo*: nothing has ever existed before Thenjiwe’s eyes. However, the very concept of creation *ex nihilo* undermines *The Stone Virgins*’ vision of transsubjectivity out of which Thenjiwe and Cephas’ encounter within the novel emerges. The idea that something can be created out of nothing (Thenjiwe’s eyes are there, in relation to nothing else but themselves) is to assume that a subject can exist outside of other subjects; in other words, Cephas views Thenjiwe as sovereignly bordered from all else.

On the other hand, like Thenjiwe, Cephas does recognize an *a priori* vulnerability in their new genesis, a vulnerability harbored in the bones he most admires. He thinks,

Does she know that bone is the driest substance of being, like all substantial forms that give form, that support wet things such as flesh and water and blood? Bone: the only material in us that cracks, that fractures, that can hurt our entire being, that breaks while we are still living. This he loves, this bone in her, as it is the deepest part of her, the most prevailing of her being, beyond death, a fossil before dying. (37)

Although Cephas desires to possess this new love he has found in Thenjiwe, and through this desire imputes an aura of sovereignty onto Thenjiwe's eyes, the very physiology of bones, Cephas recognizes, undermines his desire. The deepest part of Thenjiwe, Cephas reflects—that which “give[s] form,” her “substance of being”—is also the driest, the most susceptible to being cracked and fractured. Cephas' love of Thenjiwe's bone demonstrates that the vulnerability Cephas attempts to cover is precisely that which constitutes his love. Though death is the ultimate expression of vulnerability, the fact that Thenjiwe's inner substance exists as if she is already dead (“beyond death, a fossil”) casts her acts of living in ontological relation to her coming act of dying, eradicating any clear cut boundary between the living and the dead.

Cephas' recognition of Thenjiwe's being-beyond-death, however, which is also being-as-death—humanity's ontological vulnerability, symbolized by the physiology of bones, which Cephas beholds through his erotic captivation by Thenjiwe—is soon filtered through his desire to possess, which is why he prophetically reflects on his future relation to the dead Thenjiwe. He confesses,

If you died and I could only save one part of your body, I would save this bone. I would carry it with me everywhere, and it would be as though you were alive.

Death is when every part of us vanishes, especially the most precious part. We are here. You are in this bone, and it is my most precious memory. When you move, its motion tells me something intimate about your mind. I am inside you. If you die in my absence and I find that you have already been buried, I will dig your body up to the moonlight, so that I can touch this beautiful bone. Touch it, touch it, touch it, till you are alive. Then I will let you rest. With my fingers on your bone. I tremble to imagine you not here, somewhere in the world, when I am alive, somewhere in the world. What do you think? Thenjiwe. (45)

Cephas' confession is unintentionally prophetic. Thenjiwe soon will die in Cephas' absence, and though he will not dig up Thenjiwe's body, this desire will animate his relation with Thenjiwe's sister, Nonceba. Cephas' thought of himself digging up Thenjiwe's bones, however, symbolizes the anti-thesis of Vera's act of writing the novel. The soil of Kezi is said to have a "color like buried bone" (47), referencing the hidden corpses of the *Gukurahundi*, those denied burial and thus denied spiritual agency. Unlike Cephas' present desire to, in the future, archive his present experience by uncovering and retaining the deepest part of Thenjiwe (her bone), Vera writes this novel as an act of dispossession, of burying and thus allowing corpses their own spiritual agency.

Vera's burial act, which is entirely different than Cephas' desire for a future, archival unburying act, is why Thenjiwe does not respond to Cephas' confession. Her silence after Cephas' prophecy interrupts its beauty, and Vera stylistically performs similar interruptions throughout the chapter. During the most intimate scenes, Vera inserts phrases like "He has to leave" (40), "She is already sending him away" (43), and

“Before he leaves her” (44) to remind the reader of the fleeting existence of Thenjiwe and Cephas’ relationship. On top of Vera’s interruptions, Thenjiwe’s obsession with a mazhanje seed from Chimanimani functions as a barrier between her and Cephas, even though the seed was a gift from Cephas, a symbol of his home. The seed in her mouth, retained as “evidence of a single encounter with a singular man,” leaves her “breathless. Breathless”—a phrase that associates Thenjiwe and Cephas with the strangers at *ekoneni* (39). Mesmerized, Thenjiwe wishes to be impregnated by Cephas and to name their child Mazhanje. By associating this seed with Thenjiwe’s desire for fertility, Vera suggests that Thenjiwe and Cephas are in search of a sacred ritual—much like the Mwali ritual I previously discussed in which a seed is soaked in the sacred pools of Gulati.

The seed, however, soon replaces Cephas, becoming the mesmerizer. “Mazhanje. Thenjiwe flicks the seed to the roof of her mouth and pushes the man aside, way off the bed. [. . .] She breathes deeply. Solitude. She forgets his name. She never wants to be reminded of the name again till he tires of her and wakes one morning and catches that Kezi-Bulawayo-Kezi bus” (39). Though the fruit’s flavor is lost in the “dry sweetness” of the seed, Thenjiwe becomes “possessed” by the mazhanje, never calling Cephas by name (even two months into their relationship), focusing instead on the mazhanje (42). Thenjiwe continuously questions Cephas on the details of the mazhanje tree, which “takes her more and more away from him, from their touch and caress, from their moments of peace. Which takes her away. Certainly. It is in her eyes, which no longer look at him. Past him” (42). Like Cephas, Thenjiwe begins to desire a certain epistemic ownership, to possess a knowledge of the other’s commencement, to archive

Cephas' origins. Moreover, since Thenjiwe associates the seed with Cephas' ethnic origin, Thenjiwe's archive fever not only repeats Cephas' possessive desire, but figures the split in their relationship as an allegory of the Shona/Ndebele division fueling the *Gukurahundi*.

Using a half burned piece of paper and some charcoal, Thenjiwe attempts to draw mazhanje roots. In her drawing, "[s]ome roots spread farther and farther apart," much like her and Cephas (43). Although these roots have "the same source, they will never touch again. These are the strongest roots of all" (43). The mazhanje drawing thus represents the relation between Thenjiwe and Cephas forming and falling apart as well as the work of Vera's novel. Like Thenjiwe's drawing, Vera's writing seeks the roots, the source, of transsubjective existence; for she knows that "the roots of trees have shapes more definite than leaves" (43). Yet, the strongest roots, the deepest source, is split. Transsubjectivity in the novel is, Vera suggests, transient, falling apart at its very root. Thenjiwe and Cephas embrace on top of her drawing as the fire goes out: "Her voice, naked in the dark, unable to locate form or shape, of tree or man, is vanished, too" (44). In this space of pure transsubjectivity in which borders between forms vanish, Thenjiwe discovers the source of her newfound love.

Implicated together in the darkness, losing sense like the *amavimbandlebe*, Thenjiwe soon desires to possess this experience of dispossession by archiving the shape of both of their roots to enlighten one another, thus shifting her desire from uncovering Cephas' roots to disclosing her own, the roots of the marula tree. The mazhanje and the marula roots represent the "roots" of two homelands—as the narrative continues the seeds grow more distinctly into an ideology of ethnicity—and astonished by a such a

contingent emergence of love, Thenjiwe doubts the reality of Cephas' care, needing archived proof of this emergence to let herself trust the foreign Cephas. Though Cephas is besotted with Thenjiwe, Thenjiwe desires more—to know and be fully known—which leads her mind back to the marula tree, the symbol of her desire to possess an archivable history of her new love precisely by being possessed by Cephas. She wonders,

Till he could relish that taste and know the shape of these roots, how can he, with truth and abandon, ever proclaim to linger, to love her as absolutely as she desires to be loved, as knowingly, with all his mind intact, not wandering off to his own tree, to his own slope and incline, to his mountains in the eastern highlands, where that mazhanje grows and beckons him to return? (46-47)

Worrying that Cephas does not possess a knowledge of Thenjiwe's ethnic roots, she becomes afraid that the very transience which constituted her and Cephas' miraculous encounter will also constitute their splitting apart, which is why she, at the expense of acknowledging Cephas's presence, seeks self-disclosure. She must know her own roots, she believes, in order to give them over to Cephas, which, she hopes, will eliminate the possibility of his departure:

She would start, perhaps, with the marula tree. She wants to discover the shape of its roots and show them to him till these roots are no longer under the ground but become the lines planted on his palms, each stroke a path for their dreaming. She knows that if she finds the shape of these roots, at least, he would know a deep truth about her land, about Kezi, about the water buried underneath their feet. (46)

The love Thenjiwe desires cannot be given by a man who has never seen “roots running through the sandiest soil in Kezi, the dries, the most porous soil, with a color like buried bone” (47). To fully love each other, Thenjiwe believes, her and Cephas must know each other’s lands, origins, the roots of their life giving trees.

Thenjiwe also wants Cephas to meet her sister, Nonceba, another step in fostering a more intimate love. She wants Cephas to know that “before he occupied all the places in her mind, Nonceba, her sister, had already been holding her hand quietly and forever” (48). How can Cephas love Thenjiwe without also loving Nonceba, who is not just a sister, but an essential part of who Thenjiwe is: “Nonceba, who, though different, is also she, Thenjiwe” (48). But Cephas misinterprets Thenjiwe’s desire to be known as a loss of affection. Thenjiwe needs Cephas to stay “a little longer, then tell her again about his desire to wake, to die, to be reborn in her graceful arms” in order to build trust, but Cephas “does not hear her silent song and leaves in order to protect her own truthful search, which he dares not understand nor disturb” (48). Knowing Cephas may be leaving permanently, Thenjiwe hands back the seed, which glistens from being delicately kept in her mouth. The seed is “ready to be planted elsewhere,” Thenjiwe thinks, “not here, since she knows nothing about its roots” (49). Both desiring possession, both misinterpreting the desire of the other, Cephas thus leaves Thenjiwe’s “body of milk and dew and mazhanje seeds” (46) and “feels the earth open and swallow him whole” (49),⁶³ a blissful catastrophe after which Vera places an interpretative comment which ends the chapter: “The best love is brief and intense” (49).

⁶³ Benjamin conceptualizes “divine violence” through the same metaphor: the earth opening and swallowing the sons of Korah in the Hebrew Bible. For Benjamin, justice beyond the Law; for Vera, love beyond the archive; for both, it is the language of ritual and myth tethered immanently to human

Chapter 4, which narrates anonymous Kezi residents' experience of the 1980 ceasefire, casts their encounters as repetitions of Thenjiwe and Cephas' affair.

Surrounded by the smell of rain—like the rainy season that forms the backdrop of Thenjiwe and Cephas' encounter—the women of Kezi shout toward the hills of Gulati. Men, recently returned from battle, sit at the Thandabantu Store, where Thenjiwe and Cephas met, with the “faraway, traveled look” of shell shocked veterans (53). Women fall for these men, desiring to bear children with names that memorialize this newfound independence, names like Freedom and Ceasefire (54). Coinciding with Mugabe's landslide victory in the Southern Rhodesian general election, promising the birth of a new political community beyond the structures of racism, the residents of Kezi attempt to create their world anew through loving encounters. Like Thenjiwe and Cephas' re-gensis, couples attempt to form a “new sun rise and set” so that “[t]ime can begin here, in their arms” (57).

Their attempts fail. One couple has sex beside the Kwakhe River, but as they sleep, the man's night terrors wake the woman, and the next morning she, like everyone else in Kezi, stares past her lover toward the hills of Gulati (55-56). Female warriors also return to Kezi on the Shoeshine bus, but after their “breasts have held guns” on the battlefield, sustained human connection is arduous; now these warriors cannot “hold anything overnight less burdensome, less weighty than a broken continent” (59). Consequently, “They are so impenetrable, the Bulawayo men can only wait for them to say something first, but they meet a dead silence” (61). This communication breakdown repeats Thenjiwe and Cephas' relationship. The section ends with these tongue-tied men

experience that can help us articulate the deeply human experience of being moved by that which is beyond the human.

and female warriors standing at the Thandabantu Store listening to the Highlanders vs Dynamos soccer game. Near the beginning of the first chapter, Bulawayo residents watch a “game between Highlanders and any visiting team, whatever its name,” and here, the now named team forms a narrative end-bracket of section one (7). Listening to the score, “enamored by the possibilities of freedom” yet unable to speak, the men

panic, knowing there will never be a time like this again and that the next time they see these women they will no longer be these women and no moment at all like this will continue to exist and that this is the only time that can make the air tremble and their own voices vanish and when no words can be found to greet a woman at noon. No words at all. They fumble and fail. (62)

The men and women start life anew with desire sparked, but a wall emerges between all the new lovers, each time becoming a communication breakdown, figuring Zimbabwean ethnic division as a re-emergence of the Rhodesia from which liberation has been promised.

Rape, Possession, Trauma

The central trauma in the narrative occurs when Sibaso enters the Gumede sisters’ home, where he decapitates Thenjiwe and rapes and mutilates Nonceba. During the rape and murder, Sibaso’s violent acts are described, like Cephas’ acts of love, as acts of possession—suggesting, as Driver and Samuelson argue, “the ontological precariousness of the contrast between them” (109). For example, Sibaso “enters [Nonceba’s] body like a *vacuum*” (68, my emphasis), a word suggesting the loss of Nonceba’s subjectivity as Sibaso reaches towards the “pit of her being” (68) until he

“owns her *like a memory*” (71, my emphasis). In this act of ownership *via* rape, Sibaso enters and possesses Nonceba’s entire body. In fact, the rape is described as spirit possession: “She feels him inside her body. Near. He is as close as her own tongue, as close as her arms are to her body, her hair on her skin, close like her heartbeat; his breathing is her breathing. She is breathing in. His sweat is in her nostrils. His perspiration” (70). As Nonceba “sits inanimate,” Sibaso, like an evil spirit, animates her, refashioning her into a “receptacle for his dreaming” (71). Similar rhetoric accompanies Thenjiwe’s murder. As Nonceba witnesses Sibaso decapitate her sister, she witnesses a scene of spirit possession:

His head is behind Thenjiwe, where Thenjiwe was before, floating in her body; he is in her body. He is floating like a flash of lightning. Thenjiwe’s body remains upright while this man’s head emerges behind hers, inside it, replacing each of her moments, taking her position in the azure of the sky. He is absorbing Thenjiwe’s motions into his own body, existing where Thenjiwe was, moving into the spaces she has occupied. Then Thenjiwe vanishes and he is affixed in her place, before Nonceba’s eyes, sudden and unmistakable as a storm. The moment is his. Irrevocable. His own. (73)

For the terrified Nonceba, Sibaso is a floating spirit taking over her sister’s bodily movement.

While Sibaso performs what Vera calls a “finely practiced” dance of possession, he himself acts as if possessed: “He may forget why he is here, why she is with him, who she is. He, too, may be stunned by his own dramatic presence” (67). Furthermore, each character in this chapter exists in a state of mutual possession, complicating, much

like the rest of the novel, any clear cut separation of subjectivities. For instance, until the end of the chapter, Sibaso's name is not mentioned. Because Sibaso is, like Cephas, referred to as "the man," throughout the scenes of murder and rape, it is unclear who the perpetrator is, and it seems, at first, to be Cephas. Other textual cues also establish a connection between Sibaso and Cephas, raising the question of whether or not they are the same man. Sibaso, for example, holds Nonceba's "dark bone" (70), a move similar to Cephas' handling of Thenjiwe's bone. Similarly, when Sibaso decapitates Thenjiwe, "bone-bright white flashes, neck bone pure" (75). Furthermore, while raping Nonceba, Sibaso "cups her chin as though parts of her are crumbling, falling, *blowing off with the wind*," which was Thenjiwe's fear—being blown off the ground—during her pause before the marula tree (70, my emphasis). Sometimes the text also blends Thenjiwe and Nonceba together. For instance, after Sibaso decapitates Thenjiwe, "He holds Thenjiwe up. Then he seems to hold Nonceba's body up, too, for it is impossible for her to continue standing, for her own mind to survive by its own direction. He holds both their bodies up. Frozen" (74). When Sibaso lifts Thenjiwe, Nonceba's body is seized, suggesting a connection so intimate that the borders between bodies conflate.

This violent transsubjectivity also connects Cephas and Sibaso, Thenjiwe and Nonceba, to the surrounding environment—much like the beginning of the novel. Sibaso's "blood brown" (67) shoes root him in the bush, and the "jingle" of metal objects in his pocket, symbols of his daily life in Matabeleland, function as predatory "instruments," as if they are his own sexual organs, during the rape (70). The violated Nonceba bends like a "tendrill on a hard rock," miming the rocky hills of Gulati, where Sibaso hid in caves during the war, but also the stone virgins he later explicates (68).

Nonceba feels that Sibaso's "nails are flat, as though they have been held *beneath rock* for too long," suggesting that his body incarnates the same location (77, my emphasis). Likewise, when Nonceba witnesses Sibaso holding Thenjiwe, Nonceba's voice emulates the rocks while Thenjiwe's corpse blends with the muddy earth. Nonceba desires to cry out to her decapitated sister, but "[t]here is only discord; release as deaf as stone. The mud, dead, dried, red. She calls again for Thenjiwe. Dead" (76). Since these rocks harbor the ancient cave paintings from which the novel borrows its name, these associations cast Thenjiwe, Nonceba, and *Sibaso* as sacrificial virgins.

After the murder and rape, Sibaso interprets his victims as one and the same with the paintings:

He sees her dancing heels, her hands chaste dead bone, porously thin, painted on a rock. Her neck is leaning upon a raised arrow, her mind pierced by the sun. She is a woman from very far, from long ago, from the naked caves in the hills of Gulati. She does not belong here. She bears the single solitude of a flame, the shape and form of a pained memory. (78)

In this passage, Sibaso refers to both Thenjiwe and Nonceba, as well as the "painted memory" of ancient women in Gulati, as the same "her." Moreover, when, amidst the violence Sibaso inflicts upon Thenjiwe and Nonceba, the door swings open and slams into the doorframe, the sound of the slam "dies like a living thing," as if the house itself cries alongside the sisters (69). Similarly, when Nonceba, upon witnessing Thenjiwe's decapitation, falls, she

falls in the same way sound disappears, the way it moves away from one without shifting boulders the way water does, without disturbing even the most

weightless object, not the lightest feather, without changing the pattern of stars.

Sound departs without substance, like a torn veil lifting, greeting the air, like
burning silk. (74)

Sound dies alongside the sisters, and Nonceba falls alongside sound. This transsubjectivity casts each subject as mutually non-substantive—much like the novel's opening vignettes; each subject ephemerally emerges together like burning silk.

Vera's prose further complicates this conflation of subjects when, during the narration of Nonceba's rape, Vera interrupts the novel's third person narration with moments of first person narration, blending the narrator and Nonceba together while also placing them in contestation. Here, for example, third person narration is interrupted by four brief sentences of first person narration, which is followed by a recapturing of the position of narration by the third person narrator:

She is a caterpillar—she can hide inward, recoil, fold her knees and her elbows, and all the parts of her body that can bend, that are pliable, in her mind. I am waiting. I am alive now, a companion to his every thought. I am breathing. My temples, beating. She closes her eyes and her body listens as his movements pursue each of her thoughts. She breathes. Harm. (68)

This technique demonstrates at the level of narration an assertion of ephemeral agency similar to the various forms of *ekoneni* in the first section. Against the third person form of Nonceba's own narrative existence, which here casts her as an insect, she briefly narrates herself, gaining a fleeting, first person subject position within the novel.

Paradoxically, this act of narrative agency happens at the very moment when Nonceba is becoming someone's disposable object of possession. Furthermore, like the Bulawayo

bandleader conjuring Satchmo, the cruel reality of Nonceba's position as someone's object quickly interrupts her agential interruption, throwing her back into a object position narrated by someone else. Although Nonceba, like the bandleader, briefly inhabits the narrative "I," she is thrown back into a subordinate position, this time under both Sibaso and the narrator: "*She* is silent, without worth, with nothing precious but time" (69, my emphasis).

Time is consequently the next space through which agency is contested. Sibaso's aging hair, "white and black mingling together, inter-twined," representing both the racial politics of the newly independent Zimbabwe and each character's unstoppable, temporal movement towards death, is described by Nonceba, recalling Thenjiwe's words, as "cemetery flowers" (77). Nonceba remembers her sister's poetic language, "The head has a way of gathering its own flowers, of gathering time into a bouquet," but the narrator challenges Thenjiwe's proverbial wisdom (77). "That was not true about time moving relentlessly forward, leading us toward the grave. Time stands still, like now," when Nonceba, staring at her decapitated sister, is being raped by a stranger (77). Teleology, even teleology towards death, is thus challenged, and this challenge is deepened through another narrative interruption.

Although Nonceba's narrative interruptions continue every so often throughout the rape and murder scene, the last interruption is unique due its temporality. After the rape, a third person narrator describes Sibaso cutting off Nonceba's lips, which is followed by a first person narrator re-describing the incident. In the second narration, however, the novel's present tense is interrupted by a past tense. The first person narrator thus re-narrates the attack looking back on the incident from an unnamed time

in the future. “It seemed,” Nonceba, now in the position of the narrator, describes, “he had only touched me briefly with the back of his hand, mildly, and moved his right elbow near my left shoulder, raised it high, it seemed then” (79). The next paragraph falls back into third person, present tense, but describes Nonceba like the virgins of the cave paintings, thus continuing the narrative gesture of looking back on the past—this time an ancient past: “Nonceba mourns with a hunger caught between rock and sky” (79). Furthermore, earlier, during Nonceba’s rape, the narrator asks a philosophical question raised by this transtemporal, transsubjective narrative gaze. “Has she lived before this moment of urgency and despair?” the narrator asks, “Is there something whispered before a cataclysmic earthquake, sleep, before a frightful awakening to death? Is life not lived backward, in flashes, in spasms of hopeless regret?” (69). In the same way that Nonceba’s rape reconstitutes her past, present and future, so that any of her temporal spaces find their roots in the rape—as if life now begins with rape—does life itself emerge, the narrator asks, in the temporality of traumatic flashbacks?

Nonceba—raped, lips severed, leaving her “wordless”—symbolizes the voiceless victims of *Gukurahundi*, dying “far away, too far away” from any noticeable subject position within the global field visibility: “No one can hear. No one sees” her suffering (110). The memory of Sibaso slicing off Nonceba’s lips is registered in her unconscious like trauma, cut off from language and narrative.⁶⁴ “I miss his next act,” she declares, “It occurs between one breath and the next, one gesture, one act. I carry this moment now like a blindness. His movements are quick. I do not remember when or how anything occurs, the unfolding of his fierce act” (110). Despite Nonceba’s lack of

⁶⁴ See Bessel van der Kolk on the process through which traumatic memory is stored in the amygdala, a region cut off from linguistic, narrative meaning and thus unable to be remembered consciously.

conscious memory, the event of her lips being sliced off is harbored within Nonceba's unconscious, cut off from historical, narrative registration, thus repeating Sibaso's perpetration: she cannot speak of the event which took away her ability to speak. This harboring of traumatic memory is experienced as spirit possession, Sibaso delving deeper into Nonceba's body. "My mouth severed, torn, pulled apart," Nonceba proclaims, but "the memory of it is the blood in my bones"—not just the memory, but the perpetrator himself: "Sibaso. In my bones" (109).⁶⁵

Nonceba awakens in the hospital to the sound of a woman screaming. The woman screams "in Nonceba's mind," casting the hospital as Nonceba's unconscious—the house, host, that which gives hospice to her memories (87). In this hospital Thenjiwe visits Nonceba, attempting to give language to the unspeakable, traumatic memory harbored in her bones: "When true sadness enters your heart, Nonceba, it is like a piece of the sun. A fire burns everything. A fire burns water. I have a piece of this sun lodged inside me today" (94). The dead Thenjiwe, who speaks of herself as Nonceba, associates the memory of their murder and rape with the fantastic experience of the sun being lodged inside the body: a sadness that will burn the survivor to ash, vanish her into the air, thus vanquishing her survival.⁶⁶ The other survivors in Nonceba's hospital ward embody a similar fate. They each bear "wounds of war, which no one can heal; bandages and stitches cannot restore a human being with a memory intact and true inside the bone" (95). Just like Nonceba, the bones of the nameless survivors in the

⁶⁵ This predicament recalls the passage in Ovid's *Metamorphoses* in which Philomela is raped and her tongue is sliced off, leaving her unable to testify. She weaves her testimony onto a cloth, however, which she sends to her sister, Procne. In Ovid's rendering of the myth, the sisters enact revenge upon the perpetrator, but Vera here empties the Philomela myth of the desire for vengeance. Much like Derrida's reading of Hamlet's existential dilemma in *Specters of Marx*, Vera uses the (much more corporeal) dilemma of the voiceless, raped Philomela to seek a form of justice beyond the structure of vengeance.

⁶⁶ This phrase also relates her suffering to the paintings of the virgins, whose legs embrace the sun.

hospital ward harbor memories of suffering that refuse to heal. Moreover, since this hospital is Nonceba's unconscious, these other survivors are other forms of herself, demonstrating, like the dead Thenjiwe, the inescapable persistence of wounding after the survival of trauma (90).

On the other hand, Nonceba is another form of each patient—one of many victims of *Gukurahundi*, each seeking shelter in this phantasmagoric hospital ward (90). Consequently, in this space where Nonceba's "world is superimposed," the screams of the woman who wake Nonceba begin to blend with her own voice: "When she hears the woman's voice in the corridor, she hears her own voice beside it" (90). Nonceba also hears voices discussing the backstory of the woman screaming. According to the story, soldiers stormed her family's home, gave her an ax and held her two sons at gunpoint. They left the woman with a choice: ax her husband to death or watch her sons be shot. Weeping, yet honoring her husband's plea, the woman killed her husband. Suddenly, Nonceba sees the woman in the air: "The woman is a tree and all the branches are in her head, moving back and forth. The woman wants to cut the tree down with the ax" (89). Despite Nonceba's attempt to stop her, the woman axes the tree, which, though it is herself, is also becoming a separate entity as the woman's body "move[s] far away" (89). She now stands, ax disappeared, in a pool of blood, and Nonceba's vision of the woman ends. This vision reflects the Tancred and Clorinda parable discussed in my introduction. For Freud, Tancred slicing the tree becomes an act of accidentally wounding his beloved (whose spirit resides within the tree) once again, demonstrating the repetition compulsion. More radically, here, the nameless woman, who *is* the tree in which her husband's spirit dwells, compulsively kills her husband again—and thus

herself—severing their relation, distancing herself from the tree (which, narrated after Thenjiwe and Cephas' encounter, is also associated with ethnic origins and the possibility of a re-genesis).

Through Nonceba's conundrum of being unable to speak about the violent deed which took away her ability to speak incarnates the conundrum of Matabeleland mutilated and silenced by the *Gukurahundi*. The following depiction of Nonceba in the hospital is therefore also a depiction of thousands of survivors throughout Matabeleland, each grasping for the language through which they can voice their suffering:

She is mute. A voice dying. Unable to shape words into language, to breathe freely. She will have to find the sources of sound inside her, a pure and timeless sound. Then she will open her mouth and let the sound free. Words will flow, then language. Only then will she discover a world in contrast to her predicament. She will restore her own mind, healing it in segments, in sound.
(90-91)

For Vera, in the aftermath of a horror for which there are no words, no language, healing begins with sound, which becomes words, which become language. Sofia Kostelac connects Vera's propensity for narrating rape, abuse, and murder in lyrical prose with the relation between trauma and language in Vera's novels:

The dissonance between the elegantly crafted lyricism and its macabre subject matter amplifies the gap between the signifier and its referent, indicating that there are areas of experience which language cannot reach. [. . .] This aporia complicates any simplistic notion that the voice of the marginalised is seamlessly reclaimed in Vera's prose. While there is a constant search for a language to

‘open a space’ for the enunciation of subalternity in the text, these silences simultaneously acknowledge the spaces where the subaltern’s speaking *cannot* be retrieved in language and, hence, from history [. . .]. By calling into question the efficacy of representation itself, Vera’s prose does not allow for the easy appropriation of subaltern speech, but always points to the oppressive systems responsible for subaltern silence. (“The Voices” 124)

Like Kostelac, critics such as Ato Quayson, Stephen Chan, Martina Kopf, Jessica Murray, Harris, and Driver and Samuelson have fruitfully placed Vera’s attempts to craft subaltern agency in dialogue with psychoanalytic trauma theory.⁶⁷ In “Narratives of Wounded Time: Yvonne Vera’s Poetics of Trauma,” for instance, Kopf further explores what Primorac terms Vera’s “space-time of memory” as a textual incarnation the traumas being narrated. The everyday traumas of black, female life in Rhodesia and Zimbabwe are figured, in Vera’s act of narration, as both corporeal and temporal wounds:

By transposing wounds from the physical to the dimension of time, the texts compel us to challenge our perception: The wounds are not what we took them for. They have shifted and changed their appearance and expanded from the physical into the psychic and spiritual dimension. A wounded time has become the actual plot. (108)

By signifying trauma through its narrative form (not only its representational content, but the manner in which the novel symbolizes meaning through time)—what Quayson

⁶⁷ See also See also Régine Michelle Jean-Charles, Anna-Leena Toivanen, and Muponde’s “Reading Girlhood.”

calls Vera's symbolization compulsion⁶⁸—rather than becoming novels of recovery, Vera's novels “recover narration in front of the annihilation of meaning,” Kopf argues (108).⁶⁹

Thus, like the kwela performers of *The Stone Virgins*' beginning, Nonceba's search for a source of healing sound reflects the drive of Vera's writing. But where does this search begin?:

She thinks of the language of animals, which has no words but memory. The movement of their bodies, the memory in their bones, of the places they have been. When they have tragic encounters, how do they survive? Do they close their eyes and dream, or do they dream with their eyes open? Do they dream at all? Are they reborn in sound? Do they nurture death inside their bodies like a hurricane, their tongues inaudible? She would like to know the language of all wounded beings. Where do they begin when everything is ended? Is there a language in the ending of the mind, of all minds? (91)

Nonceba seeks a healing song within a state of liminality between the human and the animal, a state much like the one incarnated by Mwali's oracular priests. Such a song assumes a memory structure contained in the “movement” of bodies and bones, yet with “no words”: a form of memorialization beyond the archival apparatus Vera critiques.

Nonceba then searches for the tree woman, hoping to speak—for the first time to vocalize a suffering nobody heard or saw—but she soon realizes that this woman is dead

⁶⁸ Quayson writes, “Symbolization compulsion is the drive toward an insistent metaphorical register even when this register does not help to develop the action, define character or spectacle, or create atmosphere. It seems to be a symbolization for its own sake but in fact is a sign of a latent problem”: a *systemic disorder* in the postcolony, which the postcolonial text incarnates as trauma (*Calibrations* 82).

⁶⁹ Vera's writing is in this sense an example of what Adriana Cavarero calls “narrative against destruction.”

and, like Nonceba during her rape, unable to be seen or heard. Such a quest is “futile, an impossible search, to follow a voice to its source. She would not know what to ask, how to ask. She is chasing shadows” (95). Ultimately, I will suggest in the next section, this chase is symbolic of Vera’s act of writing this novel: “To speak to the dead, one must assume a silence to exceed their own” (95).

Sibaso’s Burial Rite

Vera does not cast Sibaso as purely evil. In fact, when Sibaso flees from the Gumede sisters’ home, terrified at his own cruel deeds, he performs a ritual which demonstrates the novel’s hope. As a “man who is reconciled” and “perfectly set free” who, through this independence, murders Thenjiwe and rapes/mutilates Nonceba, Sibaso represents the contradictions of postcolonial Zimbabwe, where independence from white supremacist rule led to widespread violence (117). He seeks protection from the spirit of Nehanda, the famous Shona *svikiro*, or spirit medium, of the 19th century, who inspired the first Chimurenga and has continued to function as a symbol of freedom fighting (117). Even Sibaso’s birth, like the birth of Zimbabwe, which was accompanied by *Gukurahundi*, is accompanied by death. “When I was born,” he explains, “my mother had already died. She had stopped breathing. I swam out of her body, which flowed like a river. It is this to be alive” (117). Like the continuation of violence after the birth of independent Zimbabwe, “Independence is the compromise,” Sibaso declares, “to which I could not belong. I am a man who is set free, Sibaso, one who remembers harm” (97). Sibaso, like his nation, remembers and reenacts harm, even after being “set free.” For Vera, this posttraumatic condition represents both the nation-state of Zimbabwe and the

continent of Africa. As Sibaso, whose “arms [are] a nest for a continent” (98), puts it, “Independence, which took place only three years ago, has proved us a tenuous species, a continent that has succumbed to a violent wind, a country with land but no habitat. We are out of bounds in our own reality” (82). Like his country and continent, outside its own reality, Sibaso himself “exists in several realities,” which produces a desire to reground himself.

For example, Sibaso attempts to reground himself in the reality of his personal history. While the country is celebrating independence, Sibaso, who fought for this independence but continues to feel “like a prisoner” (121), returns to Njube Township, where he grew up, hoping to reunite with his father—a stable, bodily symbol of the reality of Sibaso’s personal history amidst the chaos of a nation creating a new history. However, Sibaso discovers what Nonceba discovers in Kezi, where she grew up: “[E]verything has already changed, gone, not to be recovered” (90). Sibaso finds a stranger living in his father’s house, and the only trace left of Sibaso’s past is an old book: Solomon Mutsaers’ *Feso*, the first Shona novel. Sibaso walks by his old school and opens the book, but in this return to the past, the past assaults Sibaso. He immediately feels his head explode and mouth dry up. He clings to the school’s fence, attempting to ground himself in the very past assaulting him. Within the book he finds an old map with an arrow on it: an escape route. Sibaso planned this escape years ago (presumably to join the resistance), but now, as he is attempting to reground himself in his past, the presence of a past escape route suggests that his past is no place to seek shelter, but a place from which to escape. The map thus becomes an escape route from the past signifying the need to escape from the past.

When Sibaso flips through the book's pages, "[t]ime swings forward," suggesting that the book represents history, the movement of time (122). Beneath the map, Sibaso finds a "crushed spider weighed down by time," further signifying the oppressive weight of Sibaso's past, his struggle against time (121). Sibaso is, however, always intertwined with his country and continent, even while exploring his personal history. "Of all continents," he declares, "only Africa has known the crushed solitude of a dead spider. Charcoal perfect" (122). Consequently, this pressed spider, which at first appears to be a "faint sketch in charcoal," but now that the book is open and the exoskeleton has slightly raised, bears a contrast through which it is unable to "merge with words" on the page, symbolizes both Sibaso and Africa (122). The charcoal appearance figures Sibaso's and Africa's experience of being crushed by time, like a spider in a book, also reflecting Thenjiwe's charcoal drawing, an attempt to represent the movement of time. The raised exoskeleton, dissociating itself from the words on the page, however, functions as a reminder of the inability of language (including drawing, such as Thenjiwe's) to ever capture time's movement.

This failure of language does not, however, leave Sibaso, Africa, Thenjiwe, or the spider voiceless in the face of history. Unlike the spider's exoskeleton, Sibaso notes, "A spider's web does not break. It stretches, just like time" (121). Though the movement of time, signified by the book, may crush the spider, the spider's creation, its web, outlives its creator, bending with time as a trace of a life now gone. Sibaso continues, "In war, time weaves into a single thread. This thread is a bond. Not all bonds are sacred" (121). If the spider's web represents the presence of a web weaver's trace within history despite the transience of the web weaver crushed by time, by casting the

waging of war as the weaving of a spider's web, Sibaso is casting the waging of war as the act of writing, through traces, history. Just as the soldiers who rape and pillage Matabeleland as a "ritual for their own convictions," Sibaso conceptualizes the fight for independence as the ritualistic weaving of personal, national, and continental history across the body politic of Zimbabwe (135). Furthermore, by claiming that war-waging weaves a "single thread" forming a non-sacred "bond," Sibaso is casting the historical reality written by war as a bond able to be broken by the creation of new threads. But how does one weave this web of new threads, this postwar web? The following passage raises the same question:

I have harvested handfuls of spider legs while they remained interlocking like promises, weightless, harmless needles. Time's shadow: life's residue. I blow life's remains off my hand like a prediction. On my hand is a dark melody, shapes that curl and twist into thin marks, like tiny words on a page, a hand-written pamphlet, some spilled ink on ancient rock. I wipe my palm clean. Our country needs this kind of hero who has a balm for his own wounds carried between lip and tongue, between thumb and forefinger, between earth and the soles of his feet, who is in flight toward an immaculate truth. (83-84)

The weightless spider legs Sibaso harvests signify the traces of lives blown amidst time. On his hand they curl into marks pointing toward a melody, the "sound" which has been a constant theme throughout the novel. This melody is then associated with the stone virgins, "spilled ink on ancient rock," and thus the Gumede sisters and even Sibaso himself. Zimbabwe needs someone who can read the melody written by these spider legs, Sibaso declares.

The discovery of this crushed spider during Sibaso's venture into his past is also uncanny, considering Sibaso's history with spiders. Throughout the war, Sibaso ate "handfuls of spider legs," and in the chapter directly after the murder of Thenjiwe and rape of Nonceba, Sibaso narrates a lyrical arachnology—in part a sparse, poetic rewriting of Ishmael's cetology in *Moby Dick*—blending philosophical and political reflection, figurations of themes and characters throughout the novel, and descriptions of five different types of spiders (82). The first type of spider is able to vanish into the air, "its life a mere gasp" (83). During the approach of an earthquake or an enemy in war, this spider rallies its kin, piling into a mound, referred to as a "cubicle of time," sealing the mound with spit, then together the kin commence "self-inflicted ruin, seeking another form of escape" (83). In this collective, ritual death, much like the ancient ritual of the stone virgins and the flight of the *amavimbandlebe*, "The body vanishes, from inside out, the inside pouring like powdered dust, the legs a fossil. This is the end of creation, the beginning of war" (83).

While the first type of spider escapes impending destruction through a collective act of disappearance into time, the second type of spider fights for survival. "I have seen a spider dancing with a wasp," Sibaso declares (84). This dancing spider, common in township homes, survives destruction, providing hope for their human observers. "Every survivor," Sibaso explains, "envies a spider dancing with a wasp" (84). Like Nonceba and the other survivors of *Gukurahundi*, this spider refuses to vanish, dancing with, rather than giving into, the movement of time. While mating, the third type of spider changes color and devours its partner. This spider then rolls its dead partner into a "fine paste," which it offers as a gift to the next partner—a "perfectly prepared sacrifice in

exchange for a brief but sweet liaison” (84). Like Sibaso, this spider preys upon and sacrifices its partner, and like Cephas—who at the end of the novel becomes Nonceba’s lover—it has “two kinds of lovers, the one located in the past, and dead, the one in the future, living and more desirable” (84). Much like the narration of the rape and murder, this spider associates Sibaso with Cephas, connecting them through ritual. In an endless suspension between the dead and the living—the dead lover feeds the living lover, who becomes the dead lover to feed the future lover—this spider experience time as ritual: “The past a repast, the future a talisman” (84). This ritualistic temporality, embodied by this spider and both Sibaso and Cephas, is also embodied by Africa. Sibaso declares that “this kind of truth” functions as the “fantasy of a continent in disarray” (84). The land without a habitat mourned by Sibaso thus operates through a “fantasy” of ritual sacrifice, yet this fantasy also holds a “valuable secret—the knowledge that love cannot be founded on mercy but mercy can be founded on love” (84). Recalling Cephas’ relationship with Thenjiwe and Sibaso’s interpretation of the painted virgins, this spider suggests that a new, loving form of sacrifice needs to be crafted.

The fourth type of spider is a “postwar spider” (85). The spider, “fragile, like the membrane around dreams,” figures Freud’s hypothesis of the protective stimuli in *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*, which, in trauma such as war, breaks down (85). “I saw it walk across a mirror one morning,” Sibaso describes, “Then it stopped moving. The mirror looked cracked. I could see my own broken face behind it” (84). This barely present ego of a spider enacting the mirror stage begins to tear apart the ego of the human observer, performing the traumatic process of war survival. Yet, this spider lives and dies nearly invisibly, like the victims of *Gukurahundi*. As Sibaso describes,

“[T]here is nothing to it really, just a pale body. An apparition” (84). The barely present exoskeletal form of this phantom spider renders it almost invisible, both physically and, as the grammatical imagery of the following sentence implies, philosophically: “The joints upon its legs are mere full stops, abbreviations for a death. Its outline is a parenthesis” (85). Held together by the pauses of full stops and the understatement of a parenthetical afterthought, this spider is “almost transparent” (84). Sibaso elaborates: “Whoever would hunt it would have to lick its invisibility off the ground, like spilled salt. It knows how to live on a margin, brittle, like a shard of glass. Who would want to eat such an already-dead thing? In the future there will be no trace of it. It dies outside time” (85).

The fifth spider, the only one named, is the “*umahambemoyeni*—‘the swimmer in the air’” (85). Unmistakably poisonous, this hairy spider, “outrageous in its design and coloration,” crawls like a “deranged dancer” who makes an “art out of inflicting harm” (85). It strolls across Sibaso’s arm while Sibaso plays dead, hoping to be spared. Though the novel does not narrate a bite, Sibaso states, “I thought I had left this sort of spider in the bush, where its charm and dismay belong” (85-86). This sentence implies that, first of all, Sibaso is “charmed” by the dismal *umahambemoyeni*, even after his encounters with the spider during the bush war, and second of all, *umahambemoyeni* remains with Sibaso as he is narrating. Though absent from the narrative itself, a scene of contact between Sibaso and *umahambemoyeni* is implied, and throughout the novel, Vera casts Sibaso in totemic relation to the spider. Like the “swimmer in the air” (85), Sibaso swam out of his dead mother’s body (117).

Given that during the rape and murder, as I have suggested, Sibaso acts as if he too is possessed by a spirit, throughout the novel, Sibaso is, I would claim, possessed by the spirit of *umahambemoyeni*. While raping Nonceba, Sibaso is described as a “predator, with all the fine instincts of annihilation” (69). Like the “deranged dancer” (85), when Sibaso decapitates Thenjiwe, he enacts a “dancing motion so finely practiced, it is clear it is not new to the performer” (75). He dangles the decapitated body over his left shoulder while “his mind dances with a dead body” (75). With the body now on his back, Sibaso turns around twice, steps sideways, backward, forward, and sideways again (76). This deranged dance is the dance of the *umahambemoyeni*, the spinning of a web. Sibaso “clutch[es] that decapitated death like a rainbow,” a reference to the way light reflects off spiderwebs, which the novel mentions multiple times (74).⁷⁰

Sibaso, along with around thirty other dissident warriors, seek shelter from the *Gukurahundi* in the hills of Gulati, which, like *Feso*, represent time. To approach Gulati is to “return to the past” harbored within the rocks (141), a space where “[d]ays go by that are ethereal,” Sibaso explains, “and you forget you are in battle against anything more substantial than time” (99). Here, in this ethereality, when Sibaso stands, his “head hits against something heavy” and “he discovers that history has its ceiling” (83). The hills of Gulati thus represent history itself, and Sibaso’s continuous running into the hills is a flight backwards, downwards, beneath his historically constituted subjectivity. As Sibaso puts it, “In Gulati, I travel four hundred years, then ten thousand years, twenty more. The rocks split open, time shifts, and I confess that I am among the travelers who steal shelter from the dead” (104). Time itself shifts, which means that Sibaso does not

⁷⁰ For example, when Sibaso finds the crushed spider in his old book, he declares, “There is more than one rainbow in a web. The most complex web carries many rainbows” (121).

experience linear time travel, but a shift in temporal structure. He “travels” from his own experience of time to a deeper state of temporal embodiment, a state that he “steals” from the dead, whose corpses decorate Gulati—some recently deceased, some ancient, just bones. A cavern skeleton discovered by the guerilla warriors, for example, places Matabeleland’s current conflict in contact with a “thundering testimony of a sorrow to rival” their current sorrow, and this hidden testimony, like the testimony of thousands of victims of *Gukurahundi*, lies buried, unheard, recorded only through bones left behind (101). Thus, when Sibaso climbs into the Mbelele cave, the most sacred shine in Gulati, and each groove in the rock becomes a “foothold on time” (100), he is climbing inside of history, descending into its unconscious force. Mbelele’s overhanging rock keeps “the rain that heals”—a reference to the “cleansing rains” of *Gukurahundi*—out of the cave, sheltering Sibaso like a “womb” which, existing beneath the surface of history, operates according to its own temporality: “Mbelele has its own seasons,” despite the season of violence in Matabeleland (100). Among the dead, among the ancient rocks, within the sacred cave, Sibaso becomes “the embodiment of time” (83).

The stream of Simude demonstrates the subjective shift accompanying this temporal shift. Wedged between an “ancient parting” in the rocks, the stream is “so pure that you can hardly see your own reflection in it,” creating a “strange sensation of being invisible” (102). Simude therefore produces, through its lack of reflection, a deformation of the ego originally produced, through reflection, in the mirror stage: an anti-mirror stage, a stage of loss in which the ego vanishes back into history.⁷¹ As Sibaso puts it, in Gulati “[e]verything is infinite; it is there, not you” (102). The “you” which acts as the

⁷¹ When Sibaso rapes Nonceba, he looks into her like a mirror, and when the people rejoice over independence, “[t]hey stand in front of mirrors and seek their own truth” (120). Also, when Nonceba begins to heal in the hospital, she decides not to look into a mirror (95).

ego is not “there,” and the “it” which is “there” is the force of history, continuing to move despite the disappearance of the ego. As Sibaso affirms, “It is true: everything in Gulati rots except the rocks. On the rocks, history is steady; it cannot be tilted forward or backward. It is not a refrain. History fades into the chaos of the hills, but it does not vanish” (104). Sibaso himself does vanish, however; after (not) viewing his own invisibility in the stream of Simude, he cloaks himself in yellow grass, “odor severe, like a carcass, dead things,” and jumps into a bomb crater full of cadavers, signifying the death of his ego, a regression into a state prior to the social life in which the ego is constituted (102-103).

He narrates:

I nestle into the warm soil, as close to the dead as I can travel, as far away from the claims of the living, far from myself. Here, in this soil, there is something I can trust, someone. Everything I fear has already happened. I do not fear what has already happened—not the ungraceful arm of history, not recent and touchable deaths. Geographies are my only matter, my absolute concern.

Umhlaba. This earth. The darkness falls close to my skin, like skin. (106-07)

In his de-constituted subjectivity, Sibaso is his environment. When he falls into Mbelele, he becomes “water and air” (100); here, in the bomb crater, he continues to travel away from his “self” and into the soil and darkness, which become his skin. In this state of becoming-environment, Sibaso fears not the “ungraceful arm of history,” which moves, as Benjamin reminds us, like a storm. Instead, Sibaso unites himself with the soil, which, unlike humanity, never struggles against the movement of history, and this soil is granted personhood, “someone” Sibaso trusts. Sibaso translates the Zulu *umhlaba* not as

“earth”, but as “this earth,” emphasizing his immediate surroundings. Here, in *this* pit of cadavers, Sibaso trusts the soil. Sibaso is becoming-this-earth.

Within this soil of which Sibaso speaks lie scattered body parts, the aftermath of an explosion. He becomes one with them:

I lie among the arms, legs, the torso of an already-forgotten man. This is a resting place, this singed place, this shrine of powdered stars. I enter the lives of the dead. The soil is chaos and ash. I enter into its burning. The soil is warm like a liquid. I am among the dead voices. I inhale their last breath. I share their last memory, this sight of thundering perfume. I hear their last sounds, charred voices. (105)

In becoming-this-earth, Sibaso is becoming-dead, sharing the breath and memory of the dead as well as the burning of the soil, now ash. In “entering the lives” of the ash and bodily remains, which represent the burned and torn apart body politic of Zimbabwe, Sibaso’s act of becoming-this-earth takes on political significance, which is why Sibaso calls this pit of the dead the “afterbirth of war”: becoming-dead is also a rebirth, a transition into a new way of living after war. Of equal importance, as Sibaso himself explains, are the ontological questions raised by his process of entering the “lives of the dead”:

A man can vanish in a single sigh. An instant is eternal; in it, a man becomes all sound, then perishes into ash; the echo of his own death outlives him. His life cracks like bone, melts, condenses into fine paste. No struggle can restore a man’s life. Nothing can recapture his presence. He is flame, the smooth heat found on a piece of frayed metal, the mound cooling, finally silent, as though

nothing sudden had happened. It is a peaceful calm except for the signs of death everywhere, the absolute detonation. His life is past. It is not clear if he has died alone or with another. Was he alone? Was he? (105)

In the first sentence, Sibaso begins a treatise on “man” as species, reflecting on our transience, but the last sentence refers to a specific man: the “already-forgotten” corpse who may have died alone. Since the first sentence casts the inquiry as universal, the remains of this specific man prompt the question, *do all men, like this man, die alone?*

Sibaso then finds a whistle in a dead man’s pocket. Curious, he raises the whistle to his mouth. When the whistle touches his lips, Sibaso “taste[s] the presence of a dead man. (106). Sibaso then channels the spirit of the deceased owner of the whistle: “I breathe in his passageway, my breath following his. I blow slowly. The sound emerging is his voice, calling from the ashes. I raise his lips to mine. An eerie passage. Not a lament, but an embrace. Not an embrace, but acceptance” (106). Sibaso follows the lead of the spirit—a word deriving from that Latin *spiritus*, meaning breath—allowing the dead man’s breath within the whistle to animate his own. Through the blow of the whistle, the dead man speaks from his ashes, not lamenting or embracing his untimely death, but, now that his voice has been heard, accepting his place beyond life. However, in this act of conjuring a dead man’s voice, Sibaso wonders, does the voice remain another man’s voice? In other words, through duplication, has Sibaso stolen another man’s spirit?:

Sound is precise, cannot be duplicated; yet, a man imitates the man before him, with all his weaknessess. I hold the whistle with my thumb and forefinger. This is how he must have held it, the man before me. I know I have erased his last

touch, the impress of his fingers. I have lost him. I blow a soft tune, which I can hardly hear. It is the only way to bury man—with a sound lighter than his own ashes. (106)

Sibaso, the weak imitator, to use the language of this passage, follows the sound and movement of the dead man, inventing a spirit possession ritual. In allowing the dead man's spirit to speak through him, however, Sibaso erases the remaining "impression" of the dead man's life. The last finger impress on the whistle—left, presumably, during the bomb explosion—is forever erased, replaced by the impress of Sibaso's finger, but it is during this act of erasure that the dead man's last breath—his last blow of the whistle, the breath signifying his own death—is finally heard. Consequently, in the same act through which Sibaso allows the dead man's spirit to speak, Sibaso also "erases" the trace of the dead man's past life. Sibaso then blows a "soft tune" with his own breath, signifying the passing away of the dead man's spirit: a burial *lighter than ash*.

Like the band leader conjuring Satchmo, this soft tune is symbolic of the novel itself. As I argued earlier, *The Stone Virgins* is not a historical narrative of the *Gukurahundi*, but a narrative burial of the victims of the *Gukurahundi*, performing a spiritual, prophetic historiography at odds with the archival framework often assumed as natural within cultural memory studies. Sibaso's and the dead man's breath ushers the present into an ancestral history—a vital relation between the living and the dead—which constructs the very possibility of "memories of the future"—as Vera puts it in her first novel, *Nehanda*—when memories of the past have been erased, burned to ash (3). Such a historiography (or more precisely, cosmology) is further demonstrated by an approaching wind:

In the darkness, a wind builds, whipping through the trees. It moves against my cheek and throws wild dust into my eyes, hard and sharp grains like bits of ground bone. If I close my eyes, I can tolerate this rough exposure; it is a merciful burial. I raise my hand to protect my face. My eyes are open to the breath of a wind. I hold the rough grains between my fingers. The sensation is not unpleasant. I sleep. (107)

In an act of mutual care, the spirit responds to Sibaso's burial by burying Sibaso. The Greek *pneuma*, meaning spirit, also means wind. Sibaso keeps his eyes open, gazing into this "breath" of the "wind"—that is, gazing into this spirit of a spirit—who gives Sibaso a "merciful burial" under "wild dust": an *umhlaba* burial. By providing care, however belated, in death, Sibaso and the dead man's ritual of spirit possession—invented on the fly, like the pennywhistle solo of a kwela tune—consisting of duplicated breath followed by a duplicated burial answers Sibaso's previous question on dying alone: we must, this spirit of a spirit responds, die in communion.

Conclusion: Deliverance

Archive Fever maps out the manner in which deconstructive psychoanalysis moves beyond the paradigm of repression and the persistence of the trace recoverable through memory work. If the victims of the *Gukurahundi*, for instance, are not merely forgotten and repressed, but rather, historically *erased*, *vanished* from their ancestral place within history, then the writer faced with the responsibility of narrating trauma after the *Gukurahundi* does not inherit the responsibility of the much debated work of cultural memory. It is not the memories of the victims that have been stolen, but rather

their agency, through ancestral history, in the future. This erasure is thus not a trauma of the past, but a trauma of the future, recasting the problem of “the archive as an irreducible experience of the future” (45). The deconstructive, psychoanalytic vision of *Archive Fever* therefore does not correspond to the metaphoric act of digging for a repressed memory, but to a more difficult—in fact, impossible—quest of digging for that which is no longer there, yet continues to assert its absence through what Derrida calls ash, or cinders (59, 61, 62, 63). Taking such a form beyond the paradigm of cultural memory studies, the *Gukurahundi* as represented in *The Stone Virgins* is at its core a spiritual genocide, casting Vera’s writing of history as the under-theorized task of spiritual re-animation, of *calling forth the spirits of the dead*, which is paradoxically, Vera suggests, a latent burial rite, an act of finally *letting the spirits of the dead be*.

The Stone Virgins thus constructs the sort of narrative space Derrida refers to as the space “between life and death” that is “addressed to a dead person”—or, more precisely, dead bodies robbed of their spirits (Derrida, *Specters* xviii; *Archive* 29). What this spectral writing of the archive beyond the archive means is that *The Stone Virgins* is not, as readers may think, an act of historical witnessing directed at the living and intended to raise transnational awareness of an overlooked atrocity. Rather, the novel is Vera’s ritual performance, through fiction, of a latent burial, which is also a spiritual re-animation, of the victims of the *Gukurahundi*. But Vera also leaves hope for the living.

In the last chapter, Nonceba, now living in Bulawayo, strolls past a flower shop while the clanging bells from the City Hall reverberate through the city. The bells ring every fifteen minutes, reminding everyone of the time (166). This scene is reminiscent of Clarissa Dalloway’s walk to the flower shop in Woolf’s *Mrs. Dalloway*, in which Big

Ben's methodic rings keep London moving *on time*. Vera makes this allusion more explicit. As Nonceba decorates the room Cephas has given her, the bedroom directly across from his own, the room, located in 341 Kensington Flats, becomes "completely hers" (169-71). This room, a space of healing, alludes to Woolf's birthplace (Kensington in London), and Nonceba's ownership refers, like the beginning of the novel, to Woolf's famous call for the female writer to have a room of her own. Vera thus asks us to interpret *The Stone Virgins* in dialogue with Woolf. I would suggest that J. Hillis Miller's "*Mrs. Dalloway*: Repetition as the Raising of the Dead" provides an interpretive key for this intertextual relation. For Miller, each "mind" in Woolf's novel exists only in relation to every other mind, including the narrator's mind, demonstrating what we may call a relational ontology. For Miller, the scene in which an old woman standing near Regent's Park Tube Station sings a wordless song with "'the voice of an ancient spring' spouting from some primeval swamp," which seems to have been projecting noise for "millions of years," demonstrates the impetus of *Mrs. Dalloway* (180). In a similar scene, responding to the horror Sibaso inflicted upon the Gumede sisters, their aunt Sihle "moans a lullaby that flows from the sky to the earth. She awakens all our ancestors" while her "voice splits the air, so close that it seems to emerge from my own body," Nonceba describes (113; 112). Hillis Miller writes,

An impulse to create a social situation which will bring into the open the usually hidden continuities of present with past, of person with person, of person with depths of himself, is shared by all the principal characters of *Mrs. Dalloway*. This universal desire makes one vector of spiritual forces within the novel a general urge toward lifting up and bringing together. (184)

While Woolf uses modernist narrative form to articulate a spiritual force animating the human desire to “lift up” and “bring together” the living and the dead into some form of communal existence, Vera pairs this form with the indigenous ecotheology of the Mwali cult as well as her desire to belatedly bury the victims of the *Gukurahundi* in order to “lift up” and “bring together” their position in the ancestral, spiritual realm. Moreover, by placing Nonceba’s room within Cephas’ apartment, Vera questions the concept of “one’s own” proliferated by the American, feminist reception of Woolf, suggesting on the contrary that, like Woolf’s novels, the dispossession of agency is the only route toward crafting a new form of agency. Vera ultimately makes this claim through the character of Cephas. Ironically, he is an archivist for the National Museums and Monuments of Zimbabwe (154; 182). Cephas the archivist becomes, in the end, the novel’s protagonist, the one who learns love by surrendering his desire for possession which culminated in him leaving Thenjiwe. This surrender becomes, for Vera, an image of hope for the future.

In the novel’s final pages, looking back on his departure from Thenjiwe, Cephas realizes that Thenjiwe’s hesitancy to commit herself, like Cephas, to their newfound love was actually Thenjiwe’s way of asking Cephas to stay, to linger within their affair a bit longer as she learns more about him: “Thenjiwe needed other kinds of truths before accepting their own truth. They hardly knew each other. [. . .] She had hesitated; he had hesitated, and left. He had not heard her at all [. . .] Thenjiwe had asked him to stay” (182-83). This mistake is called his “original sin” for which he is seeking, through his relation to Nonceba, penance:

When he met Nonceba, then, he was *seeking penance*, for an absence, for a forgetfulness, for abandon: He now felt it was he who had walked away.

Thenjiwe had asked him to stay. He needs to sustain the attitude of the *penitent*: a *contrite heart*, which dares not double its *original sin*. He is beginning to mistake his weakness for fortitude. (183, my emphases)

The last line revises Cephas' religious zeal towards his past relationship with Thenjiwe, decorated in Christian language, as *weakness*. "He must retreat from Nonceba," the narrator consequently argues; for "perhaps he has become too involved in replicating histories" (184). Cephas the archivist, argues the narrator, is too involved in replicating the past, and should instead construct a future relationship out of the blueprints of the past. Unlike his "original sin" of desiring to possess Thenjiwe, Cephas must learn to let Nonceba go, to love her without possessing her and therefore perform the sacrificial love at which he previously failed.

Here, the religious etymology of Cephas' name is important. In the New Testament, *Cephas*, the Aramaic word for rock, is what Jesus renames his disciple Simon, the Greek translation of which is *Petros*, resulting in the English name *Peter*. John narrates Jesus' renaming of Simon succinctly: "Thou art Simon the son of Jona: thou shalt be called Cephas, which is by interpretation, A stone" (John 1:42b). Matthew's narration, however, bypasses Aramaic translation, allowing the Greek wordplay to signal itself, focusing instead on Peter's position within the construction of a new, spiritual community:

And I say also unto thee, That thou art Peter [*Petros*], and upon this rock [*petra*]
I will build my church [*ekklēsian*, meaning *assembly*, literally signifying—by

combining *ek*, “out of,” and *klesis*, “a calling”—an assembly produced by subjects called out of a previous mode of existence]; and the gates of hell [*Hades*, the realm of the dead] shall not prevail against it. (Matt. 16:18)

In Matthew’s account, Jesus’ renaming of Simon to Peter symbolizes Peter’s role within the formation of a collective subjectivity that is no longer dictated by the laws of death, signified by the gates of *Hades*. You are a rock, explains Jesus, and it is through such rock that my collective subjectivity beyond the realm of death will be produced. Vera draws on this Christian etymology in her character Cephas, but rather than extolling Christian ecclesiology, she associates Cephas, the rock, with Gulati, the Voice of the Rock and thus the Voice of Mwali, and rather than placing her hope in a coming resurrection of the dead, Vera has Cephas perform, like Sibaso, a burial which is paradoxically a re-animation of the dead.

The novel ends with Cephas beginning his assignment of recreating King Lobengula’s kraal from the 19th century. As Vera writes in the novel’s last sentence, Cephas’ “task is to learn to re-create the manner in which the tenderest branches bend, meet, and dry, the way grass folds smoothly over this frame and weaves a nest, the way it protects the cool, livable places within—deliverance” (184). Cephas must *re-create* (a word reminiscent of Cephas and Thenjiwe’s position as the novel’s “originary couple”) this historical kraal—which is where Lobengula was tricked into signing the Rudd Concession in 1888 and is thus the space of the contractual genesis of Rhodesia. Through this second chance at a re-genesis Cephas is given the responsibility of *weaving deliverance*, a responsibility reminiscent of Benjamin’s messianic theology, embodied in the coming archivist whom Derrida calls the ““scholar of the future”

(*Specters* 177), yet also curiously reminiscent of a spider spinning a web, thereby casting Cephas as a new Sibaso. By weaving a living relation between an ancestral past and a fragile present, Vera suggests, Cephas must become an archivist of the future—like Nehanda before him, a prophet—and for Vera, this task finds its language not in archiving the past, but in remembering the future embedded in the past. Yet, as Sibaso's spirit possession ritual in the pit of cadavers suggests, when history has been burnt to ash, the task of prophetic remembrance bestowed upon Cephas must also become a burial of agency itself, which places hope in a re-animated agential relation between the living, the dead—and, as the next chapter will suggest, the unborn.

Chapter 3

The Sacrificial Foundation of Community in Wole Soyinka's *Death and the King's Horseman*

For the truly independent thinker it is always easy—and often relevant—to recall the artificiality, the cavalier arrogance, the exploitive motivations which went into the disposal of African peoples into nationalities.

Soyinka, *The Man Died: Prison Notes* (175).

I shall begin by commemorating the gods for their self-sacrifice on the altar of literature, and in so doing press them into further service on behalf of human society, and its quest for the explication of being.

Soyinka, *Myth, Literature and the African World* (1).

Wole Soyinka's *Death and the King's Horseman* was first titled *Death and the District Officer*. This title places antagonist Simon Pilkings, British district officer in

colonial Nigeria, in striking parallel with protagonist Elesin Oba, horseman of the king of Oyo. A scene deleted from *Horseman* demonstrates this proximity. Simon complains to his wife, Jane, that he is stationed away from then raging World War II. “I just can’t go through the war sitting at an outpost of empire while my old school chums are all doing their bit and getting killed,” he declares. “Oh Simon do stop being silly,” she responds, “And anyway, why do you want to commit suicide?” Simon is confused, but Jane persists: “Why are you so anxious to be a dead hero?” (*Death and the D.O.* II-10). Jane’s questions reveal a will to die on behalf of the community, which unites the horseman and the district officer and their respective communities. This unity complicates the plot as well as the interpretive framework through which critics approach the play.

Later, Simon arrests Elesin before he completes a death-rite on behalf of the Oyo Kingdom. Elesin calls himself a “traveller” to the “navel of the world,” conceptualizing his death not as, in Simon’s view, the stasis at the horizon of sequential time, but a transition into another form of life within cyclic time (13). What is for Elesin sacrifice is for Simon suicide. Speaking candidly with Jane, however, Simon reveals the hypocrisy of his judgement by wishing he too could die for his empire, or as Jane puts it, commit suicide. Despite Simon’s aversion to the Oyo Kingdom’s practice of human sacrifice, the British Empire, this scene implies, bears the same sacrificial structure. The published version of the play contains a debate between Jane and Elesin’s son, Olunde, over the self-sacrifice of a British captain who blew himself up with his ship to save a coastal community. In both this unpublished scene and the final draft, then, Soyinka places the political communities his critics juxtapose, European and African, in mimetic relation

by hinging both upon the willed sacrifice of their subjects. *Horseman*'s tragedy—the Yoruba people's severance from the sacrificial structure of the Oyo Kingdom—is therefore both contingent and universal, symbolizing through a crisis in the Oyo *polis* a crisis generative of the political as such: what Jacques Derrida calls the “sacrificial structure” of culture (“Eating Well” 112).

Taking this scene as a point of departure, I wish to explore the relation between the political theology of sacrifice and cosmological trauma theory immanent to *Horseman*. I will argue that by staging the loss of a sacrificial rite and with this rite the desacralization of a communal experience of time, Soyinka narrates the trauma of colonization as a cosmological rupture resulting in an entanglement between the cyclic time of ritual and the sequential time of modernity.⁷² Critics largely mistake this process as secularization, but I will claim that it is a transfiguration of the sacred as, paradoxically, desacralization.⁷³ Although unacknowledged within criticism, Elesin's indigenous death-rite transfigures, I will suggest, into an imperial possession-rite, incarnating the political theology of the colony as a ritualized sacrifice of sacrificial mediation. Soyinka explores the structure of this political-theological process in his *Myth, Literature and the African World* lectures, delivered in 1973, while writing

⁷² For the cosmological aspect of Freudian trauma theory see Jean Laplanche.

⁷³ I use the term *transfiguration* rather than the term *metamorphosis* strategically. Metamorphosis suggests a change in the subject's essence, while transfiguration suggests a change in the process through which the same subject is figured (literally trans-figure). *Horseman* narrates the transition from an indigenous monarchy to a British colony, but as the sacrificial desire uniting Simon and Elesin in the deleted scene demonstrates, for Soyinka, indigenous and colonial socio-political structures are not *essentially* differentiable. *Horseman*, I will demonstrate in this chapter, casts the political-theological phenomenon of sacrifice as the essential component to each structure. Although the “modern” subject of biopower may appear to be at odds with the “primitive” subject of monarchy, Soyinka's rendering of modernity suggests that we moderns, much like the subjects of the Oyo Kingdom of *Horseman*, “do not sacrifice sacrifice,” as Derrida puts it in “Eating Well” (113). Moreover, transfiguration implies a process of idealization, or spiritual elevation (e.g., Christ's transfiguration). The structural transfiguration staged in *Horseman*, I will demonstrate, brings to the fore a process of negative idealization in which the modern subject is epistemically severed from the passing of time.

Horseman on a fellowship at Cambridge University. I recast this project as a prefiguration of contemporary theory's turn to what Michel Foucault, a few years after Soyinka's lectures, terms biopolitics, which informs my interpretation of *Horseman*. Placing Soyinka's writing in dialogue with the biopolitical critique of sovereignty mapped by philosophers such as Derrida, Giorgio Agamben, and Achille Mbembe, I argue that in *Horseman* desacralization enigmatically functions as the *sacrificial* and *sacralized* foundation of modernity, that which places African life under the sovereignty of the nation-state. I will also suggest, however, that by staging this trauma as tragedy, *Horseman* aesthetically mediates the loss of sacrificial mediation represented, providing a passage into modernity by regenerating, through the performance of the play, the cyclic time it laments.

This post-secular exploration of cultural trauma and survival challenges the interpretive framework assumed within *Horseman* criticism, which tethers literature to aesthetic representation rather than ritual transformation. In one of the most influential essays on *Horseman* in the past two decades, for example, Olakunle George concludes that the ultimate lesson the play bestows upon cultural theory is an awakening to the unbridgeable abyss that separates the literary and the political. "[A]cts of language are no more than acts of language," he writes, and "literary structures cannot be conflated with social structures." He continues,

[T]he fine deconstruction of imperialism in the play cannot in itself reorder the phenomenality of imperialism itself. This merely tells us something we all know but too often repress in the inner logic of contemporary theory, namely, that

criticism cannot solve or stop political traumas; it can only witness and give voice to the witnessing. (88)

For George, *Horseman* bears witness to the trauma of colonization by representing the political reality of colonization. This representational aesthetic crucially misses what Soyinka calls “art as ritual process” (“Ritual” 7). For Soyinka, I wish to suggest, literature can operate beyond the field of representation to which his critics remain anchored. Ritually crafting a vision of political community beyond, yet emerging through, the sacrificial structure of the nation-state, *Horseman*, I will argue, passes on a vision of what Derrida calls “an other politicization [. . .] and therefore another concept of the political” (*Beast* 75).

In making this claim, one of my points of departure is David Scott’s assertion that “tragic vision” is an epistemic gesture through which postcolonial theory can move beyond the exhausted, emancipatory teleology of the past century’s anticolonial struggles. Such teleology tethers postcolonial thought to nationalist and socialist utopian visions of futurity, he argues. Another is Sam Durrant’s framing of such tragic vision in terms of cultural trauma and survival. If the Aristotelean and Hegelian schools of tragedy assume a stable body politic, temporality, and cosmological order, the influx of the postcolonial *polis* needs a different tragic vision, he argues, one that can witness the “temporal and cosmological rupture effected by colonialism” (“Surviving Time” 99). More explicitly than Scott, Durrant connects this vision to the form of the novel. As Benedict Anderson famously argues, the rise of the novel solidified the “imagined community” of the nation-state as a social reality by allowing readers disconnected from each other to feel, by interpreting themselves in the plots of representative protagonists,

connected. In colonized cultures, a tragic protagonist, Durrant claims, strategically fits this representative role.⁷⁴

This cultural work is modeled for Durrant by Chinua Achebe's *Things Fall Apart*. Achebe utilizes Okonkwo's tragic fate to implicate his readers in their historical "disinheritance": European modernity's triumph over Africa's indigenous cosmologies (99). Inverting Hegel's famous "Spirit of a People," Durrant claims that Achebean tragedy figures the "abject (non-)spirit of the people" which is postcolonial existence (108). Though bleak in terms of content, tragedy is, from this point of view, hopeful at the level of reception, even politically liberating. Tragedy allows readers conscripted through colonization into the peripheries of global modernity to imagine a postcolonial community through a post-teleologic time of *anangké*: the "blind necessity" enforcing the tragic protagonist's failures. More specifically, Achebean tragedy recovers, or more precisely (re)invents a mode of agency by "resacralizing" the historical trauma that erased indigenous agency (99). This resacralization arises through the collective act of writing and reading the emergence of the postcolonial nation-state as tragedy, a process that casts novelistic literary reception in Africa as sacred ritual.

Soyinka, I would suggest, takes up this post-secular work of ritual more explicitly than Achebe. *Horseman*, for instance, is ritualized not only at the contextual level of reception, as in Durrant's take on *Things Fall Apart*, but in its very form as tragic drama—which emphasizes the temporal dimension of the tragic. If the novel creates a community through the process, as Anderson narrates it, of reader reception, imagined communities emerge in slow accretion. In *Horseman*'s stage directions, on the

⁷⁴ In a succinct explanation of a tragic plot, George Steiner writes, "In tragedy, there are no temporal remedies. [. . .] Tragedy speaks not of secular dilemmas which may be resolved by rational innovation, but of the unaltering bias toward inhumanity and destruction in the drift of the world" (291).

other hand, Soyinka insists that the play should “run without interval” with “rapid scene changes,” contrasting novelistic accretion with dramatic immanence (4). As I will suggest, as *Horseman*’s narrative unfolds, the audience becomes addressed by a vision of collective life emerging through death. Venturing beyond the Andersonian imagined community, this vision emerges not only through the accretive time of textual reception, but, more enigmatically, through the ritual of the literary performance itself—that is, in *literary time*. The Nobel laureate’s position within a global literary culture notwithstanding, *Horseman*, in my interpretation, asks its audience to imagine a form of collective life-in-death arising not only in the world of “world literature,” but in the world that is performatively conjured, through language, in time, by the play. In other words, for Soyinka, literature can function as a sacred ritual, conjuring what he describes in his lectures as “the African world.” Furthermore, *Horseman* does not quite perform the role of resacralization that Durrant finds in *Things Fall Apart* because the world envisioned in the play is, as I will demonstrate in this chapter, not desacralized, but rather experiencing a transfiguration of the sacred under biopolitical modernity. *Horseman*, in other words, I will argue, (re)sacralizes—otherwise than colonially.

Another point of departure for my inquiry in this chapter is the relation between trauma and tragedy posited within psychoanalytic theory. In psychoanalysis, tragedy and trauma are formally incompatible, yet also entwined through the process of mediation. Tragedy stages the foundational structuring of a referential framework, the clearest example being the Oedipal complex, while trauma names the structural breakdown of a referential framework, the most cited example being the “shell-shocked” soldiers of the twentieth-century. As literary history attests, however, the force of tragedy always

emerges from a scene of trauma, Oedipus' patricide and incest again providing the clearest example. One way of stating this formal entwinement is that trauma ruptures structures of meaning, while tragedy gives meaningful structure to a history emerging from trauma. As a social form, then, tragic drama mediates the collective inheritance of historical trauma. In Soyinka's case, by staging the desecration of an indigenous cosmology during its collision with European modernity, *Horseman* mediates colonial trauma as it is inherited in postcolonial Africa.

This mediatory process—the collective act of passing-on and inheriting a trauma that is transsubjective and transtemporal, implicating an entire culture—is why Jacques Lacan associates classical tragedy with the universally experienced trauma of entering culture as such. A culture is, in short, a world in which symbols must mediate historical reality, a process not only damned to failure, but predicated on this mediatory deficit. This deficit is heightened, we might add, in a culture whose symbolic structure is under colonization—such as the Oyo Kingdom staged in *Horseman*.⁷⁵ This process is also why Judith Butler in *Antigone's Claim* extrapolates a Lacanian theory of tragedy to conceptualize contemporary forms of political subjugation: mediation always implies the sacrifice of someone outside the frame of reference structuring the act of mediation—a process made explicit, I will suggest, in the colonial subjugation performed in *Horseman*. The representational aesthetics assumed in *Horseman* criticism (such as George's interpretation quoted above), largely misses the political impetus of tragedy assumed by both Soyinka and psychoanalysis. As tragic drama, *Horseman*, in

⁷⁵ As Ketu Katrak observes, that the Yoruba market is closing as the play opens posits a sense of cultural death (96). Act II's colonial symbols such as a gramophone, notepad, and khakis, I would add, by contrasting the colorful stalls and matts from Act I, suggest the emergence of a new cultural order as the Yoruba world symbolized by the market closes.

Butler's words, "points somewhere else, not to politics as a question of representation but to that political possibility that emerges when the limits to representation and representability are exposed" (*Antigone's Claim* 2). This exposure emerges in *Horseman*, I will suggest, through a ritual aesthetic. Through writing the play, Soyinka attempts a return to the primal form of mediation—prior to tragedy—by staging a ritual meant to mediate death for collective life through the sacrifice of an individual; by staging a shift in the sacrificial structure of the Oyo Kingdom, however, he suggests a primary desecration of mediation upon which the performance of the play *as tragedy* hinges.

"A Stranger Force of Violence"

Dramaturgically, the anti-Manichaeism of the deleted scene with which I began this chapter means that, as Soyinka tells Martin Banham in an interview on drama in West Africa, the "Greek classics" informing the Western *polis* can transfer to Africa "without any problem" (3).⁷⁶ Hence *Horseman's* classically tragic form.

Philosophically, it means the play addresses, through its tragic form, the trauma of colonization as, transtemporally, the generative structure of the precolonial *polis*.

Soyinka describes this contingent universality in his author's note. Warning his audience against "a sadly familiar reductionist tendency" in the global reception of African literature—the imposition of the "facile tag of 'clash of cultures'"—Soyinka infamously writes, "The Colonial Factor is an incident, a catalytic incident merely." Instead, "The confrontation in the play is largely metaphysical," he declares, "contained in the human

⁷⁶ Greek myth, Soyinka further claims in his *Myth* lectures, holds a similar structure to Yoruba myth, which does not diminish the cultural contingency of the Yoruba world because African thought, he argues, is "radically anti-Manichean" (10; 127).

vehicle which is Elesin and the universe of the Yoruba mind” (3). Following Anthony Appiah, most critics interpret this claim as a rhetorically strategic rejection of political reality through which Soyinka attempts to write an “African world” without reference to Europe.

More specifically, Appiah argues that Soyinka uses the mask of authorial intention to strategically “conceal his purposes” (105). Participating in the creation of an emerging African canon, Soyinka’s goal is to “take Africa for granted,” he claims, but to do so he must write an African culture into existence (106). This mutually constitutive relation between a culture irreparably disfigured by colonial history and a historically located act of imagining a recovered culture demonstrates an inescapable paradox of modern African aesthetics: “Africans can only take their cultural traditions for granted by an effort of mind” (107). Put differently, canonless, Soyinka cannot represent an already present culture, but must create a culture through his representation. It is symptomatic of this paradox, according to Appiah, that Soyinka simultaneously disavows the “colonial factor” and stages its overwhelming presence. Since postcolonial Yoruba consciousness is dialectically enforced by the history of British intervention, Soyinka, despite his intention, will inevitably represent the endogenous as exogenously polluted. Thus, since Yoruba culture cannot be “taken for granted,” Soyinka tricks his audience, claims Appiah. By prefacing the “clash of cultures” staged with strategically cosmological rhetoric, Soyinka directs the audience from the explicitly exogenous to the apparently endogenous and therefore transforms his play into a “declaration of independence of the African mind” (112). This strategic concealment, a rhetorical response to a political paradox, crowns Soyinka “the archetypical African writer” (106).

Appiah's figuration of Soyinka as representative of the conundrum facing the modern African writer is helpful. I would suggest, however, that his influential interpretation of *Horseman's* author's note ultimately remains rooted in a juxtaposition between Europe and Africa, which the sacrificial desire uniting Simon and Elesin challenges. As Soyinka explains in an interview with Alby James,

I wanted to pick at this word *juxtaposition*. Juxtaposition of the colonial culture and the traditional experience of peoples. You see, for any kind of drama [. . .] there is always a circumstance that triggers [. . .] abnormality [. . .]. In this case it was, indeed, the colonized set of values, but I always insist that *this kind of tragedy could have taken place without external intrusion*. (1, my emphases)

By staging the historically contingent trauma of colonization as a universal tragedy, the play addresses a generative rupture arising from yet also preceding colonization. Critics are thus partially right that the play places trauma theory and postcolonial theory in dialogue. Using the Freudian concepts *angstbereitschaft* (preparedness for anxiety) and *nachträglichkeit* (deferred action), for example, Ogaga Ifowodo and Andrew Barnaby trace within the play a structural relation between the traumatized psyche and the colonized *polis*.⁷⁷ But critics largely miss the structural trauma Soyinka stages as generative of colonial history and, more broadly, human history: sacrifice. For Soyinka, the sacrifice of indigeneity at the foundation of colonialism is a repetition of the sacrificial foundation of all forms of political community.

⁷⁷ See also Mpalive-Hangson Msiska on Soyinka's relation to Freud and Lacan. For the drama's aspect of "race retrieval" as a technique of cultural survival, see Tejumola Olaniyan. These interpretations challenge the dichotomy between "Western" theory and postcolonial texts assumed by many critiques of trauma theory (see the introduction to this thesis).

The horseman ritual of the Oyo Kingdom incarnates this foundation and moreover hinges the meaningful passing of time upon it. The Alafin (king) has died. After nearly a month of ceremonies, Elesin must sacrifice himself.⁷⁸ Characters describe this ritual in threshold terms such as *gateway* because, according the dramatic rendering of the ritual, Elesin must enter what Soyinka describes in his author's note as the *numinous passage of transition* between *the living, the dead, and the unborn* (3). This passage arises as what Soyinka terms the fourth stage. If the ancestors, the living, and the unborn (and thus the past, present, and future) exist simultaneously, Soyinka reasons, the fourth stage is the abyss between them, through which they mutually animate one another. Meeting Alafin's spirit at this ontological threshold, at the precise moment consecrated by the elders Elesin must utter a sacred message to conjure Alafin into "the land of the ancestors" (34, 60; 53). According to the logic implied by the play, only when Alafin becomes an ancestral spirit can the link between the Yoruba cosmological and Oyo political orders continue. During Elesin's death, then, his body, which mediates the body politic of the Oyo Kingdom, becomes an *orita meta*—a threshold between *aye* and *orun*, the distinct, inseparable realms of matter and spirit in Yoruba cosmology—through which the Oyo monarchy and Yoruba cosmos remain intertwined (Henry Johan Drewal, et al. 14).

⁷⁸ Soyinka changes the timeframe of the event depicted, which historically happened after the war. He also changes the cultural milieu. The Oyo Kingdom had been declining, as Ato Quayson notes, since the eighteenth century, and in the colonial period in which the drama is set, it had been "completely superseded by fresh realities that called for reassessment of its former glory" (*Strategic* 97). The same is true of the horseman ritual. As James Booth writes, "By the time the Rev. Samuel Johnson was completing his *History of the Yorubas* in the 1890s, he could assert that the practice was dying out at Oyo: 'With the exception of the women, all the men now refuse to die and they are never forced to do so'" (140). *Horseman* is thus not a historical representation of the Oyo Kingdom, but a *strategic transformation* of history, to use Quayson's term. For the historical narrative, see James Gibbs (117-18).

This political-theological ritual exemplifies the sacrificial drive Soyinka takes to be central to Yoruba myth and tragedy, both of which narratively function as a “recurrent exercise in the experience of disintegration” (*Myth* 151). In “The Fourth Stage” Soyinka recalls Orinsa-nla, the first deity, whose slave rolled a stone upon him, shattering him into thousands of pieces and thereby creating, through his disintegration, the Yoruba pantheon (152).⁷⁹ Ogun, arising from this destruction, was the first deity to bridge the abyss between the gods and humanity, thereby becoming the first king of Ife, yet tragically killing his subjects and himself in a repetition of Orinsa-nla’s primal disintegration. The Yoruba “tragic actor,” Soyinka argues, repeats Ogun’s repetition of Orinsa-nla’s sacrifice by ritually regenerating, through his or her willful disintegration and re-assemblage in the fourth stage, the intertwinement between life that was, is, and will be (142-43).⁸⁰ The fourth stage is therefore a cosmological and aesthetic term. Unlike the fourth wall—the imagined gulf between the audience and the actors rooted in the tradition of the proscenium-arch—Soyinka’s onto-dramaturgical fourth stage names the “immeasurable gulf of transition” between subjective life and cosmic totality, implicating all ritual participants, the audience included (148). As Elesin prepares to sacrifice himself on behalf of the Oyo Kingdom under British colonization, he also functions as a sacrificial mediator for the audience witnessing the drama in the

⁷⁹ Soyinka wrote “The Fourth Stage” in 1967, but was imprisoned before he could receive editorial comments (*Myth* ix). First published in a collection dedicated to his former Leeds professor G. Wilson Knight (who taught Soyinka Shakespearean tragedy), it is republished as the appendix to *Myth*, which is the version I cite throughout this essay.

⁸⁰ More specifically, a protagonist such as Elesin must enter the fourth stage, subjectively disintegrating yet ultimately resisting ontological annihilation through a hubristic assertion of the will on behalf of the Yoruba community in its ancestral, living, and unborn totality. He writes, Yoruba tragedy plunges straight into the ‘chthonic realm’, the seething cauldron of the dark world will and psyche, the transitional yet inchoate matrix of death and becoming. Into this universal womb once plunged and emerged Ogun, the first actor, disintegrating within the abyss. [. . .] Within the mystic summons of the chasm the protagonist actor [. . .] resists, like Ogun before him, the final step towards complete annihilation. From this alone steps forward the eternal actor of the tragic rites. (142-43)

postcolonial present. His mediatory act is, like the tragedy itself, both contingent and universal; by interceding on behalf of the Oyo Kingdom, he becomes, as Iyaloja (mother of the market) words it, “intercessor to the world” (16).

But Elesin fails to fully enter the fourth stage. Since the sacred message which can conjure Alafin’s spirit into the ancestral realm is patrimonially passed on amongst the horsemen, nobody beyond Elesin’s son, Olunde, knows the words (60). Thus, after Simon arrests Elesin, Olunde sacrifices himself in his father’s place. Horrified and ashamed that “the son has proved the father,” Elesin strangles himself with his colonizer’s chains (62). As Elesin’s response to Olunde’s death suggests, although Olunde’s name, *my lord has come*, implies a messianic role, his substitutionary death does not carry the redemptive force of the Christian concept of substitutionary atonement. Rather than mediating human and divine life, or even ancestral, living, and unborn as the horseman ritual is meant to do, Olunde’s death symbolizes a crisis in which sacrificial mediation must—but may no longer—carry ontological efficacy. With both Olunde and Elesin dead, the horseman ritual itself dies because nobody else knows the sacred message. The ancestors, the living, and the unborn have no intercessor to ritually bridge the numinous passage between them, and the intertwining of these multiple planes of existence enters a mode of crisis.

Most critics assume Elesin performs his ritual correctly until he is arrested, but Soyinka does not stage the arrest, which raises a question regarding the play’s crisis in transtemporal mediation.⁸¹ Act III contains the performance of the death-rite, but the act closes before the interruption—lights fading as the drums beat, women chant a dirge,

⁸¹ For three examples amidst many, see D.S. Izevbaye (120), Joan Hepburn (597-98), and Craig McLuckie (154).

and Elesin dances entranced. As Tanure Ojaide rightly observes, the consecrated moment of Elesin's death is never revealed to the audience, which means it is impossible to know if he is arrested before or after he is meant to sacrifice himself (214). This narrative absence complicates the question of Elesin's and Simon's roles in the desecration, making it impossible to say with assurance that Simon's intervention causes the tragedy. By not staging the disruption of the ritual upon which the play's tragic force hinges Soyinka depicts the moment as what Lacan would call a missed encounter (55). Constitutively missed within the collective frame of reference Elesin incarnates, the disruption of the ritual emerges in the drama indirectly, through its impact upon his performance of the ritual. I wish to suggest that Elesin's performance transfigures from a traditional death-rite into an unknown possession-rite. The language of this transfiguration, moreover, makes clear that the horseman ritual becomes what Ato Quayson calls a "maimed rite" *before* Simon's arrival, recasting it as both a maimed rite and a prophetic incarnation of colonial modernity ("Wole Soyinka: Disability, Maimed Rites, and the Systemic Uncanny").

When Alafin's spirit enters Elesin's Praise-Singer's body to perform ritual exhortations, he recognizes the danger signified by the "drowsy as palm oil" movements composing what the stage directions label Elesin's trance-dance (36; 35). Alafin fears his companion may be anchored to the earth by "evil minds who mean to part us at the last" (34).⁸² This fear proves true. "Strange voices guide my feet," Elesin admits (35). Guided by these voices, Elesin rejects the rhythm of the death-rite for a new, unrecognizable rhythm, which cannot be heard by his companions or the audience. As

⁸² Although Elesin reassures Alafin that his sash of *alari* (a rich, woven cloth) is "no tethering-rope," but rather symbolizes the fact that he, like a charging elephant, cannot be detained by any stranger, Alafin is not comforted. "And yet this fear will not depart from me," the king maintains (34).

Praise-Singer asks, “Are there sounds there I cannot hear [. . .]” (36)? This alien rhythm places the ritual in jeopardy. Praise-Singer asks, “[D]o footsteps surround you which pound the earth like *gbedu*, roll like thunder round the dome of the world?” (36). Elesin must sacrifice himself at the moment deemed sacred by the *gbedu* drums.⁸³ The *gbedu* is a “deep-timbred royal drum,” as Soyinka defines it, used by the *Osugbo*, which he defines as both the “secret ‘executive’ cult of the Yoruba” and “its meeting place” (63).⁸⁴ Soyinka leaves both the members and location of the *Osugbo* off-stage, yet asserts their presence through the sound of the *gbedu* drums, providing a rhythm for Elesin’s sacrifice. But Alafin contrasts the rhythm of Elesin’s dance to that of the afterlife—that is, the tempo of the ancestral realm and thus the horizon of Elesin’s death-rite. Only the *Osugbo* sages recognize this spiritual tempo, and they inscribe it within the material world through their drumming. Elesin, channeling the strange voices, dances out of sync with this rhythm. “The drums are changing now but you have gone far ahead of the world,” Alafin exclaims, “It is not yet noon in heaven [. . .]. So why must you rush like an impatient bride: why do you race to desert your Olohun-iyó [Praise-Singer]?” (35). It is not that a polyrhythm arises from the death-rite, constituting a cross-rhythm amongst the ritual participants, but rather that a rhythm purely external to the pattern of the ritual arises within Elesin alone. Strange voices replace the sacred role of the *gbedu* drums by asserting a tempo alien to the tempo through which the *Osugbo* sages transpose the intertwinement between and ancestral, living, and unborn time into the material world.

⁸³ “Human eyes are useless for a search of this nature,” Elesin explains, “But in the house of *osugbo*, those who keep watch through the spirit recognised the moment, they sent word to me through the voice of our sacred drums to prepare myself” (51).

⁸⁴ Also called *Ogboni*, the *Osugbo* is “the traditional society of elders that historically formed the judiciary in communities throughout southern Yorubaland” (Margaret Drewal 33).

Elesin's black skin, that which marks him as African, begins to mark the presence of the voices now animating his body: "Is your flesh lightened Elesin[?]," asks Praise-Singer (36). While most critics recognize that Elesin's lightening skin signals his journey into the fourth stage,⁸⁵ no critic has yet recognized that, through their process of lightening/whitening the possessed subjected, the "strange voices" here reveal themselves as voices of the British Empire—which possesses and is transfiguring not only Elesin's body, but the body politic he is currently mediating, the Oyo Kingdom. This spectacle draws the internalization of white supremacy foundational to colonial subject formation to the surface. If, as Lacan suggests in his theory of the mirror stage, subjectivity emerges when one recognizes for the first time one's image reflected, black subjectivity, Frantz Fanon famously argues in *Black Skin, White Masks*, has been doomed to never emerge. In the colonized world, recognizing one's blackness means witnessing one's blackness reflected in subservient relation to whiteness. Thus, for the black subject, the mirror stage provides narrative structure not simply to subject formation, but to the internalization of racial *objectification* which defers the very possibility of black *subject* formation—a process Fanon calls *epidermalization*.⁸⁶

⁸⁵ Ketrak's description of Elesin's dance is emblematic: "Elesin's dance communicates symbolically to the onlookers—both his retinue on stage and the audience in the theatre—that the dancer is passing from the human into the spiritual realm," she writes, "While Elesin's dance is rooted to the earth, it becomes, at another level, a spiritual device which enables him to step into the beyond" (98).

⁸⁶ Fanon writes in his introduction,

The analysis that I am undertaking is psychological. In spite of this it is apparent to me that the effective disalienation of the black man entails immediate recognition of social and economic realities. If there is an inferiority complex, it is the outcome of a double process:
—primarily, economic;
—subsequently, the internalization—or, better, the *epidermalization*—of this inferiority. (10-11, my emphasis)

Stephen Frosh explains the relation between Fanonian epidermalization and the Lacanian mirror phase: The Lacanian subject looks in the mirror and sees its image reflected back to it, and then appropriates that image as a source of comfort and a means for making meaning out of what was previously fragmented experience. The black subject racialized through the racist gaze, sees itself

The stage directions describe Elesin's consequential loss of agency: "Elesin is now sunk fully deep in his trance, there is no longer sign of any awareness of his surroundings" (35).⁸⁷ Although his companions cry out, "Elesin dances on," the directions explain, "completely in a trance" (36).⁸⁸ Praise-Singer, in contrast, maintains awareness and poise in his possession rite. While channeling Alafin's spirit, he participates in the animation of his body. This reciprocal enforcement is denoted by the two proper names Praise-Singer uses in ritual calls: Elesin *Oba* and Elesin *Alafin*, both of which translate as horseman of the king. The latter title signifies Alafin's spirit in Praise-Singer's body calling his servant, while *Oba* signifies Praise-Singer calling his lord. Embodying the voices of the British Empire, on the other hand, Elesin, as he later confesses, experiences a sapping of the will through the "power of the stranger" (54):

It is when the alien hand pollutes the source of will, when a stranger force of violence shatters the mind's calm resolution, this is when a man is made to commit the awful treachery of relief, commit in his thought the unspeakable blasphemy of seeing the hand of the gods in this alien rupture of his world. [. . .] My will was squelched in the spittle of an alien race, and all because I had committed this blasphemy of thought—that there might be the hand of the gods in a stranger's intervention. (56-57).

Elesin gives his will to imperial voices interpreted as gods, figuring what Soyinka takes to be the "disposal of African peoples into nationalities" mentioned in the first epigraph

in the *white* mirror that removes the possibility of self-assertion and mastery and instead creates further fragmentation. (90)

⁸⁷ The Norton Critical Edition italicizes stage directions. In order to differentiate them from rhetorical emphases, I de-italicize them. In quotations that contain both dialogue and stage directions, I leave directions italicized.

⁸⁸ What Quayson terms the "dialectic of stasis and mobility" tied to the play's "dynamic of ethical choice" should be interpreted in relation to this loss of agential mobility ("All of the People, Some of the Time" 68).

of this chapter as theologically structured—the implications of which I will soon explore (175). Elesin here dances himself into estrangement from both his own consciousness and his ritual participants. Praise-Singer, for instance, asks if the gbedu drums have “blocked the passage to [Elesin’s] ears” (36). Severed from the calls of his companions—“Elesin Oba, can you hear me at all?”—the possessed Elesin transfigures from consecrated mediator to a stranger to his own death-rite, thereby desecrating his intercessory role before his arrest (36).

This possession challenges what is perhaps the most common assumption within *Horseman* criticism: the trauma of colonization is, within the play, a Weberian secularization of Africa under modern, European rule.⁸⁹ This assumption unites decades of debate. For instance, while many early critics praised Soyinka’s fusing of Yoruba and Greek mythic and tragic poetics to craft a “drama of existence” for modern Africa, the “Ibadan-Ife” critics opposed this mythopoetic technique as a glorification of a lost culture which was as steeped in inequality as the colonial order.⁹⁰ Casting Soyinka as

⁸⁹ Max Weber influentially characterizes modernity as “rationalization and intellectualization and, above all, [. . .] the ‘disenchantment of the world’” (155).

⁹⁰ For a few examples of positive reception, see, Gibbs, Gerald Moore, D.S. Izevbaye, Henry Gates Jr., and Katrak. See Soyinka’s “Who’s Afraid of Elesin Oba?” in *Art, Dialogue and Outrage* for excerpts from the Ibadan-Ife group and his response.

The most exemplary Ibadan-Ife critic is Biodun Jeyifo. While Jeyifo’s more recent criticism is far more insightful than his early work, it is worth rehearsing Jeyifo’s first critique of *Horseman*, which still influences Marxist interpretations of the play. What Jeyifo deems the “anxious” proposition in Soyinka’s author’s note is less a rhetorical trick, as Appiah describes, than a philosophical consequence of his mythopoetics, argues Jeyifo. By staging a conflict between capitalist and pre-capitalist superstructures in which the former category swallows the latter, Jeyifo writes,

Soyinka polarises the conflict between a traditional African, organic vision of life and an alien system of discrete laws and social polity, with tragic results for the indigenous system. In other words, it is a confrontation at the level of categorical super-structures wrested from their economic and social foundations. (170)

Rather than dissecting the socio-economic foundation of African colonization, global capitalism, Soyinka attempts to conjure its metaphysical consequences, “the collective psyche and spirit of a whole continent” (168). Hence Soyinka’s emphasis on metaphysical rather than cross-cultural conflict in the author’s note. This goal is not only impossible, as Appiah claims, but, for Jeyifo, flawed. Superstructures exist in a mutually constitutive relation to their material foundations, which means the metaphysical structures staged—Yoruba cosmology and European modernity—cannot be wrested from the socio-economic

either “the archetypical African writer” or nativist ideologue, both sides assumed *Horseman* to be a tragic rendering of the traumatic loss of a sacralized, indigenous culture under the rise of the modern, secularized colony (Appiah 78). Critics such as George, Abedeyo Williams, Mpalive-Hangson Msiska, and others have moved *Horseman* criticism beyond this battle between myth criticism and ideology critique, but have retained the Weberian assumption. The play represents the intersection of traditional logic and scientific-secular rationalization (George 75-76; 82-83), feudalism and capitalism (Williams 73-75), or tradition and modernity (Msiska 77) as the constitutive trauma of contemporary Africa, they argue.

These interpretations are partially correct. As Simon’s death wish suggests, however, for Soyinka, modernity is not a triumph of the secular over the sacred, but a transition into a new sacrificial and sacralized order in which life becomes subject to the

inequalities of which they are both products and producers (170). The systemic inequalities of the Oyo Kingdom, symbolically reproduced by Elesin’s death-rite, are thus integral to Soyinka’s cosmology, Jeyifo argues. That Soyinka chooses to stage a sacrificial ritual that functions as an ideological state apparatus for the Oyo monarchy illustrates for Jeyifo the “gaps and dents in Soyinka’s present ideological armour” (170). If, for Appiah, Soyinka’s author’s note is symptomatic of his position as an African writer, for Jeyifo, it is symptomatic of his failure as an African writer: Soyinka infuses a culture plagued by inequalities with metaphysical lyricism, culminating in a reactionary tragedy.

Most materialist readings of the play use Jeyifo’s early interpretation as a springboard for discussing the play’s engagement with ideology (e.g., Adebayo Williams and George). Ultimately, Jeyifo’s argument hinges on the relation between literary and critical theory: rhetorically or not, what are the consequences of Soyinka directing the audience away from *realpolitik*? As multiple critics have pointed out, Jeyifo’s materialist analysis may still reveal, contra his argument, the play’s political potency, as long as materialist criticism is divorced from reflective aesthetics. As George puts it, a “sufficiently materialist” interpretation must follow the logic of the text—that is, to read the text within its own terms, despite its ideological leanings—“to a point where it tells us more than what the author may or may not want it to say” (69). Taking the unmasking of Soyinka’s metaphysics of ritual as an end point of criticism, the Ibadan-Ife group excludes this arena of meaning from interpretation. While Appiah discovers within this arena a rhetorical trick, post-Jameson Marxist critics like Williams, George and others retain Jeyifo’s economic focus while moving beyond his vulgar Marxism. Williams, for instance, accepts Jeyifo’s ideology critique, yet argues that reading not just the text and context, but the political unconscious determining Soyinka’s writing, reveals the play’s condensational value. Precisely because of its ideology, the play stages for George, Williams and others the internal contradictions of the hegemonic narratives that created and continue to sustain the colonial and postcolonial world (Williams 194-95). As I suggested in the introduction to this chapter, however, and as I will continue to suggest throughout, although these critiques open important questions on the relation between feudalism, capitalism, and neocolonial ideology, they ultimately miss the political impetus of Soyinka’s tragic mythopoetics.

sovereignty of the nation-state.⁹¹ As Soyinka writes in *A Man Died*, published a year before his fellowship at Cambridge (where he delivered his *Myth* lectures and wrote *Horseman*), the structure of the European nation-state oversees postcolonial African culture with “divine authority”:

What God (white man) has put together, let no black man put asunder. The complications of neo-colonial politics of interference compel one to accept such a damnable catechism for now, as a pragmatic necessity. Later perhaps, the black nations will themselves sit down together, and, by agreement, set compass and square rule to paper and reformulate the life-expending, stultifying, constrictive imposition of this divine authority. (181)

His point is that as long as the Biafran war, and by implication any postcolonial conflict, is waged without fighting the structural problem of nationality, people will continue to be sacrificed on behalf of the state, and thus the transition into colonial modernity staged in *Horseman* will continue to shape African cultural dynamics.⁹² As Elesin embodies this transition as a possession-rite, he demonstrates explicitly the sacred structure of modernity Soyinka critiqued a few years earlier from his prison cell.

Soyinka’s post-secular vision of modernity partially aligns with that of Carl Schmitt. Delineating the nation-state’s sovereign-subject relation within Christian doctrine, Schmitt writes, “All significant concepts in the modern theory of the state are

⁹¹ On the sacred and the secular as formulated within modernity, see Talal Asad and Charles Taylor. For a preliminary exploration of this inquiry in African literary studies, see Jeanne-Marie Jackson and Nathan Suhr-Sytsma.

⁹² In “Language as Boundary,” Soyinka writes,

In the politics of this continent, I have no patience with any national strategy which in any way, overt or covert, solidifies the meaningless colonial boundaries which have created and are still creating such intense havoc on the continent among African nations and peoples. With C.L.R. James, the radical historian, author of *The Black Jacobins*, I believe that ‘the nation state, as an ideal, belongs to the last century.’ (*Art* 87).

secularized theological concepts” (36). Schmitt’s departure from the Weberian narrative of “disenchantment” provides a framework through which to recognize Soyinka’s critique of the modern, I wish to suggest, which entails not a loss of the sacred, as most critics believe, but its transfiguration. In his monograph on Soyinka, one of the most extensive studies on the author to date, Biodun Jeyifo gestures toward this transfiguration when he claims that *Horseman* plots what René Girard terms “the sacrificial crisis” (124).⁹³ Girard argues that the loss of explicit sacrificial rites has infected the modern West with “impure,” chaotic violence, and Soyinka includes Africa in this cultural anxiety, Jeyifo claims (Girard 51). I would suggest, however, that Soyinka’s vision of modernity is more regimented than Girard’s. As Adélékè Adéèkó rightly claims, throughout the play, the Oyo Kingdom’s and the British Empire’s surveillance of human sacrifice “directly figures culture as law, something that has to be followed and obeyed and cannot be violated without incurring a violent reprisal”: death (79).⁹⁴ Indeed, the *nomos* of the colony is within the drama predicated on the British administration’s right to “*take* life or *let* live,” to use Foucault’s formulation of sovereignty (136). Iyaloja mocks this *nomos* as Simon threatens to shoot anyone who may help Elesin complete his ritual. “To prevent one death you will actually make other

⁹³ In this more recent study, Jeyifo is far less critical of Soyinka’s mythopoetics.

⁹⁴ *Horseman*’s sacrificial crisis is in this sense more akin to Georges Bataille’s theory of sacrifice. Sacrifice is that which constitutes the human as such by positing a certain relation to death, he argues. Insofar as the spectacle of sacrifice enables through mediation the witness to experience death while living, sacrifice, like fiction, he claims, produces a temporality arising from, yet positing a beyond of, mortality. According to this logic, sacrificial rites are never lost because a meaningful experience of life depends up it; the question then becomes not whether or not a culture still performs sacrificial rites (all do), but who is being sacrificed and on behalf of whom. See also Walter Benjamin’s “Critique of Violence” and Derrida’s “Force of Law.” We should also note that in “Elesin Oba and His Critics,” Soyinka places the tragic poet, himself, in this role of the sacrificer. Death, he writes, is the “ultimate, imponderable dialectic over which tragic poetry builds its symbolic edifice” (77). Responding to its “eternally tyrannic negation” of the “will to being,” the tragic poet’s “collective phenomenization of death,” he claims, functions as an “ameliorating device” (76). *Horseman* is thus “mythopoeic,” he ultimately argues, staging a primal drive to “communally contain Death” through poetic language (77).

deaths?,” she asks, “Ah, great is the wisdom of the white race” (59). Such “wisdom” casts colonial modernity as, contra Girardian chaos, a strategically sacrificial regime.

Foucault terms this regime biopolitics: a transfer of sovereignty from the body of the king (or Alafin) to the body politic of the nation-state, “the people.” In his *The Beast & the Sovereign* lectures, Derrida filters this transference through Schmitt’s critique of secularization—providing a useful framework for approaching *Horseman*. The allegedly secular “sovereignty of the people or of the nation merely inaugurates a new form of the same fundamental structure” of the sacred, Derrida argues, and in this structure “man is caught, evanescent, disappearing, [. . .] a hyphen between the sovereign and the beast” (282; 13). Agamben famously traces this hyphen, the space of sacrifice, from ancient Greece to the Holocaust. The concentration camp, he claims, is the *nomos* of the modern, that which demonstrates the sovereign-subject relation of the nation-state in its most raw form by strategically reducing certain subjects to bestialized, bare life on behalf of the body politic. This barring of particular life from the political which constitutes the political is, Mbembe argues, the fundamental technique of colonial expansion, recasting the slave plantation as, prior to Auschwitz, the *nomos* of the modern (“Necropolitics”). Modernity hinges upon biopolitics as a racialized, territorialized technique, he claims, which the African subject experiences as necropolitics: the colonization of life embodied as social death. Mbembe’s intervention in the post-deconstructive critique of sovereignty illuminates, I would suggest, how the discursive formation of sovereignty emerges within African narrative—in the case of *Horseman*, the bio-political theology incarnated in Elesin’s possession-rite. With his agency disappearing, Elesin performs the sovereignty of the European nation-state over

the colonized subject, dancing the political-theological structure of modernity as an unknown ritual. Channeling a “stranger force of violence,” Elesin gives his will to the voices of “unnamable strangers” appearing as “the hand of the gods” (56-57). Given Elesin’s intercessory role, the audience witnessing this submission in the postcolonial present must ask the fundamental question of their own biopolitical stratification: to whom am I a living sacrifice?

Sacrificing Time

Soyinka narrates this capture of African life itself as founded on a sacrifice of time. *Horseman*’s tragedy is not that Elesin does not kill himself (he does), not that Olunde must die (as the next Elesin he is prepared to die with the next Alafin), but that both die *at the wrong time*, which ruptures the ontological continuum of time itself. As Iyaloja declares while Pilkings attempts to resuscitate Elesin’s corpse, “He is gone at last into the passage *but oh, how late it all is*” (62, my emphasis). She scorns Elesin for his role in introducing not just this belatedness, but with it a temporal disjunction to the cosmos. This disjunction is substantiated by Olunde’s suicide, which reverses the life cycle symbolized by the plantain: “Elesin Oba, tell me, you who know so well the cycle of the plantain: is it the parent shoot which withers to give sap to the younger or, does your wisdom see it running the other way?” (57). Again: “The pith is gone in the parent stem, so how will it prove with the new shoot? How will it go with that earth that bears it? Who are you to bring this abomination on us!” (55). This temporal crisis constitutes an epistemic crisis. As the horseman ritual transfigures from sacrifice to abomination,

the temporal intertwinement regenerated in the fourth stage degenerates. This degeneration enforces a “blind future” upon the Oyo Kingdom, to use Praise-Singer’s term for his people’s loss of prophetic insight (62). This phrase suggests a loss of *knowledge* and *time*, becoming blind to the unfolding of history as a consequence of being severed from its ancestral, living, and unborn continuum. To summarize *Horseman*’s plot, ritual sacrifice transfigures into substitutionary suicide detached from sacrificial mediation, twice. Soyinka therefore plots two antagonistic cosmologies, Simon’s swallowing Elesin’s, introducing the play to a desacralized experience of time.

Soyinka describes this temporal discordance in his *Myth* lectures, beginning by explaining the normality of what he calls the “cyclic consciousness of time” in Yoruba life (2):

[T]he degree of integrated acceptance of this temporal sense in the life-rhythm, mores and social organisation of Yoruba society is certainly worth emphasising, being a reflection of that same reality which denies periodicity to the existences of the dead, the living and the unborn. The expression ‘the child is father of the man’ becomes, within the context of this time-structure, not merely a metaphor of development, one that is rooted in a system of representative individuation, but a proverb of human continuity which is not uni-directional. Neither ‘child’ nor ‘father’ is a closed or chronological concept. The world of the unborn, in the Yoruba world-view, is as evidently older than the world of the living as the world of the living is older than the ancestor-world. (10)

This temporal structure of *non-uni-directional continuity* between the living, the dead, and the unborn bears political-theological implications, he goes on to claim:

And, of course, the other way around: we can insist that the world of the unborn is older than the world of the ancestor in the same breath as we declare that the deities preceded humanity into the universe. But there again we come up against the Yoruba proverb: *Bi o s'enia, imale o si* (if humanity were not, the gods would not be). Hardly a companionable idea to the Judeo-Christian theology of 'In the beginning, God *was*', and of course its implications go beyond the mere question of sequential time. Whatever semantic evasion we employ—the godness, the beingness of god, the otherness of, or assimilate oneness with god—they remain abstractions of man-emanating concepts or experiences which presuppose the human medium. No philosophy or ontological fanaticism can wish that away, and it is formulative of Yoruba cosmogonic wisdom. It is also an affective social principle which intertwines multiple existences [. . .]. (10-11)

The horseman ritual assumes a non-sequential, non uni-directional time and by extension, subjectivity, that, according to Soyinka, distinguishes Yoruba cosmology from the Judeo-Christian theology of God as sovereign subject and by extension author of sequential, teleologic time.⁹⁵ This infinitely implicated time and subjectivity rooted in the intertwinement of multiple existences—living, dead, and unborn; human and divine—implies an “affective social principle”: a political theology. Thus, as the desacralization of the horseman ritual degenerates its temporal structure, it also throws a vision of the social into crisis.

⁹⁵ As Soyinka writes, eternity for the Yoruba does not carry the “remoteness” or “exclusiveness” of Christian eschatology because “life, present life, contains within it manifestations of the ancestral, the living and the unborn” (*Myth* 143; 144). In *Spectres of Marx*, Derrida makes a similar claim. Turning like Soyinka to Shakespearean tragedy, Derrida finds this temporal and social structure *haunting* the West. While Hamlet laments that time is “out of joint,” discovering the living’s implication with the dead, such a recognition is natural, not “disjointed,” in Soyinka’s Yoruba cosmology, assuming its own form of continuity.

This principle is the “secular social vision” immanent to African cosmologies, Soyinka goes on to argue (xii). Much like Walter Benjamin’s appropriation of the term “natural history” to propose a historiography undermining post-Enlightenment concepts of both nature and history, Soyinka appropriates the term “secular” in a manner that undermines post-Enlightenment concepts of both the secular and the sacred. This appropriation further challenges the Weberian assumption of *Horseman* criticism. In Africa, Soyinka claims, “the gods themselves, unlike the gods of Islam and Christianity are already prone to secularism; they cannot escape their history” (87). This statement implies that Soyinka’s secularism is not so much a “suspicion of totalizing concepts,” as Edward Said defines his “secular criticism,” but rather a theological framework in which the sacred is implicated in, rather than sovereign over, historical time (*The World* 29). This immanence of the deities means the concept of “impurities or ‘foreign’ matter” in a “god’s digestive system”—the cultural taboos that, according to Frazerian anthropology, define the sacred—can paradoxically be digested and thus sacralized by these gods. “Experiences,” he writes, “which, until the event, lie outside the tribe’s cognition are absorbed through the god’s agency, are converted into yet another piece of the social armoury in its struggle for existence, and enter the lore of the tribe” (54). If the monotheistic God authors history, which leads humanity toward Him, African gods, Soyinka argues, can digest the very history that births them, allowing their followers to survive the passing of time by perennially ritualizing, and thus sacralizing, historical experience.⁹⁶

⁹⁶ Soyinka likewise writes in “The Fourth Stage,” “Ifa’s cycle of masonic poetry—curative, prognostic, aesthetic and omniscient—expresses a philosophy of optimism in its oracular adaptiveness and unassailable resolution of all phenomena; the gods are accommodating and embrace within their eternal presences manifestations which are seemingly foreign or contradictory” (*Myth* 155).

In a call-and-response performance prior to Elesin's death-rite, Praise-Singer recounts this sacralization of history Soyinka deems secular, celebrating the ritual construction of cosmological continuity despite the numerous catastrophes throughout Yoruba history. The performance uses the ancestors as a reference point:

Praise-Singer: In their time the world was never tilted from its groove, it shall not be in yours.

Elesin: The gods have said No.

Praise-Singer: In their time the great wars came and went, the little wars came and went; the white slavers came and went, they took away the heart of our race, they bore away the mind and muscle of our race. The city fell and was rebuilt; the city fell and our people trudged through mountain and forest to found a new home but—Elesin Oba do you hear me?

Elesin: I hear your voice Olohun-iyo

Praise-Singer: Our world was never wrenched from its true course.

Elesin: The gods have said No.

Praise-Singer: There is only one home to the life of a river-mussel; there is only one home to the life of a tortoise; there is only one shell to the soul of man; there is only one world to the spirit of our race. If that world leaves its course and smashes on boulders of the great void, whose world will give us shelter?

Elesin: It did not in the time of my forebears, it shall not in mine. (6)

The Yoruba wars, the slave trade, the rebuilding of the capital city: through these historical events, the horseman ritual has continued to mediate between the historically located Yoruba people and the cyclic time of the cosmos, Praise-Singer maintains,

ensuring collective survival despite catastrophe by ritually regenerating a transhistorical Yoruba subject. However, the disruption of the call-and-response immediately prior to the celebration of this “true course” of the world—“Elesin Oba do you hear me?”—foreshadows the tragic outcome of the drama.

Moreover, as Quayson observes, this foreshadowing takes place in a sequence in which Elesin purposefully interrupts Act I’s ritual elicitation three times (“*Horseman in Comparative Frameworks*”). He first casts himself as greater than the gods, the only one to not fear death (10). He then fakes offense in order to be adorned in royal cloth of *alari*, *sanyan*, and boa-skin (the latter, I would add, foreshadows Elesin’s suicide by asphyxiation) (12). Finally, upon seeing a betrothed virgin enter the market, he convinces Iyaloja to allow him this “bed of honour to lie upon” the day of his sacrifice (15). He implores,

Then let me travel light. Let
Seed that will not serve the stomach
on the way remain behind. Let it take root
In the earth of my choice, in this earth
I leave behind. (16)

Reluctantly gifting Elesin his new bride, Iyaloja discerns a cosmological potential within this symbolic union:

Iyaloja: [. . .] The fruit of such a union is rare. It will be neither of this world nor of the next. Nor of the one behind us. As if the timelessness of the ancestor world and the unborn have joined spirits to wring an issue of the elusive being of passage . . . Elesin!

Elesin: I am here. What is it?

Iyaloja: Did you hear all I said just now? (17)

Like Praise-Singer, Iyaloja celebrates the horseman's role in ritually producing the continuity of Yoruba history. Even more, she declares that Elesin may leave behind a spiritual gift, ushering the cosmos into a new dispensation. Preparing for his sacrifice, Elesin is becoming *ancestral*, while his new bride (soon to carry Elesin's *unborn* seed) will remain *living*. Elesin will therefore leave behind not just a life, but a living threshold between the intertwined temporal realms of Yoruba cosmology within the womb of his bride. As Elesin later boasts, holding a newly stained virgin cloth, "It is no mere virgin stain, but the union of life and the seeds of passage. My vital flow, the last from this flesh is intermingled with the promise of future life" (32). While this seed could gift the cosmos with a new temporal and spiritual interconnection, Elesin's last conjugal act carries danger, Iyaloja warns, if the seed attracts a curse (18). Thus, when Iyaloja abruptly ends her celebration by questioning Elesin's attentiveness—"Did you hear all I said just now?"—she, like Praise-Singer questioning Elesin's ability to hear (a motif I will further explore later), foreshadows the tragic outcome of the drama.

For Soyinka, the ritual construction of community in cyclic time that Praise-Singer and Iyaloja celebrate is not antithetical to the tragic foreshadowing contained in their celebratory performances. Such a community is in fact immanent to the structure of classical tragedy, Soyinka argues. In *The Death of Tragedy*, George Steiner famously argues that tragic drama's prolonged collapse, beginning in the seventeenth-century, reached a point of no return with the modern "triumph of rationalism and secular metaphysics" over Europe's older "organic world view" composed of "mythological,

symbolic and ritual reference” (193; 292). Responding to Steiner’s diagnosis, Soyinka declares in *Myth*,

The implication of this, a strange one to the African world-view, is that, to expand Steiner’s own metaphor, the world in which lightning was a cornice in the cosmic architecture of man collapsed at that moment when Benjamin Franklin tapped its power with a kite. [. . .] For cultures which pay more than lip-service to the protean complexity of the universe of which man is himself a reflection, this European habit of world re-definition appears both wasteful and truth-defeating. (48-9)

According to Soyinka, the “assimilative wisdom of African metaphysics” protects indigenous cosmologies from the collapse of ritual frames of reference coinciding with European modernity (49). Thus, the discovery of electricity symbolized in the Franklin legend does not in Africa coincide with a disenchanted framework of teleologic discovery and progress, as the Weberian narrative would have it. Rather than sequential “world re-definition,” modernity enlarges the potential for ritual within cyclic time. Unlike Steiner’s Europe, then, the mythic, symbolic, and ritual framework of tragedy coincides with Soyinka’s Africa.

More specifically, tragedy survives African modernity, Soyinka argues, because of what he terms *the metaphysics of the irreducible*. Rather than the self-authorizing, sovereign subject of post-Enlightenment Europe, the African subject, Soyinka argues, is implicated within the forces of the cosmos. He writes,

Where society lives in a close inter-relation with Nature, regulates its existence by natural phenomena within the observable process of continuity—ebb and tide,

waxing and waning of the moon, rain and drought, planting and harvest—the highest moral order is seen as that which guarantees a parallel continuity of the species. We must try to understand this as operating with a framework which can conveniently be termed *the metaphysics of the irreducible*: knowledge of birth and death as the human cycle; the wind as a moving, felling, cleansing, destroying, winnowing force; the duality of the knife as blood-letter and creative implement; earth and sun as life-sustaining verities, and so on. These serve as matrices within which mores, personal relationships, even communal economics are formulated and reviewed. (52-53, my emphasis)

Against ipseity, Soyinka's African subject is cosmically enforced. This fundamental irreducibility is why he pairs cyclic time with what he calls "the animist interfusion of all matter and consciousness" (145). Such perennial interdependence, or mutual animation amidst the entirety of the cosmos, Soyinka argues, raises a formal relation between African life and tragic form. "The profound experience of tragic drama is comprehensible within such irreducible hermeticism," he writes, "Because of the visceral intertwining of each individual with the fate of the entire community, a rupture in his normal functioning not only endangers this shared reality *but threatens existence itself*" (53, my emphasis). Africa's metaphysics of the irreducible—that is, the coexistence of cyclic time and animist consciousness, which endows a sacralized community with a "secular," historically implicated vision of the social—suggests a tragic aesthetic lost in modern Europe, Soyinka argues, because of a cosmological difference.

Horseman's transitions between acts emphasize this difference. Acts shift between an indigenous and colonial setting: a Yoruba market and the British Residency. While the Yoruba scenes assume a ritual aesthetic and consist largely of verse, the British scenes shift to a representational aesthetic and consist largely of prose. Act I, for example, introduces Elesin's death with proverbs, prophecies, incantations, and call-and-response performances, which seek to realize the ritual in cyclic time. In Act II the British (and Anglicized) characters explain the ritual in sequential time. This difference coincides with conceptions of the relation between language and the world. Praise-Singer and the market Women use language to prepare Elesin for his death, cast as his entrance to the "one river" and "great market," symbolic locations of the cyclic movement of the cosmos:

Praise-Singer: The gourd you bear is not for shirking.

The gourd is not for setting down

At the first crossroad or wayside grove.

Only one river may know its contents

Women: We shall all meet at the great market

We shall all meet at the great market

He who goes early takes the best bargains

But we shall meet, and resume our banter. (12)

Alternatively, the Pilkings and their houseboy, Joseph, use language to describe Elesin's death and its social function. Unlike the cyclic, non-uni-directional continuity of the "great market," in which the living (present), the dead (past), and the unborn (future)

meet, barter, and banter, this dialogue casts Elesin's death as a sequential event in an empty, linear narrative:

Pilkings: [W]hat is supposed to be going on in town tonight?

Joseph: Tonight sir? You mean the chief who is going to kill himself?

Pilkings: What?

Jane: What do you mean, kill himself?

Pilkings: You mean he is going to kill somebody don't you?

Joseph: No master. He will not kill anybody and no one will kill him. He will simply die.

Jane: But why Joseph?

Joseph: It is native law and custom. The King die last month. Tonight is his burial. But before they can bury him, the Elesin must die so as to accompany him to heaven. (21-22)

With the British prose *representing sequential time* and Yoruba verse *conjuring cyclic time*, the play's language contrasts two temporal structures coinciding with two cosmological frames of reference coinciding with two forms of political community: the British colony and the Oyo Kingdom.

As the tragedy unfolds, Elesin distills the colonization of the Oyo Kingdom in his language. The arrested Elesin's words molder from elevated verse—his usual mode of articulating the cosmological import of his actions—to metaphysical abstractions, as David Richards rightly asserts (268). This shift away from what Jane calls the Yoruba people's "long-winded, roundabout way of making conversation" should be considered in relation to Martin Rohmer's observation that Soyinka pairs "words, music, and

dance” together to “constitute the fundamental pattern of communication throughout the play” (Soyinka 44; Rohmer 69, 57). As the drums’ silence in the final act coincides with a shift in Elesin’s language, the “enormous vitality” of his marketplace dancing and singing in the opening scene is replaced by his handcuffed, dead body in the closing scene (5).⁹⁷ The simultaneous staging of silent drums, devalued language, and a lifeless body in the final act therefore signify a larger shift in the play’s frame of reference.⁹⁸ What Henry Gates Jr. terms the play’s “semantics of death” does not arise from a stable semiotic system, but the intertwinement of two systems: Yoruba cosmology and colonial modernity.

The law functions within the drama as the site in which this intertwinement emerges as a cosmological trauma. While Yoruba characters refer to Elesin’s fate as ritual *death*, the colonial administration renders it ritual *murder* (20). The cleavage between these biological and jurisprudential referents demonstrates what Soyinka means by claiming in his author’s note, “The confrontation in the play is largely metaphysical” (3).⁹⁹ Eugene McNulty rightly takes this confrontation to be the “metaphysics of Law” (2). Elesin’s sacrifice assumes a law based on ontological transition in cyclic time, but before he completes his rite, he is forced before a law based on the sequential subordination of life itself under the sovereignty of the nation-state. As he sits chained

⁹⁷ Soyinka’s references to drums throughout his stage directions reveal their dramaturgical importance. The opening directions pair Elesin’s entrance with his drummers who, in contrast to the off-stage *gbedu* drummers, follow Elesin and provide rhythms to his performances (3; 7). Often, directions pair discussions of the horseman ritual with the sound of the *gbedu* drums, and all other ritual performances are accompanied by on-stage drums. (7; 24; 32-33). Directions pair the final act, the *anagnorisis* in which a denigrated Elesin witnesses his son’s corpse, moreover, with silence from the drums (60). From start to finish, then, drums provide a rhythm for the plot’s movement.

⁹⁸ This shift explains the conclusion to Soyinka’s infamous author’s note “*Horseman* can be fully realised only through an evocation of music from the abyss of transition” (3).

⁹⁹ See Rooney on animistic natural law in relation to the monotheistic, paternal law of Western metaphysics (*African Literature* 57-74).

in a former holding cell for slaves, now the Pilkings' "disused annexe" holding broken furniture, the past, present, and future of the Oyo Kingdom mediated by Elesin's (now imprisoned) body is revealed to be captured by a legal structure which forms/enslaves its subjects through the process Derrida calls the "becoming-thing of the person" (*Horseman* 47-8; *Beast* 199).¹⁰⁰ What the stage directions describe as Elesin's "animal bellow" resounding from off-stage during his arrest signifies his entry into this process of dehumanization under the law—the necropolitical foundation of biopolitical modernity (49).¹⁰¹ As Elesin laments his loss of incantatory power, he incarnates an Oyo body politic being severed from his people's temporal consciousness. "My powers deserted me," he cries, "My charms, my spells, even my voice lacked strength when I made to summon the powers that would lead me over the last measure of earth into the land of the fleshless" (55). By incarnating the desacralization of the horseman ritual and thus the degeneration of cyclic time and its coinciding political theology, Elesin's possession, arrest, and lamentation signifies the process through which the Yoruba world's metaphysics of the irreducible is being sacrificed under the metaphysical structure of colonial law.

¹⁰⁰ Msiska thus writes that like Gilroy, Soyinka

reminds us of the importance of the Slave Triangle in the production of the concept and materiality of modernity, but unlike him, he locates its fundamental structures further in time, in the domain of ancient myth as well as history, suggesting that, though the "Black Atlantic" is historically unique, it may have antecedent structures which it mirrors and to which it may be historically linked. We can thus argue that Soyinka advances a dialectical reading of the 'Black Atlantic', relocating it from geographical spatiality to historical genealogy. (35)

¹⁰¹ For the "creaturely" structure of modern subjectivity, see Eric Santner's *Creaturely Life*. Interestingly, in Soyinka's prison notes, written a few years before Elesin's dramatic imprisonment, he discovers a symbolic relationship between himself, the postcolonial condition of Nigeria during the Biafran war, and a lizard he finds in his cell. Interpreting the lizard's movement of his head as symbolic of a cultural repetition compulsion in which the African nation-state is caught, Soyinka writes, "There are reasons, undoubtedly, in folk-lore why the lizard constantly nods his head. [. . .] Whatever ancestral trauma plagues the lizard still, will, I hope, be exorcised some day at some great lizard meet" [sic] (270).

Severed from his consecrated mediator, Alafin's spirit is condemned to "roaming restlessly on the surface of the earth," in Iyaloja's words, while the Yoruba "world leaves its course and smashes on the boulders of the great void"—that is, the British Empire—in Praise-Singer's words (58; 6). The phrase *great void* suggests a temporality akin to what Benjamin terms the "homogenous, empty time" of modernity: a teleologic succession of distinct moments ("Theses" 261). Yoruba characters continue to believe in the presence of ancestral spirits and ritual efficacy, implying that the drama is not fully submerged within the temporality of the great void. Yet the Oyo Kingdom is plagued with a certain blindness, or de-mediated relation to the cyclic time of the cosmos. As Praise-Singer laments to Elesin, "Your heir has taken the burden on himself. What the end will be, we are not gods to tell. But this young shoot has poured its sap into the parent stalk, and we know this is not the way of life. *Our world is tumbling in the void of strangers*, Elesin" (62, my emphasis). The play's Yoruba consciousness thus encounters, through its tragic plot, what Mbembe describes as modern Africa's time of *entanglement* (*On the Postcolony* 14). Cosmologically entangled between cyclic and sequential time, Soyinka's characters embody a "social vision" rooted in an infinitely implicated subjectivity being grafted into the sovereign-subject relation at the core of the modern nation-state.

Conjured Communities, Entangled Cosmologies

Amusa, sergeant in the colonial army, and Joseph, the houseboy, comically incarnate this entanglement. Joseph appears only once, attempting to serve as "native guide" to Simon and Jane, but hindered by his "elephantine notions of tact" (21). Amusa

appears thrice, similarly enacting a servitude hindered by the “peculiar logic” of his “big pagan heart” paired with his “rather quaint grammar” (21; 19; 38). Each inhabit a state of interpellation arrested at the threshold between the political-theological structures of the Oyo Kingdom and the British Empire.¹⁰² This threshold leaves both shocked by and unable to assimilate within the logic of each community. Amusa is filled with “disbelief and horror,” for example, by the Pilkings’ use of *egungun* costumes, which incarnate ancestral spirits, for “fancy-dress” to accompany their tango (18). Yet he is equally frightened by threats from Yoruba schoolgirls. “Off with his knickers!,” they taunt, expelling the “eater of white left-overs” from the market (31). Neither British nor Yoruba (Yoruba characters describe Amusa as a castrated son of the white man who can no longer recognize his own mother), *Horseman*’s “inarticulate, obsequious fools” as George dubs them in the essay quoted at the beginning of this chapter, play the role of the colonial mimic man (Soyinka 27-29; George 74).¹⁰³ Amusa and Joseph are,

¹⁰² They stage the “predicament in a social nexus where new (colonial) infrastructure collides with the old (native) superstructure,” George writes (78).

¹⁰³ As George argues, their foolish mimesis functions within the drama to reveal the ambivalence within imperial discourse championed by Homi Bhabha: to Anglicize the native is to interpellate him or her from native to constitutively not-English. For George, the logic of the constitutive paradox informs both *Horseman*’s characters and its author’s note. Thus, oddly, what he terms the “dissonance” between the drama and the note demonstrates a certain unity: not only does every character signify the process of their colonial subject formation, but so does Soyinka and so does the play. Just as Olunde’s sacrifice cannot stop the historical collapse of the Oyo Kingdom, and just as Soyinka’s writing—as Appiah argues—cannot transcend the overwhelming presence of colonial history, the play, George tells us, necessarily fails to recover Yoruba consciousness from a world reshaped by European expansion. Yet the play’s “usefulness,” to use George’s term, hinges upon the critic’s ability to recognize the knot in which these necessary failures interweave, he suggests (88). Taking up this task, George perceptively reroutes Jeyifo’s critique back through Appiah’s interpretation of the author’s note, culminating in a re-staging of the *mise-en-scène* of postcolonial critique which is *Horseman* criticism. He writes,

[T]he social process that Elesin’s failure signals is one that Olunde’s self-important suicide cannot arrest by a mere gesture of will. For his self-sacrifice is finally symbolic, driven as much by an aristocratic concern for the metaphysical “balance” of the Yoruba world as by the transforming gaze of the colonial eye. By a similar logic, Soyinka contests European cultural arrogance by seeking to deny Europe the status of originating protagonist in his play; yet the very fact of the contestation confirms Europe in the status under contestation. For the specific idiom of address—that is, the modern stage, the printed text, and the perceptible murmurings of Aristotelean tragedy—remains at the very least of European provenance: Europe, not to belabor

however, fools of Shakespearean mold, I would suggest. What George terms their “logic of immediate transparency” both constitutes the play’s humor and reveals the process of sacralization undergirding the drama’s staging of community (82).

George contrasts Amusa’s logic with Olunde’s. Olunde returns to Nigeria from medical training in England on the day of Elesin’s death-rite, planning to bury his father before returning to England. Donning what the stage directions call a “sober Western suit,” he represents a less foolish form of the Anglicized native than Amusa and Joseph (40). He is also alienated from his Yoruba culture, though, unlike Amusa and Joseph, at the level of epistemology. In contrast to Amusa’s horror as he witnesses the Pilkings in *egungun*, for example, Olunde asks “mildly,” as the stage directions dictate, the reason she must “desecrate an ancestral mask” (41). While Amusa assumes the immediate transparency of ancestral spirits in the Pilkings’ tango,¹⁰⁴ George claims, the

the point, remains the occasion and irreducible addressee of the playwright’s labor. At the intersection of Soyinka’s play and his preemptive interpretation of it, the oblique dynamic at work is one of disavowal. (86)

For George, Soyinka’s “preemptive interpretation” is a strategic concealment, as Appiah would have it, but the force of Soyinka’s rhetoric only emerges in relation to the failures embodied, as Jeyifo would have it, by both the characters and author of the play. George therefore takes the message of the play to be one of disavowal, yet this disavowal emerges indirectly, only in relation to the act of interpretation staged—and failed—by Soyinka, a failure the audience must in turn interpret.

This self-reflexive scene of writing and reading poses a hermeneutic challenge to postcolonial theory—which, as I claimed in the introduction of this chapter, concludes, George argues, in a critical impotence. Contra Bhabha, then, Soyinka does not stage “flawed colonial mimesis” as a liberating aporia, George ultimately claims (Bhabha 87). Instead, he suggests that Soyinka productively represents a political impasse without offering any form of transformation. *Horseman*’s post-Ibadan-Ife Marxist criticism (and George’s argument is in many ways the culmination of this tradition) thus continues to assume a fundamentally reflective aesthetic. According to this logic, which George pursues the furthest, the most radical act a work of art can perform is to reflect its constitutive paradoxes by revealing its own failure to transcend the reality of its historical context. My reading suggests otherwise. The question that motivates my reading throughout this chapter is, if we interpret Soyinka’s play not as the staging of a historical ritual, but as ritual performance, how might this shape our interpretation?

¹⁰⁴ Since *egungun* traditionally incarnate ancestral spirits despite the context, intention, or body behind the mask, Amusa sees not Simon and Jane, George argues, but “masks-in-motion.” George borrows this term from Gates Jr., who claims that unlike the Western concept of a mask, Yoruba masks do not signify apart from their performative movement, which is moreover detached from authorial intention. Yoruba masks thus mask a certain meaning, signifying through veiling, only while in use, though it is not the performer who dictates this meaning, but rather the mask, or more precisely the mask as it arises within the performative scene—in the case of *egungun* the incarnation of ancestral spirits.

“secularized” Olunde (George’s use of the term does not follow Soyinka’s appropriative use), recognizes the significance of authorial intention. Thus, Olunde is able to confront Jane, who he does not believe to be channeling ancestral spirits, but rather “desecrating” his culture.

Amusa, on the other hand, refusing to relay information of Elesin’s impending death-rite to Simon in *egungun*, nervously asks him, “How can man talk against death to person in uniform of death? Is like talking against government to person in uniform of police.” (19). By associating the police uniform with *egungun*, this line, I would suggest, implies not simply indigenous panic at a broken taboo, but a theory of reference through which Amusa interprets the symbols of both the Oyo Kingdom and the British Empire. Amusa would be equally frightened of speaking against the government to a man in a police uniform as he is speaking against death to the Pilkings in *egungun*. For him, sacred symbols channel the presence of the signified. They *ritually conjure*, rather than *represent*, the power of that which they reference. As he explains *egungun* to Simon, “This dress get power of dead” (40).

That Amusa views the police uniform as sacred like *egungun* baffles both British and Yoruba characters. The market women, for example, mock Amusa and the Constables, but by dubbing their batons and hats phallic symbols, fetishes for the “white man’s eunuch” to mediate imperial power, the women agree with Amusa more than they recognize (27).¹⁰⁵ The schoolgirls snatch the batons and hats and model the fetishes as

¹⁰⁵ For example:

Woman: [*makes a quick tug at the Constable’s baton*] That doesn’t fool anyone you know. It’s the one you carry under your government knickers that counts. [*She bends low as if to peep under the baggy shorts. The embarrassed Constable quickly puts his knees together. The Women roar.*]

Woman: You mean there is nothing there at all?

they mimic the British and by implication Amusa (29). They banter in English accents, finally calling for Amusa's service:

Girl: [. . .]

—You've kept the flag flying.

—We do our best for the old country.

—It's a pleasure to serve.

—Another whisky old chap?

—You are indeed too too kind.

—Not at all sir, Where is that boy? [*With a sudden bellow.*] Sergeant!

Amusa: [*snaps to attention*] Yessir!

[*The Women collapse with laughter.*] (31)

For Amusa, the girls in police uniform, like the Pilkings in *egungun*, channel the spirit of that to which they refer. Witnessing the girls' mimicry, he sees not acting like, but a channeling of, the colonizers.¹⁰⁶ What makes Amusa laughable to both the British and Yoruba characters is not his "non-modern" belief in spirit possession, but rather his refusal to structurally differentiate the indigenous and the modern, the sacred and the secular. For Amusa, symbols of the British Empire, such as the police uniform, as well as its language, such as the girls' imperial bellow (an inverse of Elesin's animal bellow), hold sacred, incantatory power.

Frustrated by Amusa's "mumbo-jumbo," Simon finds comfort in Joseph's Christian assertion that *egungun* "has no power" (19; 21). Joseph's shock when Simon

Woman: Oh there was something. You know that handbell which the whiteman uses to summon his servants . . . ? (27)

¹⁰⁶ For anthropological explorations of European spirits channeled in South America and West Africa, see Michael Taussig and Paul Stoller as mentioned in my introduction to this thesis.

dismisses Anglican baptism as “holy water nonsense,” however, places him in proximity to Amusa (24). When Joseph declares that “Black man juju can’t touch master,” he demonstrates not a disbelief in the spiritual forces associated with Yoruba symbols, but his amalgamated belief in Christian symbols (23). In other words, at the epistemic level, Joseph is not a convert, but rather follows Soyinka’s “philosophic accommodation” by absorbing the Christian god into the Yoruba pantheon and claiming that the newly acquired white, European ritual of baptism offers protection against the antagonistic juju of colonized, African life. Like Amusa, Joseph makes no differentiation between the animist and the imperialist.¹⁰⁷

Crucially, in Act IV’s opening stage directions, British characters reveal their community to be, as the fools believe, ritually conjured. The setting is a Masque at the Residency in honor of the Prince of Wales’s visit:

At last, the entrance of Royalty. The band plays ‘Rule Britannia’, badly, beginning long before he is visible. The couples bow and curtsy as he passes by them. Both he and his companions are dressed in seventeenth-century European costume. [. . .] The Prince bows to the guests. The band strikes up a Viennese waltz and the Prince formally opens the floor. [. . .] The orchestra’s waltz rendition is not of the highest musical standard. (37)

The poor quality of the music contrasts the scene to the Yoruba characters’ vibrant singing and dancing. Yet much like Simon’s desire in the deleted scene, the use of seventeenth-century costume places a stale, European “tradition” in mimetic relation

¹⁰⁷ Similarly, in “Who’s Afraid of Elesin Oba?” Soyinka’s labels his early critics, who misread what he perceives as a spirit-matter continuum as superstition, “superstitious” marxists (*Art* 66). By treating political economy as that which can interpret all reality, such critics miss, Soyinka claims, the complexity of reality, which cannot be adequately perceived through a matter/spirit binary.

with the Yoruba characters' "rituals," exposing European tradition as ritual.¹⁰⁸ In fact, the Pilkings incorporate *egungun* rituals into their dance:

The Prince is quite fascinated by their costume and they demonstrate how the *egungun* normally appears, then showing the various press-button controls they have innovated for the face flaps, the sleeves, etc. They demonstrate the dance steps and the guttural sounds made by the *egungun*, harass other dancers in the hall, Mrs Pilkings playing the 'restrainer' to Pilkings' manic darts. Everyone is highly entertained, the Royal Party especially who lead the applause. (37)¹⁰⁹

Like *egungun*'s incarnation of ancestral spirits in masks, the British conjure through their Masque a European past onto the African present, incanting without words that "Britannia rules the waves."¹¹⁰ The Pilkings, meanwhile, have "innovated" the *egungun* costumes with mechanical controls. As the audience becomes captivated by this performance of modernization, the dance becomes a *mise-en-scène* of colonization, demonstrating a proximity between Yoruba culture and European modernity's own sacralized economy of which the Pilkings, the guests, and the Prince remain unaware.¹¹¹

¹⁰⁸ The directions refer to this scene as a "ritual of introductions" (37).

¹⁰⁹ By emphasizing a fascination with "guttural" noises commonly made by spirit mediums as well as the attack and restraint movements of *egungun* performances, this scene embodies the anthropological framework Soyinka critiques in his *Myth* lectures. Speaking in the department of social anthropology rather than English, Soyinka claims that the academic setting of his Cambridge lectures stages an epistemic, and indeed axiological, struggle. Since his host university while writing *Horseman* takes the exoticness of African culture for granted, but does not believe in the "mythical beast" of "African Literature," as Soyinka puts it, he focuses his lectures on "eliciting the African self-apprehended world in myth and literature" (vii, ix). In other words, rather than *apprehending* the African world, Soyinka's work is an attempt to exegete a form of *self-apprehension* immanent to African poetics, the "primal systems of apprehension of the [black] race," through which to then interpret the African world, a project he terms "racial retrieval" (xii; 108). Thus, Simon teasing Jane by calling her a "social anthropologist" demonstrates, in this scene, more truth than either recognize (23).

¹¹⁰ See Eric Hobsbawm and Terence Ranger, especially Ranger's chapter "The Invention of Tradition in Colonial Africa" (211-262).

¹¹¹ In the *District Officer* draft, the band plays a charleston while guests dance "like a speeded-up film," endowing this "traditional" scene with a Chaplinesque sense of modernity (IV-1).

Olunde recognizes this repression of the sacred at the core of European modernity, which Soyinka elsewhere describes as a “world of ritual repression” (“Ritual” 8). Despite Olunde’s interpretation of *egungun* filtered through perceived authorial intention, his interpretation of the Masque demonstrates a fundamental agreement with Amusa and Joseph. Challenging Jane’s assumed superiority, he contends that the British Empire is equally “feudalistic,” “barbaric,” and “savage,” in Jane’s words, as the Oyo Kingdom (43; 45). The aristocratic “decadence” of the Prince of Wales’s current “tour of colonial possessions” amidst the “mass suicide” of WWII, he suggests, parallels the Oyo monarchy and the sacrifice his father must undergo, blurring the Pilkings’ distinction between death and murder and leaving them with no “right to pass judgement on other peoples” (43, 44). Like the fools to which he is juxtaposed, then, Olunde rejects the Pilkings’ differentiation between the indigenous and the modern, arguing that the colony is, like the Oyo Kingdom, conjured through sacred rituals mistakenly taken to be, in Jane’s words, “the preservation of sanity in the midst of chaos” (43). As Iyaloja approaches the arrested Elesin, Simon proves Olunde correct by imagining a border between the two neither can cross, inscribing colonial law upon the earth itself (55). When Iyaloja angrily crosses this line, thereby transgressing Simon’s law, whistles blow, guards leap forward, and Iyaloja stops in her tracks (57). She berates Elesin for this new world in which the district office’s voice can speak a law into existence, reconstituting her agential movement as sacrilege (58). That Simon wears a police uniform in this scene reinforces Amusa’s association between it and *egungun* and, more expansively, Yoruba cosmology and colonial modernity’s shared dependence on a structure of the sacred (50).

At the height of the Pilkings' *egungun* performance, moreover, a prophetic interruption casts indigenous desacralization as, through the cosmological entanglement of the two communities staged, a form of ritual sacrifice. The Resident interrupts the dance with news that Elesin's death-rite is impending. Unlike Jane, Simon is not bothered by the death of a native. In his words, "If they want to throw themselves off the top of a cliff or poison themselves for the sake of some barbaric custom, what is that to me?" (25). With the Prince of Wales visiting, however, what the stage directions call Pilkings' "far-flung but key imperial frontier" must appear a "secure colony of His majesty" (37; 39). As the Pilkings' *egungun* performance is halted by news of Elesin's impending death, Simon decides, because of the British ritual of the royal visit, to halt the Yoruba ritual. This scene intertwines the two halted rituals tied to the political-theological differentiation enforcing the play's tragic plot. The Pilkings' dance prophecies through its interruption the interruption of Elesin's death-rite and thus the loss of the temporal continuum through which the *egungun* the Pilkings appropriate incarnates for the Yoruba ancestral life. Despite the Pilkings' authorial intention in performing an *egungun* ritual, then, their dance incarnates not ancestral spirits, as Amusa believes, but ancestral trauma: the desacralization of the horseman ritual upon which ancestral mediation depends. Furthermore, unbeknownst to the Pilkings, Elesin's death-rite, which he is performing during their Masque, is maimed alongside their dance. It is thus impossible to say which maimed dance conjures the other's maiming. Rather, the Pilkings and Elesin together prophetically dance the political-theological structure of biopolitical modernity, and the dance itself places Elesin in the position of the sacrificial surrogate (i.e., the necropolitical subject) for the Pilkings' "secure

colony.” By prophesying the transfiguration of the horseman’s sacrifice into suicide (and thus a sacrifice on behalf of the colony), the Pilkings’ and Elesin’s simultaneously maimed rites cast indigenous desacralization as the drama’s form of ritual sacrifice, revealing the Pilkings as the narrative’s pillager-kings.¹¹²

Spiritual Deprivations

This political-theological structure of the drama’s transsubjective dance reshapes the function of the *gbedu* drums during Elesin’s death-rite. That Elesin’s ritual estrangement first manifests itself in his ear—his inability to hear his companions—suggests a severance from his sacred *calling* as the king’s horseman while being addressed by the *voices* of the new order. However, the otic manifestation of this severance emerges before Elesin gives his will to the “stranger’s intervention.” Crucially, it does not emerge from a self-authorized will to abandon his consecrated position, but rather through Elesin’s repetitive attempt to hear his calling in the beat of the *gbedu* drums—which further casts the performance as a transsubjective act of prophecy (in which even the elders of *Osugbo* are implicated) rather than, as many critics claim, the moral failure of a high ranking individual.¹¹³

For example, as his death-rite commences, Elesin commands everyone to heed the drums alongside him, yet his hearing and vision immediately begin to deteriorate. He declares: “Listen! [*A steady drum-beat from the distance.*] Yes. It is nearly time. The

¹¹² As the Anglican legal category of simony denotes the corrupt instantiation of religious authority, Simon’s name further suggests the structural violence through which he obtains his authority.

¹¹³ For examples moral interpretations, see Booth, Wole Ogundele, and Lokangaka Losambe. In *Myth*, Soyinka rejects the concept of the tragic flaw, asserting that “Oedipus the Innocent remained the ethical archetype” despite, or perhaps because of, his failure (14). Tragedy is for Soyinka beyond good and evil, rooted in cosmology rather than morality.

King's dog has been killed. The King's favourite horse is about to follow his master. My brother chiefs know their task and perform it well. [*He listens again.*]" (32). Couched between two acts of listening, Elesin interprets his position within the temporal sequence signified by the drums. The dog has been killed, he expounds, which means the horse will soon be killed, implying that his own death is impending. "Listen," he commands again:

[*They listen to the drums.*] They have begun to seek out the heart of the King's favourite horse. Soon it will ride in its bolt of raffia with the dog at its feet. Together they will ride on the shoulders of the King's grooms through the pulse centres of the town. They know it is here I shall await them. I have told them. [*His eyes appear to cloud. He passes his hand over them as if to clear his sight*]. (32-33)

Couched once more between two stage directions, this time denoting both listening and seeing, Elesin proclaims that the horse is being sacrificed, again implying that his moment approaches. His clouded eyes, however, suggest a loss of vision coinciding with his attempt to hear his consecrated position within the rhythm. This process escalates in the next stage directions: "He listens to the drums. He seems again to be falling into a state of semi-hypnosis; his eyes scan the sky but it is in a kind of daze. His voice is a little breathless" (33). Elesin's clouded, dazed eyes and breathless voice suggest an obstruction of the very senses mediating the Oyo Kingdom—and indeed the cosmos—before the lightening/whitening of Elesin's body by "strange voices" who impute upon Elesin a "stranger force of violence."

When Alafin's spirit first enters Praise-Singer's body, he immediately recognizes this danger:

Praise-Singer: Elesin Alafin, can you hear my voice?

Elesin: Faintly, my friend, faintly.

Praise-Singer: Elesin Alafin, can you hear my call?

Elesin: Faintly my king, faintly. (33)

Alafin first questions Elesin's ability to hear his calling, then see the spiritual threshold he must cross. "The darkness of this new abode is deep," Alafin declares, "Will your human eyes suffice?" (34). In questioning the efficacy of Elesin's senses, Alafin ultimately questions Elesin's ability to complete the ritual:

Praise-Singer: Is your memory sound Elesin

Shall my voice be a blade of grass and

Tickle the armpit of the past?

Elesin: My memory needs no prodding but

What do you wish to say to me?

Praise-Singer: Only what has been spoken. Only what concerns

The dying wish of the father of all. (33)

By associating Elesin's deprivations with amnesia, Alafin questions the plagued Elesin's ability to function as "intercessor to the world." By sacrificing himself in order to relay a sacred message to Alafin's spirit, the horseman becomes, in the performance of the ritual, a mediator between cultural memory and the future. That which has been spoken—the message patrimonially passed down from one horseman to the next—becomes that which will be spoken: the interdependent release of Alafin's spirit into the

ancestral realm and the regeneration of the Oyo Kingdom's cyclic time through the horseman's posthumous voice. The progression of Yoruba history—the intertwining between the worlds of the ancestors, the living, and the unborn—hinges upon Elesin's mediatory voice within the fourth stage, which itself hinges upon Elesin's ability to hear his consecrated position in the beat of the *gbedu* drums and therefore see the spiritual threshold he must cross. Alafin's spirit thus recognizes that Elesin's otic, optic, and oral deprivations pose a cosmological threat.¹¹⁴

That the locus of these deprivations is Elesin's head bears symbolic meaning in Yoruba ontology and aesthetics, elevating his ritual companions' fears. The *ori* (head) is the locus of *ase*, the life-force that sustains existence, distinctly embodied in everyone and everything:

Ase is given by Olodumare to everything—gods, ancestors, spirits, humans, animals, plants, rocks, rivers, and voiced words such as songs, prayers, praises, curses, or even everyday conversation. Existence, according to Yoruba thought, is dependent upon it; it is the power to make things happen and change. (Henry John Drewal, et al. 16)

As the locus of *ase*, the head bears ontological preeminence over the rest of the body. This belief is formalized in Yoruba sculptural practice through the aesthetic prominence given to the head of each sculpture. In fact, as Babatunde Lawal explains, the human body is said to be sculpted from clay by Obatala, beginning with the *ori ode* (external, or

¹¹⁴ Interestingly, Olaniyan sees this threat emerging in the first act, through Elesin's use of representational language instead of cosmic action. "Elesin's actions all along contradict every Ogunnian principle," he writes, "*Action* is what defines Ogun, and the Ogun figure is the cosmic-scale actor. Elesin knows this, of course, but what he does is to substitute representation, through his rhetorical flamboyance, for action" (53). I would suggest that Olaniyan's interpretation extends beyond Elesin's failure, and even provides framework for critiquing the focus on representational aesthetics in *Horseman* criticism, as I am attempting to do in this chapter.

physical head), into which Olodumare breathes *emi* (life), casting the human as a sculpture animated by divine breath. Once animated, the human form is sent to Ajala Alamo, potter of the *ori inu* (inner head, or insight), which houses *ase*.

Following the gods, Yoruba sculptors begin with and aesthetically emphasize the head of each sculpture, rendering the head, in Lawal's words, the "coordinating center for human existential struggles" ("The Head" 102). According to Lawal, unlike the representational aesthetic of the famous Ife head, stressing the individuality of the royal subject's *ori ode*, the stylized, abstract heads of divination sculptures accentuate the *ori inu* and its primordial, animating forces. This divinatory aesthetic thus bypasses the sculpted subject for the transsubjective act of ancestral mediation, and the historically located mediator of this process is swallowed by the transtemporal the act of sculptural mediation itself. Stylized facial marks, for example, "identify the sculpture with a lineage rather than with a particular individual," and through aesthetic abstraction, the *ori inu* is "rendered, as it were, in embryo: eyes, nose, mouth and ears enlarged and schematized as if to convey a return to primordial spirituality" (95). In other words, in the same way that the *ori ode* functions as a mask for the *ori inu*, which is itself a mask for *ase*, divination sculptures cast the carved subject as a mask for what Soyinka conceptualizes as the non-uni directional temporal continuum between the ancestral, living, and unborn. Due to his role as intercessor between these intertwined temporalities, the horseman embodies a de-individuated "return to primordial spirituality" analogous to the divinatory aesthetic in Yoruba sculpture. When Elesin begins to lose the senses embodied in his ears, eyes, and mouth, Alafin fears the

deterioration of Elesin's *ori inu* and thus his *ase*, threatening his efficacy as cosmological mediator *before* the death-rite is transfigured into a possession-rite.

Likewise recognizing this transtemporal, transsubjective threat, Praise-Singer and Iyaloja attempt to steady Elesin through an exhortative performance composed of Yoruba proverbs. I quote in full:

Praise-Singer: The river is never so high that the eyes
Of a fish are covered. The night is not so dark
That the albino fails to find his way. A child
Returning homewards craves no leading by the hand.
Gracefully does the mask regain his grove at the end of the
day . . .

Gracefully. Gracefully does the mask dance
Homeward at the end of the day, gracefully . . .

[Elesin's trance appears to be deepening, his steps heavier.]

Iyaloja: It is the death of war that kills the valiant,
Death of water is how the swimmer goes
It is the death of markets that kills the trader
And death of indecision takes the idle away
The trade of the cutlass blunts its edge
And the beautiful die the death of beauty.
It takes an Elesin to die the death of death . . .
Gracefully, gracefully does the horseman regain
The stables at the end of day, gracefully . . . (35)

Praise-Singer's exhortation evokes a correlation between essence and home in order to conjure within Elesin, contra his deprivations, an indestructible vision of his spiritual home, the threshold beyond death he was born to cross. Water cannot blind the fish because the river is its natural habitat. On their homeward journeys, the albino needs no torch and the child needs no guidance; both know their paths because of who they are. This proposed vision arising from the synergy between where one dwells and who one is means that Elesin's vision of the spiritual passageway cannot be hindered, Praise-Singer contends, as long as he performs the rite "gracefully," recognizing his sacred role as the king's horseman. Iyaloja continues this exhortation by evoking a correlation between craft and death. As the warrior is killed in battle, as the swimmer drowns, craft of life determines form of death; thus, as the king's horseman, Elesin's death-rite cannot be stopped—again, as long as he performs his duty "gracefully," adhering to the horseman's role.

The language of this performance, however, prophecies Elesin's impending failure. As David Richards notes, Iyaloja's words imply, through the "creative paradox" central to Yoruba proverbs, contradictory meanings (205).¹¹⁵ On one level, her exhortation establishes a relation between social role and life, which dictates how people will die: the trader dies according to the market. On another, it implies that the end of such a social role results in one's death: the death of a market (for example, the play's opening sequence) leads to the death of its traders. Finally, Elesin is said to die not the death of the horseman, but the "death of death," thereby negating the previously proposed thanatological laws through the promise of a regeneration of life in death.

¹¹⁵ Much of the poetic language of the play is composed of Soyinka's English translations of traditional Yoruba proverbs, which Richards insightfully traces.

Although the trader may die according to the market, and although the death of the market constitutes the death of its traders, Elesin kills death itself by regenerating the temporal continuum between the living, the dead, and the unborn symbolized in what the market woman term “the great market.”¹¹⁶ The climax of Iyaloja’s exhortation thus contorts the word *death* through its repetition, which implies a contradictory meaning upon each utterance; through this contortion, the proverbial claims fall apart. This work of “creative paradox” evokes the metaphysical paradox of the horseman ritual. By willingly dancing into that which ends life, death, Elesin contorts its ontological grip. Approached from this angle, Iyaloja’s thanatological laws culminate in a celebration of the regeneration of communal life secured by Elesin’s mediatory death.

Iyaloja’s words, however, transform her and Praise-Singer’s exhortative performance into a lamentation. Explicating her phrase *to die the death of death*, Richards writes,

An internal tension is evoked as the semantic field of the word [*death*] is subjected to the proverb’s paradoxical convulsions. Her speech spirals through opposing conditions from consolation, to the beneficent refinement of spiritual expertise within a sympathetic universe which acknowledges individual

¹¹⁶ Iyaloja’s exhortation should therefore be interpreted in relation to Elesin’s song of the “Not-I bird” in Act I. The song anchors the fate of Yoruba characters of every caste, even the gods, to death. Elesin casts himself, however, as the only one to welcome death, symbolized by the “Not-I bird”:

I, when that Not-I bird perched
 Upon my roof, bade him seek his nest again,
 Safe, without care or fear. I unrolled
 My welcome mat for him to see. Not-I
 Flew happily away, you’ll hear his voice
 No more in this lifetime—You all know
 What I am. (9)

As in Iyaloja’s proverbs, in Elesin’s song the thanatic hospitality performed in the horseman ritual defeats death’s grip on the entire Yoruba community. The voice disavowing being—chirping “Not-I”—becomes the horseman’s posthumous voice regenerating being in the verse’s final words: “I am.” Although the song is most often interpreted as an example of Elesin’s hubristic *hamartia*, I would suggest it demonstrates precisely through its hubris the cosmological stakes of the horseman ritual.

predilections, to a nihilistic finality and closure, *to the collapse of a social order and the loss of the transcendent capacity of ritual*. (204, my emphasis)

To push this interpretation further, in their performance, Praise-Singer and Iyaloja unintentionally give linguistic form to their own demise—becoming, as it were, alongside Elesin and even the Pilkings, unwilling prophets. Praise-Singer and Iyaloja conclude their exhortations by wielding their proverbial correlations (essence and home, craft and death) as ritual exhortations celebrating the graceful dance through which Elesin will die. Iyaloja's repetition of Praise-Singer's triad, "gracefully, gracefully . . . gracefully," however, also mirrors her own triad, "to die the death of death." This silent repetition of death within the performance's culminating repetition of grace casts the compromised relation between Elesin's graceful movement and his mediatory death as the focus of the entire performance. To die the death of death, thereby regenerating life, Praise-Singer and Iyaloja imply, Elesin must dance gracefully to the *gbedu* drums; Praise-Singer's and Iyaloja's verses are bordered, however, by stage directions asserting the "heavy" steps of Elesin as he becomes entranced by imperial voices. During Praise-Singer and Iyaloja's performance, then, Elesin perverts the graceful movement of which they speak. Rather than celebrating the moment in which he will die the death of death, through Elesin's disjointed dance, he signifies the impending moment in which the ritual will be halted, he will live on, and thus his mediatory death of death will die.

But this prophecy is already lodged in the language of Iyaloja's triad and consequently the metaphors of return begun by Praise-Singer. Interpreted alongside the dance which accompanies their utterance and the silent repetition of death within Iyaloja's triad of grace, the mask returning to the forest and the horseman returning to

the stables shift from metaphors of Elesin's unstoppable death, or return to the "great market," into allegories of the cosmological desacralization Elesin is incarnating. Through Praise-Singer and Iyaloja's celebration of communal life in Elesin's death, a lament of communal death in Elesin's life prophetically arises; their exhortation of Elesin's grace becomes an anachronistic act of mourning his, and consequently their own, disgrace. Thus, immediately after this performance, Praise-Singer laments his own spiritual senses while witnessing Elesin's worsening deprivations. "How shall I tell what me eyes have seen? [. . .] oh how shall I tell what my ears have heard?," he cries, "Do you hear me still Elesin, do you hear your faithful one? [*Elesin in his motions appears to feel for a direction of sound, subtly, but he only sinks deeper into his trance-dance.*]" (35). While witnessing Elesin attempt to undo his severance from his sacred calling, Praise-Singer questions the limits of his own voice, vision, and hearing: how shall I *tell* what I *see* and *hear*? Praise-Singer recognizes that because of Elesin's role as the consecrated intercessor of the cosmos, the desacralization of the horseman ritual manifesting itself in Elesin's deprivations bears transhistorical, transsubjective import. A plagued Elesin means a plagued universe, a desecration of *ase* itself.

In fact, the fissure between the beat of the *gbedu* drums and Elesin's recognition plagues the entire drama. In acts set in the Residency, for instance, the *gbedu* drums beat in the distance, haunting the colony's representational aesthetic with a Yoruba ritual outside its frame of reference. The noise places Simon in a similar interpretive position as Elesin:

Pilkings: [. . .] I am getting rattled. Probably the effect of those bloody drums.
Do you hear how they go on and on?

Jane: I wondered when you'd notice. Do you suppose it has something to do with this affair?

Pilkings: Who knows? They always find an excuse for making a noise . . .

[*Thoughtfully.*] Even so . . .

Jane: Yes Simon?

Pilkings: It's different Jane. I don't think I've heard this particular—sound—before. Something unsettling about it.

Jane: I thought all bush drumming sounded the same. (21)

This dialogue demonstrates the epistemic divide between the British and Yoruba characters, but also their mutual incomprehension of the drums despite their epistemic frameworks.

Joseph, for instance, like Elesin during the ritual and the Pilkings as they prepare for the Masque, has trouble interpreting the distant beat. “It sounds like the death of a great chief and then, it sounds like the wedding of a great chief,” he declares, “It really mix me up” (24). On one level, Joseph is correct. Elesin consummates a marriage and begins his death-rite in swift sequence—calling his companions to heed the *gbedu* drums immediately after he reveals to them the cloth bearing his new wife's virgin stain. On another, like Iyaloja in Act 1, he implies that what Ifowodo terms Elesin's “death-hour wedding” is a consecrated union between life and death, an ontological marriage. By rupturing the cosmological union between life and death, however, Elesin leaves behind a seed “tainted with the curses of the world,” as Iyaloja later puts it, recasting this wedding as an ontological divorce (55).¹¹⁷ It is therefore not that Joseph's

¹¹⁷ As Richards notes, the seed thus becomes Abiku, a child that, according to Yoruba belief, dies and returns to the mother's womb only to die again. Soyinka finds within Abiku a temporality of the repitition

interpretive framework is flawed, or even that his interpretation is incorrect, but rather that no character in the drama is able to interpret the cosmos through the *gbedu* drums, which is their purpose. At the very moment Elesin struggles to hear his calling in the drums, for example, Olunde attempts to make sense of the same beat, which he can hear faintly while at the Masque:

Olunde: Listen! Come outside. You can't hear anything against that music.

Jane: What is it?

Olunde: The drums. Can you hear the changes? Listen.

[The drums come over, still distant but more distinct. There is a change of rhythm, it rises to a crescendo and then, suddenly, it is cut off. After a silence, a new beat begins, slow and resonant.]

There, it's all over.

Jane: You mean he's . . .

Olunde: Yes, Mrs Pilkings, my father is dead. His will-power has always been enormous; I know he is dead. (45)

Olunde correctly interprets the drums as signifying the moment of his father's sacrifice, but his interpretation proves incorrect. The drums declare death, yet Elesin, unbeknownst to Olunde, lives. Upon seeing his arrested father, Olunde is dumbfounded the *Osugbo* sages have misinterpreted reality, that the *gbedu* rhythm is disjointed from the rhythm of the cosmos. "Oh son, don't let the sight of your father turn you blind!"

compulsion in which postcolonial life is figured as a repetition of death. As he writes in his poem "Abiku,"

In vain your bangles cast
Charmed circles at my feet
I am Abiku, calling for the first
And the repeated time. (24)

cries the arrested Elesin as he approaches Olunde, but heeding the Osugbo sages has already left Olunde—like Elesin, Joseph, and indeed the Pilkings—blind to the cosmological crisis at hand (49).¹¹⁸ Thus, as Elesin’s hearing, vision, and voice deteriorate in his ritual performance *not* through his rejection of the *gbedu*’s sacred rhythm, but precisely through his attempt to interpret it, he incarnates a hermeneutic conundrum; although this conundrum is contingent upon Elesin’s “laggard will,” as Iyaloja scolds, it emerges throughout the drama as a universal condition of colonized life (58).¹¹⁹

Conclusion: The Creative Destructive Principle

My reading of *Horseman* has thus far addressed the intersection between trauma theory, biopolitics, and political theology by explicating from *Horseman* a theory of colonial trauma as a cosmological rupture arising from the transition between an indigenous and a modern political theology of sacrifice. I now conclude by gesturing beyond the representational aesthetic assumed within *Horseman* criticism. I wish to suggest that the play generates within the transition represented a vision of political community emerging through the social death performed. By dramatizing a Yoruba death-rite transfigured into an imperial possession-rite as tragedy, Soyinka, in my

¹¹⁸ In the final act when Elesin tells Iyaloja, “I need neither your pity nor the pity of the world. I need understanding. Even I need to understand,” he repeats Jane’s response to the death-rite while debating Olunde, “I don’t understand that at all,” casting incomprehension as the play’s central transcultural phenomena (56; 46).

¹¹⁹ As Elesin laments, “white skin covered our future, preventing us from seeing the death our enemies had prepared for us. The world is set adrift and its inhabitants are lost” (51). Since Elesin is a communal vessel, his lightening/whitening during his possession—what he describes in this line as white skin covering the future—becomes “our” possession, transfiguring, as I have been suggesting, the future of the Yoruba world. The white skin of this line refers not only to Elesin’s possession, I would suggest, but also the skins of the *gbedu* drums, which resonate prior to Elesin’s possession, further suggesting the transtemporal, transsubjective nature of the collective trauma being staged.

interpretation, crafts this transfiguration into a new ritual. As tragedy, *Horseman* is not a representation of sequential events implying a moral lesson, as many critics assume, but a performance in which the actors and audience witness themselves addressed by that which is staged. In Elesin's maimed rite, a vision of new life, I propose, addresses the audience as this death is witnessed.

Due to the previously noted spiritual deprivations, during his possession, Elesin is unable to recognize the consecrated moment of his death. "I cannot tell where is that gateway through which I must pass," he confesses as he searches the sky, attempting to interpret the position of the moon (33). The *gbedu* drums are meant to relay to Elesin the consecrated moment as signified by the placement of the moon. By attempting unsuccessfully to interpret the moon himself, Elesin performs the collapse of the *Osugbo* hermeneutic process central to the horseman ritual—resulting, as I have suggested, in a hermeneutic crisis affecting the entire drama. What I also wish to suggest is that the audience becomes addressed by this collapse through Elesin's dramaturgical role as interpretive mediator during the ritual. The moon is visible to Elesin, but not the audience, yet its significance is hidden from both; the *Osugbo* is hidden from everyone, yet their presence resonates across the stage through the sound of the *gbedu* drums; Elesin can only comprehend the visible (moon) by listening to the invisible (drums), while the audience can only comprehend the invisible (moon) by watching the visible (Elesin) interpret the invisible (drums). This dramaturgical structure, I would suggest, stages inheritance as communal interpretation. Elesin must pass on, through his voice, a sacred vision he can only witness by hearing himself called within the drum beat, and the audience must make sense of this calling. But through his inability to interpret the

drums, the moon, and therefore his position within the rhythm of the cosmos, Elesin passes on the collapse of the horseman ritual and, furthermore, its cosmological frame of reference.

Performing the maimed inheritance of that which he is condemned to incarnate—the Oyo *polis* becoming a “colonial possession,” in Olunde’s words—he passes to the audience the sacrifice of his own meaning, thereby mediating, through the hermeneutic conundrum he performs, the loss of sacrificial mediation staged in the play. As Elesin later tells Pilkings, “[T]he honour of my people you have taken already; it is tied together with those papers of treachery which make you masters in this land” (55). Since the Oyo Kingdom is legally conscripted into the British Empire through these papers before the play begins, Elesin embodies that which is most intimate to his companions precisely when he becomes ritually estranged from them.¹²⁰ Giving aesthetic form to the psychic, political, and for Soyinka spiritual death constitutive of the modern, African nation-state, *Horseman*, I am suggesting, regenerates mediation by ritualizing its deactivation. Through its scripted performance, the plot ultimately subjects the sequential time it represents to the cyclic time of ritual. Ritual sacrifice transfigures into substitutionary suicide detached from sacred mediation, *twice*, which paradoxically ritualizes the loss of ritual. Rather than resurrecting a lost sense of indigenous community, *Horseman*, according to this logic, stages the possibility of a new community by regenerating the temporal continuum it laments, a process Soyinka

¹²⁰ What is more, that Elesin calls a curse upon Pilkings before the play begins—“Elesin cursed master good and proper,” says Joseph—suggests that the tragedy has affected Elesin’s incantations before the drama unfolds (23). Ultimately, Elesin’s curse becomes, much like his disowning of Olunde before the play begins (a disowning which the play ironically reverses), an imperial conjuring act, unintentionally leaving his people, who are necessarily grafted into the colonial rule embodied by the cursed Pilkings, “tainted with the curses of the world,” as Iyaloja later cries (55).

terms in his author's note the play's "threnodic essence" (3). The sacrifice of sacrifice thus becomes sacrificially regenerative, staging through necropolitical reality an "affirmative biopolitics of community" (Vanessa Lemm 10).

In "The Fourth Stage," Soyinka calls this regenerative death "the creative-destructive principle" (*Myth* 28). He writes,

[T]here is knowledge from within the corpus of Ifa oracular wisdoms that a rupture is often simply one aspect of the destructive-creative unity, that offences even against nature may be part of the exaction by deeper nature from humanity of acts which alone can open up the deeper springs of man and bring about a constant rejuvenation of the human spirit. Nature in turn benefits by such broken taboos, just as the cosmos does by demands made upon its will by man's cosmic affronts. Such acts of hubris compel the cosmos to delve deeper into its essence to meet the human challenge. [. . .] Tragic fate is the repetitive cycle of the taboo in nature, the karmic act of hubris witting or unwitting, into which the demonic will within man constantly compels him. (156)

In sum, cosmological rupture is generative and its tragic occurrence in human hands natural, that which mutually compels human history and the cosmos. Soyinkan tragedy is, then, ultimately comic, affirming that the human spirit and the cosmos are rejuvenated precisely when their interfusion is ruptured—as in *Horseman's* cosmological trauma. Thus, when Elesin's and Olunde's suicides are performed and witnessed *as tragedy*, they shift, through the literary performance, from the colonial sacralization of indigenous desacralization to the postcolonial sacralization of desacralization itself.

Soyinka conceptualizes the work of African literature around this creative-destructive principle. Taking the Yoruba sculptor as symbolic of the modern African writer, he claims,

When gods die—that is, fall to pieces—the carver is summoned and a new god comes to life. The old is discarded, left to rot in the bush and be eaten by termites. The new is invested with the powers of the old and may acquire new powers. In literature the writer aids the process of desuetude by acting as a termite or by ignoring the old deity and creating new ones. (86)

Like Friedrich Nietzsche, Soyinka takes the death of a god to be an affirmative, ritual process, the foundation for the birth of a new god, or political-theological structure.¹²¹ In *Horseman*, as Soyinka stages the death of a sacred way of life under colonization, he transforms this death into a generative rupture, the foundation of a new form of collective life. The creative-destructive principle thus operates as the foundation for a postcolonial trauma theory by envisioning through cyclic time a regenerative death drive—which always points toward new life. As Iyaloja stands before Olunde's and Elesin's corpses—symbolic of the breathless body politic of the Oyo Kingdom—she declares in the final, choric line of the play, “Now forget the dead, forget even the living. Turn your mind only to the unborn” (63). The play represents on the one hand the cosmological trauma of colonization, but also, in my interpretation, conjures a vision of life arising through, yet positing a beyond of, this collective experience. Soyinka's writing fuses the literary and the sacred, pointing an audience sacrificially severed from sacrificial mediation toward a new form of political community. In response to the

¹²¹ Responding to “divine decomposition,” Nietzsche's madman recognizes the need to create new sacred rituals: “With what water could we clean ourselves? What festivals of atonement, what holy games will we have to invent for ourselves?” (120)

capture of African life itself under the sovereignty of the nation-state, Soyinka compels us to ask, *what form of collective life may arise through this death?*

Conclusion

From Trauma Theory to Political Theology

Throughout this thesis I have not addressed what is currently one of the most debated interventions in the theorization of cultural trauma: Catherine Malabou's concept of destructive plasticity. Contemporary "post-traumatic subjectivity," Malabou writes in *The Ontology of the Accident*, incarnates "new figures of the void or of identitarian abandonment who elude most therapies" (14). If trauma is an event that constitutes a new subjectivity, Malabou asks us to conceptualize a form of trauma in which this new subjectivity is thoroughly severed from one's past subjectivity. She terms this form of trauma, central to modernity, "the new wounded," claiming that the neuroplasticity of the brain, especially during an experience of trauma, poses a philosophical problem:

The individual's history is cut definitively, breached by the meaningless accident, an accident that it is impossible to re-appropriate through either speech or recollection. In principle a brain injury, a natural catastrophe, a brutal, sudden, blind event cannot be reintegrated retrospectively into experience. These types of events are pure hits, tearing and piercing subjective continuity and allowing no justification or recall in the psyche. How do you internalize a cerebral lesion? How do you speak about emotional deficit since words must be carried by the affects whose very absence is precisely what is in question here? (29)

Through such traumas the past self is not repressed, Malabou argues, but thoroughly destroyed. The survivor is severed from all past experiences, relationships, and beliefs,

and is effectively a new person. Malabou's trauma theory, in other words, operates *beyond memory*—much like the ancestral trauma articulated by Frantz Fanon and Achille Mbembe in my introduction.

Malabou's project addresses the intersection between Continental philosophy and neuroscience, never mentioning African literature or postcolonial studies more broadly. Interestingly, though, her goal—to “take destructive brain plasticity into account as a hermeneutic tool to understand the contemporary faces of violence” (38)—leads her to a motif that brings us back to my introduction: posthumous transfigurations in European literature. Much like Cathy Caruth, Malabou seeks to conceptualize her theory of the brute accident “without genealogical cause” at the ontological level—not only as an event that may happen, but as a possibility that constitutes modern life (3). To do so requires a rethinking of subjectivity entirely outside linear progression, a subject always already vulnerable to catastrophic metamorphosis—that is, an experience severing the subject from the past, thereby creating an entirely new subject. This process is “glimpsed often enough in fantasy literature but never connected to reality,” Malabou claims (6). Seeking examples, she critiques Ovid's *Metamorphoses*:

In the case of Daphne, paradoxically, the being-tree nonetheless conserves, preserves, and saves the being-woman. Transformation is a form of redemption, a strange salvation, but salvation all the same. By contrast, the flight identity forged by destructive plasticity flees itself first and foremost; it knows no salvation or redemption and is there for no one, especially not for the self. It has no body of bark, no armor, no branches. In retaining the same skin, it is forever unrecognizable. (12)

She critiques, moreover, Kafka's *The Metamorphosis*:

Gregor changes form; we will never know what he looked like before but in some ways he remains the same, awaiting meaning. He pursues his inner monologue and does not appear to be transformed in substance, which is precisely why he suffers, since he is no longer recognized as what he never ceases to be. But imagine a Gregor perfectly indifferent to his transformation, unconcerned by it. Now that's an entirely different story! (18)

What Malabou seeks in European literature is a narrative of regenerative death in which new life is entirely severed from the past—a life, in other words, so severed from past lives that it becomes “indifferent,” to use her terminology, to them.

Malabou's theory of destructive plasticity helpfully moves the discourse of trauma theory away from memory studies, aligning her project with mine, but her insistence on indifference to the past is where our projects part ways. In the posthumous transfigurations from my introduction, for instance, Wanuri Kahiu, Wangechi Matu, and Nandipha Mtambo all give us glimpses of new life emerging through death, but none give up on the ancestral relations from which they have been severed. Rather, they create visions of a coming reanimation of the ancestral: new life severed from the past, as Malabou claims, yet also *a new past grafted into the future*. In other words, although Malabou's trauma theory at first seems to venture beyond the latent liberalism of multidirectional memory studies I critiqued in my introduction, much like Rothberg's interpretation of the Tancred and Clorinda parable, she focuses entirely on the living and is in this sense too engulfed in a secular temporality (i.e., the past is past, the dead are dead) to ultimately make sense of the regenerative death drive I have been exploring in

African literature. What this juxtaposition illustrates is that by attempting to explicate a theory of cultural trauma and survival—ancestral trauma and animist poetics—from African literature, I have ended up laying the groundwork for a post-secular theory of postcolonial time.

In the first chapter, I explored how two novels set in Sierra Leone imagine the possibility of a new community after the mass trauma of the Civil War, focusing on how the animist realism of Delia Jarrett-Macauley's *Moses, Citizen & Me* attempts to create the “alternative state” represented in Aminatta Forna's realist novel *The Memory of Love*. Since *Moses, Citizen & Me* ends up representing an imagined ritual without becoming itself a ritual, animist realism, I claimed, is, at its core, more realist than animist. Each novel perceptively plots the problem of theorizing trauma in postcolonial contexts, but neither engages, through its form, with the indigenous cosmologies represented, and thus ultimately each novel, much like Rothberg's and Malabou's scholarship, only addresses the living. Put differently, Jarrett-Macauley's animist content is, in its form, secular. The hope immanent to Jarrett-Macauley's and Forna's writing is a future form of community alternative to the nation-state, but an alternative past reconstituted in the future remains unimagined, and thus the ancestral remains, as Fanon theorizes in *The Wretched of the Earth*, colonized.

In chapter two, I explored how Yvonne Vera's *The Stone Virgins*, unlike the novels in chapter one, becomes a latent burial rite for the dead to which the novel is addressed. Rather than archiving a largely ignored genocide, Zimbabwe's *Gukurahundi* massacres, to an international audience, Vera attempts to narratively bury its victims, allowing them to enter through her fiction an imagined ancestral future. While Vera's

novel is, much like Malabou's trauma theory, critical of the "archive fever" often assumed natural within cultural memory studies, unlike Malabou, Vera believes that history, even erased history, can be recreated in the future—not as an open-ended representation of what happened (as most Vera criticism assumes), but rather as the groundwork for which a future community, and thus a future relation between the living and the dead, can be constructed. Similarly, in chapter three, I explored how the cosmological trauma of colonization staged in Wole Soyinka's *Death and the King's Horseman* relates to the political theology of sacrifice immanent to the play. Most critics believe the play represents the transition from an indigenous cosmology to secular modernity as a cultural trauma. While this interpretation is partially true, I argued that the play stages this trauma not as secularization, but as a transfiguration of the sacred, recasting colonial modernity as inherently theological—more specifically, animated by human sacrifice. Moreover, I argued that the play ventures beyond representing and critiquing colonial trauma: it becomes a ritual in which a future community may emerge *through* the traumatic past it stages.

Both Vera and Soyinka, in response to the ancestral trauma of colonization and its repetition in the postcolonial nation-state, attempt, through their animist poetics (which is, unlike animist realism's focus on content, an animism of literary form) to ritually regenerate a relation between the living, the dead, and the unborn. And both authors conceptualize death as the space in which this future community can be crafted. Whether in the flight of the *amavimbande* or the tragic actor's entrance into the fourth stage of existence, the presence of ancient, feminine agency painted on cavern walls or a dispossessed Alafin doomed to wandering the colonized world, Vera and

Soyinka both give us glimpses of a coming form of ancestral life emerging through death. *Death and the King's Horseman* ends with Iyaloja declaring “unborn” hope, *The Stone Virgins* with Cephas attempting to archive a coming “deliverance.” As I claimed at the end of chapter three, in *Myth, Literature and the African World*, Soyinka argues that this crafting of a transtemporal, transsubjective life-in-death, a process modeled by the Yoruba sculptor, is *the work* of African literature. While Freud famously claimed that the aim of all life is death, Soyinka and Vera, I have suggested in this thesis, respond that for the African writer, *the aim of all death must be life*. The regenerative death drive at the heart of animist poetics I have been exploring thus both extends and overturns Freud’s most radical insight—and this productively agonistic relation between psychoanalytic theory and African literature is what the Manichaeism assumed by most postcolonial critiques of trauma theory ignores.

The theory of time I have espoused in this thesis—a “non-uni-directional” temporal continuity in which the intertwined agency of the living, the dead and the unborn are ritually regenerated, as Soyinka describes it—is, for both Vera and Soyinka, generative of a new form of political community. Thus, not only has my placing of psychoanalytic, deconstructive trauma theory and African literature in dialogue laid the groundwork for a post-secular re-imagining of time in the postcolony, but it also—as I briefly suggested in my introduction and more explicitly argued in chapter three—leads us into the discourse of political theology. Just as the trauma theory of which Freud conceived in *Beyond the Pleasure Principle* became an exploration of the theological structure of collective life in *Moses and Monotheism*, my attempt to explicate a trauma theory from African literature has ultimately become an exploration of the cosmological

structures of collective life immanent to African literature. For Freud, the trauma of modernity is animated by a monotheistic form of collective life, which itself emerges as the generative trauma of being subjected to the sovereign Father. In the texts I have explored in this thesis, the trauma of modernity is likewise animated by the monotheistic form of sovereignty implemented in Africa through the colonial encounter. However, authors such as Vera and Soyinka, I have suggested, attempt to transform this political-theological structure by regenerating polytheistically structured forms of collective life erased by the traumatic implementation of monotheistically structured colonial modernity. Put differently, African literature's animist cosmologies assume political theologies that, by envisioning forms of post-sovereign subjectivity, emerge through modernity as resistant responses to the theological form of the colonized *polis*.

This shift from trauma theory to political theology is the most surprising turn this thesis made. When I began my research, I planned to place trauma theory and postcolonial literature in dialogue in a more complex manner than the oversimplified dialogue assumed by the common postcolonial critique summarized in my introduction. One motif I discovered early in my research is that cultural trauma is often figured in African texts as an embodied experience of spirit possession. This motif can be found, for instance, in each of the texts I discuss in this thesis. Agnes, Citizen, Sibaso, Thenjiwe, Nonceba, Elesin, and Praise-Singer are all described as being possessed. On one level, casting colonial and postcolonial traumas as spirit possession can be interpreted as strategic figurations of the colony—and later the postcolonial nation-state—traumatically possessing its subjects. In each of the texts I explore in this thesis, however, posttraumatic survival is also imagined as ritualized forms of spirit

possession—creations of new ways in which the living, the dead, and the unborn mutually animate one another. It is this latter point, spirit possession as both trauma *and* a logic of survival, that moved my thesis from a theory of trauma to a preliminary exploration of time and political community in postcolonial Africa—more specifically, a temporality through which the possibility of a political community beyond the living present can be imagined. Vera and Soyinka, for example, not only dissect the political theology of colonial modernity, but also attempt to write political theologies of what is not, but could be: political theologies of the future, which hinge on re-imagining the relation between the past, present, and future. In moving forward, then, I wish to more extensively study the political theologies immanent to African literature beyond the animist poetics of Vera and Soyinka.

There is a passage in Amos Tutuola's *My Life in the Bush of Ghosts* (1954) that illustrates such a project. A chief-ancestor spirit from the river gifts the narrator a six foot smoking pipe with a monstrous bowl—four feet in diameter and three feet deep, nesting a half-ton of tobacco. As the narrator smokes, an unnamed spirit continuously refills the bowl with fresh tobacco from the spirit world. The narrator continues to inhale the eternally regenerative leaf, hitherto unsmoked by humankind, growing intoxicated while the surrounding spirits begin to celebrate:

They were singing, clapping hands, ringing bells and their ancestral drummers were beating the drums in such a way that all the dancers were jumping up with gladness. But whenever the smoke of the pipe was rushing out from my mouth as if smoke is rushing from a big boiler, then all of them would laugh at me so that a person two miles away would hear them clearly [. . .]. So at this time I

forgot all my sorrow and started to sing the earthly songs which sorrow prevented me from singing about since I entered this bush. (74)

Transitioning into this intoxicating mode of being-with-spirits allows the narrator to sing songs formerly inexpressible, songs he had forgotten. These “earthly” songs are not quite a recovery of the past, though, because they are now sung alongside the claps, bells, drums, and singing of ancestral spirits *in the present*. In other words, as the narrator enters a new relation to the ancestors, together they reinvent the past by performing new ancestral relations for the future.

The spirits stand agape above him, struck by the beauty of this new music. Saliva begins to drop from the spirits’ open mouths onto the narrator until he is bathing in their spit. After this baptism into life-with-spirits, the chief-ancestor places the narrator on top of a three-hundred foot long coconut tree, uprooted from the ground and resting on the head of another unnamed spirit. Moved by the narrator’s “earthly songs,” this spirit jumps onto the head of the chief-ancestor and they all begin to dance with the surrounding spirits. The coconut tree, the unnamed spirit in the middle, and the chief-ancestor spirit on the bottom all then grow feathers to fly the singing narrator to their king. Through this song, then, the narrator briefly experiences a new form of political community, an experience toward which the questions I have raised in this thesis ultimately point. What if we divert the direction of trauma theory from a) recovering and proliferating diverse memories through multidirectional studies of cultural trauma and b) critiquing our trauma-inducing *polis*? Instead, what if we attempt the more puzzling task of creatively joining the spirits of a coming tradition? In other words, I am asking us to imagine, like Tutuola in this passage, a transformation in the theological structure of the

polis itself—the possibility of which has thus far resided beyond the purveyance of cultural memory studies.

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