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Traumatic Ecosystems: Trauma and the Environment in African Literature and Film

By

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DISSERTATION

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Abstract

In our climate-change present, one in which the shifting planetary reality challenges human conceptions of human and nonhuman, *Traumatic Ecosystems: Trauma and the Environment in African Literature and Film* reads African literature and film and asks: How do human affective relations with the nonhuman shape our experiences of trauma? This question triangulates three areas of study that in the past have only collaborated in pairs: Environmental Humanities, African Literature, and Trauma Studies. Literature and film from African countries offer a unique archive for this project. Colonialism, internecine conflicts, and globalization have thrown many African countries into what theorist Achille Mbembe has called a "quasi-permanent" state of trauma, and the literature from these countries often excavates the complicated and compounding traumatic effects of historical and systemic violence against humans and nonhumans. Because most scholars regard trauma as an anthropocentric event, few have considered the role of the nonhuman in these experiences of trauma. Toward this end, my project introduces the concept of *traumatic ecosystem*, which describes local networks of affective relations between the material, psychological, and social from which humans and nonhumans emerge. These relations, however, are rarely if ever unmediated. To distance themselves from their finitude, humans use violence to divide humans from nonhumans and hierarchize them in ways that place existential value on each. These processes of dividing and hierarchizing create traumatic experiences as they forcefully destabilize how individuals and groups self-identify, which generates feelings of insecurity. The relations within a *traumatic ecosystem* also shape how individuals and groups respond to trauma and determine their capacities for healing. The concept at once generalizes the human experience of trauma as one that creates feelings of existential insecurity and localizes that experience within individual and group identities, histories, belief systems, and environments. In recognizing the co-emergence of the human and the nonhuman, the psychological, the social, and the material, and trauma and violence, the concept of *traumatic ecosystem* shifts the paradigm of the healing process, whether of humans or the planet, from purely psychological, social, or material approaches to ones that recognize their intimacy. Healing, I argue, requires applying an ethic of care and not just technological fixes to the psychological and material wounds that affect humans and the planet.

I organize the project around different material environments and the stages of healing from trauma. The first chapter reads Chigozie Obioma's *The Fishermen* and Helon Habila's *Oil on Water* to show how traumatic ecosystems shape relations among individuals, communities, and nations. The second chapter I analyze Didier Ouenangare and Bassek Ba Kobhio's *Le Silence De La Foret* and In Koli Jean Bofane's *Congo, Inc* to demonstrate how violence against the Congolese forest and the humans who live there is often a symptom of unresolved, historical trauma. The third chapter highlights how Yvonne Vera in *The Stone Virgins* and Yvonne Adhiambo Owuor in *Dust* use lithic waypoints to disrupt endemic patriarchy and affectively remap colonial and post-independence experiences of trauma.

Introduction: *Traumatic Ecosystem*

Frantz Fanon, one of the most influential thinkers of the twentieth century, concludes *Black Skin, White Masks* (1952), his psychiatric diagnosis of the colonized Black man, rather controversially by arguing that in order to be free, Black people should not reach back to past African civilizations to buttress their identities but should disidentify with their Blackness entirely. This conclusion arises out of his analysis of the colonial world, which he expands upon in *The Wretched of the Earth* (1961), where he identifies Blackness as a symptom of the violence of colonization in which Europeans imposed a Manichean racial hierarchy on the colonial world. He calls it a "compartmentalized world" in which "different species," the colonizer and colonized, coemerged (*Wretched* 5). Although he does not interrogate the origins of this biological language, the racial hierarchy, he suggests, starts from the "'jungle savage'" who lives in nature and ends with the white man who lives in the city (*Black Skin* 14). What I want to point out here is that in the colonial world Fanon describes the natural environment as the original threat to the European colonizer that he must subdue and from which he must separate the colonial subject. It is that which European colonizers are trying to escape, an original site of trauma where they confront their finitude and against which they deploy violence to master it. Despite its prominence in our daily lives—our commutes, our morning or evening strolls, and our newsfeeds that warn of resource extraction and climate change—the natural environment and our affective relations with it rarely enter conversations within trauma studies or the environmental humanities. My argument is that these worlds are intimately connected if not inseparable. Consequently, we are neglecting a fundamental aspect of being human in the world when we theorize trauma or our relationship with the environment without acknowledging and accounting for these affective relations in which we are enmeshed. As we progress into the

twenty-first century, as we are beginning to realize our climate-change futures, I argue that the global changes that we will be necessary to heal the planet start with attending to the unresolved trauma wrought by European colonialism and its aftermath that individuals and groups, especially people of color, women, and LGBTQ+ people, are carrying with them from the previous six centuries. Learning how to remediate those past experiences of trauma will teach us how to care for the planet.

Mapping the rhizome of affective relations, even apart from those we have with the natural environment, that shape our affective worlds is undoubtedly impossible, but what is indubitable is that at birth, we enter a world already shaped by our parents', our relatives', our neighbors', our ethnic groups', and our cultures' experiences of trauma—feelings of insecurity and fear—against which they are trying to protect us and themselves, and they fundamentally shape how we engage with the world, especially threats. Even if the map remains incomplete, we can start to construct images of these affective worlds to better understand how the unhealed trauma we carry—the insecurities and fears that structure our lives—closes us to other possible worlds and limits our interactions with them. The "compartmentalized world" Fanon describes is an example of such a world, what I will call a *traumatic ecosystem*, or the meshwork of material-psycho-social relations that shape individual human and group experiences of trauma in given worlds. Put simply, in *Traumatic Ecosystems: Trauma and the Environment in African Literature and Film*, I employ the concept to chart how humans' relations with their natural environments are integral to what trauma studies has traditionally described as the psycho-social relations that form individuals' and groups' experiences of trauma. My aim is to further compromise the containers that separate our mind-body experiences from the natural world and to bring trauma studies and the environmental humanities into closer conversation. More specifically, I draw

insights from authors and filmmakers from the African continent, such as Didier Ouenangare and Bassek Ba Kobhio, In Koli Jean Bofane, Chigozie Obioma, Helon Habila, Yvonne Vera, and Yvonne Adhiambo Owuor, who untangle local and national traumatic ecosystems, the knots of these material-psycho-social relations, that bind the past violence of European colonialism against indigenous Africans and Africa's natural environments to the on-going violence of the present to understand the challenges of the contemporary African nation-state and the wounds that require healing to imagine its future. More broadly, I hope to demonstrate that human violence, disproportionately committed by the Global North, against the planet on which we live is symptomatic of the attention or lack of it that we pay to our emotional lives.

While Fanon's analysis of the colonial world is incomplete, it provides a helpful starting point from which to theorize a *traumatic ecosystem*. In the colonial world, he continues, humanity was contrasted with animality and denoted European education and whiteness. "The colonized," Fanon explains, "is elevated above his jungle status in proportion to his adoption of the mother country's cultural standards. He becomes white as he renounces his blackness, his jungle" (*Black Skin* 18). And, yet 'humanity' was an ontological trap for the colonial subject. As the colonized strove for a European education and whiteness, their educators kept them in their subordinate places with stories of "tom-toms, cannibalism, intellectual deficiency, fetichism, racial defects, slave-ships, and above all else, above all: 'Sho' good eatin'" (*Black Skin* 112). The violence of the hierarchy created a "massive psychoexistential complex" that fragmented how Black people related to their minds and bodies, and it inspired fear and insecurity (*Black Skin* 14). The "psychoexistential complex" extended beyond direct relations with white people to those that structured Black communities, forming a "collective unconscious" of fear and insecurity (144-45). Religion and capitalism conspired to maintain the social order while a

subspecies, the "colonized intellectual," emerged toward whiteness to form the "national bourgeoisie" who competed with their compatriots to replace the colonizer and maintain the violence of the colonial structure (*Wretched* 11, 24). Violence, Fanon famously asserts, became the panacea for the colonized in the colonized world: it was "the only way of casting off their animal status for a human one" (77). As Fanon, himself, has noted, however, the cessation of violence will not permanently transform the colonized world. Only the renunciation of 'race' altogether, including the concept of Blackness, promises freedom because 'race' arose from that world. More to the point, the colonized world is *a* world and not *the* world and the racial hierarchy from which whiteness and Blackness emerge is foundational to that world but not to all possible worlds. Rather than emulate Europe, Fanon argues, "humanity . . . must make a new start, develop a new way of thinking, and endeavor to create a new man" (239). Outside the violence of the colonial world, Fanon suggests, new worlds appear, ones in which we might choose different relations between humans and between humans and the world.

In this dissertation, I argue that the relations Fanon describes in the colonial world, what I am calling a *traumatic ecosystem*, are not exclusive to that world but offer a model for understanding individual and group experiences of trauma and their responses to them more broadly. Although I focus here on *traumatic ecosystems* from the African continent, the concept is one that I believe applies across human experience because all cultures and communities emerge from the affective relations they form with their psychological, social, and material environments. As I will demonstrate in chapter one and two, the ontologies Europeans imposed on the colonial world emerged from *traumatic ecosystems* in Europe. From this rough sketch of the world Fanon describes, we can tease out some of the key features of a *traumatic ecosystem*. First, it describes the myriad traumatic relations that structure an individual's and group's

experience of a world. For example, in this colonized world, Black children are born into their "animal status." They would be shaped by the trauma of the racial hierarchy that forms their parents' and community's "psychoexistential complex" and the "collective unconscious" that defines Blackness. Before they even entered the white world, their parents would unconsciously model their fragmented identities and their aspirations against and in fear of whiteness. Upon encountering white society, the social structures that impose the racial hierarchy would reinforce the trauma they inherited from their parents. A second feature of a *traumatic ecosystem* is psychological and corporal violence, which is both the visible cause and symptom of hidden trauma. The violence of the racial hierarchy, Fanon describes in the colonized world, traumatizes all involved—both colonizer and colonized—because each must use violence to maintain their position on the hierarchy. Even if the application and consequences are inequal, violence is dialectical and inspires fear in both groups: "the violence of the colonial regime and the counterviolence of the colonized balance each other and respond to each other in an extraordinary reciprocal homogeneity" (*Wretched* 46). The racial hierarchy, however, is not totalizing. The colonizer, Fanon explains, "achieves only a pseudo-petrification" (*Wretched* 17). The reason for this and a third feature of a traumatic ecosystem is that multiple traumatic ecosystems exist within a world. The European colonizer imported the racial hierarchy that displaced previous ontological relations—the "magical superstructure that permeates the indigenous society"—that shaped the colonial subjects (*Wretched* 18). Fanon describes these ontologies in how Europeans weaponized them to dehumanize the colonial subjects: the "tom-toms," "cannibalism," "fetichism," and the ontological worlds from which "slave-ships" removed them. They remain for the colonial subjects "the secret sphere" that connects them to their "traditions and history of my land and ethnic group" (*Wretched* 18). In this colonial world,

the racial hierarchy does not only stage a competition for mastery between races but between ontologies that determine relations among beings. Departing from Fanon, the African authors and filmmakers that I bring into the conversation indicate that all types of difference, including human and nonhuman, and not just race, are apparatuses that divide beings to form a *traumatic ecosystem*, which is the final feature. Several critics, including Ato Quayson, point out that in the colonized world, "the problem of identity . . . was not solely a racial problem" (86). Differences between genders, sexes, classes, religions, ablism, and humans and nonhumans, among others, all contributed to the trauma that formed the "massive psychoexistential complex" that occupied the colonized mind-body and community. For example, Black female-identifying individuals were abstracted by white and Black men alike into images of Mother Africa that associated women's bodies with their natural environments—both "cheap natures"—which men believed they were entitled to exploit (Moore 111). These material-discursive relations that differentiate men from women and associate women with the environment form part of the ontological hierarchy that inspires violence against both and establishes a *traumatic ecosystem*. Echoing Fanon, however, a *traumatic ecosystem,* like the colonial world, is only one of many possible worlds and potentially opens to new relations that dismantle their originating hierarchies and heal experiences of trauma. In subsequent chapters, I will turn to the literature and film from Africa to further trace the nuances of these relations between people's experiences of trauma and their natural environments, opportunities for healing both, and visions of what might arise anew.

The concept *traumatic ecosystem* emerged from my engagement with African literature and film. In the process of preparing to write this dissertation, I spent considerable amounts of time reading African literature from an Environmental Humanities lens with the intention of writing about a related topic. I remember, in particular, preparing a paper on J.M. Coetzee's *Life*

and Times of Michael K (1983), a novel popular in postcolonial ecocriticism at the time, and returning to scenes of Michael K on the veld and in the mountains because I was unable to separate his relationship with those environments from his experiences of trauma. At the time, I was unfamiliar with trauma theory, so I struggled through Cathy Caruth to understand how to describe the affective relations between Michael K, a liminal 'human' figure himself, and his nonhuman surroundings. Once I started recognizing trauma in African literature, I noticed it everywhere in all its origins and iterations from patriarchy, colonialism, racism, post-independence, and globalization. Each generation of African authors, it seems, added to the palimpsest of trauma, and they offered more nuanced analyses of these experiences than I could account for in current trauma theory. The relations they depicted resembled more of an ecosystem, a network of affective relations, including with the nonhuman world, that was sustained by competition for power among individuals and groups within the specific worlds than isolated individual or group experiences of event-based trauma. The complexity of the traumatic relations that African writers and filmmakers attempt to unwind and represent in their work contributes greatly to our understanding of human trauma and the complex debates within trauma studies and environmental humanities and intervenes in both to expand their areas of study.

Trauma, Environment, and Africa: Rehabilitating Overused Concepts

If you rolled your eyes when you read the dissertation's title, *Traumatic Ecosystems: Trauma and the Environment in African Literature and Film*, I would not blame you. The questions "Another book on trauma? The environment?" might follow the eyeroll. Whatever intrigue the title might hold emerges from the combination of the terms and the objects of study, African literature and film. What is a "traumatic ecosystem?" How are trauma and the natural

environment implicated? Is the natural environment experiencing trauma or is it the source of trauma? Is not trauma a Western term? How does it apply to those living in Africa? More fundamentally: What is 'trauma'? What is 'environment'? What is 'Africa'? How do individual nations relate to the continent and local regions to the nation? What is the continent's relationship with the planet? Because of globalization, the internet, and the hegemony of Western thought, most of us live in the "age of trauma" and climate change not because they are more present to us than in other periods in human history but because we have latched on them to describe our experiences of ourselves and others in the present and what our climate change futures likely hold for many (Bond and Craps 41). In their abstraction, these terms have lost their more limited definitions and are symptomatic of more fundamental challenges to once exclusive Enlightenment categories, such as mind and body, human and nonhuman, and material and immaterial. They also point to a tension in our desires to both generalize our experiences of the world and differentiate them, based on our unique situations in time and space. We search for common definitions of 'trauma,' 'environment,' and 'Africa' because we desire to talk about our experiences of them with other people, but we also need each of the terms to acknowledge our specific experiences of them, which leads to disagreements over their definitions and the proliferation of qualifying terms. The tensions between these terms emerge in African literature and film as well in the meshwork of ontologies present in African countries. The concept of *traumatic ecosystem*, I believe, offers us an opportunity to realize both desires. To better articulate how it does so, I will sketch the recent evolution of the terms that have given rise to this tension between the general and the specific.

The term 'trauma' has become particularly polarizing since its use expanded beyond clinical and academic settings into popular culture.[1] Jean-Martin Charcot, Pierre Janet, and

Sigmund Freud were the first psychologists to formalize the study of trauma. The Holocaust prompted the necessity for new approaches to it. Most prominent centered around deconstruction and literary studies. It was informed by the methods of the influential Yale school, led by Cathy Caruth, Geoffrey Hartman, and Shoshana Felman. More formally, the American Psychological Association (APA) continues to update its original definition from DSM-III (1980), which restricted it to a delayed response to a catastrophic event, in response to four primary critiques of the criteria for diagnosing Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD). Critics argued it marginalized Freudian, psychodynamic perspectives on trauma; it medicalized survivors and denied them political agency; it restricts what experiences are recognized as traumatic; and it employs a Western-centric model that excludes non-white individuals and communities (Bond and Craps 38).

More recent interventions attempt to further individualize experiences of trauma. Historian Dominick LaCapra, for example, introduces the idea of cultural trauma to describe individual and collective experiences within specific social and political situations. His intervention separates the traumatic event from the traumatic experience, arguing that one can be involved in the event and not experience trauma. The difference, he claims, is that the event is marked by time and location while the traumatic experience has no such bounds. At the same time, he warns against mythologizing the traumatic event, which risks conflating historical trauma, which results from specific instances of loss, with structural trauma, caused by an ongoing experience of absence. He suggests in *Writing, History, and Trauma* (2014) that "while 'everyone is subject to structural trauma', 'with respect to historical trauma and its representation, the distinction between victims, perpetrators, and bystanders is crucial'" (qtd. in Bond and Craps 82). In other words, those who experience structural trauma in their lives might

overidentify with those who experienced historical trauma, appropriating their suffering. He instead advocates for "*virtual*" rather than "*vicarious*" relationships to other's trauma that encourages empathy and solidarity with the victims but avoids identifying with their trauma (82). He calls this "empathic unsettlement," which enables readers to engage with the historical event without emotionally attaching to it, and identifies literature as a key vehicle for it (83).

Others, like sociologist Kai Erikson in "Notes on Trauma and Community" (1991), distinguish traumatized communities from persons. In that paper, he argues that individual trauma is psychological while collective trauma is sociological. Addressing the latter, Erikson contends that trauma can affect groups in two ways: either weakening their social bonds or strengthening them. In both cases of individual and collective trauma, the event disrupts their psychic or social structure so suddenly that they are unable to respond effectively, which results in the loss of individual or community identity (98-9). Other theorists raise the possibility of national trauma, like what Fanon analyzed in *The Wretched of the Earth*, that provides feelings of solidarity but tends to homogenize the range of individual and group experiences. Ron Eyerman and Jeffrey Alexander both point out that these national narratives are also constructed through media and politics. They prefer the term "cultural trauma" (101). Neil Smelser offers a more specific definition of cultural trauma in which a memory is accepted by the surviving group and refers to a negative event that had indelible consequences in threatening the identity of the social group. Importantly, these theorists are not suggesting that cultural trauma is fake, but they are interested in distinguishing it from individual trauma.

Another movement in trauma studies seeks to expand the concept beyond its Western origins to include non-Western perspectives. Lucy Bond and Stef Craps contend that one cannot simply apply the Eurocentric definitions of trauma to other groups "beyond the contexts out of

which, they were originally developed" because those applications hide the specificity of non-Western individual and group experiences (107). Derek Summerfield describes this approach as "'imperialistic'" while Ethan Watters refers to it as "'Americanizing the world's understanding of the human mind'" (107, 108). Bond and Craps point out several issues with the definition. For one, it focuses exclusively on the "sudden, unexpected, catastrophic events," which ignores everyday, cumulative forms of violence (108). For another, Western formulations of trauma are too individualized and based on Western ideas of personhood that fail to account for "the wider social situation" (108). One reason that individually-focused notions of trauma are problematic is because they ignore the "supra-individual conditions," like political, social, and economic contexts, that deny the victims agency and contribute to the traumatic experiences (108). Consequently, these theorists argue PTSD is an insufficient diagnosis because it pathologizes the victim without recognizing these conditions. Other language that theorists have proposed to acknowledge the trauma of "disempowered people," again echoing Fanon's work in *Black Skin, White Masks*, includes: "insidious trauma" (Root and L. Brown), "safe-world violations" (Janoff-Bulman), "oppression-based trauma" (Spanierman and Poteat), and "postcolonial syndrome" (Duran et al) (109). Pheng Cheah takes these theorists' interventions a step further. He questions the value of the concept entirely to describe the conditions in the Global South. In "Crises of Money" (2008), he describes a "new physiology of power" that requires developing countries to internalize the former threats from the outside in order to survive (206). They must open their economies to foreign capital, which creates a permanent state of crisis whereby the postcolonial countries must exploit their own bodies, human and nonhuman, to maintain a presence in the global economy. "It makes no sense," he writes, "to speak of trauma unless trauma is no longer pathological and the result of an external imposition but a normal state of existence, a power that

is operative from the start, at the origin" (211). Cheah, instead, prefers the term "autoimmunity," which he borrows from Derrida, that describes the state in which an organism's immune system attacks itself to survive (212). In trauma studies, the term has expanded from a single, event-based definition that theorists rightfully criticized for its limits to a root ball of terms that describes ever-more-nuanced and regular experiences that leave theorists questioning the efficacy of the term itself.

From this early DSM-III model, the definition of "trauma" has been revised and grown ever more expansive. The current one addresses some of the concerns discussed above by widening the scope of what constitutes trauma. The *APA* dictionary, based on DSM-V (2013) and updated in 2018, defines trauma as:

> Any disturbing experience that results in significant fear, helplessness, dissociation, confusion, or other disruptive feelings intense enough to have a long-lasting negative effect on a person's attitudes, behavior, and other aspects of functioning. Traumatic events include those caused by human behavior (e.g., rape, war, industrial accidents) as well as by nature (e.g., earthquakes) and often challenge an individual's view of the world as a just, safe, and predictable place.

From the earlier significant-event-based model, the current definition includes "any disturbing experience" that might dislodge a person from their feelings of safety and security for long periods of time. Many theorists, ironically, now believe the definition has become too inclusive. Bond and Craps argue it has "lent itself to overexpansion and overgeneralization" (41). Roger Luckhurst is particularly attuned to how trauma has blossomed in western culture into a "'cusp term'" that describes an extensive array of issues (qtd in Bond and Craps 41). He also describes its "'transvaluation'" that peaked in the early 1990s when trauma expanded from a clinical

diagnosis into common parlance such that the culture was taken with "'traumatophilia'," and individuals started identifying themselves with the concept (qtd in Bond and Craps 41). This led Mark Seltzer to coin the phrase "'wound culture'" in which the vagueness of the definition loosely associates all the historical definitions and intermixes the body and mind, individuals and communities, and private and public spheres (qtd in Bond and Craps 42). Kirby Farrell argues that trauma became "'psychocultural'," meaning that the concept is socially constructed and evolving, in response to geographic and generational crises like AIDS and climate change (qtd in Bond and Craps 43). According to him, these new realities created a "'shock to people's values, trust and sense of purpose; an obsessive awareness that nations, leaders, even we ourselves can die'" (qtd in Bond and Craps 43). It has spawned what Terri Tomsky calls the "'trauma economy'," a product of its omnipresence in the "politics of grief" that has influenced everything from the entertainment to the clothing industries (qtd in Bond and Craps 4). In the Global North, Bond and Lucy suggest that because of the term's ubiquity, it has lost its meaning. Instead, it has "emerged as a defining sign of contemporary subjectivity and solidified into a cultural master narrative" (43).

Despite researchers' and theorists' trauma fatigue, public interest in the PTSD diagnosis has only increased. This shift occurred in large part because of psychiatrist Bessel van der Kolk's *The Body Keeps the Score* (2014), a cultural phenomenon which set a record for the number of weeks on "The *New York Times* Best Sellers" list and has been translated into over forty languages. In the book, van der Kolk challenges the Western division between the mind and body, arguing that the latter is not simply a vessel for the former but an integrated whole. He demonstrates through his and others' research that the body registers trauma and stores unresolved experiences of it that can manifest as physical symptoms and conditions. The book

has awakened popular interest in earlier publications, such as Judith Herman's *Trauma and Recovery: The Aftermath of Violence from Domestic Abuse to Political Terror* (1992), and generated an audience for countless new publications and several celebrity therapists, such as Gabor Maté, who attributes a wide range of psychological and physical symptoms, including addiction and Attention-Deficit/Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD), to trauma and controversially diagnosed Prince Harry, Duke of Sussex, with ADHD during a live-streamed event.[2] The popularity of *The Body Keeps the Score* has also generated interest in novel approaches for treating trauma beyond talk-therapy that incorporate the body, such as Eye Movement Desensitization and Reprocessing (EMDR) and psychedelics. Somatic-experiencing therapy, introduced by Peter A. Levine in *Waking the Tiger: Healing Trauma* (1997), and Internal Family Systems therapy, popularized by Richard Swartz in *No Bad Parts: Healing Trauma and Restoring Wholeness with the Internal Family Systems Model* (2021), have also entered the mainstream. Swartz, building on preexisting models, contends that each of our internal voices in the foreground of the Self represent different parts that emerged with past experiences of trauma and are stuck in that moment in time. They are unaware that the threat has passed and remain on guard to protect us from future recurrences. For this reason, there are "no bad parts" only ones that require reassurances of our safety in the present. He has also suggested that the model could describe social relationships more broadly, implying that there are no bad parts of society only ones stuck in past experiences of trauma. Regardless of one's opinion about the recent popularization of 'trauma,' its diagnosis clearly resonates across the globe with individuals' and groups' experiences of themselves and the worlds they live in. The African literature and film I analyze are no different. Yvonne Adhiambo Owuor, in *Dust* (2013), for example, dramatizes the presence of multiple experiences of trauma from different periods of Kenyan history within the

Oganda nuclear family. The Agwu family in Chigozie Obioma's *The Fishermen* (2015) similarly suffers from national trauma from colonialism and generational trauma around the Nigerian Civil War. Their representations of trauma resonate with advocates of the more recent, inclusive definition of trauma but also represent individuals' differentiated experiences of it within systems of patriarchy, colonialism, racism, and globalization. The concept *traumatic ecosystem* allows for this dynamic discussion of trauma in accounting for how different ontologies shape individuals' and groups' experiences based on their precise situations within these hierarchies. It also accounts for how the natural environment is involved in shaping these experiences.

The concept of 'environment' has undergone a similar transformation as 'trauma,' especially in the context of climate change, which has brought both into focus our situatedness on the planet and challenged still prevalent Western notions of humanity's separation from and dominion over it. Climate change and concerns about how to address it have forced researchers and theorists in the West to adapt the Enlightenment ontology that separates humans from the 'environment' to the present a diversity of experiences or to reimagine it entirely. I will mention two that characterize this perspective more generally. E.O. Wilson's *Half-Earth: Our Planet's Fight for Life* (2016) represents a scientific approach, which advises we reframe our relationship to the planet and prescribes specific technological fixes. He argues that to ensure "our own survival," humanity should adopt an "ecological-realism worldview" that frames humans as stewards and relies on free markets to select for "biology, nanotechnology, and robotics" to shrink our impact and reestablish the ecological baseline by limiting humanity to half of the earth's surface (8, 164,165). Eileen Crist in *Abundant Earth: Toward an Ecological Civilization* (2019) offers a more politico-theoretical proposal. She argues "human supremacy," or the anthropocentric instinct toward planetary colonization, "is the deepest causal layer of the

biosphere's plight, for it makes humanity's expansionism appear acceptable and inevitable" (47). The worldview, she maintains, contributes to a sense of human "homelessness" whereby we have grown insensible to our more-than-human neighbors and populated the planet beyond its ability to sustain human life (62). In its stead, Crist proposes a "global ecological civilization" in which humanity recognizes the "dystopia at the doorstep" and promotes more-than-human flourishing by reducing our impact on planetary biodiversity (245, 169).

For Black and Indigenous scholars, informed by their local ontologies and historical experiences of systemic racism and colonialism, however, these intellectual moves elide more fundamental questions about the categories subsumed under the concept of 'environment,' namely 'human' and 'world.' They argue that before addressing our climate change present, we must answer the questions: Who is included in this category of 'human'? How is 'human' implicated in an 'environment'? What constitutes a 'world'? How does the concept of 'world' complicate our understanding of a 'planetary environment'? These questions challenge the ways in which climate change discourse often promotes a posthuman ethic that foregrounds our shared vulnerability to planetary changes. In doing so, they argue, it buries the discriminatory colonial foundations of the Anthropocene in which Black and Indigenous people were treated as "not-quite-humans" but as Fanon explains, 'animals' (Weheliye 3).[3] Similarly, Western eschatological framing of climate change often ignores past apocalypses enacted on Black and Indigenous people by Europeans and Americans and fails to claim responsibility for the current planetary conditions.[4] For these reasons, Potawatomi scholar Kyle Whyte argues that for Indigenous peoples, climate change is "the experience of going back to the future" ("Indigenous Climate Change Studies" 156). It extends the logics of colonialism that displace Indigenous ways of knowing the 'environment' and impose the relationalities of Western science and capitalism on

the planet, which Mario Blaser and Marisol de la Cadena describe "as a scenario of politics characterized by an undeclared war" (6). Consequently, these scholars argue, solutions that solely rely on Western science and capitalism to save the planet are ill-equipped to address the historical and ongoing injustices of colonialism and climate change. Relying on those forms of knowledge risks perpetuating the systemic "oppression [of] race, gender, sexuality, or class" upon which they are built (Tuana 6). Instead, Black and Indigenous scholars advocate for an ethics and care from "the constitutive outside," or those historically excluded from categories of 'human' and 'life' (Karera 52). Including "the constitutive outside," Axelle Karera suggests, "would mean allowing the afterlives of slavery and colonialism on the rise to inform us on how to face the Anthropocene" (52).[5]

Consequently, for these scholars, the category of 'human' remains vital. Western approaches, such as new materialism and nonhuman theory, have challenged human exceptionalism, which is important and laudable; however, in the process, some versions flatten diverse experiences of the planet under the auspices of "shared vulnerability" to promote human and interspecies empathy (Durrant and Topper 194).[6] As a result, Zakiyyah Iman Jackson argues, moving beyond the human resembles attempts to move beyond race and risks redeploying an "Eurocentric transcendentalism" (217). Postcolonial ecocritic Cajetan Iheka shares this concern, especially in the African context where nonwhite, nonmale subjects are only starting to recover their humanity. Instead, Black studies scholars Hortense Spillers, Sylvia Wynter, and Alexander Weheliye have argued for decolonizing the Western humanist mythology of "human," or "Man," that affords rights to certain white male bodies while withholding them from others for whom "suffering becomes the defining feature" (Weheliye 12). Unlike posthumanist scholars, they advocate for a "heuristic model," rather than an ontological one, that "represents a series of

distinct assemblages of what it means to be human in the world" (8, 12). The novels and film I analyze in this dissertation certainly resonate with these Black studies scholars in their varied representations of 'human.' However, in describing these representations, I found Karen Barad's concept of posthuman performativity helpful because it recognizes situated nature of these categories. She maintains that all iterations of 'human' emerge from specific ontologies and that 'human,' like her theorization of matter more broadly, is less of category than a process. For example, in the opening scene of *Congo Inc.* (2014), Bofane depicts his main character, Isoo, who is returning from a hunt, shedding his Indigenous, forest attire for his everyday Western garb that advertises rap artists. Each suggests his different relations with the forest and different categories of 'human' he adopts in moving between the two different ontologies. Consequently, these writers and filmmakers distinguish between 'humans' and 'nonhumans' while recognizing the emergent nature of those beings and their experiences of trauma.

Following that logic, environmental humanities scholars have raised questions about whether 'the world' is not actually an assemblage of 'worlds.' In line with Fanon's theorization of the "colonized world," of late, scholars have employed variations of the concept of 'world' to confront the dominant Western epistemologies and ontologies that some suggest form the backdrop of humanity's experience of the planet. Instead, they emphasize the plurality of experiences with and ways of knowing the planet that shapes human and nonhuman lives. Nigel Clark and Bronislaw Szerszynski in *Planetary Social Thought: The Anthropocene Challenge to the Social Sciences* (2020), for example, propose the terms "planetary multiplicity" and "earthly multitudes" to emphasize different historical iterations of the planet and the variety of ways humans engage with them (8, 9). Anthropologists Mario Blaser and Marisol de la Cadena in *Pluriverse: Proposals for a World of Many Worlds* (2018) ascribe the current climate crisis to the

"colonial ontological occupation of territories" by the one world of capitalism and science and argue for a "pluriverse" of contemporaneous heterogeneous worlds (3). Thom Van Dooren in *The Wake of Crows: Living and Dying in Shared Worlds* (2019) helpfully argues that we, in fact, exist in "shared worlds," both common to and divided among humans and other species, that prompt "the ongoing work of crafting worlds" (20). Indigenous scholars also remind us of the spiritual realms that might exist within these shared worlds (de la Cadena and Blaser 4). Much like with 'trauma,' scholars have transitioned away from a unified concept of 'environment' and opened to simultaneous iterations of 'humans' and 'worlds' and the manifold ways in which they interact to form 'the world,' however inaccessible it remains. Their efforts to advocate for the legitimacy of multiple worlds aligns with the African authors and filmmakers in *Traumatic Ecosystems: Trauma and the Environment in African Literature and Film* who represent a multitude of worlds within the respective African nation-states in each of their narratives. Bassek Ba Kobhio and Didier Ouenangare in their film, *Silence de la Forêt* (2003), the first international film from the Central African Republic, depict three different worlds within the nation-state, each encountering and competing with the others at different times. Each of these worlds possesses its own *traumatic ecosystems*, ontologies and hierarchies of being that define 'human' and contour individual and group experiences of trauma, which influence how they engage, successfully and unsuccessfully, with others from these different worlds.

My object of inquiry, postglobal African literature and film, while not monolithic, emerged as a medium through which African writers could process what Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o describes as "the dismemberment of Africa" in which European colonialism displaced precolonial social and cultural systems (5).[7] As such, African authors often share a central concern, one that resonates with those of Black and Indigenous scholars, of imagining "anterior

futures" that offer strategies for surviving and rebuilding life after an existential crisis (Weheliye 16). Specifically, what roles should Indigenous and modern modes of thought assume in the ongoing refigurations of 'Africa' and the 'African' subject? In *In My Father's House* (1992), Anthony Kwame Appiah outlines the origins and stakes of the question. It arises, he explains, from the reality that African writers and intellectuals are often the products of Western education and internalize Western perspectives that center Europe and the United States and relegate Africa to the periphery. These "invented" images of Africa, the legacies of empire, are not isolated to educated Africans but seep into the national consciousness and shape 'traditional' mythologies (61). Thus, even writers who challenge these images, Appiah suggests, must do so from within modernity's antagonistic binary logic and language (72).

One approach to imagining an 'Africa' outside those the historical shackles of empire is to center it within the imaginary of the present. In "African Literature in the Post-Global Age: Provocation on Field Commonsense" (2016), Tejumola Olaniyan adopts the term post-global in place of Eurocentric descriptions of global relations, such as the three-worlds theory, the North-South divisions, or globalization. It describes a present in which the internet has profoundly altered our access to information, human rights now cross borders, and the planetary environment is of deep concern. Olaniyan argues, the current terms elide how "global anti-global forces," especially the nation-state, continue to balkanize "'global' agendas" (391). Instead, post-global, unlike postcolonial or neoimperial, foregrounds Africa's constitutive role in 'European' modernity ("Africa" 323). For this project, Olaniyan's term contributes in four ways. First, it acknowledges the global imbrication and multiple experiences of modernity, especially non-secular ones.[8] Second, it recognizes the composite nature of modern thought, whether "European" or "Indigenous." Third, it connects Enlightenment epistemologies that enable

colonial exploitation and extraction to our current planetary crisis.[9] Finally, much like its socio-political use, it registers the shared origins and influence of African literature on the continent and in diaspora. Two of the authors I include in this book are very intentional about centering Africa in such a way. In Koli Jean Bofane in *Congo Inc.* centers the Congo forest and international exploitation of its people and environment in colonialism, the World Wars, and globalization. Helon Habila similarly represents the hegemony of Western media in shaping events in the Niger Delta in *Oil on Water* (2010). Post-global also acknowledges the many worlds within the world from which our unique experiences of being 'human' and the associated trauma emerge as well as the nuanced approaches to care and wellbeing that will be required to heal those wounds.

Traumatic Ecosystems **and Academic Worlds**

As the concept *traumatic ecosystem* emerged from my engagement with African literature and film, I turned to other scholars whose previous work in trauma studies, environmental humanities, and African literature provided me the language to articulate my findings and foundations on which to build. Since Fanon first theorized the trauma of colonialism, several scholars of African literature have written about its importance in the African context. I will mention a few. Abiola Irele approaches trauma in "Narrative, History, and the African Imagination" (1993) by describing the healing effects of storytelling. He places the contemporary African novel within the context of Africa's precolonial, oral storytelling tradition. Connecting past and present storytelling traditions, Irele argues for the understanding of narratives as "testimony" that inform and shape the collective consciousness (159). Because of colonialism, Africans lack a "secure sense of being-in-history" and a "proper sense of belonging in the world" that they must reconstitute (162). The novel, he suggests, offers Africans just such a container for

the "symbolic re-appropriation of the world through language" (164). Ato Quayson speaks more directly to how colonial and post-independence trauma has written the national maps of the continent and the function of literature in healing. Addressing post-apartheid South Africa, he claims that "the social may be read as a locus for the mapping of psycho-structural trauma" such that understanding society at large requires an understanding of its traumatic events (93). He includes within this "psycho-structural trauma" victims as well as perpetrators, who, he argues, "were themselves pawning their humanity on behalf of the then dominant order" (93). Adapting Freud's concept of 'repetition compulsion,' he introduces the term "symbolization compulsion," or extraneous metaphorization, to describe how some African authors, Chigozie Obioma's *The Fishermen* comes to mind, represent unspeakable experiences of trauma in their work (82). The symbolism represents the slippery nature of memory and writers' attempts to depict particular events.

More recently, Amy Novak argues that trauma theory itself is Eurocentric and ill-equipped to describe the multifaceted experience of trauma in Africa, particularly that of African women. In "Who Speaks? Who Listens? The Problem of Address in Two Nigerian Novels" (2008), she cites feminist cultural theorist Laura S. Brown, who criticizes the limits of the event-based model of trauma to account for the everyday experiences of people from marginalized groups, to argue that in contemporary Nigeria "traumatic symptoms . . . are not an exception to human experience but [that] which make up human experience" (37). She places the blame on the binary description in postcolonial studies of the colonial world, which transfers the "knowing subject and passive object" relationship between colonizer and colonized to readers and trauma survivors in novels (5). Instead, readers should educate themselves to this dynamic and acknowledge the "incompleteness" of trauma theory (49). Ogaga Ifowodo argues in *History,*

Trauma, and Healing in Postcolonial Narratives (2013) that the psychological impacts of colonialism are understudied, and instead, that we should read "postcolonial history as a history of trauma" (2). He draws from Fanon and Edouard Glissant to analyze literature from Africa and its diaspora to understand how they function to "recuperate identities battered by and buried beneath imperialist encrustations" (xi). J. Roger Kurtz offers perhaps the most ambitious compendium of trauma studies in African literature to date. In *Trauma and Transformation in African Literature* (2019), he points, specifically, to the historical legacy and systemic nature of trauma in Africa, noting four specific periods: slave trade on Atlantic and Indian coasts, colonization, post-independence marked by Cold War power dynamics, and globalization, which exploits African resources while fomenting state dysfunction (84). These experiences, he argues, defy European-based, psychoanalytic models of trauma that rest on single events and individual experiences. To describe them, he leans on Fanon who describes three explicit aspects of colonial trauma. The first is that the trauma is "incessant or planned," carried out through social, political, and economic systems (111). Second, the origins of trauma, which he labels as Blackness, are not hidden but in the open and repeatedly recognized. And third, Fanon argues, the displacement of the ego by trauma is complete rather than half-measure. Consequently, Kurtz states, "African writers describe their experience in terms of physical dismemberment and fragmentation whose impact on individuals cannot be understood without also considering its impact on the community, and whose effects are experienced not as an isolated event but as an ongoing historical problem" (85).[10] African writers, then, employ novel strategies for representing experiences of trauma that include aesthetics of resistance, protest, and prophecy, what Fanon calls "'an awakener of the people . . . to become the mouthpiece of a new reality in action'" (85). *Traumatic ecosystems*, I argue, theorizes these novel strategies that African authors and

filmmakers employ to portray experiences of trauma and the environment on the continent to their audiences and accounts for the cascading dynamics that the history of trauma on the continent creates.

Trauma theorists have also started to engage with our affective relationships with the environment, especially around our climate-change present, one in which the shifting planetary reality destabilizes popular Western conceptions of human and environment. Concerned scholars are attempting to put language to the disparate violence of its current and future impacts on individuals and communities. E. Ann Kaplan in *Climate Trauma: Foreseeing the Future in Dystopian Film and Fiction* (2015) suggests that a condition Dorthe Berntsen and David C. Rubin identified in Danish soldiers who were sent to fight the war in Afghanistan, "Pretraumatic Stress Syndrome" (PreTSS), or "*pretrauma,*" describes the systemic shock some people feel in the face of impending "collapse of natural and social environments" (1, 2). In contrast to "Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder" (PTSD), which describes mindbody threat responses in the present based on past experiences of violence, *pretrauma* describes the fear people feel in the mindbody in the present in anticipation of future violence. In *African Ecomedia: Network Forms, Planetary Politics* (2021), Cajetan Iheka employs the term to describe people's experiences around oil extraction in the Niger Delta and uranium extraction in Arlit, Niger; however, he also points out the privileged position of Europeans who only now, in the context of climate change, experience pretrauma, something countries in the Global South have experienced at least since colonialism. In his introduction to the edited collection *Eco-Trauma Cinema* (2015), Anil Narine similarly tries to define "our age of anxiety" that emerges from contradictory psychological responses to eco-trauma (2). It emerges, he suggests from contradictory feelings: humans generally share

concern for their natural environments at the same time they deny their implication in climate change and the on-going catastrophe of resource extraction.

Timothy Clark recognizes a similar condition that he calls, “Anthropocene disorder,” that emerges from ongoing feelings of powerlessness in response to the overwhelming scale of Anthropogenic climate change and environmental destruction (141). Ecopsychologist Zhiwa Woodbury argues climate change elicits an entirely different form of trauma—"climate trauma” (1). Its scope triggers a chain reaction that resurfaces in victims’ earlier traumatic experiences, such as generational, community, and individual traumas (1). Heather Houser introduces the concept of “ecosickness” to describe the interdependence of environmental and human health that she tracks in contemporary American fiction (214). Ashlee Cunsolo and Neville Ellis, who try to define the particular affect, coin the term “ecological grief” to categorize the unique sadness that follows the graduated “loss of species, ecosystems and meaningful landscapes” (275).

Other scholars seek to expand the concept of trauma beyond the human. Ashlee Cunsolo and Karen Landman extend human feelings of loss and grief to all beings with bodies, including “human, animal, vegetal, mineral, or hydrological” (13). Tim Matts and Aidan Tyan expand on Reza Negrestani’s elaboration of the concept “geotrauma” to argue the universality of suffering, or violent change. More specifically, they contend the planetary violence that divides “the biological from the geological” also produces cuts between humans and other organisms and among humans that form ideologies (157). However, they propose that the process of healing from “geotrauma” is similar to scarification in that it holds productive potential both for the planet and humans. While climate change certainly promises spectacular climatic events that will disrupt our planetary existence, its cumulative slow violence will likely encapsulate our everyday

experience of it. The African authors and filmmakers whose work I engage with in *Traumatic Ecosystems: Trauma and the Environment in African Literature and Film* represent humans' affective relationships with the nature environment in more mundane and yet dramatic ways, such as when Nonceba, in Yvonne Vera's *The Stone Virgins* (2002), recognizes her own healing in Zimbabwe's Gulati Hills that arise in the morning mist, or the feeling of equanimity Ben experiences in *The Fishermen* in observing fish equipoise between currents of Omi-Ala. Conversely, Kiro, the warlord in *Congo, Inc.*, hates the Congo Forest and fantasizes about exploiting its minerals because it represents a warscape for him where he enacted and experienced unspeakable violence. These works demonstrate that humans are as affectively enmeshed in our natural environments as we are with our social worlds, and, in fact, the two may not be separate, such that our *traumatic ecosystems* determine how we engage with our natural environments, and our natural environments shape, even indirectly, our experiences of trauma.

The approach of my project, synthesizing methods and concepts from trauma studies, the environmental humanities, and African literature, distinguishes it from other works of postcolonial ecocriticism. One recent influential study that I build on is Cajetan Iheka's *Naturalizing Africa: Ecological Violence, Agency, and Postcolonial Resistance in African Literature* (2018). It follows Byron Caminero-Santangelo's *Different Shades of Green* (2014), the initial foray into ecocriticism on African literature. Iheka shifts the frame from Caminero-Santangelo's more anthropocentric political ecology and global environmental justice lenses to the influence of nonhuman agency on those earlier lenses. Specifically, leaning on Latour's network theory, he foregrounds the "interlinking of human and nonhuman lives in African societies represented in literary works" (2), or what he calls "aesthetics of proximity" (22). By close-reading sub-Saharan anticolonial literature between 1952 and 2012, he accumulates

evidence for diverse ways of being, plural rationalities, and what Dipesh Chakrabarty calls "hypertemporality," that challenge colonial discourses that naturalize Africa within Western epistemology (17). My project extends these conversations to include representations of psychological and spiritual relations, especially related to aftermaths of trauma, that are constitutive of these worlds and expose the limitations of network theories for reading representations of more-than-material worlds.

Erin James's *The Storyworld Accord: Econarratology and Postcolonial Narratives* (2015) and Jennifer Wenzel's *Disposition of Nature* (2019) also offer environmental methods for my project, emphasizing the importance of literature for imaging worlds. Reading works from African and Caribbean contexts, James champions the efficacy of stories in creating worlds that impact how we engage with the environment. She argues that texts create "virtual environments" (1) that allow readers to immerse themselves in different storyworlds, which might help them imagine other experiences of environments and, in this way, "bridge imaginative gaps" (3). James's approach emphasizes the ability of literary form to reveal the cultural assumptions embedded in the practices of reading that might exclude others and to influence how readers perceive physical environments. While James's emphasis on literary form highlights an aporia in ecocriticism, my project shies from the idea that storyworlds might offer readers a mind-melding experience. Instead, by incorporating trauma theory, I argue the authors I read confront readers with feelings of ambivalence that underscore their implication in the violences of storyworlds and the processes of re-worlding.

Wenzel takes a similarly capacious approach, reading examples of "world-imagining from below" (9). She reads African and South Asian authors who depict characters in situations of local environmental precarity within a planetary context. She argues that these texts, through

their literary techniques, help dislodge readers from their own assumptions about "the 'real' and how it works," specifically how they imagine their worlds and what they hide (20). Similar to my project, Wenzel hopes that such a challenge will help largely Western audiences expand their frames of possibility to confront uncomfortable pasts still present and open them to new possible futures. Notably, however, my project eschews the impressive scalar jumps in which Wenzel's engages because they encourage terms such as "world-imagining from below" that reinforce the idea that there is such a place. Instead, the authors I read pose questions about the aftermaths of trauma in their particular worlds that might be relevant to climate change futures but possess their own local implications for re-worlding. My project contributes to the environmental humanities by re-emphasizing the importance of the local in the context of climate change.

Traumatic Ecosystems: Case Studies from African Literature and Film

Traumatic ecosystem and my understanding of African literature and film have been co-emergent: African literature and film provided me with the problems and questions that led me to the frameworks through which to interpret them. The recursive process through which the world of this dissertation emerges is familiar. The novelists and filmmakers, shaped by their own experiences, build their imaginary worlds, which we interpret through our own experiences and disciplinary lenses, that provide us with new perspectives from which to interpret our worlds. My project attempts to reflect that co-emergence between interpretive lens and objects of study, as well, in its organization. I pair works that share material environments—river, forest, and stone—and loosely organize them according to the three stages Judith Herman identifies that individuals and groups must pass through to recover from trauma: healing relationships, safety, and remembrance and mourning. In most of these works, the stages are aspirational. Characters are looking to other characters and their audience members to form healing relationships, to

establish safe conditions, and to mirror their rituals of remembrance and mourning even if they do not achieve these ends. However, in the ellipses of their endings, the artists present models and opportunities for the audience members to change their traumatic ecosystems, to participate in textual and extratextual, human and nonhuman communities in which elements of their imaginary aspirations might enmesh with the material. The pairings also shift in scale from works that focus on more individual experiences of trauma to those more interested in societal, cultural, and national experiences to demonstrate how individuals and groups emerge from *traumatic ecosystems* and how those determine their interactions with others and the world.

How rivers shape the traumatic ecosystems of the Nigerian nation-state and the Niger Delta is the question that occupies the first chapter, "'A River of Agencies': Posthuman Performance and Trauma in Chigozie Obioma's *The Fishermen* and Helon Habila's *Oil on Water*." The question is premised on geographers Jamie Linton and Jessica Budds' contention that humans and H2O are fundamentally entangled and mutually shaping, or "hydrosocial" (175). In answering it, I argue that the "hydosocial cycle" is fully implicated in individual and community experiences of trauma (175). These include event-based traumatic experiences but also less conspicuous, everyday ones that individuals and communities encounter within their nested social networks, such as family, community organizations, and nation-state, from insidious forms of gender, sexual, racial, class, religious, and ableist discrimination. To chart the relationship between the chemical compound H2O and trauma, I situate the "hydrosocial cycle" within Karen Barad's broader "posthuman performativity approach" that theorizes how material-discursive practices establish patterns of interaction, or performances, from which apparatuses emerge, which form abstract hierarchical ontologies that influence future practices. Trauma emerges from these performances when "hegemonic apparatuses" exclude individuals from them

and threaten their feelings of safety and security (220). Chigozie Obioma's *The Fishermen* and Helon Habila's *Oil on Water* create story-worlds that demonstrate how the "hydrosocial cycle[s]," the process of mutual shaping among H2O and humans, shape individuals and communities within the traumatic ecosystems of the Nigerian nation-state and the Niger Delta. In *The Fishermen*, both an African bildungsroman and national allegory, Obioma writes about four brothers who were born into Akure, a predominately Yoruba city, and their parents' modern Igbo *traumatic ecosystem*, shaped by Enlightenment thought, the Nigerian civil war, and Christianity. Conflict arises when their father, James Agwu, who works for the bank, is transferred to northern Nigeria, leaving their mother, Paulina, to enforce his "map of dreams," which imagines for the boys' Western education and careers, and they start frequenting the local river, Omi-Ala, a symbol of the precolonial animist ontology, where they decide to become fishermen (25). Habila, in his satirical novel *Oil on Water*, expands the "hydrosocial cycle" from family and city to the Niger Delta traumatic ecosystem and international publishing industry. The detective story follows first-person narrator, Rufus, an aspiring journalist, and his mentor, Zaq, in their search for Isabel Floode, the kidnapped wife of an oil executive. In their circuitous mission, trauma narratives surface from their interviews with other stock characters from the Delta oil encounter as well as their own that expose the deleterious posthuman performance between the characters, H2O, and the international publishing industry of the Delta traumatic ecosystem.

Chapter two, "*Ecstasis*: Denial of Death and the Congo Forest in *Le silence de la forêt* and *Congo, Inc.*," sketches the traumatic rhizome of violence, what Achille Mbembe calls the "Fanonian *cul-de-sac*," that shapes the popular conceptions of the Congo forest ("On the Postcolony: a brief response to critics" 154). It draws from Robert Pogue Harrison's literary history of the European forests and anthropologist Johannes Fabian's theorization of *ecstasis* to

untangle the knotted precolonial, colonial, and postcolonial ontologies in the Congo forest traumatic ecosystem that assign different values to humans and the forest. In Harrison's account, patriarchal European religious beliefs transformed the feminine forest from a sustaining material habitat, governed by the cycle of birth and decay, into an overwhelming domain of spiritual confusion that impeded rituals of worship. The forest became an existential foe, a bastion of savagery, from which humans must evolve to escape death. It and those associated with it emerged as targets for exploitation and domination. I argue, though my analyses of Bassek Ba Kobhio and Didier Ouenangare's dramatic film, the first major production from the Central African Republic, *Le silence de la forêt* (*Silence of the Forest*) and In Koli Jean Bofane's satiric novel, *Congo, Inc.: Bismark's Testament*, that Europeans imported this European capitalist ontology and imposed it on a preexisting "transactional" ontology in which indigenous Africans blended with spiritual and material powers of the forest to sustain life (Mbembe *Necropolitics* 107). The confrontation sprouted a third ontology in the postcolony that retained the European capitalist identitarian hierarchy in which the feminine forest preserves a stage of human primitivism and animist spirituality that threatens the phallic colonial system of exploitation. The film and novel, both in conversation with Joseph Conrad's *Heart of Darkness,* demonstrate the stakes of these confrontations: the abstract values that the different ontological hierarchies place on material identities. *Ecstasis* is the product. It describes the feeling of insecurity and instability that arises in individuals, often male-identifying, and groups in response to encountering an overwhelming force. It emerges in the film and novel from confrontations between characters whose identities are shaped and uprooted by these different ontologies. The feeling of *ecstasis* either inspires characters to expand their identities to incorporate the value that the other ontology places on them or forces them to contract them, a violent experience of emasculation,

which registers as trauma. Often, in the film and novel, male characters get stuck in what Judith Herman calls the mourning phase of healing and seek to reclaim their masculinity by dominating other weaker characters the repetition of which creates the "Fanonian *cul-de-sac.*" Although the film and novel remain open-ended, I argue that the cycles of violence they depict are symptoms of underlying trauma in which their audiences are implicated. Consequently, addressing the visible violence plaguing the Congo forest traumatic ecosystem requires not further imposing Western frameworks but healing the underlying trauma that they have caused, including humans' relationship with the forest.

The final chapter, "Future Ecologies of Nation: Stone in Yvonne Vera's *The Stone Virgins* and Yvonne Adhiambo Owuor's *Dust*," argues that the two female protagonists, Nonceba and Ajany, learn to heal from colonial, generational, and insidious traumas through their relationships with stone. Nonceba and her sister Thenjewe, the sisters at the center of *The Stone Virgins*, live in Kezi in the south of Zimbabwe. It opens shortly after the *Second Chimurenga*, the anti-colonial war against the white Rhodesian government. Hope abounds both for the new nation-state and women's equality. After a brief interregnum, however, the *Gukurahundi* nationalist struggle erupts and both women, who embody the patriarchal "Mother Africa" trope, are violently raped, and Thenjewe murdered, by Sibaso, a traumatized independence fighter, who feels stateless after the outcome of the civil war. At the beginning of *Dust*, Ajany, daughter of a wealthy northern Kenyan family, at the news of her brother and national soccer star Odidi's murder, escapes an abusive relationship and returns from Brazil, to solve his killing. In her investigation, she interviews both the patriarchs and matriarchs of her family and nation and removes the lies that patch over their traumas and erode the walls of their family home, Wuoth Ogik, originally a colonial homestead, and symbol of the postcolonial nation-state. Through their female

protagonists, Vera and Owuor model a process for reorganizing material-discursive relations within their fictive traumatic ecosystems that I call, "affective mapping," a term I adapt from Jonathan Flatley, who theorizes it as an aesthetic practice (80). He employs the term to describe how our emotions imbue our physical environments, which influence our social and political engagements. In the novels, Nonceba and Ajany connect with the fluidity and malleability of their lithic environments, normally symbols of material permanence, to open theirs and others' traumatic wounds to the healing process and remap the corrosive material-discursive relations that form the apparatuses that organize their respective *traumatic ecosystems* of family and nation, namely colonialism and patriarchy. Vera and Owuor both recognize the interdependence of human trauma and planetary violence and the necessity of healing the former while containing the latter within our shared traumatic ecosystem.

Notes

[1] J. Roger Kurtz echoes these concerns in *Literature, Trauma, and the African Moral Imagination*. He isolates three problems in trauma studies. The first is the problem of how trauma destabilizes memory and obstructs its integration into the present, which complicates individuals' and communities' abilities to form identities. A second conceptual problem is how to understand individual and collective trauma. Kurtz points out that individual trauma always occurs in social contexts but that collective experiences of trauma do not always mirror individual ones. For one, perpetrators' and victims' bodies are subject to physical wounding that collective bodies are not. Additionally, trauma fragments individual narratives of self while it can often contribute to group self-narratives. Kurtz worries, the third conceptual problem in trauma studies, that the term has lost its potency from overuse and generalization. Instead, he advocates for the "right-sizing of trauma theory" that functions less as an explanation for our human condition than a provincial tool for addressing future experiences like the on-going effects of climate change (57). The concept of traumatic ecosystem, I believe, starts to address these issues.

[2] Maté's related publications include: *Scattered Minds: the Origins of Healing of Attention Deficit Disorder*, *In the Realm of Hungry Ghosts: Close Encounters with Addiction*, and *The Myth of Normal: Trauma, Illness, and Healing in a Toxic Culture*.

[3] Nancy Tuana highlights the absence of race in recent Anthropocene discourse (3). Arturo Arias argues that discussions of the Anthropocene ignore how histories of racism and colonialism create varied experiences of being human (111).

[4] Kyle Whyte, in "Indigenous science (fiction) for the Anthropocene," argues the "science-fiction scenarios" of climate change elide Indigenous perspectives that link climate change and colonialism (225). Melanie Benson Taylor reminds readers that the Anthropocene was founded on Indigenous and Black extinction efforts and not all humanity shares equal responsibility for our current crisis (12).

[5] Arias also argues for including "Indigenous, more-than-human political ecologies" in addressing climate change (115). Weheliye argues "what it means to be human in the modern world" is located in those whose 'humanity' has been devalued or erased (12).

[6] Importantly, as Jennifer Wenzel points out, while we all share vulnerability, we do not share vulnerability to the same degree, a perspective that the dialogue between the authors and allegorical novels I read provides as well (*The Disposition of Nature* 33).

[7] Simon Gikandi describes modernity as the "'absent cause' of African literature" (5). Harry Garuba amplifies this claim, arguing "A major—if not the central—problematic of African studies today is, I believe, the question of African modernity" ("Explorations" 280). Abiola Irele notes it is a central concern for African writers in diaspora as well (11-12).

[8] Dipesh Chakrabarty argues in "The Time of History and the Times of Gods" that the ontological trappings of secular time flatten the influence of the supernatural in human lives as superstition and the coevalness of pasts and futures in the present (35). Similarly, Achille Mbembe argues in an African context, synchronic and diachronic concepts of time fail "to account for time as lived . . . in its multiplicity and simultaneities" (*On the Postcolony* 8).

[9] It is perhaps necessary to affirm, here, Jennifer Wenzel's argument in *The Disposition of Nature* that "the globe is not a planet" (28). Chakrabarty also distinguishes between the two in "The Planet: An Emergent Humanist Category." He argues the difference is one of "sustainability and habitability" (18). Sustainability is focused on human well-being in contrast to habitability which concerns that of all organisms. While I am on board with the scalar jump, I argue both "globe" and "planet" are of a particular world largely framed by science and capitalism that historically disavow the legitimacy of other worlds. Postglobal, in my formulation, acknowledges other conceptions of "global" and "planetary" that exist alongside the globe and the planet.

[10] Achille Mbembe in "African Modes of Self-Writing" challenges the notion that slavery, colonization, and apartheid were entirely externally imposed traumas and attributes some of Africa's current struggles for self-identity to its refusal to account for how some Africans encouraged and profited from the socio-economic upheaval and chaos wrought by those periods. He suggests such denials have resulted in many Africans adopting a paralyzing "cult of victimization" (244). Both Vera and Owuor acknowledge this "cult of victimization" and excavate colonial and Indigenous roles in enacting violence especially against women.

Chapter 1

"A River of Agencies": Posthuman Performance and Trauma in Chigozie Obioma's *The Fishermen* and Helon Habila's *Oil on Water*

To be alive and human is to have been born into a traumatic ecosystem. Even in utero our mothers' experiences of trauma shape our development. Once out of the womb, our caregivers' anxieties and fears, generated from generational, vicarious, or direct experiences of trauma, influence how safe and secure we feel within our families. In turn, those feelings we inherit from them impact the material-psycho-social relations we form with the worlds outside the family that further shape our identities, our sense of self and its emplacement. For example, if one of your caregivers was traumatized by nearly drowning in a river, they might intentionally or unintentionally pass their fear of rivers on to you with the hope of protecting you. Those outside encounters might affirm or challenge the identities we form in our families, such as when we meet those who practice the same or a different religion. In other circumstances, individuals, systems, and events, such as the racial violence and oppression Fanon describes in the colonized world as well as its aftermath, might violently displace our identities, or our attachments to our worlds that allow us to feel safe and secure. These situations produce experiences of trauma that generate new anxieties and fears from which we interact with our worlds. Absent opportunities to heal, this cycle metastasizes such that trauma forms the ground from which traumatized individuals, groups, and nations act in their worlds. They are looking out for and responding to real and perceived threats to themselves and that which supports their identities whether human or nonhuman. In some cases, they strive to eliminate those threats entirely, such as in ethnic violence or civil war. To be alive and human is to experience this cycle. The challenge is to recognize violence not as the sickness but as a symptom of underlying trauma. While the

traumatic ecosystem we are born into and our experiences of trauma might differ greatly, how we learn to respond to those experiences contributes to the opportunities we have to heal and recover.

In this chapter, I offer some examples of traumatic ecosystems at the scales of family, nation-state, and global capital and how our experiences of violence and trauma that form them are enmeshed with our natural environments. More specifically, I analyze Chigozie Obioma's *The Fishermen* (2015) and Helon Habila's *Oil on Water* (2010) to demonstrate their characters' enmeshments in the material-psycho-social relations, and specifically those with rivers, that construct their traumatic ecosystems, and how their enmeshment influences their responses to their Nigerian worlds. Obioma tells the story of four brothers whose evolving identities as fishermen track the corrosive effects of trauma, stemming from British colonialism, onto their relations with their family, Omi-ala—the local river, and post-independence Nigeria. Habila expands from family and nation to demonstrate how the hierarchy of the global capitalist traumatic ecosystem influences the Nigerian media and publishing industries' portrayals of the Niger Delta oil encounter. The central conflicts in the novels emerge from characters' attempts to assuage their feelings of powerlessness and instability that accompany their global capitalist presents and imagined futures by imposing, or fixing, their situated ontological relations with water on other characters.

This chapter builds on the work of geographers Jamie Linton and Jessica Budds who among others contend that humans and water "make and remake each other over space and time" in an onto-epistemological "hydrosocial cycle" (175).[1] H2O, in short, becomes 'water' through its entanglements with humans and differs with each unique entanglement. The chapter also answers calls from trauma theorists like Stef Craps, Amy Novak, and Laura S. Brown to expand

the definition of trauma from an event-based one to include "the normative, quotidian aspects of trauma in the lives of many oppressed and disempowered persons" (Brown 18). This interdisciplinary framework elucidates how material environments, in this case hydrological systems, enfold with socio-political discourse and function as inflection points that expose the violent and destabilizing competition between ontologies that the post-independence nation-state repeatedly performs with the international community. Because trauma theory remains largely anthropocentric, I adapt what Karen Barad calls a "posthuman performativity approach" to the concept of traumatic ecosystem to explain the constitutive role that the material, in this case water, plays in the material-discursive practices that maintain these ontologies. (135).

Together, these novels expose the topological relations between the local and the global as well as the past and the future that comprise the present traumatic ecosystems of post-independence Nigeria. They represent the nation-state as an imagined container for the iterative traditional and colonial "hegemonic apparatuses" that comprise the post-independence ontological contests over the role of water in Nigeria (Barad 220). In highlighting Nigeria's performativity, Obioma and Habila destabilize the fixed topological relations, including the hydrosocial cycles, that help maintain its iterative violence and open the nation-state to new relations with itself and the global system that might facilitate healing. This includes showing readers how they participate in the traumatic ecosystems that shape Nigeria to provide us with opportunities for self-examination so that we might challenge those hegemonic relations.

Posthuman Performativity

Before turning to the novels, I would like to expand upon how I adapt Barad's concept of "posthuman performance" to trauma theory to describe how humans emerge with their material environments from a traumatic ecosystem. The central problem I believe Barad helps resolve is

how the material environment is an agent in our affective experiences.[2] After outlining Barad's theory, I will turn to a recent development in Nigerian politics concerning the ongoing trauma of the Niger Delta oil encounter and its waterways that illustrates the affective topology—the material-discursive interplay of temporal and spatial affective relations—of the traumatic ecosystem to show how the agents involved emerge from its affective relations. A recent announcement from Nigerian President Bola Tinubu and national and international responses to it evince this affective topology, and especially the role of the hydrological, and its "posthuman performativity" in forming the Niger Delta traumatic ecosystem. I will break them down, outlining the agents and their material-discursive relations, to provide a model for approaching the traumatic ecosystems in the novels.

In *Meeting the Universe Halfway* (2007), an ambitious marriage of quantum theory and queer theory, Barad builds on other performance theorists like Michel Foucault and Judith Butler to argue that matter, or the material, is fully implicated in the being that arises from performance. She calls it a "*posthuman performative* approach" (135). In Barad's words, "performativity, properly construed, is not an invitation to turn everything (including material bodies) into words; on the contrary, performativity is precisely a contestation of the excessive power granted to language to determine what is real" (133). Stated differently, materiality and language are co-conspirators in creating all that we engage in our daily lives. How does this happen? Barad is intentional in her use of "posthuman." In defining it, she seeks the middle ground between anthropocentrism and antihumanism, describing it as "the practice of accounting for the boundary-making practices by which the 'human' and its others are differentially delineated and defined" (136). Stated differently, the term indicates the practice of reflecting on how our

material and social interactions with the world produce the differences and externalities that we rely on to define the world. She calls it "an agential realist elaboration of performativity" (136).

At its simplest, what she means is that matter is created through repeated "intra-actions" between "material agencies" within a shared space and time that create patterns of difference and influence future intra-actions (56). These patterns of intra-action, or material-discursive practices, are what she calls apparatuses, a term she adapts from Foucault, and they determine the "boundaries, properties, and meanings" that differentiate, or cut, material agencies into subjects and objects (139). An apparatus includes anything from a beaver dam to a man-made dam to the English word 'dam' that parses a "river of agencies" into separate bodies that appear fixed in time and space (239). Apparatuses also describe more familiar material-discursive patterns of intra-action in which cultures assign meaning and value to matter (bodies, for example) that form our identities, such as nature, gender, sex, race, class, ableness, and age, and arrange them into hierarchies of power. However, each apparatus is situated in place and time and enfolds pasts and future imaginaries into the present, such that each uniquely produces difference and exclusions (217). Skin color, for example, acquires different meanings in different places and times. This enables a situated objectivity that we often abstract into universal truth, what Donna Harraway calls the "god trick," from which to establish contingent facts; however, the exclusions, as they continue to intra-act with the apparatuses, leave open future possibilities as they reconfigure these facts (581). Barad describes this possibility, this "enactment" of reconfiguration, as "agency" and attributes it to nonhumans, like the river in my earlier example, as well as humans (214). In other words, the exclusions remain agents because their presence leaves open possibilities of change to the dominant apparatuses and the situated objectivities that they enable. The key idea to remember is that apparatuses do not preexist the material agencies

but nonetheless shape them in a dynamic relationship—a posthuman performance—that is indeterminate and becoming. More concretely, the Niger Delta—its riverine environment and its human and nonhuman life—is the product of the human and nonhuman material-discursive practices that form its apparatuses whether its river channels or its racial hierarchies, which shape its ongoing posthuman performance.

President Tinubu's announcement and the fallout from it demonstrate more tangibly the posthuman performance of the Niger Delta and how trauma emerges within it to form a traumatic ecosystem. On June 12, 2025, Nigeria's annual Democracy Day, he posthumously pardoned the Ogoni Nine—Ken Saro-Wiwa, Barinem Kiobel, John Kpuinen, Baribor Bera, Felix Nuate, Paul Levula, Saturday Dobee, Nordu Eawo, and Daniel Gbokoo—and bestowed on writer and activist Ken Saro-Wiwa the high honor of Commander of the Federal Republic. Tinubu described the men whom the Sani Abacha regime designated terrorists for their protests against oil extraction in the Niger Delta and executed by hanging, as "'heroes'" and lauded them for their "'outstanding contributions'" to Nigerian democracy (Chibelushi). For anyone familiar with Ken Saro-Wiwa's and the Ogoni Nine's activism, their subsequent execution, and the resulting international outcry, the pardons add yet another layer to the well-documented tragedy of oil extraction in the Niger Delta. Suddenly, the government that continues to violently defend its authority to contract multinational oil corporations to extract oil from the region and poison the indigenous hydrosocial cycles is embracing the region's most famous defenders and its own ardent critics and victims. With this announcement. Tinubu is attempting to 'fix' a new image of the Niger Delta, one in which the government appears an ally to the indigenous inhabitants.

Unsurprisingly, national and international media outlets reported a wide range of responses to the announcement that belie how they also attempt to 'fix' images of Niger Delta

that contribute to the ongoing hydrosocial performance of the Niger Delta, Nigeria, and Western hegemony. After reporting the pardon, Wedaeli Chibelushi, writing for the *BBC*, in "Nigeria pardons activist Ken Saro-Wiwa 30 years after execution," offers a more historical account of the Niger Delta oil encounter. He recounts for his international audience a brief history of Saro-Wiwa's and the Ogoni Nine's convictions and their activism against multinational corporations', especially Shell's, oil extraction in Ogoniland. The article, then, reports responses from local organizations and family members. The Movement for the Survival of the Ogoni People (MOSOP) called the pardon a "'courageous act'"; however, they qualify their praise by expressing it is not enough (Chibelushi). Notably, their trauma from the incidents still remains. Family members and Amnesty International, the article states, denounced the pardon because it does not exonerate the men from the false charges on which they were convicted for the murder of four Ogoni chiefs whose names he does not mention. The article ends by reporting on the status of the Ogoni legal fight in international courts against Shell to compensate them for oil spills that polluted their farmland and Niger Delta fishing waters and Shell's denial of the charges, citing local "sabotage, theft and illegal refining" (Chibelushi). Healing, the article implies, would involve redressing their environmental losses.

In "Nigeria kills her sun: Death and vindication for Ken Saro-Wiwa, Ogoni Nine," Shola Lawal, reporting for *Al Jazeera*, emphasizes the social and environmental justice angles of the Niger Delta oil encounter. Rather than with the pardons, she starts dramatically from the gallows with Saro-Wiwa's last words and his corpse. "'Lord, take my soul, but the struggle continues'" before his "body went limp. . . . [and] swung gently from the makeshift gallows." The article only turns to the pardons, thirty years later, after a detailed account of the nine hangings. Unlike the *BBC* article, Lawal offers an extensive biography of Saro-Wiwa, writer and activist, and the

conflict between MOSOP, the government, and the Ogoni pacifist leaders, whom she does name (Edward Kobani, Alfred Bodey, and Samuel and Theophilus Orage), that led to their deaths when the government tried to bar Saro-Wiwa from a MOSOP meeting in 1994. The pacificists were accused of colluding with the government, and as Lawal explains in detail, "were clubbed with everything from broken bottles to sharpened rakes. Then they were set on fire." She places the spectacular violence enacted against the Ogoni leaders at the forefront, hinting at the remaining trauma.

Also, in contrast to the *BBC* article, Lawal reports the contemporary situation by interviewing specific individuals. The first is Noo Saro-Wiwa, one of Saro-Wiwa's daughters. She tells about the phone call she received when she learned of her father's death and how she has felt triggered when visiting Nigeria or simply hearing the name "Shell." While her family received a settlement in 2009 from Shell, she explains that "critics" have accused her and her family of profiting from the decision. To elaborate on the current situation, Lawal also interviews Nubari Saatah, the president of Niger Delta Congress, who criticized the government and Shell for failing to clean up the Delta region. He suspects that Tinubu issued the pardons to placate the Ogoni because he hopes to resume oil extraction to bolster the country's failing economy. In fact, he believes the pardons have only inflamed tensions within the Ogoni community because the President failed to mention the names of the MOSOP members who were killed whose families blame Saro-Wiwa for their deaths because of his strong position against the government. He attributes the ongoing division within the Ogonis to the government and Shell's violent responses to the original protests. At the end of her article, Nawal turns to the efforts to clean up the region. In vivid detail, she describes the "eeire stillness of Ogoniland's mangroves," once alive with "the sounds of chirping insects and croaking frogs," where "old, stooped fishermen cast nets that

bring up air." Her apocalyptic descriptions of the Delta echo the spectacular violence she describes against the protesters, implying their affective enmeshment and shared experiences of trauma from oil extraction.

Nigerian publications situate the pardons within the nation's broader struggle for democracy and environmental justice. The editorial board for the *Nigerian Tribune* published an editorial, "The pardon of Saro-Wiwa and others," arguing that the narrative of Saro-Wiwa and Ogoni Nine "mirrors" that of "Nigeria's conscience." They, too, lean into dramatic language to retell that history. They describe the Ogoni Nine's hearing in front of Abacha's hand-picked judges as a "kangaroo trial." After their executions, the board explains that "their bodies were dumped in an unmarked grave, soaked in lime to hasten decomposition." They repeat the "bittersweet" responses from the families who insist the pardon confers guilt for a crime the men did not commit. After recounting their frustration with President Tinubu's announcement, the *Nigerian Tribute* editors exclaim "the deeper tragedy" is that the environmental conditions that prompted the formation of MOSOP remain: "Oil spills slicken rivers, gas flares poison the air, and pipelines crisscross farmlands like scars. The people who live there still drink poisoned water, breathe toxic air, and watch their children grow up with respiratory diseases." They end their editorial with a series of demands and pose the question: "Is Nigeria finally ready to listen?" A final example, an editorial from *Independent*, written by David Bassey Antia, "Ken Saro-Wiwa: Is the Posthumous Pardon Constitutional?" tries to fix a different reality from the other articles. Antia is profuse in his praise of the action, suggesting it "deserves commendation—not only for its historical sensitivity but also for its moral courage." He argues the President demonstrates "a rare willingness" to engage with the past that might lead to "redemptive gestures." He highlights the tragedy of Ogoni land and people before analyzing the

legal question of whether the posthumous pardons are legal under the Nigerian constitution, finally concluding that they are "arguably unconstitutional," recommending the National Assembly pass legislation in support of them.

From this collection of articles about President Tinubu's announcement, we can identify the actors and the confluence of affective relations between them that perform the Niger Delta traumatic ecosystem. Primary among them, of course, are Ken Saro-Wiwa, the Ogoni Nine, MOSOP, the multinational corporation Shell, the Nigerian government, especially General Sani Abacha, and the international community of political actors and activists, and now President Tinubu. Secondary actors that only a few articles mention include the pacifist Ogonis (Edward Kobani, Alfred Bodey, and Samuel and Theophilus Orage) who were killed by MOSOP supporters, the Ogonis who remain split between MOSOP and pacifist sides of the conflict, Abacha's trial judges, Noo Saro-Wiwa, the Niger Delta Congress, the villages of Ogale and Bille that are also suing Shell, Delta militants, and the Delta's anonymous suffering inhabitants. Tertiary actors are the writers themselves and their readers who accept their representations as knowledge. Neither is a "'blank screen'"; both bring their individual and cultural assumptions and experiences that color the information they receive and report (Novak 39). As the articles make clear, the power relations between the international and regional actors are inequal, and they are inequal between national and local actors as well. Even within the Ogonis, the performance appears to be tilted toward Saro-Wiwa supporters. Out of these relations, the Manichean images of 'Nigeria' come to the fore. The dystopic one depicts an authoritarian democracy that sacrifices disempowered ethnic groups and their environmental resources to the insatiable greed of multinational corporations who finance the regime and its political and economic patrons. The utopic image is one of animistic simplicity in which indigenous

inhabitants are attempting to preserve their customs and traditions in the face of capitalist modernity whose only recourse lies outside the country with the international community. In a nod to their sympathetic readers, most articles close with a modicum of hope that the international courts will side with the inhabitants against Shell and the national government and restore the Delta to its past splendor. With his announcement, President Tinubu, thus, inserts his image of the Niger Delta into the ongoing material-discursive relations that shapes its present performance, which in turn inspires journalists' responses and further iterations of the performance.

Left out of socio-cultural analysis, however, are the material relations that extend from Delta ecosystem to the national and the international communities that script the posthuman performance of the Niger Delta. Nawal mentions the "mangroves," "insects," and "frogs," and the *Tribune* editors add the "rivers," "air," and "farmlands." Ken Saro-Wiwa is now remembered as much for his environmental activism as his writings. Recent images of the Delta, much like those the articles provide, often exclude its human inhabitants or blend them with the environment, like Nawal's "old, stooped fishermen" whose nets "bring up air." In accord with Linton and Budds's argument about the hydrosocial cycle, the riverine system that the articles portray is clearly a primary actor in the performance of the Niger Delta, both shaping and being shaped by socio-cultural relations. Its presence raises a series of questions: How does water matter in shaping human identities and social representations of the communities in proximity to it? Recursively, how do humans' identities and social representations shape their material-discursive relationships with water? And, finally, how is trauma implicated in the performance of these iterative material-discursive ecosystems?

Thinking through the performance of the Delta, the riverine system is an agent in its representation at every level from how the articles' sources represent it to the fact that Tinubu granted the pardons and made the announcement at all. Moreover, the Delta materially shapes those who are writing about it. From their dramatic accounts, Nawal and the *Tribune* editors are clearly affected by the environmental violence of oil extraction. As Barad posits, posthuman performance does not simply represent the world but creates it; its product does not merely change our perceptions of the world but is the world itself. There is no ontological gap between our representation of the world and the world, the articles and the Nigeria nation-state, or traumatic ecosystem. Simply, there is no real to separate from representation. Returning to water and the Delta, through the lens of posthuman performativity, the hydrosocial cycle that Linton and Budds describe in which 'water' takes on different valences depending on how people and the H2O relate is the same one that performs the Niger Delta (the Ogoni, the national government, and Shell all differently relate to and are shaped by H20) and the Nigerian nation-state.

One implication of posthuman performativity Barad only hints at but that is apparent in the journalists' reporting about Tinubu's announcement is that the violence of these agential cuts often produces traumatic stressors for humans and perhaps nonhumans that form traumatic ecosystems. For example, Noo Saro-Wiwa relates how for years she was triggered by the prospects of returning to Nigeria after her father's death and any mention of 'Shell.' She is also sensitive to those who accuse her family of profiting from the executions because of their successful lawsuit against Shell. Additionally, Nubari Saatah, the president of Niger Delta Congress, tells Nawal that the pardons actually inflamed old wounds felt by those in the Ogoni community still divided over the killing of the pacificist leaders. For the family members of

others Abacha executed, the *Tribune* describes their responses as "bittersweet," suggesting their wounds remain. And, I argue, H2O is a central actor in their experiences of trauma and, more broadly, the posthuman performances of the Niger Delta and Nigerian traumatic ecosystems. Thus, while the production of difference through agential cuts lacks an affective response, especially at the subatomic level, for humans and perhaps nonhumans for whom differences often define their socio-cultural identities within their situated ontologies and determine their feelings of security and safety in the world, the production of difference can either stabilize or destabilize their identities. This can occur both through catastrophic events, like the executions of the Ogoni leaders, and more mundane forms of violence from oppressive economic systems like neocolonialism, or oppressive social structures like patriarchy, that inspire ongoing feelings of insecurity and danger and prevent feelings of safety that might promote healing (Brown *Decolonizing* 48). Through the posthuman performance lens, everyday violence emerges from "hegemonic apparatuses" that seek to maintain the exclusions they create through their agential cuts that establish difference. Importantly, Barad argues, these social structures are not simply social but iterative material-discursive practices.[3] Matter, in this case, H2O is enfolded within these apparatuses that form individual and group identities and enact traumatic stressors. As a result, the hydrosocial cycles contribute directly to Saro-Wiwa's and Saatah's experiences of trauma and form the posthuman performance of the Niger Delta traumatic ecosystem. In the novels, Obioma and Habila show how the material-discursive practices, especially around H20, become hierarchical ontological apparatuses that contribute to and create conflict within the traumatic ecosystems from which their characters emerge as well as how their characters' violent responses to these traumatic stressors perpetuate the traumatic ecosystems.

The Fishermen

Omi-ala, a river in Akure, Nigeria, the capital of the Ondo State, is a lead actor within the posthuman performance of the family and nation-state that forms the traumatic ecosystem in Chigozie Obioma's African bildungsroman *The Fishermen*. The novel depicts the coming-of-age of the Agwu boys, their fatal infighting, and the subsequent collapse of their family, which parallels the post-independence history of Nigeria. The plot starts when their Western-educated, Christian, Igbo father, James Agwu, is relocated from his job at the Central Bank of Nigeria in Akure in the southwest to a branch in the north, leaving his wife, Paulina, alone with five sons and one daughter. James's departure represents what V.Y. Mudimbe, borrowing from Jungian archetypes, terms the collapse of the "false fathers" of colonial Africa, such as the apparatuses of the British colonial government, that impose Western ontology on Africans to shape them in its image. This archetype of the father, Mudimbe explains, maintains unquestioned authority to determine his children's lives: he "summons us in our fantasies and establishes us within an order of duties and ambitions conceived by an ancient memory he represents" (192). In the novel, James leaves Paulina to implement his "map of dreams" for the boys, a blend of Western education and Christianity that will guide them to Western careers like his own (25). In this archetype of the family, however, the child, or Africa, Mudimbe continues, "is crushed by such authority, withdraws into a position of weakness while, at the same time, the child would like to affirm a new authority and the voice of new ways to come" (192). Consequently, after James leaves, much like the British from Nigeria, the older boys, Ikenna (15 years old), Boja (14 years old), Obembe (11 years old), and Ben (9 years old) are left to shape their own identities. They veer from their father's "map of dreams" and arrive on the banks of the forbidden Omi-ala, associated with traditional religion, where they become fishermen, a more traditional profession

(25). Their departure from the map inspires a conflict between Western and traditional ontologies within the family and, more generally, the nation-state.

Readers witness this conflict after a successful fishing trip. While walking home, the boys' world is upended when they encounter Abulu, the local madman. As a plane flies overhead, disrupting the scene, he prophecies that Ikenna will be killed by a fisherman. Because of the noise from the plane, Ikenna does not hear the prophecy and only receives it secondhand from Boja. Regardless, he interprets the prophecy to mean that the fisherman is one of his brothers. The brothers try to dissuade him from the conclusion, but he has lost his trust in them. Ikenna splits further from his brothers and family. He destroys their childhood mementos and oppresses Boja who he suspects will kill him. Eventually, the conflict erupts into a family civil war, recalling the Nigerian Civil War, and Boja ends up killing Ikenna and then himself. At news of the tragedy, James quits his job and returns home, but Paulina, distraught over the deaths of her sons and the memories they raise from the Nigerian Civil War, loses her mind and is admitted to a mental hospital. Obembe and Ben, who blame Abulu for their brothers' deaths, kill him. Following the murder, Obembe flees town and Ben is imprisoned. The end of the novel depicts his early release, granted by the Ondo state governor, "in the spirit of the first ever transition from military to civilian rule in Nigeria" (285). After the tragedy, the family is reconfigured along with the Nigerian state.

While most critics understandably focus on Abulu and his prophecy as the plot's inciting incident, I argue that the children's initial decision to become fishermen and establish relations with the Omi-ala initiated them into the post-independence performance of the traumatic ecosystem in which they were born.[4] Under their father's hegemony, the traumatic ecosystem they first encounter is that of the patriarchal family, ruled by their father's belief in Western

education and their mother's belief in Christianity. Once their father leaves for the north, they venture outside the family system where they encounter Omi-ala. The river becomes a material actor, much like another Jungian figure, the grandmother who is the "depository and matrix of the memory of the family, the social group, and the community" and secretly defies the law of the father (Mudimbe 197). The river exposes them to the contest, originating with British colonialism, between traditional and Western ontologies.[5] They are formed by incompatible apparatuses whose conflicting production of difference destabilizes the Nigerian family and nation.[6] Ben describes the contest between the two apparatuses in chapter two. He explains, before colonialism, the river was a source of life. Inhabitants "once believed [it] to be a god" to which they "erected shrines" and sought "intercession and guidance" from "the spirits and gods that dwelt in water bodies" (15). They also drew drinking water and fished from its banks. Colonialism and Christianity transformed it into a source of evil and death. After "the colonists came from Europe, and introduced the Bible," he says, the inhabitants viewed it as an "evil place" and largely avoided it (15). Again, recalling the Jungian grandmother archetype, Ben compares Omi-ala to "a mother abandoned by her children" (15). However, the success of Western ontology was not total. As Ben explains, "crumbs and pieces of the African traditional religion had eluded the broom" (194). Representing the contest within the nation-state between the ontologies, the river embodies two incompatible hierarchies of being and triggers characters' feelings of trauma from the colonial period when they lost or "abandoned" it to Western ontology.

Abulu has a similar effect and is largely an extension of Omi-ala. Ben highlights the ontological confusion Abulu creates when he describes his "two kinds" of insanity (92). He calls the first, "regular or ordinary madness," a Western understanding in which he does "all the things

that stray derelicts do," like defecate in public spaces and talk to "invisible people" in strange languages (92). From this perspective, he is the excluded Other because he has lost his mind and lives in his own hallucinations. The other kind of insanity Ben describes from more of a traditional perspective as "extraordinary . . . as if he were a mediator between two domains" (94). In this state, Ben calls him "Abulu the Prophet" in which he resembles figures from traditional religion, such as an Osu, an outcast who belongs to the gods, or Eshu, a Yoruba Orisha and trickster figure who delivers prophecies to humans (94).[7] In this context, he lives on the border between the human world and the spirit world. Paulina, their mother, ties Abulu to Omi-ala when she learns he died on its banks. She declares to Ben, "'You see, it was my God that kept you safe when you were going to that place every evening to fish. . . . That river is such a place of evil and horror. Imagine the body of that evil man lying there?'" (259). She reenacts the Western material-discursive practices that differentiates her Christian god from Omi-ala and associates Abulu the madman/prophet with it. They both are the excluded Other that destabilizes the apparatuses that form the post-independence ontologies of their family and the nation.[8]

As a liminal figure, the presence of the river is a reminder of the traditional ontology that destabilizes the boys' Western conception of the world to which they respond by forming new categories of difference and fixing their identities as fishermen to stabilize it. Their efforts to stabilize their world, however, rely on violence like those enacted by the British, the Nigerian government, and their father. Only upon reflection, when he has children of his own, is Ben able to recognize the violence that once defined his life as a symptom of the unresolved trauma of patriarchy, colonialism, and national strife that shaped the traumatic ecosystems into which he was born. The novel, his story, is an attempt to draw readers' attention to the cycles of violence, to create new identities through different material-discursive practices, and to envision

nondominant modes of living.[9] Thus, for readers, the novel and, by extension, the river participate with us in the posthuman performance of the Nigerian nation-state. In the next section, I will sketch the novel's post-independence traumatic ecosystem to which the river is central and demonstrate how the brothers' identities emerge from its role in the family and nation.

Post-Independence Traumatic Ecosystems

In 2023, Obioma, who is also implicated in these performances, now living in the United States, posted a few photos of the river that readers had sent him to his *Instagram* page. On an overcast day, with powerlines and hints of industry, in one photo, tangles of sagging *esan* grass overhang what looks like a shallow, muddy stream. In another, powerlines run parallel to a nearly submerged low water bridge. Clumps of organic matter extend from the grassy banks into the lazy current. Tiled roofs and cell towers rise in the distance. Obioma laments, "Omi-ala, the river that appears in my first novel, is today almost entirely gone. . . . the one in the neighborhood where I grew up now filled with dirt and mud." On *Google Maps*, the river is almost invisible in the sprawl of the city. With Obioma's commentary, the images of the material river speak to socio-cultural change and his feelings of nostalgia and loss. With the disappearing river, Obioma is losing the childhood identity he performed with it within his affective ecosystem.

These representations stand in stark contrast to the prominence Ben, the narrator, gives the river in the rudimentary drawing of the city that appears fixed in time on the page before the novel's title page.[10] The map reflects the truncated world of the mapmaker's childhood memory. It divides the state capital into a few streets and neighborhoods connected only by two bridges with the "Open Market" and "mother's shop" on the eastern edge and the "Hills" and "Lime Trees" at the Western edge. On the north side, an "Assemblies of God" stands furthest from the

river, and then “Milo Cinema” and “Our House.” A “Celestial Church,” a syncretic religion, abuts the river near the “Fishing Spot.” On the south side is a “Mosque” and “Nkem’s Kindergarten.” This map of memory seems to capture Akure in time and space with what the narrator, Ben, who is now thirty years old, calls, “the mind’s fish hook,” which hints at the violence of fixing time and space (152). Like the utopic image of ‘Africa,’ the map enables the mapmaker and readers to imagine a stable and harmonious existence that offers security and safety to the family and symbolically the nation.

Instead, the map represents a posthuman performance of Akure, arising with the river. The city landmarks rather than implying stability evince change. They represent the topological present in which past presents and ontologies are enfolded into the time of the memory map. The church, the cinema, and the kindergarten are colonial and post-independence imports. The mosque suggests influence from northern Nigeria, once part of the nineteenth century Sokoto Caliphate. The Celestial Church represents a syncretic Christian-traditional spirituality in which the river remains a deity. The river’s name, Omi-ala, Yoruba for ‘dream water,’ invokes that autochthonic past. Another possible translation, depending on the accent marks, is ‘boundary water.’ It describes the river’s multivalent agencies, occupying material, socio-cultural, and spiritual worlds (Courtois 5). Cutting across these onto-epistemological boundaries is the fishing spot, the hydrosocial relation Ben most remembers, a relation the water and local inhabitants have maintained since time immemorial (Obioma 13).

Like the Niger Delta, the map also hints at the post-independence traumatic ecosystem into which the narrator and his brothers, Ikenna, Boja, and Obembe, were born. By now, the history is familiar in which African nation-states were left to sort out the incomplete and flawed maps the colonial governments imposed on them that drew borders and established identities and

differences that overwrote earlier ones or imposed them where there were none before. Ontological instability accompanied geographical and socio-cultural changes. In Simon Gikandi's words, "colonialism posited the project of modernity as both an apparatus of transforming African societies and the rationale for the radical and painful transformation of the traditional" (7). For Africans, the imposition of European thought created "both a conjuncture and a disjuncture of desire and loss" (8). Put differently, the introduction of Western ontology into traditional cultures destabilized them and eroded their practices, which elicited suffering and trauma around those losses. Colonial and post-independence African societies emerged in a performance in which some Africans became enchanted with Western culture and became disenchanted with older local apparatuses. The African nation-state was formed around these conflicting ontologies, identities, and feelings created by the irrevocable hegemonic colonial and post-independence performances. According to Gikandi and others, this ontological instability led to the "African crisis" in which the colonial institutions of nation and state collapsed into a "post-independence catastrophe" (14).[11] The socio-economic infrastructure that the colonial states imposed on the nations they created to usher Africans into Western culture quickly collapsed after independence.

Kwame Anthony Appiah *In My Father's House* (1992) briefly describes this process in Nigeria. When the British established the central government, they situated it in the north among the Hausa-Fulani ethnic groups because of their preexisting political structure. This divided the state into a Muslim North and a Christian-Animist South and consolidated diverse ethnic groups into the three primary political identities—Hausa, Yoruba, and Igbo (177). The formation of the Igbo identity led to attacks on them in the north and feelings of political disempowerment. Their ongoing oppression pushed the Igbo to take control of the country's oil-rich southeast and form

their own country, Biafra. The Yoruba joined the Hausa to preserve the integrity of the country and fought to reclaim the south. The British supplied weapons to Nigeria in hope of maintaining their access to cheap oil, and the French supplied Biafra with weapons for similar reasons. The Civil War ended when Nigerian forces blockaded Biafran ports and forced famine on the Igbo and other ethnic groups in the region, including the Ogoni. According to Appiah, the three primary identities and their stereotypical religious and regional affiliations were the product of modern colonial governance and did not reflect the composition of the state. For example, General Yakubu Gowon who led the Nigerian Army from the Muslim North was Christian. Instead, Appiah suggests, they became real because Nigerians believed in them (178). In the language of posthuman performativity, the political identities at stake during the Nigerian Civil War emerged from iterative colonial material-discursive practices that suppressed traditional ontologies for modern ones and formed a new traumatic ecosystem, the Nigerian nation-state from which the Igbo felt the need to escape.

Obioma scatters fragments of these traumatic ecosystems that shape the boys throughout novel. Their parents, James and Paulina Agwu, both Igbo, form the traumatic ecosystem of the family. Trauma from colonialism and the Nigerian Civil War shapes the apparatuses that divide the world for them. For example, James expresses his anger at the state of the country, "the marginalization of the Igbos . . . [and] the monster the British had created by forming Nigeria as a whole" (28). Later, Ben shares that their father often used the war to mark time, prefacing stories with "'before the war'" (116) and "'after the war'" (117). When scolding his children for their laziness, he often related how he had to care for his mother and sisters as a ten-year-old when they fled to the forest to escape the Nigerian Army. Throughout their childhoods, he also told stories of General Yakubu Gowon, whom he "accused of bombing our village several times"

and called, "'the greatest enemy of Nigeria'," such that they too learned to hate him (213). From these experiences, James finds safety through his position at the Nigerian Central Bank and financial security, which inspires the "map of dreams" he imagines for his sons.[12] After Ikenna's and Boja's deaths, Ben describes his mother who loses her mind because she is haunted in her hospital bed by her father who died on the front in 1969 during the Civil War. Trauma from the war even infects Ben's dreams. One night, he finds himself and his brothers in their village, "Amano, near Umuahia," next to a river where they are playing soccer, where Boja kicks the ball onto a footbridge that was constructed by Biafran solders to provide a second route across the river in case Nigerian soldiers invaded (56). Ikenna retrieves the ball, but the bridge collapses beneath him, and he falls into the chasm below. James' will for his sons is shaped by his own success. Despite their spatio-temporal distance from it, the Igbo trauma from the Nigerian Civil War is an apparatus that forms the boys' identities and their relations to the world within the family.

Fragments of the post-independence traumatic ecosystem that contribute to the performance of nation also appear in Akure. Ben mentions in passing and in detail the violence they heard about or encountered locally. One of their neighbors, Mama Iyabo, is the widow of a man who died in Sierra Leone, fighting for African Union forces. Ben also remembers a story their mother told them of mob justice when a robber was necklaced in town. Ben admits, "the image of a man on fire stayed in my memory" (28). It represents a threat to his personal feelings of safety and security in the city. In addition to being capital of the Ondo State, Akure is a site of national political violence that textured the emotional lives of their childhoods. In spite of their Igbo heritage, the boys primarily identify with Yoruba culture. Yoruba is the only language they speak fluently, and consequently, they latch onto Yoruba politics. Prior to the 1993 elections,

they attended a rally for Yoruba presidential candidate for the Social Democratic Party, M.K.O. Abiola. They drew his attention by adapting and singing a church song, replacing 'God' with 'M.K.O.' for which they were rewarded a picture with him, a M.K.O. calendar, and scholarships. Ben explains, "in that calendar was a strong hope for the future, for we'd believed we were children of Hope '93, M.K.O. allies" (74). After the 1993 elections, Hausa military ruler Ibrahim Badamasi Babangida nullified the results of the country's first democratic election since the 1983 coup that would have awarded the presidency to M.K.O. Abiola.

While the boys were in school, riots broke out in Akure between northerners, whom Ben explains were easy to identify because they wore "a long, flowing Senegalese robe" and Abiola supporters (120). The brothers gathered outside their school, and they proceeded through the city to their dad's office. Ikenna, Ben remembers, was afraid they would be recognized as "'M.K.O.'s boys'" (118). The trek across the city, Ben recalls, traumatized him. "Every gripping detail of the riot" in which 100 people were killed, he says, "filled me with a concrete fear of death" (119). Trauma from the riot followed them throughout their lives. Every year on the anniversary of the riot, Ben relates, people awoke from nightmares, "sodden with anxiety, hearts pulsating with fear, heads drooping with the memory of loss, eyes dripping with tears, lips gyrating in solemn prayers, and bodies trembling with fright" (121). Further in the background of the novel, Ben mentions the "biting economy of 1990s Nigeria" as well as an increase in fuel prices (25). Later, he describes the violence in the Niger Delta he witnesses on television: "a scene of fire, frantic pandemonium, and then blackened bodies in different shades of cremation, lying about in a scorched field where black smoke was rising" (231). Unknown to them, the Agwu boys are born into traumatic ecosystems, topological spacetimes in which they are enfolded into the open

wounds that emerged from colonial and post-independence violence, that implicate them as actors in the violent posthuman performances of family and nation.

Like the rivers that form the Niger Delta, the Omi-ala is also an actor in these traumatic ecosystems. Unlike the post-independence socio-political actors, however, it embodies what was excluded from Nigeria during the colonial incursions of Western ontology that Gikandi explains occurred across Africa. As such, its presence destabilizes characters' attempts to capture and stabilize their post-independence maps of family and nation. In this role, it houses everything that is physically repulsive, the unconscious of the nation itself. Floating on the water, Ben observes, a "nauseating sight of algae and leaves" that collected and "formed the shape of a map of troubled nations" (14). In Ben's mind, the sight seems to symbolize the violent creation of nation in which the living algae exists in proximity to the dead leaves who have not been fully mourned or integrated into the national consciousness. The sight, for him, triggers a bodily response because it recalls these open wounds, the generational trauma, that remain in the present iteration of nation. Like the traumatic memories of the past, residents further marginalize the river to remove it from their lives. As Ben explains, it became "the source of dark rumors," especially those of pagan rituals and their detritus of "corpses, animal carcasses, and other ritualistic materials" (15). Compounding these rumors, he recalls that in 1995, authorities also found "the mutilated body of a woman" floating in it in response to which the town council issued a curfew, closing it over night (16). Repeated unsettling incidents further tainted the river in residents' minds such that the "mere mention of it triggered disdain" (16). In excluding the river, however, the residents are also marginalizing their traditional heritage and reiterating the colonial violence because of which they originally "abandoned" their "mother." Buried in the residents' "disdain," Ben implies, are also feelings of shame and guilt over their abandonment of

it. To assuage them, they further demonize the traditional ontology and uplift their Western present and future in order to justify the deaths left in the wake of the war for the Nigerian nation-state. Simply, they spiritually bypass their trauma by cleaving to Western education and Christianity.

Becoming Fishermen

Consequently, after their father's departure, like the British after independence, when the brothers step outside their family's traumatic ecosystem, they are largely unaware of how other apparatuses create difference in Akure's posthuman performance. Their father's map of dreams, like the one at the beginning of the novel, creates a world in which they are forced to believe without question. In his absence, Ben explains, "we shelved our books and set out to explore the sacred world outside the one we were used to" (8). What they find, however, is that they are not welcome everywhere because of the material-discursive practices that shape the traumatic ecosystem, and they apply the violent patriarchal model they learned from their father to establish a place for themselves.[13] Before visiting the river, they try to join a group of neighborhood boys playing soccer, but the games quickly degrade into fights because of post-independence class differences. The other boys bully them because their father "was a rich man who worked in the Central Bank of Nigeria" and they are "privileged kids" (8). Eventually, the insults become too much, and Ikenna attacks one of the other boys but lost the fight. When they try to form their own soccer games, they are restrained by others' private property. Ben describes how they repeatedly cycle through balls as a result of kicking them into neighbors' houses where "the ball had either hit someone or destroyed something," and neighbors deflate them (10). In one attempt to retrieve a ball, Ben remembers, a doctor "gave chase, sending us all running ankle-to-head to escape" (11). Even though they "broke free" from their father's rule and the

walls of their house, they discover that they are not free but only further constrained by post-independence socio-economic relations of difference against which they must fight to create space for themselves (8).

Chased from public spaces, they seek a place for themselves near a forbidden one, the Omi-ala river, where they attempt to stabilize their world by fixing an identity for themselves as fishermen. Like a Jungian grandmother, the river steps in at the death of the false father to stem the existential crisis. In this role, she represents "the other side of the presence of the father": "the universe of goddesses and gods . . . who can within herself reunite positive knowledge (wisdom) and negative knowledge (sorcery). She would incarnate all the formulas of power and their fabulous and mysterious virtues" (Mudimbe 197). She offers her grandchildren "under the sign of play, the materialization of a smooth continuity" (197). In other words, the river, like the grandmother, provides solid ground for the boys after the crisis of losing their father to his remote job. Omi-ala, however, gathers the traditional, feminine authority that James has excluded from his patriarchal, Western "map of dreams" and challenges these apparatuses as they chart their own path with the river. Ben describes their trek to the river like a European travel narrative through Africa, a "long tortuous path," in which they travel back in time to conquer a traditional past (12). They traverse an empty lot behind their house that "stank in the rainy season and served as a home for a clan of swine" (12). Once they reach the river, they trek through "schools of prickly dead nettles that flogged our bare legs and legs and left white welts on our skin" whose Yoruba name, "*esan,"* means "retribution or vengeance" (13). After they escape that tribulation, Ben says, they run "to the river like madmen," like European explorers who lost their minds during the trek, where they "would change into their dirty fishing clothes" and "fished like men of yore who'd known the river from its cradle" (13). In their minds, they are braving the

hostile environment, traveling back in time to connect with their progenitors who harvested fish from the river.

Free of their father's whip, like the post-independence Nigerian nation-state, they develop their own ontology and material-discursive practices to form their own hydrosocial relations with the river and "became fishermen" (11). While their initial reasons for fishing were pragmatic—they hoped to replace their pet fish that had died and catch fish to sell in the market—they start to identify themselves with the profession and develop rituals around it like a religion. Similar to clergy, they carry "wooden staffs" tipped with "hooked fishing lines" that they use "to lure fish and trap them" (12). They stabilize their world like their father did by enacting violence on the fish and assuming the power over life and death. Rather than a simple pastime, their fishing trips become an obsession, something they would discuss together long into the night. To develop rituals around their profession, they create their own song, "the fishermen song," which they ironically adapt from a "Christian soap" that included "lyrics . . . from nearly every one of us" (16). The lyrics demonstrate this posthuman performance that emerges with the river: they become fishermen because they catch fish, and they catch fish because they are fishermen. In addition, the song stabilizes their relations and shared identity because they all individually contribute to it. The last two lines outline their violent iterative practice: "We, the fishermen, / have caught you, you can't escape!" (17). In the hydrosocial cycle, they need the river and the fish to differentiate themselves as fishermen. Similarly, the occasions for singing it create shared events and reinforce the differences between themselves and others. Ben recalls that they sang it "at peak moments, such as a fish's death spiral," adrenaline-filled moments in which they held the power of life and death over the fish (16). They also sing the song at home and at school where it denotes the secret and illicit lives they shared. Excluded from the post-independence

performance of the city, the river and the boys enter a hydrosocial relationship in which they both emerge with new identities. Newly adopted, the river is no longer a source of evil but the center of the boys' world, a site of feverish sport where they become fishermen by preying on the fish it sustains and reclaim the power they lost first to their father and then to other boys on the soccer pitch.

Like the Nigerian nation-state, they remain in sole possession of their shared identity only for a short time. Their identity is destabilized by other 'false fathers' who try to exorcise the river, the grandmother figure, from it and impose the power of life and death over them. Like on the soccer pitch, these new performances form new iterations of their fishermen identity through which they apply differentiating apparatuses to regain their positions on the ontological hierarchy.[14] These violent posthuman performances perpetuate the traumatic ecosystems of family and nation. Not long after they adopted the song, they are confronted by an old priest from the Celestial Church who complains that their performance disrupts their worship at the river. He scolds them for having no "'respect for God'," blames it on their generation, and encourages them to go home. Before leaving, he warns them, "'Whether you leave or not, do not raise your voices like that again'" (18). The priest in his admonishment attempts to harness the authority of a father figure to dismiss their performance as play and to silence them. He echoes their own father who believes the children's place is at home, studying. The brothers, however, refuse to bow to this false father's authority. Instead, they channel the patriarchal, Western apparatuses they learn from their parents to diminish his authority. After he leaves, they laugh at his child-like appearance in the oversized white robe and his "fearful" (18) expression at the sight of their fish and tadpoles and compare him to a local "madwoman" (19). Their

characterization categorizes him with others excluded from social value, those below them on the ontological hierarchy of the traumatic ecosystem, to preserve their group identity as fishermen.

Eventually, their father learns of their exploits and returns to Akure to expel Omi-ala, reimpose his modern "map of dreams," and cast them as a new type of fisherman. Their mother is tipped off by Mama Iyabo, a widow and beneficiary of Paulina's munificence, who caught them returning from the river. She reported their adventures to Paulina who implored James to return and control them. Both mother and father characterize their efforts as fishermen with language that recalls European and British efforts to diminish Africans and their traditional cultures to justify the violence of colonization. Through her Christian lens, she attributes their behavior to "bad spirits that must be exorcised by strokes of the whip" (26). Their father, however, interprets their deviance as a threat to his fatherly privilege over their lives, his progeny. In trading their Western education for fishing, the brothers destabilize their father's vision for their futures and his legacy. Western education, he imagines, levels the hierarchy between Nigerians and the British, and between the Igbo and the Nigerian nation-state. Success, he seems to believe, would recuperate some of the power his family and the Igbo lost in the civil war. He exclaims, "'I sweat and suffer to send you to school to receive a *Western education* as civilized men, but you chose instead to be fishermen'" (33). His use of "civilized" differentiates their efforts at a traditional trade from the Western ones he decided on for them. He later reinforces these connotations by describing fishing in English as a "'barbaric endeavour'"(35). The words he chooses further deepens the cut between the traditional and Western ontologies. Calling fishing "barbaric" once again repurposes a colonial epithet to further denigrate the traditional occupation and culture. In addition, "endeavour," an English word which they do not understand, further emphasizes his superior command of the colonial language and the world. To

enforce his patriarchal judgement, much like colonial African regimes, he whips the river out of them, reminding them of his power over life and death, reenacting the posthuman performance of colonial Nigeria, and perpetuating the traumatic ecosystem.

The next morning, after their whipping, he reframes their identities as fishermen within his own modern terms. He tells them, "'What I want you to be is a group of fishermen who will be fishers of good dreams . . . juggernauts, menacing and unstoppable fishermen'" (37). Instead of material fish, he insists they hook the immaterial dreams he projects for their futures. Importantly, James does not expel their fisherman identities entirely but shapes them through his Western apparatus. Ironically, his attempt to fix their futures is as much a prophecy as Abulu's and predisposes Ikenna to accept its projection. Thus, the river, through its exclusion, remains a central actor against which he imposes his will. Similarly, to cement this identity, he teaches them "'an anthem'" to replace their "fishermen song," which repeats his demands that they dominate their futures (37). Although they accept their return to the Western path, they refuse their loss of power and seek retribution against Mama Iyabo for their beatings. When their father leaves again, they steal one of her roosters, decapitate it, and throw it back into her yard. Revenge, they imagine, once again allows them as "juggernauts, menacing and unstoppable fishermen" to feel power over life and death in their new identities and reestablish their position on an ontological hierarchy within their traumatic ecosystems.

Importantly, however, the posthuman performance of their new identity only further imbricates their hydrosocial relationships with the river, their grandmother, through its exclusion. Abulu, an extension of the river, destabilizes their new patriarchal, Western identities as fishermen and prompts them to adopt a new iteration—literal 'fishers of men.' His prophecy—that Ikenna will die at the hand of a fishermen—brings to the surface the contradictions between

traditional and Western ontologies and imposes an "unquestionable inescapability," or a new map of the future, that divided the family and the nation-state (114). Ikenna evinces this division in his simultaneous belief in the prophecy and his attempts to renounce the traditional metaphysics that empower it. Ben describes the contradiction as "the thing that was consuming Ikenna . . . like a tireless enemy, hiding inside him" (47). Following Boja's relaying of Abulu's prophecy, the fisherman identity that Ikenna once celebrated becomes a threat: his brothers are now his potential murders. The prophecy steals from him his feeling of control over his life. To guard against their perceived threat, he destroys the relations that tied himself to them, but, in the process, also destroys the self that those relations formed.[15] Even before their father's intervention, after Abulu's prophecy, Ikenna decides that he is no longer a fisherman. One day, he abandons his brothers and friends at the river, explaining, "'I want to go study. I'm a student, not a fisherman'" (19). In his declaration, Ikenna reenacts the ontological cut between the traditional ontology in which the river traversed the spiritual and material worlds, the origins of the power of Abulu's prophecy, and the Western ontology in which he is a "student" who denies such relations. He seems to believe that establishing distance between himself and that ontology would protect him from the power of prophecy.

Later, in novel, he distances himself further from the family when he graduates from being a student to a scientist. After refusing to attend church, he tells his shocked mother, "'I'm a scientist, I no longer believe there's a God'" (111). No longer simply a student, an identity his family encouraged, as a scientist, Ikenna fully embraces his commitment to Western ontology by renouncing the spiritual world. The decision, however, effectively removes him from his family. After recovering from her shock, his mother states, "one thing Eme and I cannot take, and will never accept, is an atheist of a child. Never!'" (111). Although Ikenna is cowed by his mother's

threat to whip and refuse to feed him, he crosses the boundaries of family to isolate himself from any vestige of spirituality and protect himself from the prophecy. In identifying himself as a scientist, he also differentiates himself from his cultural heritage. As Ben explains, Ikenna used the English word "scientist" because "there was no Igbo word for it" (111). To stabilize his world, he rejects his culture and selects a proximal identity that does not traditionally exist within it to distance himself from the river and his family. Without his father, he becomes his own 'false father' to impose a new map on his own future.

This new identity, however, only further entangles him in the traumatic ecosystem's ontological trap where the supernatural becomes the foundation of his scientific methods for measuring reality. For example, when Boja attempts to convince him that Abulu's prophecy was could not happen, Ikenna demands from him, "'What is your proof? Eh, what is your proof?'" (114). These questions, however, are impossible for Boja to answer. He cannot provide proof of the falsity of a prophecy or of a future that has not arrived. Instead, all he and his brothers can offer Ikenna are assurances of their love, which prove ineffectual because Ikenna is already convinced one of them would betray him. Instead, he reinterprets events in their shared past as waypoints on the map of the future that the prophecy envisions. Ben explains, "As if to dare the prophecy to come true Ikenna began to do all he could to harm us" (116). Embracing his patriarchal role, he turns to violence, both emotional and physical, to further exclude his brothers and the river from his identity, which eventually culminates in a civil war, alluding to the nation itself, between Boja and Ikenna and the realization of Abulu's prophecy. The patriarchal and Western apparatuses that Ikenna employs to differentiate himself from his brothers and their imbrication with the river reiterate the violence of colonialism and his father's "map of dreams" in the posthuman performances of family and nation-state.

With this outcome, the novel raises questions of causality: Was the familial violence the result of Abulu's prophecy? Or, was it internally inspired?[16] Was the Nigerian Civil War the result of British colonialism? Or was it the result of national dysfunction and power struggles? The remaining fishermen, Ben and Obembe, and their parents conclude the former and blame Abulu. As a result, Ben and Obembe become 'fishers of men' and assault Abulu on the banks of the Omi-ala with fishhooks where he succumbs to his wounds and, in death, returns to his mother. I would argue, however, that the questions of blame entwine readers in the same trap of attempting to fix a fluid reality, to stabilize an unstable world, to which Ikenna fell victim. Instead, the conclusion of the novel challenges the post-independence traumatic ecosystem, itself, one which pits the tradition against the Western present. Only during his trial did Ben recognize and imagine how to interrupt the violence of these posthuman performances. On the stand, Ben's mind drifts back to the river where he is "thinking of how the fish in Omi-ala swam and how they were suspended and held up against the currents" (280). The currents, Ben seems to imagine, represent the traditional and Western ontologies that compose the traumatic ecosystem in which they live. Notably, however, the fish do not fight against them nor attempt to impede them. Instead, they stabilize themselves by resting against their changing forces and movement. In another scene, the novel builds on this image of equanimity. On his return from prison, Ben also witnesses a different way to fish. As they drive over the bridge crossing the river, he sees a fisherman in a boat. Rather than hooks, however, he is using a "fishnet," which allows the river to flow while it gathers its contents. It represents a discerning method that allows the fisherman to take the size of fish he desires and let others escape, and if he catches more than he needs, he can release them without harm. The images suggest yet another way to be

"fishermen": the possibility of a nonhierarchical, nonviolent existence among the different ontologies and people that compose the Nigerian nation-state.

Oil on Water

Characters in and readers of Helon Habila's *Oil on Water* are entrapped in a similar contest to fix the fluid ontological reality of the Niger Delta and assuage their feelings of powerlessness in the face of its destruction. Habila and the novel, arising from the Niger Delta and Nigerian nation-state traumatic ecosystems, are significance contributors to the posthuman performances that inspired President Tinubu's recent pardons of the Ogoni nine. Habila extends Obioma's representation of the local and national posthuman performance of the Nigerian nation-state to the global capitalist traumatic ecosystem that shapes the Nigerian media and publishing industries' portrayals of the Niger Delta oil encounter and reiterates these petro-colonial hegemonic relations. Unlike *The Fishermen*, however, the contest in *Oil on Water* is not strictly between traditional and Western ontologies but what Rob Nixon calls "ecologies of looking" at the Delta (155). These apparatuses describe the interplay between ways of seeing and being seen within a natural environment that fix a particular ontological reality of the environment being seen.[17] In *Slow Violence and Environmentalism of the Poor* (2011), Nixon uses the South African game lodge as an example. A white South African enterprise, game lodge owners stage 'Wild Africa' experiences for their largely American clientele that erase indigenous South Africans who live on the savannas and human development from the natural spaces and replace them with megafauna that satisfy their clientele's expectations of 'Africa.' It describes a recursive cycle: capitalist "ecologies of looking" ship the 'wild' images of post-Apartheid South Africa across the ocean where media representations shape Western audiences' ideas about 'Wild Africa' and inspire tourists who desire to experience its wildness, which game lodge owners

perform. Translated into Barad's theory, the game lodge emerges through the reiteration of material-discursive practices of apartheid and globalization that excise Black South Africans from representations of 'Wild Africa' that become the reality of the game lodge. As Nixon suggests, the exclusion of Black South Africans from or absorption of them into these representations of 'Wild Africa' are violent acts with potentially traumatic consequences for those living in the natural spaces. These hegemonic ecologies of looking are the apparatuses from which the game lodge emerges as a traumatic ecosystem.

Not unlike the lodge owners who perform 'Wild Africa' for Western tourists, in *Oil on Water*, Habila portrays the violence of his characters' "ecologies of looking," or their attempts to 'fix' the riverine environment, in their performance of the Niger Delta oil encounter.[18] Instead of nature tourism, his target is the influence of the international media and the global publishing industries on the portrayal of Niger Delta and of Africa, more broadly. In "The Rediscovery of the Ordinary," Njabulo Ndebele describes these influences within the South African publishing industry. He argues South African writers feel pressure to perform 'Africa' for the expectations of their often white, international audiences who are enticed by "the spectacular," violent images of South Africa's apartheid system. The pressure to perform, Ndebele argues, produces what he calls, "literature of the powerless" (150). It depicts Manichean violence of the white political system that oppresses Black lives, to implicate its white audience in the violence; however, it simultaneously erases "the ordinary" of Black society that demonstrates the possibilities for a new South Africa (149).[19] Consequently, "the spectacular," Ndebele argues, can only show the oppressors to themselves and imprints on readers' minds the "contest between the powerless and powerful," but this contest more often "ends in horror and tragedy for the powerless" (147).[20] Like the game lodge, in the language of posthuman performance, it fixes a fluid reality of South

Africa, one that Western audiences consume and come to recognize and demand. In doing so, it reiterates the white nationalist material-discursive practices that originally excluded Black South Africans from the performance of South Africa and shaped the nation's traumatic ecosystem.

Habila himself has written about this dynamic in his experience of the global publishing industry. In his review of NoViolet Bulawayo's *We Need New Names*, he raises the question of whether the Caine prize for African Writing, established in the UK in 2000, has "created an African aesthetic of suffering." Habila has in mind a discussion from a Caine prize seminar where a panelist shared concerns about whether new African writers were "performing 'Africa' for the world." The panelist recounted *CNN*-styled images of Africa that normalize the continent for the Global North as the locus of unimaginable violence—"child soldiers, genocide, child prostitution, female genital mutilation, political violence, police brutality, dictatorships, predatory preachers, dead bodies on the roadside"—and, in the process, create a demand from agents, publishers, and readers in the Global North for literature that reflects those images. Habila describes it as "an incestuous business": prize judges and publishers select prize-winning fiction that begets successful imitators who beget a prize aesthetic. It forces African writers to both perform the global image of 'Africa' and interpret it for their readers, which undermines what Habila describes as the purpose of literature—"to transport us beyond the headlines." In other words, the impetus to perform impedes the ability of writers to supplement the stylized *CNN* narratives of Africa with more nuanced representations and, returning to Barad, these stylized narratives shape the reality they depict.[21] They perform 'Africa' much like the Agwu boys perform their "fishermen" identities, which has material effects.

Habila, I argue, depicts how Rufus is incentivized by the global media and publishing industry to feed his readers "the spectacular images" of the Niger Delta encounter with which

they are familiar and to withhold "the ordinary" images to sell his story. More specifically, in the novel, he portrays the "incestuous business" and employs Rufus to demonstrate how it functions in the media and publishing landscape of the Niger Delta oil encounter. "The spectacular" detective story and "the ordinary" trauma narrative form surface and bottom currents, literally and figuratively, in Rufus's narrative that reflect the material-discursive practices of the global publishing industry's traumatic ecosystem. [22] Reflecting the image of oil on water in the title, in his narrative, the male, Western dominance over the spectacle of the Delta oil encounter hides the ordinary indigenous and female inhabitants of the region; the spectacle of regional violence obscures the ordinary suffering of trauma; and the spectacle of the oil, the dead matter on the surface, covers the ordinary water and the life it sustains. The inequal attention he gives to the ordinary—the indigenous inhabitants, women, trauma, and water—reflects how the global publishing industry has shaped his perception of his readerships' desires for the spectacular and contributes to the posthuman performance of the Niger Delta traumatic ecosystem.

To preview this dynamic, I will provide a quick synopsis of the novel. In the spectacular detective story, Rufus, a budding journalist, and his protégé, Zaq, travel through a Manichean Niger Delta on an assignment to locate Isabel Floode, the wife of a British oil engineer, who has been kidnapped for ransom by local militants and "to report the truth" (81). Along the way, Rufus braves "the spectacular" violence of the Delta environment to interview male characters from each of the well-known stakeholders of the Delta oil encounter—a rogue army Major, freedom fighters, militants, an animist priest, and James Floode the oil engineer—whom he allows to pontificate their contradictory truths—to assert their power to fix the reality of the tragic spectacle—for his prospective readers. In the trauma narrative, Rufus also mentions the ordinary patriarchal violence that reveals the guilt he feels for being the "lucky boy" (19). As the

first-born male, his father provided him educational opportunities that his older sister, Boma, did not receive. As a result, he was away from home when his father's errant cigarette ignited fumes in the barn where he kept the black-market oil he purchased from children for resale. The explosion destroyed the family home and maimed his sister's face, leaving the burn scars across half of it, a symbol of post-civil war Nigeria, a mark which ruined her marriage (19). In addition, he occasionally describes the polluted Delta waterways and insinuates that they are the reason his indigenous guide, Tamuno, and his grandchildren, Michael and Alali, must flee as refugees from their home.

The two currents only meet at the conclusion where he directs the posthuman performance of the Niger Delta oil encounter. In mapping the Delta landscape high upon the hill, Rufus leans heavily on the posthuman spectacular to reproduce and market the utopic and dystopic representations of the Delta. On one side, Boma and his friends are living safely in the traditional culture of the unpolluted Irikefe Island. On the other, Rufus observes, "the flares were still sending up smoke" on the horizon (238). He has evacuated all but the military and militants from this cyborg Delta environment. Furthermore, Rufus augments this relatively quiet scene with speculative violence, a strategy he uses throughout the novel. In place of smoke from the flares, he imagines for readers a totalizing, frenetic vision of ecocide, resulting from the Professor's, the militant leader's, planned attack on a refinery. The key is to recognize that Rufus is conjuring these images from his imagination and not from what he has witnessed. "Somewhere on the river," he suggests, "cliffs of smoke and giant escarpments of orange fire rising into the atmosphere, and thousands of gallons of oil floating on the water, the weight of the oil tight like a hangman's noose around the neck of whatever life-form lay underneath" (238). In the absence of actual violence, Rufus colors in the spectacular, environmental tropes readers

expect from images of the Delta oil encounter that trigger and reinforce a further trope about dystopic 'Africa.' In addition, Rufus employs exaggerated similes of the *CNN* aesthetic, such as "tight like a hangman's noose," that work to naturalize petroviolence as a feature of the landscape itself. The smoke and fire acquire the permanent qualities of "cliffs" and "escarpments." His way of looking are agential cuts that attempt to fix reality and control the posthuman performance for his readers. What I suggest, then, is that in the final scene, Rufus is staring back at us, waiting for us to perform our commodifying and globalizing roles. In this moment, one of several trickster moments, Habila highlights the ordinary hidden underneath the spectacular to challenge us readers who bring our own material-discursive practices to the novel to reflect on how our consumer expectations for the representation of H2O contribute to the Niger Delta traumatic ecosystem.

Ecologies of Looking in *Oil on Water*

The critical responses to the novel have demonstrated Ndebele's thesis about the role of the spectacular in shaping African writers and Western readers. Since its publication, Habila's *Oil on Water* has garnered considerable attention from ecocritics who enthusiastically categorize it within the emerging genre of petrofiction. Elizabeth Carolyn Miller writes that "it gets name-checked, if not discussed, in almost all contemporary criticism of petrofiction and it has generated a lot of scholarship engaged with petroculture" (63). These critics tend to conflate Habila with Rufus and accept Rufus's portray of the Niger Delta oil encounter without questioning whether it represents the whole picture.[23] The "spectacular," after all, serves well-intentioned activists' purposes, as well, and often without consideration for the ordinariness and lives it leaves out. Consequently, they miss or dismiss the hints Habila drops about how Rufus and those in his account perform their expectations of the Niger Delta oil encounter. The

situation echoes one of Cajetan Iheka's observations about the limits of witnessing: "that oil itself is a medium linking people and places. It is the mediating object between oil companies and oil communities; between governments and oil companies; but also between governments and host communities" (*African Ecomedia* 140). More generally, 'the environment,' as Leerom Medovoi has argued, is an apparatus that "serve[s] to reproduce the capitalist mode of production" ("The Biopolitical Unconscious" 86). Consequently, ecocritics must interrogate the relations that produce the representations of the environment rather than reproducing the images those relations create. This means analyzing genre, character, and plot as well as setting to understand how 'environment' contributes to the power relations in the novel.

Thus, instead of discussing how the novel contributes to petrofiction, I will show how Habila represents the imbalance of power in the global media and publishing industry that Ndebele and Habila bemoan contribute to the traumatic ecosystem that influences Rufus's posthuman performance of the Niger Delta oil encounter. Despite its prominence in the title, Rufus pays scant attention, only a few scenes, to ordinary water. It only catches his attention when it contributes to the spectacular—serving as an environmental foe in his detective story and a symbol for guilt in his trauma narrative—distracting from the ordinary fact that he cannot swim. Consequently, its agential role in the posthuman performance of the global media and publishing industry traumatic ecosystem is largely hidden within the performances of the human characters. Because of this, I will close-read a few scenes from the novel to show how Habila includes ordinary moments and metatextual commentary to draw readers' attention to Rufus's and other male characters' self-awareness of their efforts to perform "the spectacular"—familiar imaginaries of the fluid Niger Delta oil encounter—for their audiences before showing how water is implicated in this traumatic ecosystem. Much like James Agwu, the father in *The*

Fishermen, and his "map of dreams," these players perform the 'god-trick' and impose their patriarchal way of looking on Others, including water, to compensate for feelings of powerlessness that arose from personal trauma. In his narrative, Rufus documents his and others' performances that construct for his Western readers the "ecologies of looking" that mirror their Manichean expectations of the Niger Delta oil encounter. Through the ordinary moments and metatextual commentary, Habila is tipping off readers to how Rufus's narrative—his material-discursive practices—adds to the dusty shelves of "literature of the powerless" and contributes to the "incestuous business," the posthuman performance of the global media and publishing industry, that maintains the hierarchical apparatuses of the traumatic ecosystem. By exposing this "incestuous business," Habila hopes Western readers might reflect on their entanglement in the Niger Delta oil encounter and consider how they might change it.

Reminiscent of the South African game lodge, in the opening scene, Rufus explains how he adds the spectacular to the ordinary in his writing process to fix the 'reality' of the Niger Delta for readers. He draws on conventions of the trauma narrative to attune readers to the victim/expert relationship he wishes to establish with them. The postmodern structure of the narrative—the flashbacks, dreams, temporal shifts, and aporia—which disorients readers and would otherwise compromise the credibility of his witness, encodes symptoms of mental trauma. It situates readers as experts who can extract his story's greater meaning, which Rufus is too close to see. The first-person narration offers readers what seems like direct access to Rufus's traumatized mind. He admits,

> I am walking down a well-lit path, with incidents neatly labeled and dated, but when I reach halfway memory lets go of my hand, and a fog rises and covers the faces and places, and I am left clawing about in the dark, lost, and I have to make up the obscured

> moments as I go along, make up the faces and places, even the emotions. Sometimes, to keep on course, I have to return to more recognizable landmarks, and then, with this safety net under me, I can leap onto less certain terrain. (3)

He describes his search for a founding event, buried deep in his unconscious, as if it were a trek into the impenetrable Delta setting. The "path," he relates, disappears, and the "fog" closes around him, leaving him on "less certain terrain," "clawing" like an animal to orient himself. In the next paragraph, he confesses to readers the apparent founding event: "So, yes, there was an accident, a fire" (3). The event to which he is referring is one he wrote about in an article he published about the oil explosion that destroyed his family's home and sister's life. He seems to suggest this event is "the more recognizable landmark," a personal experience of trauma that attests to his qualifications to tell the current story and explains the gaps in his memory.

In the next paragraph, however, we learn that he was not present for the spectacular tragedy. Instead, he was attending journalism school at the time and did not learn about it until after he graduated. As a result, his motives for writing the novel become less clear and suggest an ambivalence toward the truth, indicated by his willingness to "make up the faces and places, even the emotions." He quickly confirms this in his admission that he embellished his family's tragedy in the newspaper article he wrote for his Western audience. "No," he confesses, "it was not a pipeline accident, as I told the white man, as I wrote in my published piece. But it might easily have been one, as in countless other villages" (3-4). What we learn later in the novel makes his truth even more suspect: His father caused the oil explosion. After he lost his job with an oil company, he traded in black-market oil that he purchased from children in the village, which he poorly stored in his barn and accidently ignited with a cigarette. In his narrative, Rufus leaves out the ordinary details, his family's role in the explosion, that challenge the Manichean

narrative, and replaces them with the spectacular, a *CNN*-style pipeline explosion, that reproduces the images of the Niger Delta oil encounter, one the "white man" expects. Rufus's performance of the spectacular and the ordinary in this opening scene to fix our image of it provides a model for the ecologies of looking that construct the Niger Delta for the reader's gaze.

Other male characters similarly perform their 'truths' about the Delta that Rufus reports for readers. They impose their ecologies of looking from opposite sides of the spectacular Manichean motif that leave both parties in possession of their realities as well as the hope that they might profit from their Western audience's gaze. Rufus outlines the mechanics of this performance when he tells the story of his classmate's, Max Tekana's, death from a botched extortion scheme:

> He had gone with six other reporters deep into the forest to interview five foreign hostages taken from their offices, in broad daylight, by masked gunmen. The kidnappers, eager for publicity, would usually invite a select team of reporters to their hideout to confirm that the hostages were alive and unharmed, after which they would make long speeches about the environment and their reasons for taking up arms against the oil companies and the government, and finally they'd send a ransom demand through one of the reporters. After a week or so, depending on how quickly negotiations went, the oil companies paid up and the hostages were set free, unharmed, each with his bagful of anecdotes. (54)

In Rufus's retelling, the kidnapping plot that the Western media depicts as lawlessness is actually a familiar performance in which all actors—the militants, the reporters, and even the hostages—benefit. As Rufus describes it, the militants receive ransom and publicity; the reporters get the scoop on an international story that will advance their careers; the hostages

receive attention and esteem for their harrowing experience in 'dark Africa.' If each performs his part, everyone leaves a little richer, and no one gets hurt.

Habila hints at this performance early in the novel when in their search for Isabel Floode, Rufus and Zaq are captured along with their guides, Tamuno and his grandson, Michael, in a military raid on a suspected rebel village. At the military encampment, Rufus continues to pursue information about Isabel Floode and encounters the Major, who parrots the government perspective on the oil encounter.[24] According to Doctor Dagogo-Mark, he was assigned to the encampment after he was court martialed for shooting a pastor's son who participated in the gang rape of his daughter. In response, the Doctor seems to imply, he exacts his rage on those he considers militants. When Rufus arrives, he witnesses the dramatic spectacle of the Major administering the daily morning petroleum shower to the rebels. The tension in the act, Doctor Dagogo-Mark explains, arises from the possibility that one day the Major might snap and burn the captives alive. However, the spectacle has become routine, and the performers lack the enthusiasm Rufus expects from their roles. Like actors who burn out, the spectacular performance has become ordinary. Rufus relates, the Major "berated" the rebels in a "surprisingly passionless voice" about their ambitions of "resource control" and to "terrorize innocent villages" (61). Additionally, Rufus notices the soldiers who are guarding the rebels "seemed to have forgotten to raise their guns and point them threateningly at the kneeling men" (59). He seems to believe they are failing in their roles to perform a key dramatic act—threatening their captives. At the same time, the rebels do not need the drama to perform theirs but are similarly uninspired by the routine. The mundanity of the spectacle undercuts the tension Rufus believes should be present in the scene.

Habila provides readers further evidence of the performance when Rufus follows the Major back to his ordinary "command shed" where he asks to interview the rebels (63). Notably, the Major seems to fall out of character and wink-and-nod to the shared performance of which they are a part. After telling the Major that he is a reporter, Rufus relates, "the anger left his face, to be replaced by a malevolent smirk. He put a hand on my shoulder" (63). His knowing facial expression and collegial touch seem to acknowledge the opportunity for a mutually beneficial relationship. With some skepticism, however, he asks Rufus a question he and others repeat in the novel, "'how can I be sure you are who you claim to be?'" (63).[25] For the Major, the question of trust is about whether he and Zaq are rebels. For the readers, the question pokes through the fourth wall and becomes one of story-telling integrity. Coincidentally, Rufus lost all his credentials and recording equipment when their boat capsized during the military raid, so he cannot prove his role to the Major. Moreover, it reminds the readers that he possesses nothing to document his experience of the Delta. Much like his previous story, he is relying on his foggy memory and must "make up obscured moments," which include those of the Niger Delta ecosystem that critics highlight.

This exchange sets the context for the Major's spectacular tirade about the oil encounter that ends the chapter. Eventually, the Major tires of Rufus's questions and orders him to deliver his press credentials or be treated like a rebel. When Rufus "insist[s]" on the release of his guides, the Major explodes with his Manichean version of the Delta that echoes government propaganda. He yells at Rufus,

> Insist? Did you say insist? Do you know what's going on out there? There's a war going on! People are being shot. In Port Harcourt oil companies are being bombed, police

stations are being overrun, the world oil price is shooting through the roof. You insist! I can shoot you right now and throw you into the swamp and that's it. (64)

With the threat, the Major reasserts his power over the situation and the picture Rufus portrays of the Delta. But, to readers, the image might be familiar. It represents the dystopic performance of 'dark Africa,' one of totalizing violence in which the uncivilized militants are destroying the civilized city, an ironically lawless situation in which the Major who represents the law could kill Rufus and no one would come looking. The rest of the novel, however, reveals a much more ordinary reality. In his search for Isabel Floode, Rufus travels to Port Harcourt to visit Boma in her tenement apartment and meet with James Floode where he witnesses no such apocalyptic violence.

The next morning, when the scene continues in chapter thirteen, the Major further asserts his expertise to fix the oil encounter narrative. He tells Rufus and Zaq: "'I know these people more than you do. You know the problem with you reporters? You believe everything you read in the papers'" (155). He argues the newspaper accounts are wrong; that inhabitants are leaving the Delta not because of pollution but because of the rebel "violence" (156). Then, he claims to possess a "big file" on the Professor that outlines his fraudulent operation to exploit environmental justice narratives for financial gain. His unique knowledge of his enemies, he insists, makes him "the only one who can handle them, the only one. They understand only one language: force" (157). In asserting his expertise, the Major attempts to master the reality of Niger Delta for Rufus and his readers, one that Rufus does not challenge. It allows him to regain the power he lost when his daughter was raped, and he was court martialed and assigned to the remote encampment. To impose his "ecology of looking," one that parrots the pro-government

narrative, he employs the spectacular to satisfy Rufus's audiences' expectations of the Niger Delta oil encounter.

In chapter fourteen, the scene shifts to Rufus and Zak's interview with Henshaw, the imprisoned leader of a small rebel group, who employs the same spectacular strategy as the Major to impose his opposing perspective. Just as with the Major, Rufus does not challenge Henshaw. After listening to the Major's harangue, Rufus conspires with him to feign his and Zaq's imprisonment, so they can gain the trust of the rebels to interview them. However, Henshaw immediately suspects his ploy. When Rufus introduces themselves, he claims the Major imprisoned them because he does not believe they are "'innocent journalists'" to which Henshaw responds, "'Well, are you?'" (162). Then, after Rufus explains they are interested in learning about Isabel Floode, Henshaw challenges their motives, asking, "'Is that all you want from me, to tell you whether some foreign hostage is alive or not? Who is she in the context of the war that's going on out there, the hopes and ambitions being created and destroyed? Can't you see the larger picture?'" (162-3). Humorously, Henshaw leaves Rufus waiting for him to fill the dramatic silence, but he never does. Critics often interpret "the larger picture" as the global oil trade that is exploiting the Delta and inhabitants, but he could equally be referring to the performance between the militants, the reporters, and the kidnapped that Rufus described. Whatever the case, as Rufus waits, he notices Henshaw, like the Major and soldiers, tiring of the performance. He writes that Henshaw "kept his head inclined, as if slumbering, already bored by that little exchange" (163). Clearly, he has scripted the familiar rebel message and is tired of repeating the lines.

When Rufus presses him for more information, Henshaw uses the platform to fix his image of the Delta and build dramatic tension that he fails to deliver on. In response to Rufus's

question about their group name, he tells Rufus, "'No! We used to have a name, but no more. . . . We are the people, we are the Delta, we represent the very earth on which we stand" (163). He claims to represent all indigenous people of the Delta. Echoing the Major, the next morning he claims totalizing knowledge of the military camp. He tells Rufus, "'I know exactly what they're doing out there . . . I've been here four days now and I know exactly what they do every minute of the day. . . . We'll outlast them. That's all we need to do. Sit tight. Wait. This land is ours, after all" (165). Like the Major's opposing claim, he professes sweeping authority to defend and represent the Delta, but when Rufus asks him about the Professor, he admits no affiliation with this internationally infamous figure. Furthermore, their group only consists of six men. This admission deflates the grandiosity of his claims and reveals his attempts to manipulate the narrative of the Niger Delta for Rufus's audience. His efforts seek to reclaim the power he has lost in his capture and in the oil encounter. And, yet, Rufus does not question it. Like the novel's ending, he leaves his readers to decide between two ecologies of looking, two opposing figures who both profess absolute knowledge of the other and the Niger Delta oil encounter. The scene provides readers with the empty spectacle they expect of which the performers themselves are tired in hope of profiting from the traumatic ecosystem.

Habila represents this relationship more explicitly in chapter nine when Rufus assumes the role Max Tekana was playing when he died and meets the melodramatically-named James Floode at his house to report what he and Zaq learned about his wife's kidnapping. The scene evinces both the performance of the Niger Delta traumatic ecosystem and how its material-discursive practices give rise to its reality. In the scene, James leads Rufus, who is alone because Zaq is infirm on Irikefe Island, into the living room to his television where he turns on the *BBC*. On the screen, news anchors are reporting the story Rufus just published in which the military

thwarted Rufus's and the other reporters' negotiations with the militants for Isabel Floode. Notably, it maps the transatlantic flow of spectacle and its influence on perceptions of Nigeria and the global economy. According to the news story:

> Some oil companies had already stopped sending expatriate workers to the region, and were even thinking of shutting down their operations because the cost was becoming higher than they could bear, and this possibility was already causing a tension in the oil market, with prices expected to rise in response. (101)

Based on Rufus's and others' reporting, the media commodifies the spectacle of the kidnapping performance for their Western audience, which influences the global economy. Despite his presence in the country, it shapes Floode's, an oil executive's, understanding of the oil encounter. Rufus observes during their conversation that he is addicted, like the world to oil, to the spectacular reporting. Between his comments to Rufus, he turns television on and off "as if unable to keep away from the news" (102). The report, too, seems to inform Floode's understanding of the country. Although only a two-year Nigerian resident, he, like the Major and Henshaw, performs the "god trick" and projects "the larger picture" of its problems. In doing so, he provides readers a third ecology of looking from which to fix their knowledge of the Niger Delta. With the *BBC* in the background, he parrots to Rufus the neocolonial development narrative: "Such great potential. You people could easily become the Japan of Africa, the USA of Africa, but the corruption is incredible. . . . Our pipelines are vandalized daily, losing us millions . . . and millions for the country as well. The people don't understand what they do to themselves" (103). In this exchange, he performs the spectacle of the *BBC* reporting while mindlessly repeating the nineteenth century "White-Man's Burden" development narrative. The real tragedy of the Niger Delta, he preaches, is that the indigenous people lack the greater

understanding to know the proper value of their land that oil companies can exploit for them. The power he derives from his feeling of mastery seems to compensate for the powerlessness and guilt he feels about his wife's kidnapping.

In response, Rufus, no longer the junior reporter, slips into Zaq's role of star reporter and takes center stage. He challenges Floode's ecology of looking with his own spectacular version that shifts the focus of the narrative from the kidnapping to his redemption for the guilt he feels from his "lucky boy" privileges. Critics often cite this passage because Rufus emphasizes the postcolonial ecology of looking that blames Western oil dependence for the Delta's traumatic ecosystem. Much like the other three characters I have discussed, however, Rufus in relating the story of his village exaggerates some details and leaves out others to fix his image of the Delta for readers. Immediately, Floode inadvertently points out its ordinary spectacle when he mistakes Rufus's town Junction with Jesse, which had a widely publicized pipeline explosion; he is already familiar with the narrative Rufus will deliver. After correcting him, Rufus nonetheless continues in broad strokes:

> There are countless villages going up in smoke daily. . . . But I don't blame them for wanting to get some benefit out of the pipelines that have brought nothing but suffering to their lives, leaking into the rivers and wells, killing the fish and poisoning the farmlands. And all they are told by the oil companies and the government is that the pipelines are there for their own good, that they hold great potential for their country, their future. These people endure the worst conditions of any oil-producing community on earth, the government knows it but doesn't have the will to stop it, the oil companies know it, but because the government doesn't care, they also don't care. And you think the people are corrupt? No. They are just hungry, and tired. (103-4)

Recalling the "literature of the powerless," Rufus paints for "the white man" a spectacular image of the Delta. Innumerable villages are "going up in smoke daily." Like the Major, he imagines a totalizing catastrophe that he has not actually witnessed for readers in the novel. He also neglects to mention his father's role in the Junction explosion that might complicate his master narrative. When he finishes, Floode humorously points out that Rufus's narrative supports his argument, too. As if the end of a friendly debate, they agree to disagree before they settle into friendly drinks and a discussion of Floode's failed marriage. The energy Rufus brought to his speech quickly fades into collegiality and opportunism. Together, the two ecologies of looking, the conflicting master narratives leave readers with no more than familiar spectacle, iterations of material-discursive practices that form the Niger Delta oil encounter.

Habila provides readers further evidence of the performance in the remainder of the scene. After Rufus's heroic moment, he assumes the role of lead journalist in the scheme he described that went awry and led to Max Tekana's death. After requesting a "Star" (104) beer, in a wink and a nod from Habila to his performance as a "star reporter" (99), Rufus accepts two "hundred thousand naira" payments from James for himself and Zaq to continue their search for Isabel (107). Following his speech, he recognizes the moral dilemma of accepting money from an oil executive, but he offers a similar justification he gave for pipeline tapping. He asks readers as if we are in on the scheme: "Wasn't he in my country, polluting my environment, making millions in the process? Surely, I was entitled to some reparation, some rent money from him?" (107). Like Henshaw, he leaves the questions in the air for dramatic effect. The answers, however, seem relatively straight forward, much like his defense of the local population. Furthermore, he neglects to ask the question that might give readers pause: "Would my participation in the performance perpetuate the Delta's pollution and residents' suffering?"

Instead, he accepts the money from Floode, who confirms his heroic role in the story. He tells him, "'I have to trust you. You're my only hope, you and Zaq. My wife's life is in your hands'" (208). In this moment, Rufus's narrative focus shifts from the detective story to the trauma narrative where he relieves his own personal guilt for being the "lucky boy" in the family and for contriving a story about their suffering from which he profited.

The spectacular performances of Rufus's human characters illuminate the influence of the global media and publishing industry on his portrayal of the natural environment, including water. Like previous examples, he adds the spectacular to it when it appears ordinary so to meet what he believes are the expectations of his Western audience. In exposing Rufus's efforts, Habila demonstrates how African writers are encouraged to elide the ordinary from their representations of the Africa, including the natural environment, in favor of the spectacular—to write a "literature of the powerless." This dynamic presents readers with an incomplete picture that reiterates the colonial narrative that Africa and its environments are exotic and violent and Africans less-than-human. Without the fuller picture, we risk reproducing the imbalanced power relations within the global media and publishing industry that contribute to the Niger Delta traumatic ecosystem. We are never detached observers of it but always enmeshed in its formation, and thus, we must be aware of our roles to challenge the inequities of the performance.

Rufus also fits the Niger Delta into familiar roles within the two narrative threads. In the detective story, it serves as the overwhelming Other that Rufus must overcome to solve the mystery. In the trauma narrative, it represents the depths of the repressed memories that he must access to overcome the guilt he feels for being the "lucky boy" (19). In both cases, Rufus attempts to fix the performance of the Niger Delta for his readers, which contributes to its

traumatic ecosystem, and obscures the real fear his inability to swim generates in him. In the opening scene, perhaps the most environmentally immersive of the novel, Rufus emphasizes the spectacular to confirm readers' expectations of the Delta oil encounter and establish his unique position to witness it. Importantly, the human and nonhuman characters Rufus paints into the setting lack the power to return our gaze. To increase dramatic tension, he uses aesthetics similar to those found in Western detective novels to mystify the landscape, depriving it of nuance that might render it more ordinary, which creates a more disorienting and threatening atmosphere. During their passage on it, the river is relatively mundane: he writes, they simply "glided silently over the water" (5). However, he describes the "mist" and "fog," suspended water droplets, as an overwhelming force which adds an element of the spectacular to the journey. He mentions them six times in the paragraph, and he accentuates its presence by reaching for farcical similes that might be familiar to his Western audience. He describes the "mist" and "fog" hanging from mangrove branches "in clumps like cotton balls," spanning the river "like a bridge," and surrounding their canoe such that they "couldn't see each other" (5). Additionally, he attributes agential qualities to the fog as if it were the menacing environment of a British detective novel. "After a while," he recounts, "the sky and the water and the dense foliage on the riverbanks all looked the same: blue and green and blue-green misty. The whole landscape was now a mere trick of light, vaporous and shape-shifting, appearing and disappearing behind the fog" (4). In his rendering, it acts like a stalker or a predator, following them along their journey. A few sentences later, Rufus describes it engulfing whole islands: the Delta "swallowed [Moon Island] by the distance and darkness cast by the mist that rose like smoke from the riverbanks" (5). The qualities Rufus attributes to the Delta both mimic Western exoticisms about 'Africa' and the more familiar settings, like foggy London, that detectives must overcome to solve the crime.

In chapter two, when they arrive at Chief Ibiram's village, Rufus continues to use the spectacular to build evidence for the threat water poses to his mission to solve Isabel Floode's disappearance and rectify the guilt he feels for being the "lucky boy." He juxtaposes the trauma of the polluted water that he imagines the villagers endure with a nightmare he experiences in which Boma is swept out to sea after saving him from the surf. Following a conversation that he overhears but does not understand among Chief Ibiram and other men in "pidgin English and their language," he adds drama to the ordinary moment by accentuating it with more spectacular but familiar images of the Delta. On the edge of sleep, he shares, "I imagined they were speaking of the dwindling stocks of fish in the river, the rising toxicity of the water and how soon they might have to move to a place where the fishing was still fairly good" (18). While he is speculating about their conversation, he leans on generalized media representations of the water, once a life-giving environment that now threatens their existence. His presumed expertise lends credibility to his projections. At the end of the paragraph, he directly ties his imaginings into the dream that he is falling into about a "little girl with the burnished skin" (18). Notably, he does not name the girl, creating ambiguity about whether he is referring to Alali, whom he had seen a paragraph earlier, or his sister Boma, which equates the villagers' trauma with his own story, further providing him authority to tell it.

In his dream, he casts water as the villain and original cause of his trauma. As he tells it, one night, he and Boma are catching crabs at the confluence of a river and the sea when a storm arises and roughens the surf. They run for the shore, but Rufus trips, and Boma has to "jump into the waves" to rescue him (18). Consequently, she is swept away, and he believes he will never see her again. Standing in the river, he tries to save her but fails. Instead, she reminds him that he is a "lucky boy." He repeats her name until his village arrives to look for her. They find her the

next morning, miraculously "on an outcrop in the middle of the sea" (19). Eventually, she recovers after a week of sleeping and "spit[ting] out seawater" (19). These are images Rufus will repeat later in the novel. In his telling, Rufus anthropomorphizes the water to make it a convincing mortal enemy. He describes it as "harsh, frothing and spitting" (18). The waves are "vicious, implacable" (19). Repeatedly, he calls the water "dark" to give it an evil quality (18). These predatory images contrast with those from the next day when the sea is "calm and demure and wouldn't-drown-a-fly" as if its fury the previous night were personally directed at him and his sister (19). These descriptions augment his earlier ones in which water threatens the villagers. He seems to compare the oil extraction in the Delta to the storm that colluded with the water to carry away Boma. In the next paragraph, however, when he awakens the next morning, Zaq undercuts the spectacle Rufus has created by describing the ordinariness of water. Rufus asks him where Tamuno and Michael went, and he replies, "They went fishing or catching crabs or whatever it is they do around here" (19). His response both calls into question Rufus's speculation about the Chief's conversation the previous evening and his attempt to 'fix' an image of water as threatening. The villagers' everyday relationship with the water remains intact, suggesting their situation is not as dire as Rufus imagines but more ordinary.

For the rest of the novel, Rufus repeatedly utilizes water to provide his detective story with an environmental foe and his trauma narrative with an existential threat that repeatedly overwhelms him and allows him to portray himself as a hero. In chapter three, as they "drifted almost aimlessly" in the river, Rufus accentuates the drama of their journey by emphasizing the ominous and animate qualities of the water, like the River Styx or the Congo River in *Heart of Darkness*. He describes it at different times as a poisonous snake—"twisting and fast and slippery"—a jute rope, "frayed and wobbly," and an arrow, "straight and unerring" (37).

Recalling the locals' image of Omi-ala in *The Fishermen*, he adds further spectacle by associating it with death. As they float, he points out the flotsam on its surface: a dead bird, "a bloated dog" (37), and "a human arm severed at the elbow" (38). His descriptions of them are so overwritten for dramatic effect that they are almost comical. The dog, he relates is "belly-up with black birds perching on it, their expressionless eyes blinking rapidly, their beaks savagely cutting into the soft decaying flesh" (37-38). The black birds' "expressionless eyes" and savage behaviors imply that they are possessed. Similarly, the severed arm retains animate qualities. He writes, it is "bobbing away from us, its fingers opening and closing, beckoning" (38). It becomes a sinister representative of the underworld, calling them to join it, and invades his unconscious. Since, he says, it has appeared in his dreams "sometimes with its middle finger extended derisively before disappearing into the dark mist" (38). Interestingly, the hand that appears in his dream uses a Western insult rather than a Nigerian one. These images of water all suggest his detective story and trauma narrative are taking him into the familiar, Western depths of environmental and psychological hell, which he must overcome to survive.

The threat of water becomes reality when he nearly drowns on three different occasions. Rather than a sinister life force, the incidents more comically demonstrate a more ordinary but no less traumatizing reality that he simply cannot swim. But he adds spectacle to the scenes to cast water in a villainous role. In chapter four, two military boats named "*Mami Wata 1*" "*Mami Wata 2*" force Tamuno, Michael, Rufus, and Zaq to abandon their boat. The name of these boats is significant because it refers to a well-known West African deity whose name translates as "Mother of Water" who brings both care and destruction. In Rufus's narrative, the fact that she is associated with the military suggests her destructive incarnation and the threat of water. As the scene progresses, the soldiers instruct them to jump overboard and toss them a rope to grab if

they cannot swim. Rufus is first to jump. In the water, he explains, he reached "blindly for the rope" (47). His use of "blindly" suggests he acted instinctively and without thought, intimating his inability to swim and his fear of water. He adds to the drama of the scene when Zaq falls overboard, capsizing the boat and dumping all their reporting equipment. In describing the scene, he characterizes the water as an endless abyss that left him watching "helplessly" as it swallowed Zaq, the equipment, and eventually the boat. He explains that Zaq dramatically came to the surface "after an eternity" and, like Boma, he was "spitting out water" (48). In contrast, he neglects to mention Tamuno's and Michael's paths to the boats. They simply appear in them, implying that they easily swam the distance and the water is not a wrathful water goddess but ordinary.

Rufus encounters sea again in chapter sixteen with a similar outcome. In this scene, the military has trapped everyone on Irikefe Island, and Zaq decides Rufus is the only one who can escape and save them. He frames him as the hero, bastardizing John F. Kennedy's 1961 inaugural address: "It's not what we want you to do, it's what must be done, and the truth is, you are the only one in a position to do it" (183). Naman, the head priest, provides him with his robe and instructs him to wade into the sea. All he must do, he tells him, is allow the currents to carry him, and he will arrive at a pier where he can find a canoe. When Rufus enters the water, however, he responds much like when he jumped from the boat, but in this instance, there is no rope. He explains, "as I dived and touched the bottom, everything went dark. I lost consciousness" (183-4). When he awakes, he finds himself on the shore, implying the river was the agent that deposited him there. He offers no explanation for why he lost consciousness and instead leaves his readers to speculate. Perhaps, like Odysseus, he disappeared into hell or was possessed by Mami Wata? Or, maybe, his encounter with the water triggered his past experiences of trauma

and he froze? Whatever the case, his lack of memory adds drama to the scene and hides the ordinary fact that he cannot swim. Ironically, when he gathers his bearings, he realizes he is not far from where he entered the river and that the pier is only a kilometer away, so he decides to walk. His encounter with the river seems to have been an entirely unnecessary, spectacular performance to enhance the sense of danger in the story and portray him as a hero.

Rufus nearly drowns a third time in the next chapter when he tries to cross the sea in a boat to once again save the day. After starting towards the pier, he turns to the city center where he arrives at his lover Gloria's empty tenement. He describes the city as all but abandoned because of the soldiers' recent attack. Behind the walls of her tenement, however, he discovers a family of five hiding out. He asks them for a boat, and the husband secretively leads him to "a deep gorge" where from under "grass and sand and rocks, he unearthed a boat and two oars" (189). They push it to the water, and Rufus sets off across a narrow stretch of the sea. He sets the scene to fit into both his detective story and trauma narrative. As he paddled out to sea, he relates, the man "stood there a long time, waving back. For a moment he had put aside the enormous responsibilities of protecting his family, and now he had to return" (189). The husband's presence adds to the weight of his journey and implies that he is acting to save the family as well. Additionally, the scene inverts his earlier dream in which the waves sweep Boma out to sea after she saves him, and he watches helplessly and calls her name. The same happens to Rufus but more because of his incompetence than a vengeful sea. Instead of a ferocious storm, he relates, "the waves were high and then low," in other words, rather ordinary (189). However, they quickly fill the boat. Like his earlier encounters with water, he wakes up without any memory of his experience. Instead, the villagers who rescued him relate that they found him, like Boma in his dream, using nearly the same language, "on a spit of dry land in the middle of the

sea" where he "was unconscious and spitting out water" (190). He speculates how he could have died but survived his encounter with water, again like Odysseus, "more by accident than by my own efforts," once again neglecting to mention that he cannot swim (190). In his posthuman performance, he emerges from the water as the hero, an Odysseus figure, who endures the monsters of the sea to save the family, and replaces Boma in the trauma narrative to be miraculously deposited on shore. He has fulfilled the promise of the education he received and no longer needs to feel guilty for being the "lucky boy."

At the same time, his spectacular rendering of water echoes the familiar role of the environment in Western hero narratives and the dramatic accounts of the Niger Delta in global media and publications. And yet, by inserting ordinary moments and metatextual commentary into Rufus's performance of the Delta, Habila tips off readers to the "incestuous business" among the ecologies of looking that influence the global media and publishing industries and encourage African writers to privilege the spectacular, to write "literature of the powerless," and to meet the expectations of Western readers and global capitalism. From this perspective, the Niger Delta that Rufus performs more closely resembles its orientation to the colonizer. It encourages readers to turn their gazes inward and reflect on how their consumption of the Other might commit systemic violence against the ordinary—the riverine environment and indigenous inhabitants of the Niger Delta.

Between the Spectacular and the Ordinary

In their novels, Obioma and Habila evince the hydrosocial performances of humans and H2O in the production of the Niger Delta's and Nigerian nation-state's traumatic ecosystems. As Barad outlines, humans and H2O share iterative material-discursive relations that form apparatuses through exclusion. Among humans, these apparatuses can form hierarchies of being,

such as race, gender, and class, that fix the value of particular identities and incite violent competition for power, resulting in trauma. The local, national, and international responses to President Tinubu's announcement show how individual and group experiences of trauma enfold the past, present, and future into a topology of trauma. Over time, it inspires further violence that can metastasize into apparatuses ranging in size from the family to the global capitalist media and publishing industries that form traumatic ecosystems into which individuals and nations are born and with which they must contend.

As the novels indicate, H2O, especially rivers, are implicated in these posthuman performances. In *The Fishermen*, the Agwu boys are trapped between two competing ontologies, the modern and precolonial, as they navigate their childhoods. Their Igbo father, James, a Jungian 'false father' and survivor of the Nigerian Civil War, constructs for them a modern "map of dreams" to guide them and their mother, Paulina, while he works his banking job in the North. It ordains Western careers that will allow them to climb the national ontological hierarchy and protect themselves from the identitarian violence he experienced during the Civil War. In contrast, the local river, Omi-Ala, a Jungian grandmother figure, who undermines the authority of the 'false father,' offers the boys a traditional identity of their choosing—fisherman. Caught in the net of local and national hegemonic apparatuses, like the Nigerian nation-state, the boys struggle to establish ontological ground for themselves. Obioma represents this struggle in the local madman, Abulu, an extension of the river, and his prophecy. Ikenna's belief in the prophecy captures him in a trap between traditional and Western ontologies. He accepts Abulu's traditional prophecy while further committing himself to Western identities of student and scientist. Similar to the Nigerian nation-state, the novel suggests, the conflict between the two leads to the deaths of himself, his brother Obembe, and Abulu, raising the question of whether the two ontologies

can coexist and, by extension, the nation-state. Only at the narrator Ben's trial for Abulu's murder does the novel imagine a hydrosocial future in which the two might live together.

In *Oil on Water*, Rufus engages readers in a posthuman performance of the Niger Delta by manipulating the hegemonic apparatuses of the international publishing industry to capitalize on the riverine crisis. Through their pursuit of Isabel Floode, Rufus introduces readers to what Ndebele calls, "the spectacular" in his representation of the Niger Delta. He spotlights familiar male stock characters, including himself, who impose their conflicting "ecologies of looking," or 'truths' about the Delta, on Rufus's audience, which enables the male characters to overcome their feelings of powerlessness that stem from previous experiences of trauma. At the same time, their 'truths' offer readers and critics rote talking points, which they might disseminate to alleviate their own feelings of powerlessness in the face of the international oil industrial complex. Habila, however, challenges the ethics of these relationships. Much like the South African game lodge Nixon describes, Habila depicts how Rufus's tour through the Delta is largely staged for his Western audience and the 'truths' he records reflect his intended audiences' expectations. It represents what Ndebele calls, a "literature of the powerlessness" in which Black South African authors emphasize "the spectacular" at the expense of "the ordinary," a move that reinforces colonial power dynamics. Consequently, in the final scene of the novel, where Rufus signs off to readers, little has changed. In his imagining, the Delta is still enwrapped in Manichean violence and divided between traditional utopic and post-independence dystopic realities. Isabel Floode is still captive in his fixed reality and friends on Irikefe Island to whom he waves are safe. The primary outcomes are that Rufus has usurped his mentor Zaq as the "Star" reporter and earned a sizeable payday to continue the search. In effect, he has shown Western

readers to themselves as consumers of "the spectacular" Niger Delta traumatic ecosystem and perpetrators of its performance.

Unlike Obioma, however, in *Oil on Water*, Habila does not imagine a water-route toward equal material-discursive practices among the hegemonic "ecologies of looking" he depicts. Instead, he interrupts the spectacular posthuman performance with the ordinary to provide readers the opportunity to, like Ben in *The Fishermen*, reflect on their participation in the ontological cuts that produce exclusions and contribute to the violence of the family, the Niger Delta, and the Nigerian nation-state. In Barad's telling, the excluded Other is the agent that opens hegemonic apparatuses to the possibility of changing their material-discursive practices. In an anecdote from his 2018 African Literature Association Presidential Address, "The Future of African Literature," Habila provides a glimpse of how change might result from interrupting posthuman performance. In the talk, he admits that when he wrote *Oil on Water* his intent was not to write about the environment. His writing was a performance for an international audience. At the time, he was largely ambivalent about the environmental movement. Instead, his subject, he explains, was the "human drama" for which the Delta served as a stage (153). The idea of writing about the Delta was not even his. In 2007, a British film company, responding to the environmental justice movement, arising around the oil extraction in the Niger Delta, approached him to write a script for a film. At the time, like Rufus, he was an up-and-coming poet and novelist. He won the 2001 Caine Prize for his poetry collection, *Love Poems*, and the 2002 Commonwealth Writers' Prize his first novel, *Waiting for Angels*. He tried to turn down the commission, explaining that he was neither a script writer nor from the Niger Delta, but the film company did not care. "What they really wanted," he says, "was a story-line by a Nigerian

author" (153). Despite his reservations, Habila accepted it. Only later, feeling there was more to the story, did he write the novel for which he has received international recognition.

For the script, he explains, he traveled to the Delta where he interviewed some of its residents, but he never considered himself "'an environmental activist'" (153). It was his reviewers and readers of the novel who attached the label to him. When he spoke at events, audience members probed him for advice about how they should respond to the crisis, perhaps by boycotting Chevron and Shell. Habila says he was flummoxed about how to respond to those questions. Once he suggested to one woman that he buys gas "wherever it is cheapest" and that she should "do the same" (154). Over time, though, between his research and interactions with readers, his ambivalence evolved into a greater understanding of "what our greed and shortsighted hunger for energy and natural resources is doing to the environment" (154). In other words, Habila wrote a novel for a Western audience that performs the human spectacle of the Niger Delta oil encounter. To his surprise, his concerned readers and critics instead identified with his spectacular depictions of the environmental tragedy and felt guilty for their participation in its exploitation. They labelled him an environmentalist and sought his expertise. Over time, he evolved to see himself through the same lens. As a posthuman, the Niger Delta is the excluded Other from the relationship between Habila and his Western readers that became an agent in its own representation and disrupted the material-discursive practices that form the hegemonic apparatus through which Habila performed the Niger Delta traumatic ecosystem. And, in its posthuman performance, Habila and H2O formed a new hydrosocial cycle, one that challenges the ontological hierarchy in which humans are valued over rivers. If expanded, Ben might imagine, it offers new possibilities for navigating the currents of the Nigerian nation-state, as well. Perhaps President Tinubu is next.

Notes

[1] Astrida G. Neimanis, Veronica Strang, Dorothy Christian, and Rita Wong are among those who contribute to this discussion.
[2] While ontologies define causes differently, in portraying the contest between them in their novels, Obioma and Habila emphasize the emergent agential qualities that relations between humans and their material environments produce rather than aligning with particular causes. In other words, characters attribute different causal explanations to agents' contributions to the process of change. Consequently, in the novels, an agent functions more as an "efficient cause" than "one that acts or exerts power" (*Merriam Webster*). Thinking back to the caregiver who nearly drowned in a river, the water is not acting, per se, but it provides the energy that causes if only momentarily the caregiver to question their identity as a living being and forces them to confront their finitude and the caregiver emerges from the river a different person. For this reason, the river is an actor. By extension, for the child to whom they have passed on their trauma, the river's simple presence could trigger fear. In this situation, the river is also an agent because it produces an effect on the child even if it is not responding to or directly engaging with the child. Its mere presence causes fear and avoidance. In short, trauma fixes the caregiver's and child's identities in relation to the river in their posthuman performance within the traumatic ecosystem.
[3] Martin Premoli, adapting Rob Nixon's term, extends these everyday stressors to people's experiences of environmental destruction, calling it "slow trauma" (175).
[4] Sreya Mallika Datta argues that the novel reimagines nationalism to advocate for political belonging. She argues Abulu is a remainder from the traditional culture that is no longer supported in the contemporary vision of nation and his prophecy destabilizes the boys fraternal identity (119). Cédric Courtois also argues that Abulu represents the state of the nation and a sacrifice to national unity (7-8). Maria J. Lopez suggests that Abulu's prophecy is the primal cause of the novel that initiates a performance between Ikenna and Abulu to determine the family's and nation's reality that implicates the readers (160). I largely agree with these readings; however, they exclude the material from the performance of meaning in the novel.
[5] In an interview with Datta, Obioma expresses these sentiment that "Westernisation has failed us and that the path forward is to redeem some of those aspects of our cultures to advance our society" ("'Silence is the Tool'" 57).
[6] A few critics make similar claims. Cédric Courtois borrows Bakhtin's term and describes the river as a "thirdspace" (6). Kate Harlin argues through Foucault that the river is a "heterochronic space" that enables the children and readers to "access the traumatic past of the Niger Delta region" (689). These terms differ from Barad's formulation of posthuman performance in an important way. They suggest that the river exists outside the dominant apparatuses of family and the Nigerian state whereas Barad argues that what dominant apparatuses exclude remains within the phenomenon as a constitutive outside. Consequently, what is excluded remains in relation to and continues to shape the hegemonic apparatus. In other words, although neglected and a remnant of a discarded past, the Omi-ala does not offer an escape but the material presence of alternative ontologies.
[7] Courtois also describes Abulu as an incarnation of Eshu (8). Datta speculates he might be an osu (119). Either way, in Ben's mind, he seems to live in multiple worlds.

[8] Datta also suggests the novel questions the appropriateness of the idea of nation for Nigeria (111).

[9] Other critics reach similar conclusions about the ending of the novel. Focusing on the act of reading as performance, Datta suggests the novel critiques nationalism and promotes "new models of collective belonging" (111). More broadly, she argues that community in Nigeria is more than a "retraditionalization" but an exploration of modernity's imbalanced role in reconfiguring the post-independence subject. Sarah Heinz thinks of the novel through parable, how its uncertainty of meaning forces revision, and argues it "revises parable as radically relational" (114). I add that the river, the nonhuman, is central to revising the performance of family and nation.

[10] Courtois also considers the map at the start of the novel. He attributes it to Ben and primarily draws attention to the centrality of the river.

[11] Kwame Anthony Appiah and Tejumola Olaniyan are a few among many who share this argument.

[12] Sarah Heinz also notes that James uses the patriarchal "map of dreams" to fix his sons futures, and its rigidity contributes to its collapse (119).

[13] Klaniecki argues that the novel depicts how modern Nigerian constructs masculinity (397-8). I argue that patriarchy along with modernity is one of the apparatuses that shapes the boys' identities.

[14] Heinz also notes the moments when they transition through three different fishermen identities: their original encounter with Omi-ala, their father's revision, and their murder of Abulu. She does not associate them with power, however, and instead frames them within the Biblical parable in which the fishermen become Jesus's disciples. She argues that the novel revises the parable to open into ambiguity, which destabilizes the confidence with which the reader might apply the parable and fix meaning in the novel more broadly (120-1).

[15] Sarah Heinz argues that Ikenna makes Abulu's prophecy self-fulfilling by destroying his familial relations. "Within an ethics of relationality," she writes, "where the self emerges through connections with others, this destruction of his closest relation logically leads to his death" (120).

[16] Lopez argues that Ikenna and Abulu's relationship is performative; that Ikenna must believe in the prophecy for it to have power (159). To me, their performance speaks more to the traumatic ecosystem in which Ikenna was born and how his father's 'map of dreams' predisposed him to believe in Abulu's prophecy, or maps of the future. The belief itself is not a problem but the modern apparatus through which he measures truth throws him into an impossible spiral of uncertainty.

[17] Nixon does not describe "ecologies of looking" as ontological. Within Barad's posthuman performance theory, however, I argue they are shaped by the ontological hierarchy in which those looking, or performing, are enmeshed.

[18] Cajetan Iheka describes the novel as "'extroverted'," a term from Eileen Julien to describe African novels whose audience is primarily Western readers where they are published before reaching an African audience (211).

[19] Philip Aghoghovwia in "Nigeria" describes a related "performance of violence" in insurgent images of petro-colonialism in the Niger Delta (241)

[20] Graham Huggan calls this transatlantic exchange the "postcolonial exotic" (vii). Huggan explains, the postcolonial exotic produces value at the interstices between "postcolonialism," an

anti-colonial methodology that highlights resistance efforts within texts, and "postcoloniality," a global network of exchange that produces "cultural value" from material and cultural goods, imported from former colonies (6). In other words, postcolonialism celebrates aesthetic objects that express their cultural and intellectual difference from their former colonizers in the Global North, and postcoloniality commodifies that aesthetic difference through a process of cultural translation, which normalizes the "exotic" within Western culture at the same time it hides inequal power relations inside the "spectacle" of difference (14). Thus, the postcolonial exotic, Huggan argues, creates a "dilemma" for postcolonial scholars and postcolonial writers, alike. Namely, in celebrating and promoting cultural difference, it enmeshes them and their objects in exploitative global systems of exchange (32).

[21] Graham Huggan also notes this: "African writers are often caught between the desire to achieve recognition—and the financial rewards that come with it—with a wider audience and their awareness of the constraints this might place on their writing and how it is received" (35).

[22] Cajetan Iheka, in "African Literature, Audience, and the Search for the Nonhuman," presents a similar reading of the novel. He notes how Habila juggles the expectations of the publishing industry for a narrative about "Africa-in-crisis" with realistic images of the human and nonhuman ecological crises in the Delta with which he challenges readers' complicity (204). In his reading, Habila and not Rufus is the writer responding to readers' demands for particular images of Africa, and thus, Rufus's witness remains a valuable contribution to "the global discourse surrounding unrest in the Delta and its implications for foreigners in the region and oil prices in the international market" (211). In my reading, Rufus is actually the writer placating his international readers to achieve his own success. Consequently, Rufus foregrounds "the spectacular" in his representation of the Delta environment as much as the social-political crises. Both reflect our expectations of the oil encounter.

[23] Ecocritical responses to *Oil on Water* evince how energy scholars' urgent efforts to populate the petrofiction canon have shaped their interpretative methodologies and the literature they read. Questions about Rufus's reliability, however, frustrate the easy association that the title suggests. For those who trust Rufus's claims of objectivity, the novel offers them a window into the distant Niger Delta sacrifice zone. For example, Ogaga Okuyade suggests that, through the journey motif, Habila offers readers access to the slow violence of oil extraction, specifically, the "environmental displacement" that destroys kinship networks and dispossesses indigenous populations (219). Another critic, Sule Emmanuel Egya, argues that the novel, among other literature that depicts the violence of "anti-environment agents: the government, the oil corporations, and militias," performs "literary militancy" (103). It raises awareness in readers about the local suffering created by petromodernity and preserves local culture to help indigenous populations imagine after-oil futures. Most recently, in "Dislocating Anthropocene: the City and Oil in Helon Habila's *Oil on Water*," Senayon Olaoluwa, placing the novel squarely within "the league of writing now designated as petrolfiction," employs a "'material ecocriticism'" methodology to read the novel as a "natural allegory," or the "natural evolution into the epoch of the Anthropocene in rural Delta" that collapses human-nonhuman and rural-urban binaries (245). It challenges, he argues, modern narratives that depict the urban environment as an escape from a despoiled rural one. Instead, the two are enmeshed in the "multidirectional trauma" (259) through "the same strategy of violence and domination" of the oil encounter (256). Through Rufus's narrative, Olaoluwa suggests, Habila "invites readers to witness" this anthropogenic transition from rural to urban in which Rufus's witness fulfills the

conventions of petrofiction by providing readers unmediated access to the historical and ongoing trauma of petroviolence.

For others who question Rufus's reliability, they still contend it offers valuable witness to the destructive reality of the oil encounter. However, his focus on his own story works as an impediment to its ability to map the global oil assemblage, an important goal of petrofiction. While praising the novel for providing readers "a broader view of the human suffering and environmental degradation behind the headlines," Wenzel remarks on a dissonance in the novel between Rufus's journalistic role as a witness and his ignorance of how others might mobilize his ambitions for their own personal causes (13). As a result, Rufus's interviewees are the familiar conspirators in the oil encounter—"the missing white woman meme," militants, soldiers, and an oil executive—who offer "little alternative to rote voice-over" (14).[23] Byron Caminero-Santangelo is equally discouraged by the novel's missed opportunities. Despite Rufus's role as a witness to "a dying landscape and an ecosystem that has gone silent" (230) that "challenges the world-making discourses of the powerful," Caminero-Santangelo argues that "the novel's postmodern sensibility and relative lack of historical reference" stunt its ability to implicate international players in the violence that has destroyed material and social relations in the Niger Delta (234). In fact, he suggests the novel even "suppresses" the region's (neo)colonial inheritance (235). Amy Riddle blames Rufus's journalistic mandate to "'observe' and 'witness'" for apportioning undo emphasis to its "material object," which distances readers from its social form (421). As a result, the novel risks simply becoming a snapshot of environmental degradation, an instance of commodity determinism "where there does not actually appear to be any agency whatsoever" (427). Like the others, these critics value Habila's depiction of petroviolence in the Delta; however, they question whether Rufus's witness reaches beyond the local encounter to primary causes in the Global North, a central concern of petrofiction.

Stephanie LeMenager, in *Living Oil: Petroleum Culture in the American Century*, attempts to transcend the problem of Rufus's ambivalence by imagining the affective impact of the novel on readers. She identifies the atmosphere in *Oil on Water* as an example of what she calls, "petromelancholia," or "the feeling of losing cheap energy that came relatively easily" (102). This feeling, she suggests, arises from two places: Rufus's mission to capture both "'the perfect story'" and "the deeper 'meaning of the story'" *and* the river's agency in resisting such impositions (127). To locate the meaning, Rufus engages in what LeMenager calls an act of "plotting" in which he attempts to "impos[e] narrative coherence on ecological and social conditions so chaotic as to be illegible" (125). At this point, she suggests, Rufus's motivations for witnessing become muddled. His ambitions place him too close to his story, which afflicts him with myopia, and he fails to see the larger picture. Interestingly, for LeMenager, Rufus's questionable value as witness does not undermine the value of what he witnesses. Rather than interrogate this tension between Rufus's witness and ambitions, LeMenager shifts the focus from the text to readers. The detective plot, she suggests, still affords readers the opportunity to tour "the novel's collapsing geography, to see that broken world," images that function as nodal points for feelings of petromelancholia (130). In its intimate descriptions, the novel cathects the Niger Delta's sensory details into the readers' consciousness, which "linger, like a sickness, in the body" and links their local experiences of oil with the "everyday flotsam in the delta's rivers and creeks" (128). What other critics frame as Habila's refusal to inspire action, LeMenager reframes as an opportunity for readers to piece together meaning for themselves and demonstrates the value of petrofiction.

Critics, however, who dismiss Rufus's suspect intentions to populate the petrofiction canon, risk contributing to the Niger Delta traumatic ecosystem through their critical advocacy. They let slip the broader ethical questions about the power imbalance of representing marginalized groups that Cajetan Iheka asks in his analysis of Michael Watts and Ed Kashi's multimedia work about the Niger Delta, *Curse of the Black Gold*: "To what extent do they succeed (or fail) to avoid revictimizing their subjects?" (132) and how deep is the "book's immersion in oil"? (139). If we consider that Rufus's interest in selling the Niger Delta oil encounter to an international audience influences his depiction of it, we have to acknowledge it also skews other elements of his narrative, including setting. As postcolonial critics have pointed out, Western representations of the Global South are often based on Edenic or primitivist myths and collapse culture into nature, such that 'natives' are part of the environment—everything Other is setting. Consequently, environmental tropes are co-constitutive of these myths.

[24] In this scene that spans chapters five, thirteen, and fourteen, Rufus also interviews Doctor Dagogo-Mark.

[25] The Major later asks: "Why did you come here, to a war zone? . . . Are you looking for fame?" (158). Before meeting the Professor, in chapter nineteen, one of his henchmen warns Rufus, "I just hope you can prove you are who you claim to be" (214).

Chapter 2

Ecstasis: Denial of Death and the Congo Forest in *Le silence de la forêt* and *Congo, Inc.*

Violence has been synonymous with the Congo Forest in the popular global imagination since 1885 when King Leopold of Belgium started extracting rubber and cutting off the hands of his forced Indigenous laborers. Few people know that it spans two million kilometers in central Africa across Cameroon, Equatorial Guinea, Gabon, Republic of Congo, Angola, Democratic Republic of the Congo, and Central African Republic. Over seventy-five million people and a hundred and fifty ethnic groups live there. For most of the world, it still remains the proverbial heart of darkness that Conrad wrote about, only coming to our attention in times of crisis, during regional conflicts like the first and second Congo wars from 1996-2006, which Filip Reyntjens has called, "The Great African War." Global media coverage only reinforces colonial narratives by generalizing the violence as if it emerges from a 'state of nature' or the 'law of the jungle.' Even in academic parlance, the Congo rainforest is known through 19th century Belgian geographers' verbiage as a geological scandal, more recently a "Great Frontier" (Moore 84) or a victim in the "rape script" of capitalism (Gibson-Graham 127).

Social theorists provide more visibility and nuance to the Congo Basin and postcolony more generally by situating them within internal and regional conflicts and the global economy. Their focus, too, is on the violence that destabilizes the postcolony and constructs a state of insecurity. Reyntjens, in documenting the history of the two Congo Wars, describes how war emerged as the regional economy, or what Chris Dietrich has called, "military commercialism" (3). During the wars, 'elite networks' in the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC) and border countries emerged as local powers to exploit the mineral resources of the DRC, a situation Ian Taylor has described as "neo-imperialist" (48). Anna Hedlund in her ethnography *Hutu Rebels:*

Exile Warlords in the Eastern Congo (2019) notes that the constellation of conflicts has caused an unknown number of deaths, estimated at over four million, and 2.7 million refugees. Bare life has spawned "bare violence" (10) and created a "warscape" where generations of war and violence have shaped social and cultural relations and people's everyday lives (12). David Riches has characterized it as a "triangle of violence" where the figures of perpetrator, victim, and witness have blurred, depending on one's perspective (8). "In a world that is insecure and uncertain," Hedlund writes, "violence is one way to respond" (15). These post-mortems suggest the Congo Forest is caught in what Achille Mbembe has termed the "Fanonian *cul-de-sac*," or a cycle of retribution spurred by the belief that the only appropriate response to colonial violence is violence ("On the Postcolony: a brief response to critics" 154).

In this chapter, I argue this cyclical violence—the "Fanonian *cul-de-sac*"—in the Congo forest and the postcolony that receives so much attention is a symptom of the Congo forest traumatic ecosystem, a palimpsest of open wounds that emerged during colonialism and remain unresolved. I follow Ato Quayson's suggestion in *Calibrations: Reading for the Social* (2003) that "to transcend this space of death requires a careful understanding of trauma that in fact produced the nation in the first place" and remains relevant today (77).[1] To better understand this palimpsest, I analyze Bassek Ba Kobhio and Didier Ouenangare's dramatic film, the first major production from the Central African Republic, *Le silence de la forêt* (*Silence of the Forest*) (2003) and In Koli Jean Bofane's satiric novel, *Congo, Inc.: Bismark's Testament* (2014), both set in the Congo forest region. In my analysis, I identify the specific mechanism, what I call *ecstasis*, that produces this violence within this traumatic ecosystem. *Ecstasis*, a concept that anthropologists Johannes Fabian and Thomas Hendricks have separately theorized among male-identifying individuals and outside the context of trauma studies, describes an experience in

which an individual or group confronts an overwhelming force that destabilizes their feelings of control and safety over their mind-bodies and presents them with their own finitude.[2] As the film and novel depict, *ecstasis* can produce two scenarios in the mindbody and/or community: one in which the individual or group expands or relinquishes their sense of self to accommodate the Other and another in which their sense of self contracts in fear of the Other.[3] The former might produce feelings of empowerment in which the individual or group survives the encounter and loses if only temporarily their fear of death. The latter results in feelings of disempowerment, instability, and insecurity, symptoms of trauma. Violence occurs, I argue, when victims are unwilling to accept they are wounded—the reality of their finitude—or unable to establish safe conditions in which to heal.[4] As Judith Herman explains, survivors can get stuck in the mourning phase when they refuse to grieve "as a way of denying victory to the perpetrator" and maintains "a fantasy of magical resolution through revenge, forgiveness, or compensation" (188). These individuals or groups either find the power and control they lost in submitting to the overwhelming force, which they eventually rebel against, or in searching for an Other on which they can impose their power. Both produce further cycles of *ecstasis*: exponential cycles of trauma and violence—the "Fanonian *cul-de-sac.*"

In the film and the novel, the forest represents this overwhelming force that, materially or symbolically, inspires *ecstasis* and destabilizes individuals' and groups' identities that causes them to form ontologies that secure their identities against it. While Ba Kobhio and Ouenangare and Bofane offer similar chiastic travel narratives, following male protagonists, that reimagine Conrad's *Heart of Darkness* (1899) from a postcolonial African perspective, their narratives occur at different scales, which together demonstrate how individual experiences of *ecstasis* might branch out to broader communities, expanding networks of unresolved trauma and

violence. In *Le silence de la forêt*, Kobhio and Ouenangare's protagonist Gonaba, a French-educated expat, returns to the Central African Republic via riverboat to work as a regional education inspector. After years of failing to impose European ontology on the education system and a confrontation with the Prefect, he ventures into the forest to 'educate' the persecuted Biaka, a Mbenga pygmy people.

In *Congo, Inc.*, Bofane's protagonist, Isookanga Lolango Djokisa, whose name means Isookanga Wounded Love (149), resembles the European comedic outlaw. He leaves his forest village where he is heir-apparent to his uncle, the Chief of the Ekonda pygmy clan, by riverboat for Kinshasa, the capital of the DRC, to become an "internationalist who aspires to be a globalizer" (11). Later, we learn that shame was his true motivation to leave the forest because his mother forgot to have him circumcised, which left him undesirable to local women. In Kinshasa, he enters an urban jungle where he connects readers to a host of other stock characters stereotypically associated with the Congo—an anthropologist, street children, child witches, child prostitutes, a child soldier, a warlord, UN peacekeepers, Pentecostal preacher, and a Chinese mineral trader. These characters, like Isoo, emerge from their own traumatic ecosystems that accompany them to Kinshasa and map onto global, historical trade routes and exploitation of the forested and war-ravaged Kivu regions in the eastern DRC to the United States, Europe, and China. In both works, the forest communities represent what Mbembe calls "'absolute otherness'," the ground of European and postcolonial ontologies whose hierarchies ignite the contest for Whiteness that forms the "Fanonian *cul-de-sac*" (*On the Postcolony* 2). Importantly, both film and novel are fiction and not ethnographic representations of these forest communities. In referring to these forest communities, I will use the language of the film and novel. For example, while we know from research that the film depicts a Biaka community, characters in

the film use the term ‘Pygmy’ throughout to refer to it, which emphasizes their ‘absolute otherness’ within country.

Neither work offers specific directions for escape from the *cul-de-sac*. Instead, the “extroverted,” or Western facing, film and novel, challenge their audiences to recognize the palimpsest of trauma, the traumatic ecosystem, and violence that stigmatizes the Congo rainforest its symptom (Julien 683).[5] By identifying the traumatic roots of the regional violence, Ba Kobhio and Ouenangare and Bofane echo the title of psychologist Richard Schwartz’s book that there are “no bad parts.”[6] In other words, it is the hierarchical relations rather than the individual parts with the traumatic ecosystem that trigger feelings of vulnerability and insecurity and produce the feelings of competition and aggression that individual parts use to protect themselves. This recognition opens the traumatic ecosystem to the possibility of changing these affective relations and highlights the necessity for care alongside economic and political solutions that accompany any movement towards reparations.[7]

Ontologies of the Congo Traumatic Ecosystem

Ecstasis emerges within the posthuman performance of the Congo traumatic ecosystem, I argue and Ba Kobhio and Ouenangare and Bofane demonstrate, from the competition among coexistent ontologies, or apparatuses, that produce difference and award value and power to particular beings. I will outline that narrative and detail those ontologies before turning to the film and novel to support them. On the ground, so to speak, the value and power that these ontologies confer materially and symbolically determine the order in which beings might be exploited or sacrificed to preserve those atop each hierarchy. They identify difference and indicate beings’ proximities to death, located literally and symbolically in the forest, and these relations shape the traumatic ecosystem. Feelings of *ecstasis* arise when an individual’s or a

group's position on the hierarchy is threatened, or the ontological hierarchy, itself. These feelings can produce psychological or physical violence among individuals and groups to preserve or advance their positions on the hierarchy and to maintain the dominant ontology. Consequently, traumatic ecosystems are palimpsests that contain unresolved trauma from diverse pasts, imagined futures, and locations as well as ontologies that shape individuals' and groups' mindbodies. They influence how they respond to apparently similar situations even in different times and locations. For example, the fear one might develop from the trauma of being bitten by a poisonous snake if left unresolved will accompany them throughout their lives and to other locations and even transfer to others like family and friends and different species of snakes. On a larger scale, the fear groups might develop from the trauma of systemic oppression if left unresolved will also follow them and influence how they engage with the worlds they encounter to preserve themselves from death. The postcolony results from this posthuman performance in which the forest, literally or symbolically, plays a central role.

Within the Congo traumatic ecosystem of the film and novel, the three predominant ontologies competing for dominance are the precolonial transactional, European capitalist, and postcolonial. Each emerges from different historical and geographical traumatic ecosystems and values beings, and, especially the forest, differently. I will sketch them here to better understand the stakes of the postcolonial presents in the film and novel. The precolonial transactional ontology is only precolonial in the sense that it predates colonialism, and it remains dominant in more secluded and shrinking areas of the Congo forest. The communities that Ba Kobhio and Ouenangare and Bofane represent are at once specific to the indigenous forest communities they depict and general in their symbolic representations of them. In their depictions, the Congo forest is an overwhelming force to which the human communities have partnered materially and

spiritually through negotiation with the nonhuman to incorporate its resources into their lives for their survival. Achille Mbembe in *Necropolitics* (2011) offers a more specific description. These "old African cognitive worlds," he explains, were not actually ontological in the sense that the boundaries between beings were opaque if not fluid (107). Humans were not content with being humans. Instead, they augmented their being by adopting qualities from animals, plants, and "various animate and inanimate objects" (107). They materially and spiritually add to their human powers by harnessing the powers of others that share their world. Importantly, neither Ba Kobhio and Ouenangare nor Bofane romanticize this ontology. They represent it as patriarchal, heteronormative, and conservative. In *Le silence de la forêt*, the male Patriarch is the liaison between the forest beings and the village and maintains the covenant between the two, such as the boundaries of the village itself, which Gonaba violates when he builds his hut. Similarly, Chief Lomama in *Congo, Inc.* communicates with nonhumans, like the male leopard, Nkoi Mobali, the king of the forest, to maintain the food chain, or hierarchy that the warthogs disrupt by killing Nkoi Mobali. Consequently, the film and the novel show how the ontology fixes members of the communities into limited roles in which some, like Kali and Isoo, grow discontented and enables patriarchs to hold their power.

European capitalist ontology, a second in the film and the novel, arose in Europe directly from humans' confrontations with the forest, which they brought with them to the Congo forest through colonialism. Robert Pogue Harrison in *Forests: The Shadow of Civilization* (1992) explains the psychological origins of this antagonistic relationship between Europeans and the forest that gave rise to this ontology. Reading Giambattista Vico's *New Science* (1744), he locates it in the initial religious trauma that humans experienced upon learning of the sky: the world beyond the forest canopy from which they might receive signs from Jove. This realization

opened “nature’s closed cycle of generation and decay” to linear time and the possibility of immortality from which formed “the universal human institutions of religion, matrimony, and burial of the dead” that provided order and certainty to life (5).[8] In Vico’s telling, the “bestial” giants from *Genesis* who first occupied the Earth knew nothing except copulating and wandering under the forest canopy until thunder and lightning revealed the ineffable sky to them. Harrison describes this experience as religious trauma in which the world transformed into more than a “habitat” (5). They understood the thunder and lightning as signs from Jove, the divine creator, whose revelation opened them to the possibilities of the human mind, civilization, and linear time. If they could communicate with Jove, they might predict the future and introduce more certainty and meaning into their lives in the form of domestic and civil order. Religion, thus, moved from its forest container to the infinite sky, and the canopy, rather than protecting humans, obscured their access to Jove. As a result, the forest “became profane” and “*monstrous*” and required clearing for humans to receive signs (6). Similarly, its disordered, promiscuous confines threatened to destroy the other two human institutions of matrimony and burial. The tangled understory provided shelter for deviant women which enabled illicit sexual unions that might corrupt the “genealogical line in the present” and hid burial sites that maintained a “reverence for the past” (8). The forest, Harrison argues, became a refuge for paganism, femininity, and rebellion. To clear confusion from the human mind and society, humans razed the entropic forests and replaced them with graduated and ordered institutions: “‘first the forests, after that the huts, then the villages, next the cities, and finally the academies’” (11). The further humans evolved from the forest and integrated into the order of human institutions, the greater distance they placed between themselves and death. Fundamentally, this hierarchy formed the basis of European capitalist ontology. It divided humans who employed reason to transcend the

natural cycle of life from the forest and its Others who remained subject to their ignorance and desires and thus finitude. Humans became masters over the forest and its Others whom they could exploit to accumulate wealth and maintain the institutions of religion, matrimony, and burial that promised them immorality.

This existential struggle to turn the forest into city both inspired imperialism and structured the colonial world. In Fanon's terms, the colonial world was a "compartmentalized world" divided into "species," which were measured against the category of 'human' (5). The species included the "ruling species" (5), or White Europeans, and colonized, or "the indigenous population," who were "reduced to the state of an animal" (7). Much like the precolonial transactional ontology, the European capitalist ontology was patriarchal. Mbembe describes it as a "phallocratic system," grounded in phallic power, where women are the objects of pleasure and domination for which men compete ("Provisional Notes" 9). The forest, a feminine space in European mythology, is literally and symbolically entwined with this system and the source of phallic power. During colonialism, European men emasculated African men by "sexually subduing" their women (13). The hierarchy established a "permanent state of tension" in which the colonized, who were excluded from the White world, both despised and envied it. They always "dream[ed] of taking the colonist's place" (16). To improve their position on the hierarchy, some of the indigenous population internalized the European capitalist ontology. "The colonized," Fanon explains in *Black Skin, White Masks*, "is elevated above his jungle status in proportion to his adoption of the mother country's standards. He becomes whiter as he renounces his blackness, his jungle" (18). From these efforts, a third figure arose: the "colonized intellectual," who valued individual subjectivity and believed "wealth lies in thought" (11). Gonaba in *Le silence de la forêt* fits this characterization. Educated in France, he quotes

Descartes to Manga, his 'Pygmy' guide, and insists on the superiority of Western epistemology (*Wretched* 8). His efforts to introduce the European education system to the country are entwined with phallic struggle with the Prefect, in the city, and Ekongo, in the forest, for the possession of women—Simone and Kali. As the film and the novel suggest, however, the efforts of phallic power to expand the city and dominate the forest are endless because it requires the forest and its Others to support the hierarchy. It produces chaos, or difference, in its quest to impose order, or Whiteness, on the world to escape the forest's promise of mortality.

Postcolonial ontology, the third one that appears in the film and the novel, blends aspects of the precolonial transactional and European capitalist ontologies within the arbitrary confines of postcolonial nation-state. The forest remains the edge of civilization from which citizens vie to escape. In "Provisional Notes on the Postcolony," Mbembe argues that the postcolony retains the violent technologies that the colonial system employed to subdue the forest and its Others and turns them inward to generate an "*economy of death*" (12). The "*commandement*," a social, political, and cultural imaginary, gives form often in the figure of an autocrat to the ontological rubble of colonialism's efforts to restructure space and time (3). Atop the hierarchy, the autocrat becomes a fetish, who much like those who participate in the precolonial transactional ontology, gathers "a surplus of meanings," which he unilaterally defines and enacts, from which he claims his phallic power (4). To avoid emasculation, a form of death, he protects himself with "the aesthetics and stylistics of power"—robes of virility, gluttony, and opulence—and projects his image into all facets of national life (9). The postcolony, however, is "chaotically pluralistic" and inherently unstable (3). As a result, the autocrat must threaten pain to preserve his "mythologies of power" (8). Again, recalling the precolonial transactional ontology, to avoid pain, citizens perform a "logic of 'conviviality'" in which they blend their daily lives with the excess power of

the *commandement* (10). However, within this everyday performance, they imagine alternate realities, which Bofane in *Congo, Inc.* calls "virtual universes," where they carve out power for their own lives (7). Consequently, both the autocrat and his citizens live in "magical" realities that sap the other's power, leading to mutual "disempowerment" (10). For example, Mbembe suggests, to display their fealty and avoid pain, a family might hang a portrait of the autocrat on their wall; however, the portrait in its mundanity reminds the family of its mythology, which provides them ontological space within the hierarchy to construct their own concepts of 'self.' However, to maintain daily autonomy, they must occasionally participate in the "ceremonies of the *commandement*" that maintain the autocrat's phallic power. At official ceremonies and public executions, his subjects are required "to sing or dance or wriggle their bodies about in the sun" and acknowledge them as "social transaction[s]" of public enjoyment (13). In the "*economy of death,"* the postcolonial *commandement*, whose excesses of phallic power flow between the autocrat and the citizens, transforms colonial violence from a disciplinary technology for 'civilizing' native 'degeneracy' and lecherousness to a postcolonial "right to punish" that enforces its ontological hierarchy (12). In its instability, however, phallic power eventually turns on the autocrat, as the former warlord in *Congo, Inc.*, Kiro, learns when he is necklaced by a mob responding to his kept wife's screams, and those oppressed by the system replace him, as Kiro's wife replaces him with Reverend Jonas Monkaya, and impose a new mythology. [9] Additionally, the autocrat's power, like that of the colonizers, as Ba Kobhio and Ouenangare and Bofane evince, is largely confined to the city. The Congo forest and its Others, like the southeastern regions of the DRC, remain the edge of civilization, largely impenetrable to and independent from phallic power, and a source of disorder, lawlessness, and coup-de-états.

Together, these three ontologies compete for power and form the Congo traumatic ecosystem. In short, the violence of colonialism emerged from unresolved European religious trauma that marked the once overwhelming forests' feminine realms of confusion, lawlessness, and death. Rather than accept this future, Europeans by-passed their trauma by attempting to dominate the forest, literally or symbolically, and its Others, whom they labelled as less-than-human, to exploit them and accumulate power that would preserve their aspirations for immortality. These aspirations stretched to the colonial world, or other spaces that harbored untamed forests and death, where through phallic power they imposed their ontology on the colonial world and displaced precolonial ones. Decolonial efforts expelled the Europeans, but male leaders maintained the colonial ontology that concentrated their power through fealty to the nation-state and oppression of Others. The precolonial transactional ontology returned literally and symbolically in the form of the "*commandement*," represented by the autocrat, that accumulated the disparate powers from the collection of beings contained with in the newly formed nation-state and harnessed the colonial apparatuses to enforce his mythology of omnipotence through pain and threat of death. Citizens decorate their houses with his image and perform in official ceremonies to maintain the mythology and avoid pain while carving out space in their lives for their own mythologies that return power to themselves. And, yet, at the edges of cities and villages, the forest stands, populated with its Others, who threaten to pull 'humanity' back into degeneracy, licentiousness, and finitude. In what follows, I will read *Le silence de la forêt* and *Congo, Inc.* to demonstrate how *ecstasis* and violence arise individually and collectively among men who are by-passing their own feelings of emasculation, or trauma, by competing to impose their ontologies on others and secure phallic power.

White Man's Burden

The three competing ontologies are present from the opening scene in *Le silence de la forêt.* At first glance, Kobhio and Ouenangare's film offers a less violent picture of the postcolony. The story is set in the Central African Republic after independence and opens with a picturesque scene on a riverboat in the Oubangui river.[10] Absent are images of systemic physical violence and neo-imperial exploitation that famously cripple the region, and the characters except for a minor one are all Black so the familiar Western racism is absent. However, if viewers are familiar with Joseph Conrad's *Heart of Darkness*, the colonial specters soon appear. The narrator and main character, Gonaba, is the first voice viewers hear, and he frames the story for us. In Marlowian fashion, as the camera pans to his younger self, he explains in French to the audience as if we were his fellow river travelers that he is returning to his homeland after finishing his education in France to serve his country as an Inspector of Primary Schools. Advertising his difference, he sits on the deck in a Western suit and tie, in a wooden lounge chair as if on a pleasure cruise, and reads a book. Unlike his colleagues who remained in France to enjoy its luxuries, he explains, he hopes to guide his country into the modern world. In other words, he hopes to modernize his country by imposing the European capitalist ontology.

As he narrates, however, Kobhio and Ouenangare draw allusions to other literary figures, like Samba Diallo from Cheikh Hamidou Kane's *L'Aventure ambigu*ë (1961) and Obi Okonkwo from Chinua Achebe's *No Longer at Ease* (1960), who blended Western education with their African identities only to find themselves ontologically homeless. In the scene, a boy ventures from his mother's side to check out the book that he is reading as if he has never seen one. Gonaba excitedly reaches into his bag and pulls out a reader to give to the boy. Before he can open it, however, his mother intervenes, slapping the reader out of the boy's hands and scolds him, telling him to "leave the tall man in peace" (1:37). Then, the ferryman adds further insult,

announcing that the "white man shouldn't be disturbed" (1:43). Gonaba is confused and immediately defends himself, insisting "I'm not white! I'm from this country!" (1:48). The ferryman questions his native bonafides, wondering how he could want to return to a country where manioc is eaten for every meal and the ministers change every month. He concludes that either he does not know the country or "something's wrong in [his] head" (2:00). The ferryman's glib comment is more accurate than he suspects. Gonaba has assimilated to the European capitalist ontology. He is like Fanon's "colonized intellectual" and is foreign to the postcolonial ontology with which the ferryman is familiar. Finally, he tells him that he should have stayed in France. Gonaba, clearly unmoored by the response to his good intentions, weakly defends himself, expressing his goal of changing the country. The ferryman laughs mockingly for several seconds. Gonaba defiantly turns away from him to the forested shoreline that harbors the precolonial transactional ontology. The camera frames him from the back against the trees as if they are in opposition, and then pans to and freezes on his distant stare upwards and off camera. The narrator concludes the scene with his resolute fantasy: "I already see the day when I'll say triumphantly: 'Come and see what I did for our happiness'" (2:36).

For many viewers, this scene elicits discordant feelings. On the one hand, we might connect to the development narrative Gonaba tells, the goals of educating his compatriots to integrate them into the modern world and set them free from the darkness of the forest.[11] From this perspective, in sacrificing a comfortable life in France, he is extending kindness and generosity to his people by improving theirs, symbolized by his eager offering of the reader to the boy. On the other hand, his fellow passengers describe him in terms usually associated with a colonizer—"white" and "tall"—terms characters use to describe him throughout the film. They resonate with many settler-colonial texts that embrace the message of Rudyard Kipling's "White

Man's Burden" (1899) that white people are responsible for taming the "new-caught, sullen peoples, / Half devil and half child" and their lands (7-8). Through this lens, Gonaba is returning to his country to 'civilize' it, an intention anyone familiar with the history of colonialism would reflexively question. However, Kobhio and Ouenangare further complicate the scene because it departs from these intertextual interpretations in one important way. Everyone involved is Black and native to the country. The racial binary, which Fanon argues constitutes the colonizer-colonized relationship, is clearly present when it seemingly should not be. Moreover, it seems misplaced because Gonaba appears well-intentioned. His imperfect fit within this white-savior trope creates dissonance for the viewers between the familiar colonizer-colonized categories and raises questions about how the film defines the face and shape of colonization and colonial violence.

I contend, however, that Kobhio and Ouenangare present viewers with a third choice, one that acknowledges that both interpretations can be true: Gonaba's intentions are benevolent and his efforts to realize them are violent.[12] Kobhio and Ouenangare signal this paradox to readers using dramatic irony—the incongruities between how Gonaba's narrative voice frames his actions and other characters' responses to his efforts. Much like Marlow in *Heart of Darkness*, Gonaba's narrative voice, delivered in French throughout, is extroverted and speaks directly to us as the final arbiters of his story. In this capacity, he addresses us, a Western-educated audience, and assumes our sympathies toward what one critic has called his "noble object of educating the Pygmies" (Joslin 182). As narrator, he plays to our shared European capitalist ontology, the basis for our internalized racist preconceptions about Africa, that paint it as what Mbembe calls "a series of hollows," or forests in European mythology, in which we can deposit our irrational fears and desires and against which we construct antithetical identities (*On the Postcolony* 179). And

yet, Kobhio and Ouenangare indicate that Gonaba's mission, as his fellow passengers hint, is not so altruistic. Instead of development, they perceive Gonaba's efforts to Europeanize their country, one still recovering from the trauma of European colonialism, as further acts of ontological violence.[13]

The dramatic irony provides us enough distance to recognize, as Caroline Levine suggests, the "hierarchical forms to see what arrangements they impose and to consider what happens to their organizing power when they intersect with other forms" (85). In other words, the dramatic irony enables viewers to witness the cycles of *ecstasis*, or contests between ontological hierarchies, or apparatuses. The challenges Gonaba receives to his ontology in these settings force him outside of himself and reveal the disconnect between the heroic narrative of his voiceovers and his self-serving actions. They follow a common pattern. Gonaba is overwhelmed, or emasculated, by the jungle on which he attempts to impose his ontology. Then, to recover his phallic power, he challenges what he perceives as the injustices of the local social hierarchy and hurts those whom he believes he is defending. When that fails, he seeks to recover it by blending with an equal, a sought-after local woman. Likewise, the women are attracted by the alternative example of masculinity he offers. At first, these relationships represent the positive face of *ecstasis* in that they offer him possible futures within their respective communities. Gonaba, however, is uninterested in abandoning his 'civilizing mission' to blend with another ontology, and his efforts to integrate are solely in service of it. The negative face of *ecstasis* emerges once he has recovered his phallic power when he discards the women to renew his colonizing efforts elsewhere. In his path, Gonaba leaves behind further trauma from which the communities must recover. By juxtaposing these *ecstatic cycles*, Kobhio and Ouenangare reveal the narrative voice's attempts to spin his past violent actions to Europeanize his country—to master the

"silence of the forest"—as efforts to recover the phallic power he lost in his Western education. In his failure, Kobhio and Ouenangare also demonstrate the mythology of such hierarchies and the futility of trying to escape where we always already are—the forest. If viewers can resist blending with the power that Gonaba offers us to diagnose modern Africa, then we can analyze the ontological complexities of the film's traumatic ecosystem in which characters perceive violence as a viable path toward healing. From this perspective, the film argues that unresolved colonial and postcolonial trauma, and not the corrupting influence of the forest, perpetuates the contests for phallic power that plague the 'postcolony.'

In the film, Kobhio and Ouenangare repeat and expand the opening scene twice more in what I call *ecstatic cycles*. They place Gonaba in two thematically parallel 'jungle' traumatic ecosystems: the postcolonial urban 'jungle' and a Pygmy village in the Congo forest. Within the European capitalist ontology where Gonaba formed his identity both are external to civilization and represent degrees of proximity to the forest and finitude. Consequently, they produce similar responses in Gonaba when he fails to impose his ontology on them. To identify these patterns, I will analyze scenes from each of these traumatic ecosystems in which Gonaba's attempts to impose his ontology to overcome his trauma bring him into confrontation with other overwhelming forces that trigger *ecstasis* and emasculation that drive him further into confrontations with the forest to recover his phallic power. In these cycles, Kobhio and Ouenangare demonstrate the centrality of trauma to the contests between ontologies that produce violence in the postcolony.

The initial cycle ignites between Gonaba and the Prefect, a representative of the *commandement*. The confrontation takes place at the Independence Day party at the Prefect's mansion. At the Prefect's mansion, Kobhio and Ouenangare sketch him with stereotypical

characteristics of the autocrat. The Prefect and his wife are greeting guests at the front entrance, and his interactions with them seem to confirm Gonaba's earlier criticism of his corruption that demands fealty. The two sets of guests prior to Gonaba's arrival prefigure the sources and prizes of the Prefect's phallic power, the forest and women, which were also the sources of colonial power, that remain in contest. In an inversion of colonial relations, the first guests are the white forest minister and his Black wife. In the brief encounter, the Prefect asks him about the wood, and he replies that "it's exported . . . despite the ecologists" (7:29). Ironically, on Independence Day, the Prefect demonstrates that independence from colonial rule only means a shift in the skin color of those exploiting the country. The Prefect has adopted the colonial perspective that the country's resources are his personal bank account, a refrain to which he admits later at the party. Simone Izou is the next guest to arrive. The respected owner of *Le Paris* bar, she ascends the stairs in a tight-fitting, black sequined dress. Simone speaks French and possesses the qualities of European beauty: tall, slender, straight hair, and light brown skin. The Prefect greets her as if they are long-lost acquaintances, but Simone is indiscreet about the Prefect's frequent visits to her bar, revealing his extramarital interest in her. Before the Prefect can recover with small talk, Gonaba arrives, providing him with a distraction from his embarrassment. He attempts to shame Gonaba by insulting his clothes in front of his wife and Simone, but it fails to land. Instead, Simone and Gonaba lock eyes. They both admit to having heard of each other but never having met. Gonaba says that he does not frequent bars, and Simone insists hers is different, foreshadowing their next stop in the evening. To the Prefect's disappointment, they disappear together into the party, Gonaba having won the attention of the woman, phallic power, and, symbolically, the region.

In the next scene, their contest for dominance explodes into a negative *ecstatic* display over the Prefect's dehumanizing treatment of a Pygmy dance troupe, a symbol of the forest in postcolonial ontology. His behavior angers Gonaba, a student of the Enlightenment, who advocates, at least in principle, for the equality of all 'men.' In this example, his identity contracts under threat, and he is forced to retreat. After entering the party, Gonaba and Simone eventually stroll out onto the balcony overlooking the performing dance troupe. Male and female Pygmies are topless in grass-like skirts, shuffling in a circle and playing instruments around a spinning dancer who is outfitted with top and bottom skirts that expand to resemble tree leaves, identifying them with the forest. Gonaba and Simone are clapping along to the drumbeat and smiling when a dignitary next to them tosses a scrap of food down to the circle. The Pygmies break the circle and shamelessly fight over the scraps as if they were a pack of dogs. The government official laughs at the sight, and Gonaba grunts disapprovingly at his sense of superiority.

In response, he decides to participate to teach his fellow countrymen. Instead of joining the circle, however, he pushes his way to the center, a dominating and attention-grabbing move, and dances enthusiastically to the delight of Simone. But Gonaba has ulterior motives. In joining the troupe, he has challenged the postcolonial ontological hierarchy that he believes exploits the Pygmies and represents "undignified behavior" (10:14). In short order, a suited security guard attempts to pull him out of the circle, and Gonaba pushes him to the ground and threatens to punch him. The confrontation only stops when the Prefect yells at him in French from the balcony, accusing him of being a "shame to our government!" (10:07). The Prefect responds to Gonaba's challenge as a personal affront, scolding him for telling him how to act and insulting him as an "ill dressed monkey" (10:14). The Prefect's insult alludes to the postcolonial

ontological hierarchy, situating Gonaba and the Pygmies within the forest world. Gonaba responds by grabbing a reluctant Pygmy and pulling him toward him, an emasculating gesture. He asserts some kind of kinship with him and accuses the Prefect of treating them "like beasts" and forcing them to perform for guests as if they were in "a zoo!" (10:24). The Prefect defends himself by describing them, much like he does the forest earlier, as "a natural wealth we should exploit" (10:39). The Prefect, escalating the situation, descends the stairs. Gonaba counters that the Prefect is the "shameful one," as he again reaches for the Pygmy (10:48). He rubs his head and pats his shoulder as if he were his servant or a child. Before the Prefect reaches him, however, he walks off, acknowledging his defeat. As he does, Simone runs down the stairs after him, and the Prefect, grimacing, reaches out to her and calls her name but to no avail. In asserting his political dominance, he has lost the female prize. Even in retreat, Gonaba absconds with some of the Prefect's phallic power.

Kobhio and Ouenangare hint, however, that Gonaba's crusade against the Prefect enacts ontological violence against those he claims to defend: the Pygmies and the forest. In the next scene, Simone catches up and walks with him to his car. She offers an astute critique of Gonaba's actions, specifically that the Pygmies were confused by the confrontation. Gonaba dismisses her concern and reveals true intentions, explaining "If you understood, it's enough for me" (11:16). His primary concern was impressing Simone, and he used the Pygmies to do it. The admission explains why he occupied the center of the dance circle rather than joining it. Further, her concern provides him with the opportunity to lecture her about his admiration for them. In Orientalizing language, he tells her, "They're truer than we are . . . centuries of humiliation didn't change them a bit," a subtle nod to his dissimilar experience in France (11:20, 11:30). She objects that if they are so resilient, then "they don't need you. They never asked you!" (11:34).

Gonaba retorts, “I don’t need their ballots to defend them” (11:38). Gonaba fits them into his white savior project that he believes licenses him to speak for them against the postcolonial hierarchy. His attempt to challenge the Prefect and to position himself as a heroic figure for Simone comes at the expense of those he purports to defend. His efforts differ little from the Prefect’s whose interests are to exploit the country’s natural resources. Both his confrontation with the Prefect and his exploitation of the Pygmies are examples of ontological violence.

After his failure to ‘protect’ the Pygmies of the forest, Gonaba next targets Simone, the postcolonial woman and the next guest after the Forest Minister to arrive at the Prefect’s house, from whom he hopes to recover his phallic power. He treats her much like the Oriental woman of European travel narratives, a role with which she is familiar. However, she is more of his equal; she covets him for his ‘whiteness.’ In his car, travelling from the party to her bar, she admits as much to Gonaba. She tells him, “You read too much. You dream with your eyes open. I don’t care if you’re right or wrong. You’re different” (12:01-12). Later, she reveals the difference to which she is referring is his whiteness. She tells him that he is her “ideal”: a black man who acts like a white one (26:18). In other words, she is attracted to the European capitalist ontology though which he engages the world, something she learned about as a secret mistress to an “impotent” old French white man to whom she gave his “manhood back,” a service she will perform for Gonaba, too (14:15). Her association with Gonaba’s colonized mind allows her to distance herself from the ‘jungle,’ a sentiment she expresses later when she insults the Pygmies not because of their body size but because they “lack both brain and soul,” echoing European racist beliefs about Africans (25:50). A representation of the postcolony, she places the white man atop her hierarchy furthest from the monkey and strives to escape towards Europe rather than return to her historical origins.

Their different ontologies also create an ecstatic contest for dominance, but one like Fabian's examples that seems to expand their identities rather than threaten them, which leads to a positive outcome rather than violence. At Simone's bar, Kobhio and Ouenangare quickly expose viewers to the underbelly of the postcolony, a heterotopic space that complicates the 'official' hierarchical order that the Prefect, the embodiment of the *commandement*, maintains. A band is setting the rhythm for a hormonal scene of drinking and dancing, the antithesis of the performative order of the parade and afterparty. Simone and Gonaba join the dancing but quickly escape to the backroom where Simone, in a further inversion of the postcolonial *commandement*, consults with her male manager about the success of the night. Echoing critiques of postcolonial governmentality, they agree about the superiority of the band to her cadre of DJs who steal her CDs with impunity because she is unable to identify the culprits. Simone expresses her frustration to Gonaba, and he suggests she accompany him on an official school inspection to Bilolo the next day. Aware of what he is implying, she smirks and questions him: "Moving fast, no?" (15:36). Quick with his reply, Gonaba insists, parroting colonial racist stereotypes about African hypersexuality, "Long courtships are for white men!" (15:38). As if proof of Gonaba's claim, the film skips any foreplay and jumps to the end of their sexual intercourse. The hierarchical inversions follow them to the bedroom. Immediately, they resemble her racist description of the Pygmies—no brain, no soul. They are preverbal, animal bodies in the forest, grunting and groaning, wrestling each other into position for physical gratification. Like the Pygmies, Kobhio and Ouenangare shoot them in partial nudity, topless. As the scene continues, however, their bodies appear less utilitarian. Simone's, instead of an Oriental woman, resembles a white western ideal. She has not birthed children, and her body is shot from the side and sexualized. And Gonaba's large physique and hairy chest, in contrast to the Pygmy men's smaller

physiques and hairless chests, more closely resemble an ape's body, identifying him with the jungle. Her skin, too, is lighter than his, alluding to colonial fears of African men raping or stealing white men's wives. In this case, she is the ex-white-man's lover and presently the Prefect's love interest whom he has 'stolen.' In a dramatic reversal, however, Simone takes control and mounts Gonaba where she orgasms first and does not wait for him to do the same. Instead, she slides down his body to perform fellatio, grabbing his jaw as if binding him while he convulses in ecstasy that one could mistake for pain. In the heterotopic bedroom scene, both Gonaba and Simone appear to equally fulfill their desires for power. Gonaba regains his masculinity through possessing the Oriental 'other,' and Simone dominates her white suitor. As a couple, they appear the ideal power couple. She has potentially found a 'white' male partner who can protect her from her thieving DJs, and he has symbolically replaced the Prefect as a manager for her business empire. And yet, for viewers, the mélange of colonial tropes Kobhio and Ouenangare layer on the scene reveals their mythology. Regardless of the ontological hierarchies with which Gonaba and Simone engage the world, they are animals in the bedroom, no different from their evolutionary ancestors in the forest. In the bedroom scene, both Gonaba and Simone recover phallic power. Gonaba dominates the Prefect by possessing Simone in bed, and Simone transacts with Gonaba's phallic power that the postcolony awards to white men.

This iteration of the ecstatic cycle concludes outside the bedroom heterotopia in the village of Bilolo where, having recovered his phallic power, he abandons Simone and his 'civilizing mission' in the urban 'jungle' and leaves behind only ontological wounds. After breakfast, in a scene that resembles for viewers the beginning of a colonial safari, his servant drives them in a truck through the urban jungle toward the rural village, which is seemingly carved out of the forest. As if moving back in evolutionary time, the camera follows Gonaba's

truck down a congested potholed road through a bustling market, which transforms into a single-track, and cuts through a dense forest that ends at the village. The change of place also enacts a transition in hierarchical relations. Their arrival resembles that of the Prefect's at the Independence Day ceremony. They drive up in the pickup, and the entire school is lined up in front of the colonial-era classrooms awaiting his arrival. Their ontological differences clash when they discuss the school's problems with elders and students' parents under the counsel tree. Once the men gather under the tree, the Chief complains to Gonaba that the principal and his teachers who are all male and assigned from elsewhere in the country have been sleeping with their female students. They steal their virginity and that decreases the value of the doweries suitors offer. Because the Principal and teachers are appointed by the government, the Chief and village have no authority over them. Instead, they must appeal to Gonaba to intervene. Surprisingly, however, he scolds both sides. Overwhelmed by the challenge to his mission he faces, he complains that all he hears about when he visits, he says, is sexual misconduct. Instead, as if the topics were unrelated, he would like to discuss "schooling . . . [and] the learning initiatives [he has] organized recently" (20:24, 20:32-3). Much like he did with Simone, he fails to defend the female students by ensuring they feel secure in the classroom. Nor does he challenge the village's marriage customs that treat women as chattel. Obviously, the equality he espouses does not extend to women or those below him on his ontological hierarchy. Overwhelmed by local issues, he experiences *ecstasis*, becomes angry, and tries to force his agenda on the village. In doing so, he commits an act of ontological violence.

The postcolonial jungle *ecstatic cycle* ends with Gonaba retreating further into the forest. That evening, Gonaba is despondent, entirely emasculated by the postcolony in his efforts to Europeanize it. At his desk, he hears a noise outside and catches the chief's Pygmy servant,

Manga, slinking in the shadows around the white man's hut. Rather than admonish him, he invites him to sit and learns that Manga sought out his servant role to educate himself about the "tall men" (22:39). Echoing the precolonial transactional ontology, Manga tells him, "To us, you are strange beings. I want to know the secret of your power" (22:44-46). The implication is that they might augment their own power with it. In response, Gonaba expresses that he would like to know them as well and inquires about the distance to their village—a two-day walk. Later in the night, Gonaba walks outside again and decides he will purchase Manga from the Chief to set him free and return with him to his village to build schools so "they can fight injustice" and to make Simone "proud of" him (25:25-28). Gonaba imagines her as a partner in his 'civilizing mission,' but she objects that she cares nothing for the Pygmies. Instead, she had started to love him because he is her ideal—a white black man. Recalling the scene at the Prefect's and the pattern he is developing, she tells him, "It's easy to run away" (26:49). But her pleas fail to change his mind. He sends Simone back to Nola with his servant and follows Manga into the forest to provide the Pygmies the Western education for which they never asked. His efforts in his hero's quest to justify his European education and heal his neocolonial trauma only reduplicates colonial violence for those in his path.

Although truncated, the postcolonial 'jungle' scenes provide viewers with the context to recognize the *ecstatic cycle* Gonaba experiences in his efforts to impose European ontology on the Pygmies and the forest. In this cycle, the forest transforms from a symbolic Other in Nola to a dominant presence in the village. While Joslin is certainly correct to suggest his time in the village is "less about what he is able to teach the Pygmies . . . than about what they end up teaching him" (181), the knowledge Gonaba learns is not transformational for him—his "worldview" is not "altered" (175). Rather, his education—his efforts to blend with the village—

is a means for him to achieve his 'civilizing mission': convert the Pygmies to the modern world so they can regain their "dignity" and "fight injustice" (23:42). It is one to which Western viewers, who hold similar Orientalizing beliefs about the forest ontology, are sympathetic. However, his primary motivation is to provide himself an achievement he can "be proud of," to recover his phallic power (24:09-14). Much like the Prefect in Nola, however, the forest only further emasculates him and confronts him with his finitude, which leads to violence. In presenting viewers with these *ecstatic cycles*, Kobhio and Ouenangare reveal the origins of violence in the postcolony in the confrontation between hierarchical ontologies that shadow the feelings of powerlessness left by trauma.

In a transition between scenes, Kobhio and Ouenangare provide viewers with a sense of the forest's overwhelming power that contrasts with Gonaba's human aspirations with panoramic view of its immensity. The camera pans its canopy and finally rests on two small human figures with whom we are meant to identify who appear shrunken among the trees. It shifts to eye level where it follows them through the crowded underbrush until they nearly disappear. Like the ferry scene, Gonaba resembles to viewers a white explorer whose excessive Western outerwear appears silly next to Manga's minimal clothing. Gonaba carries a walking stick and wears a beige long sleeve shirt, blue jeans, and hiking boots while Manga walks barefoot in a tank top and shorts, hauling Gonaba's bag and a machete. Gonaba struggles to keep pace as the forest renders him childlike and helpless while Manga appears at home. At one point, he asks whether they have far to go, and Manga chides him that he does because "he walks too slowly" (27:49). Shortly after, Gonaba complains that he is hungry and starts to get fatigued. They encounter a large waterfall they must traverse. As they cross, he slips several times, and Manga must wait on him. When they reach the other side, Manga looks unfazed while Gonaba's clothes are muddy

and wet. Night falls, and the camera focuses on bushmeat roasting over a fire, leaving viewers little question who killed it. Sitting next to the fire, Manga further unsettles Gonaba by explaining to him they would "have to beware of wild beasts" (28:39). With a look of consternation, he asks how they might protect themselves at night, and Manga reassures him wild beasts do not attack sleeping humans. Gonaba realizes the education the French offered him will help him little in the forest where he is impotent.

To recover his phallic power, Gonaba lectures Manga about the foundational concepts of his European capitalist ontology to convince him of the merits of his 'civilizing mission.' Kobhio and Ouenangare structure the conversation to resemble the one he had with the ferryman and employ dramatic irony to highlight the disconnect between the two ontologies and the violence of his educational efforts. As the bushmeat cooks, Gonaba apparently having forgotten his struggle with the forest, scoots toward Manga and talks to him as if he were explaining the world to a child. He says, "I want to tell you . . . a secret" (29:00). Invoking what he believes is their common history, he mentions the French-educated, Catholic "father of our independence" (29:05), Barthélemy Boganda, who "said that we are all equal. All of us" (29:07). He lists himself, Chief Sobélé, and Manga, notably leaving out women. Manga appears surprised by what he hears, so Gonaba continues, referencing Jean-Jacques Rousseau to explain that he is equal to tall men because he is a citizen of the country. Manga replies, hinting at the forest framework from which he engages the world, "What tribe is he from?" (29:21). For Manga, tribe rather than country defines group identity. Mistaking tribe for race, Gonaba explains, Rousseau was "a white man who thought a lot. And what he said is true everywhere" (29:26-29). Confused, Manga replies, "They told me white men don't rule anymore" (29:31). Believing Manga is referring to the French colonial government, Gonaba chuckles at his innocence;

however, later in the film, the village Patriarch informs Gonaba one's personhood is located in the spirit rather than the body. It suggests that Manga's comment is referring to the colonial ontology that ruled their minds rather than the colonial government. The implication echoes the ferryman who questioned whether there is something wrong with Gonaba's mind.

Unaware of Manga's meaning, he leans in further as if explaining a complex idea to a child. He confirms their independence but explains that "we should take what is good from them" (29:39). Ironically for viewers, Manga pulls from his pocket a picture of a teenage soldier in a white military uniform, standing at attention with an automatic weapon. The juxtaposition equates French ontology with French weaponry and violence with each. He tells Gonaba, referring to him by his difference in height rather than skin color, "Tall man, if I'm a citizen, then I want to be like him" (29:47-52). Disturbed by this, Gonaba's face narrows at the colonial inheritance that Manga believes would make him equal. He discourages him from becoming a soldier, but Manga explains "that is my dream" (29:57). Once again, however, Gonaba fails to understand his words and misinterprets his "dream" as an aspiration rather than what we learn later as a message from his ancestors. He tells him that instead of a soldier, you can be "a guide among your people" (30:02). They can teach the Pygmies together, he suggests, "to refuse to be second class citizens" (30:23). In return, Gonaba repeats an indigenous stereotype and tells him, "You'll teach me the secret of your integrity" (30:29). Manga becomes frustrated and ignores his suggestion. Instead, he retorts, "You didn't understand me. I can only go back to my village once I've become a soldier" (30:31-6). He believes he is pursuing his destiny and cannot return without realizing it. In pointing to Gonaba's failure to understand Manga's meaning, Kobhio and Ouenangare show that they are operating from two different ontologies, one that orders being according to concepts such as race, citizenry, and intellectual inheritance and another according

to height, tribal affiliation, and spiritual inheritance. As a result, he is ignorant of the responsibility Manga has to his ancestors and the future they have laid out for him.

In the next scene, Manga attempts to bridge the gap in understanding by explaining to him the precolonial transactional ontology. After eating, they are reclining next to the fire. Manga removes a pendant from his neck and places it around Gonaba's. He tells him to wear it because it will protect him. "The animals," he explains, "know I'm not easy prey" (31:24). The implication, which the Patriarch later confirms, is that his spirit resides in the pendant. Gonaba is confused by Manga's explanation, so Manga starts to tell him their origin story, one that all the children of the village learn, about how the gorilla lost its tail. He explains that in the beginning the "Great Spirit created water and forest" and was happy with all their creatures except for one, the Pygmy, who was "rude and disobedient," so it expelled them to the forest (31:46-8, 31:56). Gonaba, however, has fallen asleep and the scene ends. The scene evinces that what Gonaba imagines as equality between him and the Pygmies only extends to their ability to blend with his European capitalist ontology.

The next morning, Gonaba quickly learns the inadequacy of his ontology when he wakes alone and finds a python slithering across his legs. Overwhelmed, he seizes up and immediately falls into *ecstasis*. Confronted by the unknown, he grabs his bag and machete and runs frantically through the dense forest, screaming for Manga. As he bushwacks, the camera shifts to a panoramic view of the forest, stretching endlessly, emphasizing the impossibility of Gonaba's situation, given the tools his ontology provides him. When the camera returns to Gonaba, he is disoriented, staring anxiously into the understory. Frantic, he resorts to violence against the forest and recklessly swings the machete at vegetation near his ankles. He trudges ahead past an ancient tree that creates a small clearing. With the machete in his right hand and the bag over his left

shoulder, he hunches over and resembles the gorilla from Manga's story. For the remainder of the minute and thirty second scene, the comparison is inescapable. The jungle, like the bedroom, flattens ontological hierarchies and reminds viewers of his animality, and, like Simone, it finishes the encounter on top. Before long, he stops and pans the forest, looking for an exit. Finding none, he continues his battle with the underbrush that at times appears to swallow him. Exhausted, he stumbles upon another ancient tree in a clearing. This time, however, his disoriented steps find a snare that entangles his ankle. He trips and concusses himself against a root of the tree. His watch falls off his wrist, his keeper of linear time, and the scene ends with a close-up of his head, bloodied, seemingly having fallen victim to the forest's cycle of birth and decay. Like white explorers before him, Gonaba has entered the jungle to master it only to learn that in the forest, he is the prey, and Jove is nowhere to save him.

In the next scene, Kobhio and Ouenangare layer colonial tropes about 'savages' from Western travel narratives that trigger viewers' own racist fears of the forest that remind us of the lens from which we view the film. It opens with a hunting party of four Pygmies, armed with a crossbow and spears, emerging from the forest carrying an unconscious Gonaba on their shoulders, calling out in their local dialect, "Come and see! All of you, come and see!" words most viewers would find unintelligible without the onscreen translation, further disorienting viewers (34:14-18). The camera focuses on the hunting party as they emerge from the dense forest. Topless villagers exit their thatch huts and rise from midday fires. Instead of beating drums, they pat their chests and gather around a pole hut as the party sets Gonaba on the ground. Untranslatable chatter breaks out, and the camera focuses on the crowd, some of whom have sharply filed teeth. The scene recalls Marlow's first sighting of Kurtz in *Heart of Darkness*. Similarly ailing and carried by natives on a makeshift stretcher, Marlow observes that he is

followed by “streams of human beings – of naked human beings with spears in their hands, with bows, with shields, with wild glances and savage movements . . . [who] poured into the clearing by the dark-faced and pensive forest” (59). Kobhio and Ouenangare draw on similar colonial fears, and yet, when the Patriarch arrives, he undermines those expectations by immediately demonstrating the healing powers of the forest. He orders the men to carry Gonaba to the guest hut and his grandson and heir, Toulou, to attend to him. Having dreamt of his arrival, he has already prepared two bundles of leaves and an orange-colored ointment that he sourced from the forest for him. Instead of eating him, villagers watch while Toulou rubs the ointment on his chest and wraps him in broad leaves. Ironically, rather than its victim, the trap appears to have saved him from himself in the forest. The Pygmies’ precolonial transactional ontology testifies to how the forest can support humans. Much like they did in the urban jungle, Kobhio and Ouenangare employ tropes from colonial travel narratives to stoke our fears of the Pygmies and the forest just before they undermine them. In doing so, they enable us to detach ourselves if only momentarily from European capitalist ontology and recognize the violence of those assumptions. As a result, viewers witness that for those steeped in it, the jungle is not a threat to life but a source of it.

Following Gonaba’s dramatic arrival, Kobhio and Ouenangare sketch the everyday life of the village that repeatedly confronts him with the differences between European capitalist and precolonial transactional ontologies that force him outside of himself into *ecstasis* and anticipate the violence of later scenes. His first foray into the village after a period of recovery demonstrates the different ways he and the community relate to materiality. Shortly after his arrival in the village, Kali, the younger sister of Touka, the man whose trap snared him, assumes his caretaking duties. When he awakes, her face is the first thing he sees. In an oneiric fog, her bright-eyed and beautiful smile appears angelic. Her short stature and closely-cropped hair strike

an entirely different figure from Simone's Western beauty, but Gonaba is immediately smitten. As he recovers, the film shows that she is unmarried but has a suitor, Ekongo, who becomes jealous of the attention she pays to him. Like Simone, she too returns strength to him, but their objects reveal their differing ontologies. Simone uses her body as 'medicine' to restore his phallic power and symbolic masculine identity while Kali applies manioc and caterpillars, medicine from the forest, to restore health to the physical body. Gonaba, however, fails to register the difference. Once strong enough, she leads him out of the hut's low-hanging arched doorway. Outside, they make observations about other's body that evince for viewers the different values they place in them. When he stands, she observes, "You're very tall" (42:06). In response, Gonaba attempts to flirt by sexualizing her body: "You have the most beautiful eyes ever" (42:10). Kali, however, is confused by his observation, asking "What's so special about my eyes?" (42:13). When he repeats his compliment, she challenges him: "Have you ever seen ugly eyes?" (42:18). Gonaba just smiles at the question, acting as if she is being difficult, but her meaning is more complex. Kali relates to the body in an entirely different way than Gonaba. She describes its practical, material features while Gonaba focuses on her body's aesthetic, abstract value to him.

Kobhio and Ouenangare further accentuate the difference between the value the ontologies place in material and abstract qualities for viewers as Kali leads him around the village. When they come to the pole hut, he finds his books, of course made from trees, ironically scattered on the ground in the forest and erupts in anger. He yells, "My books! I can't believe this! . . . They are precious" (43:14-19). Exasperated, he demands Kali to pick them up. Having internalized European capitalist ontology, they signify the value of the sacrifices of his own identity to the greater cause of converting his countrymen to the hierarchy affords him phallic

power that places him near the top. Their place on the ground threatens to cast him back into the forest's cycle of birth and decay, evincing life's finitude. The confrontation continues in a subsequent scene depicting the celebration of a successful hunt. The women are dancing to drums and singing in a circle with green, bushy tails, depicting their origin story about how gorillas lost their tails, and the men are drinking an alcoholic beverage from a bowl and sharing a joint. After attempting to dance with the women, he joins the men. When the joint reaches Touka, he comments, "Your leaves are good to roll weed" (44:59). The offhand comment has significance beyond what Touka can imagine. As soon as Gonaba realizes the "leaves" to which he is referring are from his books, he again loses his mind and falls into an *ecstatic* rage. He attempts to swat the joint out of Touka's hand and yells at him: "You must worship these pages. This knowledge will set you free. It will teach you not to fear tall men" (45:02-11). His words once again emphasize that he values the pages for the words, the abstract concepts, on them rather than their material qualities. The music and dancing halt. Touka looks confusedly at the Patriarch; clearly, he does not understand why these "leaves," processed into paper, hold the value Gonaba ascribes to them. Echoing the ferryman from the opening scene, the Patriarch announces to the village: "I told you so, his head hasn't healed yet" (45:13-18). In other words, his mind is still colonized by his European education. Gonaba immediately looks remorseful, and someone offers him palm wine as a peace offering, which he refuses until Kali insists it will make him feel better. The two encounters evince differences between Gonaba's European capitalist ontology and the precolonial transactional ontology. Gonaba assigns abstract value to eyes and leaves that affirm his linear perception of time and its promise of immortality while the Pygmies regard them based on their material functions. Moreover, the double entendre reminds

viewers that all leaves, including those that comprise books, originate in the forest and that we have never left.

In subsequent scenes, rather than submit to this truth, Gonaba, like the Prefect and the Europeans before him, attempts to exploit the forest, desecrating it much like the Pygmies did his books, to impose his European capitalist ontology, which results in *ecstasis* and violence. After his initial failures, Gonaba eventually constructs a classroom around the ancient tree where he has hung the blackboard to teach his abstract concepts; however, the scene emphasizes the value of interpreting the material environment. He has only started his first lesson on the alphabet when one boy speaks up and says, "Run, it smells like rain" (51:04). Gonaba scolds him: "Be attentive. There's no sight of rain" (51:07). The contrast between the child's use of smell and insistence on sight belies Gonaba's ignorance of the forest. In the city, where the sky is in view, sight is a reliable sense for detecting rain, but in the forest, where the canopy obstructs the sky, it like the alphabet is useless for interpreting it, and rain pours on their lesson. In another scene at the school, Gonaba is excited because the children had progressed from A to C and they "behaved," but when he examines their boards to see what they wrote, he finds they had all drawn pictures of animals and loses control. Out of his mind, he throws the board to the ground and then his pointing stick, and the children run. He yells, "Damn! They never understand anything. All this shit for nothing!" (1:07:07-10). Kali tries to console him by suggesting he should be happy they know how to draw. But Gonaba is not satisfied. For viewers, Kobhio and Ouenangare thickly paint his response with dramatic irony. Standing in front of the ancient tree where he hung his board, he corrects her, "No, Kali. In today's world, knowing how to read and write, is the basis of everything" (1:07:37-45). Literally every tool—the tree, the board, the pointing stick, the charcoal with which he writes, the benches on which they sit, and the books he

hopes to teach them to read—he is using to educate his students are products of the forest. The juxtaposition of his corrective and the setting reveals both his colonizing attitude, which only values abstract knowledge that excludes the village and forest from "today's world," and his colonized mind, which blinds him to the material reality that the forest is "the basis of everything."

The clash between the two ontologies sends Gonaba into *ecstatic* states when he builds his own hut without the permission of the Patriarch and forest. The scene recalls his conflict with the Prefect at the Independence Day party. The idea to build a hut follows a village hut-erecting ceremony. The village women, singing and dancing, construct it, and the men drink, smoke, and cheer them on. Gonaba, who stumbles on the event, immediately looks at the 'lazy' men in disgust, and tries to help the women, but they push him away. Chuckling, Touka explains, "Women do that" (54:43). The other men join him in laughter. Another adds the insult, "I can't believe it! This guy is a real moron" (54:51-2). Gonaba is emasculated by the criticism and retreats to the forest where he slumps in *ecstatic* despair against an ancient tree. Among bird calls, he stares at the ground and fingers a plant tendril in defeat. As he looks up, however, his empty gaze falls on a butterfly, balancing on a leaf, presumably drawing inspiration from its lifecycle from cocoon to flight. His mind, too, expands from the insult to surpass his entrapment within the forest in *ecstatic* bliss. Out of his mind, he smiles as he realizes a plan to recover his phallic power.

He decides to "set an example" of the superiority of European capitalist ontology by building a "large rectangular hut" for himself (56:15). In the next scene, women and children are gathered around Gonaba, watching noisily as he violently hacks the undergrowth into wooden poles with his machete and erects them into a frame. The men arrive, and like the Prefect at the

Independence Day party, they angrily question his actions. Gonaba patronizingly responds, "We're in a forest zone, the huts have to be large, ventilated and healthy" (56:17-21). His endeavor, however, violates precolonial transactional ontology. Touka furiously objects that huts are round and that "only the Patriarch is allowed to build beyond this limit" (56:29). The Patriarch further questions, "Who gave you the right to build here? Don't you know it's forbidden?" (56:31-3). When Gonaba challenges the idea, Touka insists, "It's the land of the ancestors. It's always been this way" (56:39). Instead of acquiescing, Gonaba continues his lecture: "You shouldn't do things out of habit. You'll be proud of this hut" (56:43-7). Kali joins the men, and Ekongo, her suitor, turns to her and asks, "What kind of retard are you hanging out with!" (56:51). Kali leaves the men in shame. In his efforts to recover his phallic power, Gonaba attempts to dominate the forest, ancestors, and the other men in the village and fails.

The forest responds to the violence of his violation when it denies his entry into the gorilla fraternity and village. The initiation ritual requires that he kill an elephant, but a thunderstorm disrupts the hunt. A hunting party member exclaims, "The gods refuse your initiation" (1:16:38). Gonaba tries to discourage such thoughts by challenging their masculinity, calling them "wimps" (1:16:42). Inevitably, though, the party decides to return to the village. Upon arriving, the huts are empty, and the fires are only plumes of smoke. As if depicting a crime scene, the camera shifts to a view from the canopy where it unveils the material consequences of his refusal. The ancient tree that held the blackboard, the symbol of the European capitalist ontology, had fallen in the storm. The ancestors destroyed the material locus of his threat to the order of the forest. The camera shifts to the villagers who gather around the tree where someone is trapped under the trunk. The camera shifts again and shows Gonaba attempting to comfort Kali, the person trapped under the tree, but his efforts are for naught. The

scene inverts Gonaba's earlier experience of being caught in a Pygmy trap. She ironically whispers, "Bouche" (1:17:15), with her last breath, and he kisses her. The fact that last word she utters is in French signifies her betrayal of the precolonial transactional ontology. The dramatic irony of the scene leaves little doubt in viewers of the forest's power to reassert its cycle of birth and decay.

This *ecstatic cycle* closes with the film when Gonaba decides to leave the village and Lema, Gonaba and Kali's son, who embodies the hope of Gonaba's colonizing project, becomes an object of contention. The morning after the funeral, he visits the Patriarch's hut in contrition. The Patriarch is livid. He accuses him of betraying the village's trust and causing her death by building his hut on forbidden land. Gonaba breaks down into tears and insists that he loved her. He admits that he can no longer live in the village and requests that he can return to his relatives with the baby. The Patriarch refuses, insisting that "the child belongs to the forest" (1:22:36). In the dark of night, however, Gonaba sneaks into Kali's family's compound and steals Lema. He escapes with him into the forest, but eventually, falls asleep against a tree. The village men awaken him with chants of "Death! Death!" and spears pointed at his face (1:23:59). They retrieve the baby and tie Gonaba to a tree for the "wild beasts to feed on [his] flesh" (1:24:27). As they do, Touka accuses him of betrayal and stealing Kali's blood, and Gonaba makes many of the same excuses he gave to Simone for leaving her. He explains that "It was for the sake of the child. I wanted him to go to school and become a great Pygmy" (1:24:11-13). Gonaba's excuse, though, reveals to viewers that he regards Lema more as an object for achieving his 'civilizing mission' rather than his son. Both terms, "great" and "Pygmy," like a 'white' Black man, originate within the European capitalist ontology and are measured against whiteness. They only promise a life of lesser subordination, farther from the forest, in service of those at the top of the

hierarchy. This scene most clearly demonstrates that Gonaba's aspirations for Lema are really those he holds for himself, and he hopes his crusade to rescue the Pygmies from the forest will help him reach equality in the eyes of Western society, specifically, us—his audience.

"Permanent radiation"

Because of Gonaba's unresolved trauma, his flight from the Congo forest ends one *ecstatic cycle* at the same time it promises others and further violence. Although Kobhio and Ouenangare leave viewers to imagine future cycles, one can expect they will appear similarly. Gonaba's singular example provides a basis for recognizing how *ecstasis* compounds among individuals and groups and spreads to form more complex traumatic ecosystems. More plainly, the invisible, root experiences of colonial trauma branch into the exponential violence that characterizes the contemporary Congo forest region. In *Congo, Inc*., In Koli Jean Bofane satirizes this global process. Inverting colonial travel narratives, he centers the DRC and Congo forest within the global network of trade relations to demonstrate how the resources that global powers have extracted from the forest since colonialism have fueled their violent, cyclical contests for economic and military supremacy. From this vantage point, he does not trace the phases of the *ecstatic cycle* but provides us with a view of the entire forest, including the urban jungle: the traumatic roots and violent canopy that inspire the simultaneous and entangled *ecstatic cycles* that form the novel's traumatic ecosystem.[14] More than the other works I have discussed, the novel illustrates the rhizomatic quality of traumatic ecosystems, or their temporal and scalar interrelation and interdependence. Traumatic ecosystems are not unique to Africa or the postcolony but emerge and network across the globe. Individual or group acts of violence and experiences of trauma that arise from local traumatic ecosystems can have global consequences. Similarly, the healing process extends beyond temporal and scalar boundaries. The DRC and the

Congo forest cannot heal from past and present experiences of violence without the participation of the international community.

The world that Bofane constructs at once invokes and mirrors the stereotypical, violence-ridden DRC and postcolony that Western readers expect. He borrows from familiar characters in European literature. Isoo, for example, recalls a Robin-Hoodesque outlaw who ventures from the forest, disguised in a pair of Superdry JPN jeans and a T-shirt emblazoned with the image of Snoop Dogg," into Kinshasa (2).[15] There, he discovers in his encounters with characters familiar to Medieval comedies—"corrupt sheriffs, bribed judges, arbitrary decrees of law"—the chaos and corruption of the global trade network that better resemble depictions of the forest in the European capitalist ontology (Harrison 79). Concurrently, Bofane inverts Joseph Conrad's colonial travel narrative *Heart of Darkness*. Isoo resembles Kurtz in his escape from the Congo forest instead of Europe aboard a tugboat, traveling down the Congo river. Rather than the forest, his destination is the country's capital where he aspires to become an "internationalist who aspires to becoming a globalizer" (11). Bofane portrays the Congo forest and DRC as a hub of global trade.[16] The narrator describes the barge that the tugboat pulls as "a floating city" (17), full of "thousands of people" (17) and "merchandise of all kinds to supply the capital" (18). The journey symbolizes his birth from 'Mother Nature' or 'Mother Africa,' which European and African men have exploited to fuel global trade, technology, and violence, into Kinshasa's "chaotically pluralistic" urban jungle, the Great Market. Rather than riches, however, Isoo finds 'the heart of darkness' that collects cast-off perpetrators and victims of global capitalism, the same stock characters that resemble Medieval comedy, such as a European anthropologist, street children, child witches, child prostitutes, a child soldier, a warlord, UN peacekeepers, a Pentecostal preacher, and a Chinese mineral trader. These characters, like Isookanga, emerge

from their own traumatic ecosystems, carrying with them the different ontological hierarchies, or "concepts" (174), which also map onto global and historical trade routes from the war-ravaged Kivu regions of the DRC to the United States, Europe, and China. These ontologies collide in present-day Kinshasa and form the novel's traumatic ecosystem. The narrator calls it "the algorithm Congo, Inc." (174), a self-perpetuating, closed network of capitalist exploitation in which characters seek "new ways of living with violence." Overwhelmed by the "permanent radiation" that "the algorithm" produces, however, Isoo returns to the forest with his Uncle Lomama, a Marlowian figure, who traveled to the city to fight the incursion of Chinese cell towers on the forest. Ironically, both are equally disturbed by the savagery of the city (186).

With these allusions, Bofane, similar to Kobhio and Ouenangare, tempts readers to affectively blend with his stock characters and the stereotypes about the DRC before he complicates them. The process forces us out of our minds into something like *ecstasis* from which we can recognize the cycles of violence that the European capitalist ontology perpetuates. Together, the film and novel depict how the hidden, traumatic relationships between individual characters' local, *ecstatic* encounters with the Congo forest grow into the visible, globalized violence that has entangled the attention of social theorists and journalists who in turn shape their Western audiences' concepts of the region and the postcolony. Although we might not see them, the forest and trauma are always present, materially and psychologically, in our bank accounts and the technology at our fingertips that we use to access them. In recognizing our implication through colonialism and global trade in the present violence within the Congo forest, we might also recognize how those global networks could transport forms of care rather than resources to help address the underlying trauma.[17]

In the remainder of the chapter, I will sketch what Bofane calls, "the algorithm," the traumatic ecosystem in the novel, both in the abstract and in specific scenes, to demonstrate how it produces "permanent radiation," or the on going experiences of *ecstasis*, throughout the Congo region.[18] While Bofane primarily sets the novel in the city, the forest is ever present whether in how the city resembles it or in conversations among characters about how to exploit it. Consequently, in the postcolonial ontology, the forest remains that which characters fear and are escaping. Isoo, despite his globalizing aspirations, and Uncle Lomoma are the only characters who exist fully within the precolonial transactional ontology, so their journeys to the city expose the "madnesses" of the postcolonial ontology where the order with which they are familiar has been upset.

In the abstract, Bofane represents "the algorithm" through the novel's network form. Despite my linear retelling, the plot's structure is rhizomic and mirrors the confusion that the algorithm creates. Figuratively lost in the Congo jungle, our reading experiences at times fall into the absurd, resembling attempts by the UN workers in the novel to sort through the country's myriad rebel groups and their ever-changing names. "Rather than silencing the guns," the narrator suggests, the UN workers "struggled to identify the acronyms [for rebel groups] represented in the east of the country—RCD, CNDP, FDLR, FNL, etc." (115). However, in the last chapter, the narrator provides us with the algorithm's and the novel's organizing principle:

> It's only logical when the balance of payments turns out to be problematic, it becomes imperative that, via charges and gains, accounts be balanced first by getting the people dealt with. . . . It's a regular practice in a liberalized universe. And the megalopolis is the place par excellence where people's concepts and madness are telescoped with extreme

> violence, generating energies as dense as those of black holes. . . . Permanent radiation doesn't bring innocence back; it leads to rage. (186)

While Bofane's language is more figurative, "the algorithm" maps onto the Congo forest traumatic ecosystem in that *ecstatic cycles*, like those Gonaba experiences, respond to trauma by perpetuating its violence. Established during colonialism and further developed during the Cold War and globalization, "the algorithm" describes how power relations shift among the nested hierarchies that determine who and what the algorithm might exploit from the Congo to fuel the global market. The narrator describes the shifts in power as "concepts and madnesses" (186). In situations where they feel trapped in an ontological hierarchy by the "concepts" imposed on them, characters turn to "virtual universe[s]," like Gonaba does when he reaches for Enlightenment philosophy, that they affectively blend with their material ones (7). They allow these characters new spaces in which to impose their "concepts" of themselves and supplement their phallic power.[19] In the novel, these include animism, witchcraft, the internet, prosperity theology, and satellite maps. Over time, these impositions create a "permanent radiation," or feeling of oppression, which triggers "rage" from the victims who turn into the aggressors and eliminate the authoritarian, like Nkoi Mobali and Kiro Bizimungu, atop the hierarchy. The action creates "black holes" of phallic power, represented symbolically by the forest and the female body, which other males compete to fill (186).[20] From this abstract perspective, the novel seems to suggest that "the algorithm," or the traumatic ecosystem, births the parts it needs to persist. The narrator communicates as much when describing Isookanga as his avatar Congo Bololo: in the video game, "Isookanga was voracious, a true marauder. Because that's what the game demanded" (7). The implication is that in traumatic ecosystems, like "the algorithm" and the

postcolony, the relations among characters rather than the characters themselves beget *ecstatic cycles* and form the "Fanonian cul-de-sac."

More tangibly, Bofane shows how power relations within "the algorithm" organize life across the DRC, linking the forest to the city. In the forest, "the law of the jungle," or the concept of "eat or be eaten" (7), governs relations among those on the "food pyramid," or local ontological hierarchy (80). In the opening scene, as Isookanga walks through the forest with game, the narrator describes "towering trees" that hoard the light and dwarf humans. Insects "compet[e] for space with ferns from the Pleistocene era . . . and dying trunks fighting against decay" (1). Monkeys and birds fill the air with their calls, only occasionally interrupted by the sounds of larger animals who spray and scrape "to mark their territory" (1). Then, "on the ground and below," narrator relates, "invisible sprawling empires were ceaselessly being built and demolished under the iron rule of greedy and omnipotent sovereigns that reigned over populations without light" (2). This description of the forest closely resembles that of the urban jungle later in the novel. In a mirrored passage, the narrator describes the same law governing Kinshasa's Great Market. As former warlord Kiro Bizimungu sits in his SUV, the narrator explains, "the people formed something like a herd of wildebeests having nothing to do with one another, each moving in its own direction in utter disarray" (80). Among them, "table scavengers, such as hyenas, jackals, [and] vultures" loom, waiting to pick pockets, rip earrings from earlobes, and steal wares (80). Above them, "the great predators, the policemen and military men in civilian clothes" (80) shake down their victim for more substantial gains, like "part of his nest egg" (80). The din of the market—"the car horns, and the noise of the motors"—however, screens perpetrators from detection (80). The same law that governs ground dwellers in the forest organizes humans in the market. The invisible hierarchical relations between characters

within this traumatic ecosystem produce the visible violence that results in further traumatic experiences.

Bofane maps these relations through Isoo's attempts to secure his position within these hierarchies. His efforts lead him to transact and compete with other characters, who have their own networks of relations, with similar aspirations. These secondary characters arrive in Kinshasa as figurative and literal refugees from regions and countries that have historically extracted resources from the forest that spurred global conflicts—"The Scramble for Africa," the Cold War, and the Great Africa War. They are effectively the detritus from the production and use of the materials extracted from the Congo forest to sustain these conflicts. In Kinshasa, they bury their traumatized identities and adopt new "concepts" of themselves based on the ontological hierarchies from their differing traumatic ecosystems. Their efforts are similar to the DRC itself, which was once the Belgium Congo and Zaire, and the region's various armed groups. These "concepts" protect them from their "madnesses," or fears that their traumas might recur. Thus, each character inhabits two identities, one they project onto the world and one they hide from it, which influence their interactions with other characters. However, as in *Le silence de la forêt, ecstasis* arises from their extended efforts to impose their new "concepts" on each other. These efforts produce the familiar fight-flight-freeze-fawn responses and renewed efforts to find other worlds and characters who will affirm their "concepts" of themselves, to escape the forest.

To uncover these globally entangled relations, I will sketch the "concepts" and "madnesses" of each character and then demonstrate in specific scenes how they interact to produce *ecstasis* and violence. Bofane incorporates three primary international characters: Aude Martin, Waldemar Mirnas, and Zhang Xia. Aude is a Belgian "Africanist," who travels to Kinshasa for academic research. Part of her motivation for her research is the white guilt she

feels for the atrocities her country committed in the Congo. In addition, she arrives with an Electra complex from the loss of her father, the object of her nascent sexuality and sense of security. Waldemar is a Lithuanian officer for the United Nations Organization Stabilization Mission in the Democratic Republic of Congo (MONUSCO) in Kinshasa. Like Lithuania and the UN, he is a product of the Cold War and its aftermath. He worries about how his friends and family will view his service and its dangers. Prior to his post in the DRC, he worked for NATO in Afghanistan where "the men and vehicles packed with explosives . . . could detonate at any moment" (116). Like Gonaba, his intentions to 'civilize' the local population are enmeshed with his desire for women, and in his case, underage girls. Zhang Xia is a Chinese national who struggles to reconcile the Communist party propaganda he has internalized with his inherited trauma from the Great Chinese famine. Unable to secure sufficient local employment to support his family, he partners with a Chinese mineral trader and travels with him to the DRC. His business partner, however, defrauds him and sets him up as a patsy for his illegal import business. He ends up stranded in Kinshasa where he worries about how he will return to his wife and child in China.

In Kinshasa, each of the international characters establishes business relations with Congolese characters, Isookanga, Kiro, and Shasha La Jactance, who have fled to the city from their own traumatic ecosystems in the forest. All major Congolese characters respond to their traumas by adopting new names, or "concepts," of themselves. Although he is vocal about his aspirations to become a "globalizer," Isookanga's true motivation for leaving the forest and discarding his 'Wounded Love' identity is his feeling of emasculation. He feels entrapped by his Pygmy and cultural identities. As a Pygmy, he complains that he occupies "very little space politically, socially, and, above all, physically" (8). Within his culture, he feels emasculated

because his mother neglected to circumcise him and women find him undesirable. Both traumas, he admits "give him complexes" (141). To escape his reality, he turns to the online video game, *Raging Trade*, that he plays on a stolen laptop where he finds his "true place," a world where "it makes no difference whether you speak Pygmy, Lapp, or Japanese" (8). In *Raging Trade,* he adopts the avatar, Congo Bololo, or "Bitter Congo," who is a warlord and international mineral trader, an identity that inspires him to escape his village and his destiny to succeed his uncle, Chief Lomama. By playing the game, he believes he is learning skills that will empower him in the global economy and teach him how to exploit the forest that has rejected him.

Kiro Bizimungu is a retired warlord and current administrator of the Salonga National Park where Isoo's village is located. He grew up in what Anna Hedlund has called the Congo forest "warscape" and learned to hate the forest through the trauma of those experiences (12). Born a Tutsi in Rwanda, his family fled to North Kivu in eastern Congo during the Hutu genocide. Eventually, he fought as a Tutsi proxy for the Rwandan government and traded in blood minerals. In this role, he adopted the warlord moniker Kobra Zulu, to overcome his madness, or the trauma that he suffered during the genocide. Since becoming the park administrator, he often sits in his office, stares at satellite maps of his territory, and dreams of bulldozing the forest to extract its minerals.

Shasha "La Jactance, the Haughty One" is a *shégué*, or street child, who lives in the Great Market as a surrogate mother for other *shégués* (28). She was born Charlene in the Kivu province but fled "ethnic cleansing" to Kinshasa with her younger brothers, one of whom died in route (31). The armed group, like the one Kiro led, killed her parents and "massacred" her village (30). To earn money, she works as a child prostitute for Waldemar and others. She also practices witchcraft on her clients for whom "her hate . . . was mounting with each passing day" (144).

The algorithm also ties these characters to other peripheral ones both inside and outside of the DRC with whom they are competing in the "food pyramid."[21] They, too, assume two different identities. Gong Xiyan, Zhang's wife, lives in Chongqing where she makes goods that are sold in the Middle East and Africa. In Zhang's absence, she is sexually preyed upon by Szechuan Police Chief Wang Lideng, who is investigating Zhang for his business dealings, and eventually submits to him. Wang Lideng, before rising to Police Chief, was an honest, overlooked police officer, who worked twelve hours a day but was held down by department jealousy. He "stagnated in the same position without complaining" until a new governor, who wanted to fight corruption, recognized his accomplishments and the files he kept on all his superiors' acts of corruption (107). Chiara Argento is an American who works for the United Nations department of Peace Keeping in Washington, D.C. She is investigating Waldemar and Kiro for their roles in a massacre in North Kivu involving UN peacekeeping troops. To relieve herself of the traumatic images, the "muffled, distant explosions, which were obviously in her head," she loses herself in the symphony where she tries "not to think about anything" (88, 87). Adeïto Kalisayi is Kiro's kept wife. He forced her into concubinage after his soldiers destroyed her South Kivu forest village, killing and mutilating her parents. She turns to the church and prayer to escape her subjugation. Reverend Jonas Monkaya, the failed professional wrestler Monk, "who played a reverend in the ring" (90), is the pastor of the Church of Divine Multiplication where he applies his "imagination" and "theatrical sense" from the ring to the church (91). He devises a lottery for God's blessings into which congregants can buy and preys on his female congregants. Finally, Old Lomama is the chief of Ekonda clan and harnesses environmental animism to heal the forest. He also ironically manages the clan's forest coffee plantation. After he discovers the corpse of a male leopard, the patriarch of the forest, mutilated

by warthogs, he travels to Kinshasa to raise an alarm about the madness and appeals to the administrative state which he believes might help him restore the forest hierarchy. He blames the recently installed Chinese Cell Tower for disrupting "[Nature's] own operation" rather than deforestation to which his coffee plantation contributes (129). He fantasizes about wielding environmental animism to decommission the Tower.

Within the algorithm, these hierarchical "concepts," or ontologies, that Bofane's characters adopt to hide their "madnesses," or traumas, collide when they try to impose them on each other. These encounters result in both positive and negative experiences of *ecstasis* that either establish unstable alliances or generate feelings of "permanent radiation" that trigger "rage." Unable to resolve their rage, the characters often turn to "virtual universes" to satisfy their anger through violence. To illustrate this cycle, I will focus on scenes involving the forest, specifically ones in which Kiro, Isoo, and Uncle Lomama are the primary actors. While these encounters take place exclusively in the city, much like in *Le silence de la forêt*, the forest looms as an overwhelming force that influences all of their interactions.

In their scenes together, Kiro and Isoo identify their common interest in exploiting the forest and try to incorporate each other into their "virtual universes"—satellite maps of the forest and the online video game *Ragging Trade*. In meetings at Kiro's office, surrounded by maps of the forest, both Kiro and Isoo blend each other into their virtual universes to enact their contrary motivations for revenge against the forest. Initially, they appear to speak the same language. Pointing to the virtual universe on his walls, Kiro humorously complains to Isookanga who has lived there about how the images are "bloated with green" and laments the environmentalists who describe the forest as "'lungs'" (99). Rather than contradict him, Isookanga joins him in

revelry over the possibility of cutting down the forest and extracting the mineral wealth they imagine below its soil.

As they talk, however, it becomes apparent that they are speaking crosswise from their different self-conceptions to overcome their feelings of entrapment, or "permanent radiation" within "the algorithm." Kiro's complaints about the forest derive from the trauma he has acquired while fighting in the forest. He asks Isookanga, "'How can you breathe in such an environment? There are too many trees; they smother everything!'" (99). He hopes to harness the Pygmies' mysterious animist powers to help him tame the forest. As examples, he questions Isoo about apocryphal incidents during colonialism when a Pygmy tribe "'stole a boat without leaving any traces'" and the rumors that they can manipulate nature to subdue their enemies (99). Kiro also recalls an incident when he and his soldiers were continuously tormented by a swarm of bees and questions whether the Pygmies controlled them. Kiro believes Isoo can channel this environmental animism to facilitate his campaign to eliminate the forest that he sees in the satellite images on his walls.

In contrast, Isoo hates the forest because of the Pygmy environmental animism, which he hopes to destroy. He attributes the smothering feeling the forest creates to his Uncle and the cultural traditions the forest maintains. Isookanga warns him that "'elders like my uncle Lomama . . . insist on preserving everything as it stands'" (99). Unmindful of the warlord in his presence, he ironically calls these indigenous leaders "'demagogues'" and "'megalomaniacs'," and insists their traditional "'techniques'" for preserving the forest are "'really diabolical'" (100). During another office visit, Isoo introduces Kiro to the strategy he has developed in *Ragging Trade* for eliminating actual obstacles to participating in globalization. He explains that his Uncle never educated him about the forest's minerals, so he has resorted to the video game for his education.

He tells Kiro: "'Anything that has to do with mines and oil interests me. . . It's diabolical. Lots of us in the world are playing, and for now I'm almost master of the situation'" (115). Isoo assumes the indigenous leaders' "diabolical" powers by blending his Pygmy identity with his virtual warlord identity, Congo Bololo. As if speaking to fellow warlord, he shares with Kiro his troubles with the United Nations Security Council, foreshadowing Kiro's actual troubles later in the novel. Briefly, Kiro humors him, offering emotional support—"'Really, Little One, you're in deep shit'" (114). Isookanga, however, fails to realize Kiro is placating him and continues to blend the two worlds. He tells him not to worry about him because he has weapons stashed. As Kiro leaves to eat lunch, Isoo assures him: "'I keep thinking about the raw minerals'" (114). Thus, the two assume they are channeling the same grievances and become aroused at their common goals of exploiting the forest. However, neither realizes that they are imagining employing virtual universes the other has abandoned—satellite cartography, environmental animism, and online war games. Consequently, they blend each other into their "virtual universes" that they invoke to extend their power and assuage their feelings of madness, or trauma, imposed on them by "the algorithm," or, in their cases, the forest.

These scenes provide the framework for reading two brief scenes at the end of the novel when Old Lomama, who represents the precolonial transactional ontology, introduces yet another "virtual universe," the administrative state, to the algorithm and imposes his concept of the forest on the other two. In the first, Isoo and Old Lomama meet Kiro in his office. Kiro hopes to enlist Old Lomama in his efforts to utilize environmental animism to destroy the forest; however, Old Lomama dominates the encounter. He unfurls the leopard's, Nkoi Mobali's, hide that he carried with him to Kinshasa and voices his 'madness,' or trauma, concerning the threat his death poses to the forest hierarchy of which he is a part. Believing he is speaking to a sympathetic audience,

he blends his environmental animist concepts of the forest with his theories about the effects of the Chinese Cell tower, explaining that "the warthogs had turned mad" because of the atmospheric cell tower signals (161). He hopes to enlist the powers of the "virtual universe" of the administrative state to rectify the power imbalance. The stakes, he suggests, are themselves ironic. Apparently unaware of the Great African War, he predicts to the former warlord that if the laws of the forest are not salvaged, "people would end up devouring each other" (162). After his speech, he quickly leaves Kiro's office to visit other governmental offices only to leave frustrated. Like Kiro and Isoo, Old Lomama assuages his feelings of powerlessness within the algorithm by reaching for a "virtual universe" only to reinforce the relations of "the algorithm." Simply, Old Lomama and the precolonial transactional ontology are not outside but firmly within "the algorithm," the Congo forest traumatic ecosystem. The network Congo, Inc, Bofane suggests, is a closed network with no externalities. By including Old Lomama within "the algorithm," Bofane cuts down readers' hopes that a return to environmental animism might solve the crisis in the DRC. Instead, his efforts to reorient the global economy around the Congo forest rather than the Global North appears more like a perspectival shift rather than an escape.

"No Bad Parts"

Both *Le silence de la forêt* and *Congo, Inc.* appear to confirm social theorists' analyses of Central Africa and the postcolony in which the end of colonialism ushered in "neoimperialism" and unleashed "the law of jungle," generating a "warscape" where forest inhabitants and minerals became commodities and "bare violence" the currency for warlords and autocrats as well as multinational corporations, NGOs, and predatory states. At the end of *Le silence de la forêt*, Kobhio and Ouenangare depict Gonaba's return as yet another, truncated *ecstatic cycle*. By this point in the film, viewers are familiar enough with colonial tropes to recognize its

resemblance to European travel narratives. After rescuing Lema, the men leave Gonaba to die in the night forest, but when he turns his head, he finds Ekongo, who symbolizes the forest ancestors, holding a large knife. He motions to stab him but instead cuts the vines and the precolonial transactional ontology holding him, announcing that he repaid his debt to Gonaba who earlier saved him from a snake. After his release, the forest becomes his object of conquest in his return to 'civilization,' and the brief scenes ironically demonstrate how well he has adapted to it. Kobhio and Ouenangare shoot him following the same route Manga took entering the forest with which he struggled. Barefoot and wearing cut-off shorts and a soiled shirt, he crosses the waterfall, looking more like Manga than the earlier version of himself. He effortlessly leaps from rock to rock and wades between them. Even if he has failed in his efforts to educate the Pygmies, he has mastered it and simultaneously grown further from 'civilization.'

Once he crosses the creek, the camera pulls back to the treetops and provides a panorama of the forest. It gives viewers the sense that he is not leaving the jungle at all. As the environment transitions from forest jungle to urban jungle, Gonaba's voice-over returns to interpret his journey for us. He frames it much like a European travel narrative in which he emerges victorious from an epic struggle. Subtly, he is reclaiming his phallic power:

> How long did I stay in this forest closing up behind me? One year, two years, maybe more . . . I don't know. I only know one thing: here, right now, as rise the first noises of the city, I know I will forever miss the silence of the forest (1:26:18-36).

While it is true, as Joslin points out, that he lost his watch when he hit his head after being caught in the game trap, Gonaba's description of the forest as a timeless space reasserts the linear time of the European capitalist ontology. If nothing else, the cycle of Kali's pregnancy marked time for him. Instead, for viewers, his epilogue is ironic in its similarity to European descriptions of

wilderness, which erased the people who lived there and shaped its traumatic ecosystem. Consequently, the silences viewers will remember are not those of the forest but of the memories he chooses to bury: the failure of his 'civilizing mission,' his relationships in the village, especially Kali and Lema, and the ontological violence he wrought on the forest community. Beneath these silences, we also know he has buried other memories from a different traumatic ecosystem, ones on which he is acting to protect himself and inspire his *ecstatic cycles*. Specifically, he never details his experience in France, one during which he lost "his people" and that produced his colonized mind. For this reason, he presents himself as a heroic masculine figure, one who has braved the virgin forest and, more broadly, the postcolony and prevailed as he did with Simone and Kali. His pronouncement is yet one more attempt to impose his ontology upon the country and to write its story by convincing us, his Western-educated audience, of his victory. But, at this point, we recognize his search for phallic power as an attempt to protect himself from past traumas by establishing his ontological distance from the forest.

Similarly, at the end of *Congo, Inc.,* Isookanga and Uncle Lomama are aboard a barge on the Congo River leaving Kinshasa to return to their forest village. Instead of having conquered Kinshasa, they have rejected it. After Kiro is necklaced, Zhang is arrested, and he witnesses Shasha surreptitiously trying to kill her client Waldemar, Isookanga discovers his concept of globalization does not match with his experiences of it. He concludes, "One couldn't dump on people to that extent, for in the end they would inevitably want to take revenge" (186). In his conclusion, he describes the "Fanonian cul-de-sac" and how *ecstasis* perpetuates it: the competition among people, and men especially, for phallic power to maintain themselves or better position themselves on an ontological hierarchy leads to exploitation and violence, which seeds more violence.

Likewise, Uncle Lomama gives up his efforts to convince the government to help him protect the forest from globalization. In a moment of reconciliation, Uncle Lomama convinces him to return to the village and his role as future chief. The common cause they find, however, emerges from two different traumatic ecosystems and the ontologies they plan to impose are in conflict. On the barge, Isookanga, grasping onto his laptop's fading battery life and a weakening internet signal, returns with new dreams of how to enact his globalizing plans. Zhang Xia has recommended he read Sun Tzu's *The Art of War* to learn new strategies to implement. Until then, he reimagines himself. He decides to ditch his identity as a lone marauder and join forces with his primary rival in *Raging Trade*, Kannibal Dawa. As future chief, he imagines himself a "monarch with a bit of glamor" and fantasizes about extracting the minerals from the "gold-bearing layers beneath the thick vegetation" (189). Next to him, Uncle Lomama is simultaneously fantasizing about how he can destroy the Chinese Cell Tower. Using termites for inspiration, he imagines "covering it with a thick coating of mud" (189). It is another example of positive *ecstasis* that promises to degrade to future "rage." Readers can easily imagine a new but different iteration of the novel's opening scene in which Isookanga, returning from collecting caterpillars, is cursing them and his Uncle for distracting him from *Raging Trade* and his globalizing ambitions. Consequently, Kobhio and Ouenangare and Bofane seem to promise their audiences more of the same rather than an escape from the "Fanonian cul-de-sac."

Among the closing violence of the novel, however, Bofane provides readers with glimpses of another future in which characters might practice restorative care. Among the closing violence of the novel in which a mob kills Kiro, however, Bofane imagines what Richard Schwartz suggests is possible—different relations within the network—with glimpses of another future in which characters might practice restorative care. When Uncle Lomama suggests to

Isookanga that they return to the village together so he can become Chief, Isoo believes this is impossible because he remains uncircumcised and unable to take a wife. In response, his Uncle proposes what readers have long been thinking—that he simply undergo circumcision. In his absence, his mother sent a letter to Uncle Lomama and expressed that "'it's never too late to do the right thing'" (184). Uncle Lomama comically explains that "'it may hurt a little, but with a good circumciser anything is possible'" (184). In context of the DRC's violence, the solution seems absurd; however, on a more abstract level, Uncle Lomama's suggestion merits further consideration: what if characters addressed their hidden traumas rather than attempted to overcome its symptoms, the visible violence? Or, what if societies eliminated such "concepts" entirely? Perhaps those are the new relations that Bofane's perspectival shift, to center the DRC within the history of globalization, creates.

Certainly, one might object that Isookanga's traumatic experiences appear to be minor or even comical in scale in contrast to other examples of violence in the novel and the postcolony. Similarly, Bofane does not offer readers any evidence that healing his trauma will prevent future violence—Isookanga still intends to exploit the forest's minerals. Nevertheless, Kobhio and Ouenangare and Bofane have shown us that these impulses to judge others' traumas originate from our own insecurities that sprout from desires to impose our ontological hierarchy on the narrative world to preserve our phallic power and avoid feeling threatened by the heart of darkness and the forest they represent. Like their extroverted narrative forms, these examples encourage us to pause and refocus our attention from the parts of the traumatic ecosystems to the relations that shape them, the *ecstatic cycles*. If we follow this advice, we recognize with Richard Schwartz that there are "no bad parts." In other words, the characters' choices and decisions are limited if not determined by their traumatic ecosystems, and the resultant violence is a symptom

of their fears of repeating their traumatic experiences. Thus, focusing on violence only attends to the forest's canopy and hides the wounded root system that feeds it. Instead of razing it, if we can pause and orient ourselves among the trees, we might recognize our wounds in others and offer the care to heal both. And, in doing so, we might discover a hidden path and realize the "Fanonian cul-de-sac" never was one.

Notes

[1] Ogaga Ifowodo in *History, Trauma, Healing in Postcolonial Narratives* also argues that postcolonial history is a history of trauma. He suggests both colonizers and authoritarians suffered from and responded to traumatogenic experiences, and thus, postcolonial violence emerged from the colonial traumata.

[2] In addition to Fabian and Hendricks, Judith Butler coins a similar phrase, "ek-static involvement" of a self in the Other, in *Undoing Gender*, in which self is "decentered through its identifications" with the Other (137). Mbembe also describes a similar state he calls, "*delirium,*" in *On the Postcolony* (185). Mbembe locates this vertigo in the challenges the land itself poses, of which the forest, fauna, noise, and corpses are examples. It paints Africa as a land of death, unpredictable and volatile, against which the colonizer must protect himself, but it also enabled the colonizer to produce himself as the antithesis of the colonized. In addition, Mbembe, in *Necropolitics*, refers to an "*ecstatic* notion of temporality and politics" that exists at the intersection of "terror, death, and freedom" in which one imagines the future from a present, sustained only from moment to moment by a "freedom not yet come" (91). These iterations all describe situations in which individuals or groups under threat are separated from previous concepts of themselves to survive traumatic experiences.

[3] Fabian, in *Out of Our Minds: Reason and Madness in the Exploration of Central Africa*, identifies among European travel writers this first, positive experience of *ecstasis*. Hendricks builds on Fabian's theorization in *Rainforest Capitalism: Power and Masculinity in a Congolese Timber Concession* where he posits a negative experience of *ecstasis* among Congolese timber workers whose identities are contracted and trapped within the systemic racism and exploitation of capitalism. I argue that these negative experiences of *ecstasis,* however subtle, where individuals lose themselves in confrontation with their finitude, are traumatic.

[4] Herman contends that survivors must name their trauma to understand the changes trauma has wrought in their senses of self. Otherwise, patients often feel that "they may be losing their minds," or that "they have lost themselves" (158).

[5] This term, coined by Eileen Julien, acknowledges the economic reality that creative work from African artists is largely produced in the West and must circulate there before it finds its way to Africa. Consequently, African artists are often intentionally and unintentionally addressing a Western audience. I argue both Ba Kobhio and Ouenangare and Bofane direct their works to Western audiences.

[6] The idea of "no bad parts" emerges out of Schwartz's theorization of internal family systems where he argues that "the Self" is composed of several often conflicting and interdependent parts that emerged from trauma and are advocating for the specific needs of the self that went unmet. Toward the end of the book, however, he suggests one might apply the internal family system to describe societies at large.

[7] In *Necropolitics*, Mbembe opposes the "will to kill" with the "will to care" (107). In his synthesis of Fanon, he argues a "*relation of* care" (176), born out of a "reciprocal recognition of vulnerability," is the only escape from the "master-slave paradigm" (176). I argue another way to think about "vulnerability" and "care" is through the lens of trauma. What we "recognize" in each other, in our shared humanity, are the psycho-physiological wounds that shape our relations

with others, a "gesture" that gives rise to care and thus healing (176). Meredith DeBoom in "Climate Necropolitics: Ecological Civilization and the Distributive Geographies of Extractive Violence in the Anthropocene" expands Mbembe's reading of Fanon to argue that our climate change mitigation efforts necessarily need to include efforts to curb "violent social relations" (909).

[8] In his reading of European literature, Harrison tends to universalize the relationship between the humans and the forest, and while I agree that humans often recognize their finitude in response to an overwhelming force, what I am calling *ecstasis*, like a forest, the precolonial transactional ontology offers a different response to this experience that opens to its presence rather than the European capitalist one he traces that responds to it as a threat.

[9] Filip De Boeck, James H. Smith, and Achille Mbembe in different ways have suggested the different presents individuals might seek include the spiritual and that these imaginaries are often monetized as solutions to material problems. De Boeck in his work with children in Kinshasa notes the contemporary postcolonial crisis in which capitalism and globalization have breached social and cultural traditions has ushered in the emergence in space and time of people and situations that are "difficult to place, interpret and attribute meaning to," and thus people seek spiritual solutions such as in the Pentecostal church (189). Mbembe adds that it has also turned to people towards "witchcraft, healing cults, [and] brigandage" (*On the Postcolony* 57). Smith also describes a similar response, which he calls, "movement," or "literal movement (mobility of things and people), collaboration across difference, making transformative connects with powerful people and forces outside of Congo, and the positive transformation of space-time and reality through the exponential concentration of all other forms of movement" (32). These connections, he clarifies, can be transdimensional, involving ancestors and what influence they might wield. In this way, it is similar to what Mbembe calls a "transactional world" (*Necropolitics* 107). It describes an animist, pre-colonial Africa where "one was always transacting with some other force or some other entity just as one was always trying to capture some of the power invested in those entities in an effort to add the latter to one's own originary powers" (107-8).

[10] The film is adapted from Étienne Goyémidé's 1984 novel of the same name. Interestingly, it does not start with this riverboat scene.

[11] Perhaps reference Walter Rodney on European underdevelopment of Africa

[12] Isaac Vincent Joslin, in his analysis of the violence of the postcolonial African education system, also recognizes the conflicting feelings with which the film leaves viewers. Focusing on the bulk of the film when Gonaba is living with the Pygmies, he argues that despite his 'civilizing mission,' the film leaves us with "a hint of optimism that positive changes can be made, if only on an individual level" (182). Echoing Fabian, he explains that in his pursuit of "his noble object of educating the Pygmies," the community challenges him "with their alternative framework for interpreting the world, events, and relationships" (182-3). Gonaba rather than the Pygmies is educated into a new ecology that levels the hierarchy he espouses between his European philosophy and the indigenous 'mythology.' Yet, Joslin also suggests the film primarily leaves viewers to decide its concluding question about future solutions. While "Gonaba's arrogance and self-assuredness" lead to his expulsion from the community, the viewers are "led to question two very different visions of human existence and . . . forms of relating to environments" (184). It potentially promotes a more holistic vision of humanity's relationship to the planet and our approach to knowing it, but Joslin admits, the title might also

foretell the silencing of these diverse voices in the face of "a dominant epistemological paradigm" (185).

[13] Joslin and other theorists discuss this competition as one between epistemologies, but, as I will make clear, in the film, these knowledges of the world are central to characters' beliefs about being-in-the-world, reflected in differences in how they understand the relationship between mind, body, and spirit as well as humans and nonhumans.

[14] Harrison argues that as the natural forests in Europe disappeared, the cities replaced them as havens for godlessness, depravity, and death (100).

[15] Yoon describes Isoo as an "antihero, a hustling trickster" (317) who attempts "to enter the economy as an agent rather than a recipient of globalization" (336).

[16] In *On the Postcolony*, Mbembe argues African societies have always already been globalized (9). Jean and John Comaroff in *Theory from the South* contend that throughout modernity, the economies of the Global North and Global South have been intertwined (26-7). Paul Tiyambe Zeleza makes a similar argument in *Rethinking Africa's 'Globalization,'* claiming globalization is not new nor has Africa been excluded from it (4). Tejumola Olaniyan argues in "Africa, Post-Global: A Reaffirmation" that theorists need to position Africa where it has always been, which is in the modern world (324). More specifically in relation to the Congo, Renton, Seddon, and Zeilig contend global interest in the forest's resources has always situated it within "a modern and globalized world" (175).

[17] Critics who have written about the novel largely focus on Bofane's depiction of these local and global networks of violence that exploit the DRC's natural resources and potential areas outside of capitalism. Jack Taylor in *African Migration and the Novel: Exploring Race, Civil War, and Environmental Destruction* tracks the migratory routes of characters in the novel, particularly Isookanga and his Chinese business partner Zhang Xia, and their use of technology to capture and commodify nature. Taylor suggests the dynamic is represented by Isookanga's video game, *Raging Trade*, that "stages the dynamics of power . . . and . . . the lethal logic of global capitalism present in the DRC" (177). He argues, Isookanga's journey from the forest village to Kinshasa creates conflict with his Uncle Lomama over "'tradition'" and "'modernity'" (153) and dramatizes "the second scramble for Africa" in which state and corporate actors are extracting mineral wealth from the region while simultaneously excluding residents from the profits (184). Gibert Shang Ndi in "The Coltan Novel: Narrating the Congolese Saga in In Koli Jean Bofane's *Congo Inc.: Le testament de Bismarck*" thinks of these networks in terms of genre. They join the extremes of indulgence and exploitation in pursuit of survival within the globalized economy. He also identifies the video game, *Raging Trade*, as the literary device Bofane employs to critique these global networks and blur the novel's diegetic and extradiegetic worlds by connecting the "local, regional, and international players" for whom "financial calculations take precedence over any ethical considerations" (72). Through the video game, Bofane, Ndi argues, helps to represent characters' social realities. Despite this, he concludes that the narrator maintains a "firm belief in and hope for justice" (71) because of the fates of the novel's allegedly more nefarious actors—Aude Martin, Waldemar Mirnas, and Kiro Bizimungu.

In "Participatory Cultures and Biopolitics in the Global South in In Koli Jean Bofane's *Congo Inc*.," Russell West-Pavlov also identifies an alternative to the exploitative practices of globalization in the novel. He describes Bofane's representation of globalization as a contest between two biopolitical extremes. At one end, he suggests the economic regime excludes some people and instead treats them like the "waste material of the globalizing process" (106). At the other, he identifies an "'affirmative biopolitics,'" a term he borrows from Roberto Esposito, in

which participation reaches beyond the "political, economic, technological, or medial" to include "cosmic or planetary dimensions" (106). Although he acknowledges the strangling violence Bofane portrays, he also argues that the "warlord henchmen" do not "have the last word on participation" (113). Instead, Chief Lomama exemplifies an affirmative biopolitical alternative in which the forest and its inhabitants form a "single universe" governed by a "universal ecological ethics" (114) that provide its own "healing techniques" (115). West-Pavlov focuses on the leopard, Nkoi Mobali, who died by the tusks of warthogs whom the narrator calls "intruders" (Bofane 130), and Chief Lomama's response to it as a sign of a cosmic imbalance. From his perspective, Nkoi Mobali is the top of the food chain and the figure that maintains balance within the system. According to West-Pavlov, this cosmic framework divides participation across species, implicates all in its maintenance, and defines the "ethical parameters for participation" (116). He concludes that Bofane offers readers an alternative to "predatory globalization" (116) that locates planetary futures in the example of the Global South.

[18] Ndi also discusses how Bofane uses narration to sketch the globalized networks in the novel; however, he is primarily interested in the circulation of minerals and not its accompanying trauma (57).

[19] Yoon, who focuses particularly on Congolese-Chinese economic relations in the novel, frames the collisions in the novel through Benjaminian durées—"digital, revolutionary, ruined, planetary, and extractive" (331). He also describes the collision between these durées throwing characters into "Messianic time" (318). There might be ways to understand these durées producing traumatic ecosystems, but Yoon is more interested in demonstrating how the novel complicates the neocolonial exploitative narrative about the DRC and China by portraying Isoo and Zheng as "guerilla capitalists," so he does not address the topics of trauma or violence (334).

[20] In *On the Postcolony*, Mbembe describes the mechanics. He explains, European writers, Hegel and Heidegger in particular, characterized the African colony as "a series of hollows" (179). In their imaginations, European colonizers emptied the land and filled it with their own images and stories such that 'Africa' and 'Africans' became 'nothing' in which they could deposit their pent-up, libidinous desires that were frustrated by social hierarchies and customs in Europe.

[21] There are several other minor characters all of whom assume different identities to hide their trauma, but I have left them out because they do not add more to my argument.

Chapter 3

Future Ecologies of Nation: Remapping Stone in Postcolonial Zimbabwe and Kenya

Stone is at once singular and plural. It accretes time and enfolds space in its genres: sediment, pebbles, boulder fields, and lava flows. Each erodes. In its stillness, it bears witness and shares in silence. In its movement, it startles and deafens with rock falls and slides. For humans and nonhumans, it organizes space as well as confounds it. Caves and cliffs shelter beings. It serves as a base and accent for expression: scent marking, drawing, painting, etching, and sculpting. In human cultures, birthstones mark life, and cairns and tombstones mark death. For the living, rapids, canyons, crags, rigids, and mountains are waypoints on maps as are stone walls, stone dwellings, menhirs, and megaliths. In these ways, stone is a participant in our everyday lives. Familiar grand markers like peaks and pinnacles or more subtle ones like sidewalk cracks and lawn ornaments provide a feeling of security and home. Rather than an inert, silent presence, the lithic shapes our relations. It carries our memories and erodes them. It participates in our stories as metonym and metaphor. Flagstones guide us to a neighbor's house and monuments concretize a nation's history. But stone also carries bloodstains from scraped knees, car wrecks, and mass shootings. We decorate it with our memories of joy and tragedy.

In *Stone: an Ecology of the Inhuman* (2015), Jeffrey Cohen poetically argues that we should re-evaluate our relationship with the lithic. More than a passive actor, stone, he suggests, is a "catalyst for relation" and thus an origin of story (Cohen 33). If we attend to its presence in our lives, Cohen argues, it forces a "perspective shift . . . an ontological and temporal reeling, a rocky movement of affect, cognition, horizon" (16). It transports us beyond the human to spatio-temporal realities that crush our mental capacities. It confronts us with the sublime and

cosmological indifference. In this chapter, I am interested in pursuing one of these rocky movements, specifically how it influences our experience of trauma. Trauma, while a veritable presence in the body, also registers some of the same paradoxes. Like stone, it is singular and plural. It shapes our individual and communal identities. It also spans generations and compresses time. Like stone, it can shatter the structures supporting our everyday lives and it can denote waypoints in our memories. Trauma can turn places of safety and security into effigies. In our minds and relationships, it can produce aporias—silences, gaps, and tears. It can split communities and unite them through the rituals and traditions that it destroys and inspires. Its ghosts haunt people and places, both awake and dreaming. For some, trauma is neither a temporary absence nor a delayed immune response but, as Achille Mbembe suggests in "African Modes of Self-Writing" (2002) "something quasi-permanent" (268). It is a forever chemical in one's blood stream and in a community's aquifer. It leaves its marks on a body as scars and on a nation as memorials. It spawns founding narratives and smothers them at their inceptions just as it inspires feasts and holidays as well as songs and photo albums. It compresses immaterial pasts and futures within material objects and places. And, thus, it also inhabits the material objects in our lives like jewelry, ruins, and mountains. Stone.

In this chapter, I read Yvonne Vera's *The Stone Virgins* (2002) and Yvonne Adhiambo Owuor's *Dust* (2013) to build on the previous chapters that demonstrate the interrelation of our experiences of trauma with our natural environments to explore how they might also be implicated in the healing process. While stone is obviously only one of many natural environments that might contribute to healing from trauma, I selected it because Vera and Owuor heavily implicate it in the remapping of their characters' affective relationships with the nation-state, Zimbabwe and Kenya respectively. In *Great Zimbabwe: Reclaiming a 'confiscated' Past*

(2020), Shadreck Chirikure argues Great Zimbabwe, the capital of the precolonial Shona people and famously built from stone, "is a symbol; it is a metaphor for telling the African story to a global audience in decolonial and decolonised languages" (7). Stated another way, the ruins of Great Zimbabwe hold the trauma of East African civilizations that Britain destroyed and replaced with their own stone structures and the English language. Stone also recalls Fanon's famous description in "On Violence" of the colonized world as "Manichean and petrified" (*Wretched* 15). The silence and hardness of stone represent the effects of trauma from colonial violence on the mind-bodies of colonial subjects. The same qualities of stone suggest a placeness and permanence that belie its material capacity in relation with other forces to create sound and to change. Vera and Owuor, much like the African archaeologists who are facing what has been lost in the ruins of Great Zimbabwe, are thus tasked with healing that trauma in their narratives: the present reality "demands that the old and new must be integrated to question pre-existing ideas to move society forward in ways better than what preceded us" (7). Specifically, Vera and Owuor each incorporate three separate stone settings, or what I will call *lithic waypoints*, that emerged from the precolonial, colonial, and nationalist hierarchical apparatuses that shape the traumatic ecosystems and hold trauma, which their characters excavate and remap to imagine new nonhierarchical ways of being in the world. In *The Stone Virgins*, the *lithic waypoints* that Vera includes are the Gulati Hills, concrete streets of Bulawayo, and the boulders of Kezi, and in *Dust*, Owuor embeds her characters' traumas in the red cave, Wuoth Ogrik, a rural colonial-era coral house, and Nairobi's asphalt streets. The relationship they draw between trauma, healing, and the lithic expands our understanding of trauma from a psycho-social experience to psycho-social-environmental one. It recognizes that the body and mind are not closed systems but permeable intensifications of carbon, hydrogen, nitrogen, oxygen, sulfur, and phosphorus within broader

ecosystems. Thus, it also helps to explain both how material objects can trigger individual traumatic responses and how trauma can remain in places as relational, insidious, or historical trauma without personal knowledge of or experience with the originating event. They follow other postcolonial and Indigenous scholars who have sought to expand the definition of trauma beyond its original Western psychoanalytic theorization to include other possible worlds. Indigenous cosmologies have long described "more-than-human political ecologies,"[1] or the role of place in their lives and cultures, and advocated for "making room," as Val Plumwood suggests, for "possible respect and renarrativisation" that might inspire new strategies of care and healing (122).[2]

By writing in the genre of national allegory, Vera and Owuor are not only challenging colonial maps of the nation-state but patriarchal ones as well. Feminist scholars have thoroughly deconstructed how male nationalism has mimeographed the hierarchy of family onto nation, upholding women as the symbolic foundation to rehabilitate African male and national experiences of colonial emasculation while marginalizing them politically.[3] The central victim in each of the myths of family and nation is the woman—sisters Thenjiwe and Nonceba in *The Stone Virgins* and Ajany, Akai, and Justina in *Dust*—who represents different iterations of what Florence Stratton has identified in male-authored African national allegories as the "Mother Africa trope" (41). The trope originated with the Negritude writers. They, much like the Europeans before them, imagined virile men as creators and producers and alluring women as the bare, fertile land, which men had to tame and seed to produce culture and political society. As objects of the male gaze, women were primarily symbolic and excluded from political participation while men performed the functions of the state. The trope, Stratton argues, has persisted and "implicitly gives men license to exploit, rape, oppress, and dominate nations" (54).

She separates it into two strands both of which Vera and Owuor incorporate: "'the pot of culture'" and "'the sweep of history'" (41). In the former, women are the sources and guardians of indigenous traditions whose bodies retain vestiges of male pre-colonial sexuality and represent symbolic wombs from which men will create the post-independence nation-state. The latter identifies women with the health of the nation but largely reflects the degradation of the male political project. In this strand, the mother becomes the temptress-prostitute who embodies the moral decay of society that corrupts the men who run the state. These strands, however, are not exclusive in that female characters can embody both, nor are they only perpetuated by men. The familiar concepts of 'family,' 'home,' and 'nation' became terms of oppression, ones that African women writers have sought to redefine. As Carole Boyce-Davies and others suggest, writing became a strategy for black women to challenge this experience of double marginalization. She argues that the prerogative of black women's writing is "the dismantling of received geography" (22) and "to re-create and remove lines of impossibility in which we exist" (23).

The aesthetic strategy Vera and Owuor deploy in their novels to rewrite the traumatic ecosystem of the patriarchal post-independence nation-state is "affective mapping" (Flatley 77). In *Affective Mapping: Melancholia and the Politics of Modernism* (2008), Flatley borrows the concept from geography and environmental psychology to describe how our emotional engagement with and memories of particular spaces influence the ways in which we navigate the world as well as define our sense of self. He imagines it as a complement to Fredric Jameson's theorization of "cognitive mapping," which, he suggests, offers a solution to the postmodern moment in which our situated lived experiences feel disconnected from our ever-expanding knowledge of the world (349). In this moment, he contends, we struggle to construct an ideology

that locates ourselves within it, inspiring feelings of alienation and paranoia. The aesthetic practice of cognitive mapping encourages individuals and groups to take stock of real objects and their patterns of interaction with them to form abstract social maps that ground their material existence in the world that might enable us to 'wrap our minds around it' to operate both locally and globally. Flatley argues that we overlay those social maps with affects—our "intentions, beliefs, desires, moods, and affective attachments"—by which we navigate our social and political activities (77).[4] Our affective maps, he explains, are formed by synthesizing "one's historical context and the social formations one lives in" (78). Because our social formations, or what I describe as the apparatuses like patriarchy and capitalism that form our traumatic ecosystems, are often hierarchical, they imprint negative affects on our maps. To resolve these feelings, Flatley argues, individuals and groups must challenge these hierarchical relations to replace the negative affects with positive ones. Art, he suggests, offers us opportunities to engage with our maps in ways that open us to new possibilities of interacting with the world (80). Literature, specifically, provides us readers in our identification with the fictional world an experience of "self-estrangement" that allows us to view ourselves from outside our "affective environment[s]" as well as the social and political relationships that create them (80). It provides readers with affective experiences unrelated to their everyday lives that momentarily dislodge them from their subjectivities and allow them to reevaluate their affective attachments to their environments and open themselves to new ones.

Vera and Owuor employ affective mapping in their novels to demonstrate for readers how their protagonists disrupt the "quasi-permanent," stone-like, patriarchal traumatic ecosystems of the precolonial, colonial, and nationalist nation-state through remapping their relationships to *lithic waypoints*, which opens them to and models for readers processes of healing. Like Flatley,

Vera and Owuor both in their own and their protagonists' practices present art as one path. In *The Stone Virgins*, Nonceba starts the healing process through her job arranging and delivering flowers for a flower shop, and, in *Dust*, Ajany processes her trauma and helps Isaiah Bolton and her family process theirs through sculpting Hugh Bolton's bust. Crucially, in their efforts to remap their countries, Vera and Owuor do not exclude anyone from their affective maps. Sibaso, the traumatized independence fighter in *The Stone Virgins*, who kills Thenjiwe and rapes Nonceba, chooses to leave Bulawayo to return to the Gulati Hills, his symbolic mother. Similarly, by the end of *Dust*, perpetrators and victims have blurred, and characters form new pairings to start new lives. They conclude their feminist national allegories, echoing the title of Richard Schwartz's book outlining family-systems theory, by imagining nation-states in which there are "no bad parts," only traumatized ones in need of healing.

In what follows, I will close-read both novels to trace how Vera and Owuor remap the affective relations between humans and the lithic that emerged during colonial and nationalist conflicts that instrumentalized socio-political hierarchies to exploit women and shaped local traumatic ecosystems. Although Vera focuses on an individual's experience of trauma and Owuor on a community's, they employ remarkably similar strategies to depict these affective relations to stone. As I have mentioned, they organize their novels around three lithic waypoints that represent different but concurrent iterations of Zimbabwean and Kenyan life—pre-colonial, colonial, and nationalist. Bisecting these periods of national conflicts, romantic or filial relationships emerge from these traumatic ecosystems that allegorize possible founding national narratives. Both novels turn on the gruesome death of a family member or lover. These deaths, memorialized in *lithic waypoints*, function as spatio-temporal nodes that force characters to confront their histories as perpetrators and victims during nation-building efforts. In these

moments, Vera and Owuor excavate the cycle of trauma in which wounded subjects form relationships that assuage their pain but reinscribe the hierarchical relations to which they became victims. Only after processing their experiences of trauma through their relationships with stone are characters able to remap their affective relations and imagine nonhierarchical ecologies of the future for family and nation.

The Stone Virgins

In her national allegory, Vera maps the traumatic ecosystem of Zimbabwe through four principal characters and their affective relations to the three primary lithic waypoints—the concrete of Bulawayo, the Gulati Hills, and the boulders of Kezi—that represent its pre-colonial, colonial, and nationalist iterations and their gender relations.[5] These characters include Cephas Dube, an archivist from Chimanimani region in eastern Zimbabwe, who lives in the colonial city of Bulawayo. Thenjiwe and Nonceba Gumede are unmarried sisters who live together in the southern rural outpost of Kezi in Matabeleland. Sibaso is a former Zimbabwe African People's Union (ZAPU) independence fighter who landed on the wrong side of the nationalist struggle. He is hiding out in the war-torn Gulati Hills. Together, they represent a composite of indigenous stakeholders during the *Second Chimurenga*, the anti-colonial war against the White Rhodesian government in the first section of the novel from 1950 to 1980, and the *Gukurahundi* nationalist struggle between the ruling Zimbabwe African Nationalist Union (ZANU) and the ZAPU in the second section from 1981 to 1986. Rather than focus on the fighting, Vera imagines two peripheral events during the *Second Chimurenga* and the *Gukuranhundi* that, much like the characters themselves, function as metonymies for the civil war and the nation-state: Cephas's Orientalist love affair with Thenjiwe and Sibaso's murder of Thenjiwe and rape and disfiguration of Nonceba. In my analysis, I will first demonstrate how Vera's close attention to setting evinces

how the lithic waypoints, and their associated hierarchies, shape the characters. In the second section, I map how Cephas and Sibaso apply the violence that emasculated them in colonial Bulawayo and the war-torn Gulati Hills to Thenjiwe's and Nonceba's bodies to recover their phallic power. The last section is where I trace how Vera models affective mapping for her readers in the approach Nonceba takes to healing through remapping her affective relations with the nation-state's lithic waypoints. Several critics have written separately about trauma and the environment in the novel and some make similar claims to mine about one or the other; however, critics have yet to consider trauma and stone together and trace their relationship throughout the work.[6]

Lithic Waypoints: Bulawayo, the Gulati Hills, and Kezi

Vera's description of the colonial lithic waypoint, Bulawayo, demonstrates how the British used stone, in this case "concrete and sandstone," to reinforce the ontological hierarchy that they used to differentiate themselves from their colonial subjects and men from women (4). Living in the city, Cephas was shaped by the same colonial logic. Like his status as a Black man in the colonial city, he remains unnamed and living in the shadows of Vera's description of it. Easy shaped and malleable, concrete and sandstone are perfect for creating the corners, or "*ekoneni*" that colonial architects employed to segregate the city into gendered and racialized spaces (11).[7] These spaces emerge from what Timothy Mitchell calls "enframing," which he defines as "a method of dividing up and containing . . . which operates by conjuring up a neutral surface or volume called 'space'" (44). It turns a space into an exhibition, giving it "the apparent certainty with which everything seems ordered and organized, calculated and rendered unambiguous" (13). In Vera's description, Bulawayo is a similar grid system that taps into British culture and history for names, occasions, and locations, requiring anyone orienting themselves in

the city to engage with their dominance. As the narrator explains, Bulawayo "revolves in sharp edges; roads cut at right angles" so that "nothing is obscured" (11): "Selborne Avenue . . . cuts from Fort Street (at Charter House), across to Jameson Road (of the Jameson Raid), through to Main Street, to Grey Street, to Fife Street, to Rhodes Street, to Borrow Street" (3). The Charter House was a White-only male boarding school. The Jameson Raid refers to an earlier colonial incursion that helped incite the first colonial uprising (Baker 136-7). Rhodes Street recalls John Cecil Rhodes, the British imperialist and founder of Rhodesia. Additionally, Selbourne Avenue represents the centerpiece of the exhibition. The narrator describes it as "the most splendid street in Bulawayo" along which "you can look down it for miles and miles" (4). Jacaranda trees and flamboyant trees, both colonial imports from South America and Madagascar and planted for their flowers, line the avenue and create a "dazzling horizon" (4). The Avenue proceeds "straight and unbending" with "a single solid view, undisturbed" towards other colonial landmarks and into the suburbs whose streets are named after English poets (5). It continues beyond Zimbabwe's borders to Johannesburg, facilitating the travel of black gold-mine workers.

The right-angled, lithic architecture also creates spaces of exclusion and structures capitalist time. The city is segregated into White and Black areas. Africans must meet outside buildings because "entry is forbidden to black men and women" (11). Instead, the narrator says, "you meet outside buildings, not at doorways, entries, foyers, not beneath arched windows, not under graceful colonnades, balustrades, and cornices, but *ekoneni*" (11). In other words, the only meeting spaces available to Black people in the White part of the city are stony corners, liminal spaces that obstruct an on-looker's gaze and allow for some anonymity and ambiguity, but those opportunities too are only momentary. The design allows everyone to be seen eventually, and thus, helps to enforce segregation. The only respite from White eyes is underground in the bars.

After work, Black men are pushed below the concrete sidewalks and sandstone buildings where they can congregate and socialize. These spaces, however, are not free from the colonial hierarchy. In the spaces where the colonizer is absent, the male gaze seizes control, resembling the scalpel of the unbending streets of the city.[8] He uses it to recover the masculinity that he has lost in colonial domination. The narrator describes one man's gaze, most likely Cephas's,[9] on a woman and her skirt as "solid" (9). He then proceeds to dissect her body: the "perfume rising from this woman's elbows," the sliding of her legs, and the position of her toe in relation to his knee (9). The man's gaze, like enframing, divides the woman into parts that he finds sexually suggestive, and thus objectifies her much like the gridded streets that turn the city into an exhibition. It enables surveillance and control, inspiring feelings of power and possession. In these spaces, Vera implies that men colonize women's bodies much like the British have colonized the nation. Across the colonial city, she shows how the violence of enframing that shapes stone into corners creates affective relations that impose the colonial hierarchy on its inhabitants, and especially Black women who receive no quarter from objectifying gazes.

In contrast, Vera paints the Gulati Hills, which lie between Bulawayo and Kezi, as a precolonial, feminine space, or the womb of Zimbabwe, whose "towering" and "impenetrable mass" defies mastery and control (18). Like Bulawayo's enframing, however, its protrusions of rocks, foliage, and streams are transformative; they force their human visitors to conform to their nonhuman logic. The Gulati Hills, Lily G.N. Mabura explains, have deep historical and religious significance for Zimbabwe. First settled by the San people who decorated caves and rock shelters with naturalistic art, they later were home to "Shona and Ndebele female spiritual mediums" (97). During the independence and nationalist wars, they were refuge for resistance fighters and heavily shelled. Instead of using the omnipresent narrator, Vera describes the Hills through the

eyes of ZAPU fighter, Sibaso, who is hiding out near the Mbelele Cave, "the most sacred of sacred places" (100). For Sibaso, the Gulati Hills are both a site of trauma and an Oedipal sanctuary, a place for rebirth.[10] His garbled, traumatized narration intersperses his movements among the dense forests, rushing streams, and imposing monoliths with flashbacks from the war. He associates his trauma with stone. As if offering directions to reenter the Earth's womb, he maps the route to Mbelele Cave. On his approach, he suggests the moonlight "gives a profile of the hills, the shape of a woman, whole, above the rocks. A still figure, a woman of stone" (142). Further landmarks, suggest entering the cave is like entering a prostrate woman. He says, "You do not stop till you reach that ancient parting in the rocks, the valley with the stream wedged in it, which they call Simude" (102). The trek for Sibaso, however, is not one of domination but submission. Like the "concrete and sandstone" of Bulawayo, the Hills force him to conform to the environment. When he enters them, he says, "you keel over, rise quickly, mutter a word" (102). Once inside, his subjectivity seems to disappear into the rocks, and he remains only a body. He explains, "The mind is perishable. Memory lingers, somewhere in fragments" (102). In the bomb crater where he hides, those fragments resemble a war-aborted pregnancy. He describes living among "limbs discarded, the flesh hanging from uprooted trees. The broken ground, an aftermath of ambush. This is my life's basin. This is the afterbirth of war, its umbilical presence" (105). He returns to the womb of the country, the origins of life, to live among the dead because it is the most unlikely place to find life. After the trauma of war, configuring the Gulati Hills as a mother-figure represents for him an opportunity to reorient himself to the present, to experience rebirth.

Sibaso, however, is not entirely without hope. In another area of the Hills, he, like Cephas in Bulawayo, he finds women that he imagines he can possess to rehabilitate his traumatized

mind and body.[11] Under a rock overhang, much like the Bulawayo underground bar, he finds ancient cave art, depicting the titular stone virgins who were being sacrificed to a king, and constructs an origin story from them that remaps his location in time. He calls them "disembodied beings" (103). He focuses particularly on two women who he decides are virgins. He explains, "Their thighs are empty, too fragile, too thin to have already carried a child. They are virgins who walk into their own graves before the burial of a king" (103). His relationship to the women is one of possession. He views their deaths as sacrificial in service to the king with whom he identifies as he molests the paintings. He narrates his molestation: "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). The hip bone he gropes has mythic significance. It symbolizes Nehanda, an anti-colonial female hero, who prophesized before her hanging that bones of the dead would rise in the liberation struggle to help defeat the British (Coundouriotis 215). David Lan in *Guns and Rain: Guerrillas and Spirit Mediums in Zimbabwe* (1985) explains that guerrilla fighters like Sibaso identified with these spirit mediums who they believed spiritually sanctioned their struggle and protected them in battle (6). However, Lene Bull-Christiansen argues these beliefs were largely a corruption of these myths. And, in fact, Lily G.N. Mabura describes Sibaso's presence in the cave as a "physical and metaphysical transgression" (97). Thus, while the allusion to Nehanda recalls women's role in the independence movement, Sibaso's interaction with the women emphasizes the symbolic nature of that role. Later, he expresses this desire: "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. The stretch of her arm, a tattoo" (104). Sibaso's attention to the procreative parts of the female figures on the cave walls recalls that of the man in the underground Bulawayo bar. Not only are both locations hidden, but both

men objectify the women in the spaces, dissecting them into body parts for their consumption. In the Gulati Hills, Sibaso, like the Zimbabwean nation, navigates material and psychological impediments to enter the primordial stone womb of the nation, seeking a rebirth. On the walls of the cave, he interprets just such a story. He identifies the autochthonous stone virgins, sacrifices for the king, as affective tools with which to rebuild his male subjectivity, fragmented by the traumas of colonialism and war. Rather than equal partners in nation-building, Sibaso imagines the women as receptacles for male desire from which to reconstitute precolonial patriarchal glory.

Kezi, where Thenjiwe and Nonceba live, is the third lithic waypoint Vera depicts in the novel. Described as a "rural enclave," it represents a nonhierarchical space, a middle ground between male-dominated, colonial Bulawayo and the female-dominated, precolonial Gulati Hills (17). Like those places, "the land" Kezi sits on, the narrator explains, "is rock" (18). However, unlike Bulawayo and the Gulati Hills, the stone features are not themselves imposing. Vera writes as if the rocks are in a dance with the trees, attracted by the water below them. The narrator explains that "tumbling rocks [rest] between the trees," "a tree extends its branches over an expanse of rock," and "roots are as hard as stone" (18). Instead of dominating life, stone is a part of it, even acquiring names like "Umthetho, that tranquil granite rock . . . where old men go to recline, and die, in silence" (19). Kezi resembles what Mitchell describes as a "pre-modern" town (48). He defines it according to three features. First, unlike Bulawayo, it is not ordered according to a framework. Second, there is not a "fixed boundary between an inner world and its outside" (50). Finally, the order of the town does not isolate individuals as objects apart from the world. Kezi, and its residents, exist as a part of the landscape rather than separate from it. "The huts," the narrator suggests, "are flattened and, from a distance, form perfect circle of calm

merged with the land" (17). Instead of wide, straight avenues, "meandering footpaths" emerge from between the huts, "leading in and out of every homestead, to the river, to the road" (18). Boulders stand among the huts that, themselves, appear living. The narrator explains that after a rain, "the top layer of wet, partly decomposed thatch is the softest scent of living things there is—it is life itself" (17).

Because the town is intimately connected with the environment, it is subject to the elements, disorganizing spaces and time, but they fit into the flow of people's lives. The "winding Kezi-Bulawayo road" has places "where the ground dips unexpectedly" (19). When the Kwakhe River floods the bridge disappears "as if it had never been there" and the bus between the city and the town stops completely so that "people have to spend a day and maybe half a night waiting on the other side" (19). In general, the narrator suggests that "delay is part of the signature of their lives" (22). In contrast to the corners of the city that encourage movement, the town has flat spaces that encourage loitering. The Thandabantu Store has a "large wide veranda where often people meet and sit and talk and wait for the bus" (24-5). Its walls "create a comfortable surface wide enough to sit on" (25). Additionally, the town obscures the observer's view. Unlike Selbourne Avenue, the paved road ends in the town, and it "goes no further, as though there were no possibility of the mind ever wanting to wander off steadily into the distance, farther than the eye can see" (22-3). The dust too hinders sight and dwarfs the human presence in town. The narrator explains that "when a car approaches from the opposite direction, you see the dust first, not the car" (23). Only the next day, "when the dust has settled," does the car appear (23). It also hides the Thandabantu Store as if "a luminous, darkening wall" (24).

The coexistence of people with stone in the town mirrors the relationship between men and women. While patriarchal, the town seems to tolerate female agency. Nonceba and

Thenjewe's aunt Sihle has lived unmarried, choosing to remain unattached to Ndabenhle Dlodlo, the man with whom she has conceived her children. For a time, the female veterans, liminal figures from the anti-colonial struggle, occupy the veranda of the Thandabantu Store, the central gathering place. The narrator also describes young couples who meet at night in an unconnected telephone booth and "pretend there is a vast distance between them, when in fact all there is to separate their bodies is nothing more traceable than a whisper" (21). Instead of a handset, the narrator relates, "they hold hands" (22). Consequently, in contrast to the underground Bulawayo bar, where the male gaze dissects the woman in the skirt, the young couple in town engages in a mutual fantasy in a space that brings them together out of choice rather than necessity. In effect, the town is a lithic waypoint, at least early in the novel, in which humans and stone, men and women have developed nonhierarchical relationships. Together, Vera depicts how characters' experiences of stone in three lithic waypoints that compose post-independence Zimbabwe, representing three different periods, the pre-colonial, colonial, and nationalist, shape their relationship to the opposite sex. For Cephas and Sibaso, these relationships are violent, leaving them emasculated and traumatized with wounds that they seek to heal by dominating the sisters.

Trauma, Stone, and post-independence Zimbabwe

The traumatic ecosystems interact when Cephas and Sibaso separately and anonymously visit Kezi and encounter one or both sisters. While Cephas's and Sibaso's encounters with the sisters have dramatically different endings, they both treat the sisters as objects on which to remap their traumatized male subjectivities, engaging them much like their lithic waypoints, the concrete and sandstone of Bulawayo and the war-torn monoliths and caves of Gulati Hills, have treated them.[12] As a result, the two characters blur for readers, suggesting similarities between Cephas's love affair with Thenjiwe and Sibaso's decapitation of Thenjiwe and rape of Nonceba.

Vera juxtaposes these scenes with two others depicting the end of the *Second Chimurenga*, the anti-colonial war, which offered the country hope, and the start of the *Gukuranhundi*, the nationalist war, which crushed the hope the anti-colonial war inspired. By juxtaposing the events and comparing the two encounters, the scenes function allegorically to demonstrate how women were victimized in Zimbabwe's nationalist struggle.[13]

Cephas's encounter with Thenjiwe depicts what Partha Chatterjee has described as a type of reverse Orientalism in which nationalism transfers colonial logic from 'high culture,' colonial cities to the rest of the country. Similarly, it resembles sexist traditions Kenny C. Chinyowa describes in early Shona literature that stereotyped rural women as submissive Mother Africa figures and urban women as prostitutes (166). Through those lenses, Cephas's visit from Bulawayo, Zimbabwe's second largest city, to Kezi and his interactions with Thenjiwe recall a European travel narrative. As Edward Said famously explains in *Orientalism* (1978), romance was a common theme in these narratives. In Europe, "sex in society entailed a web of legal, moral, even political obligations . . . so the Orient was a place where one could look for sexual experience unobtainable in Europe" (190). This literature created the trope of the "Oriental woman" (187). For some writers, like Flaubert, they were "entranced by her self-sufficiency, by her emotional carelessness, and also, by what, lying next to him, she allows him to think" (187). In other words, for these writers, Oriental sex and the Oriental woman were sources of physical and mental vitality. Cephas enacts a similar journey. From the Chimanimani region in the east of Zimbabwe, he travels to the Matabeleland region because he wants to see the spectacle of the countryside. The narrator explains, "he wanted to see the mopani shrubs, the Mtshwankela, the Dololenkonyane, the balancing Matopo hills, the gigantic anthills of Kezi" (41). The landscape is apparently new and unfamiliar, and one he wants to experience. More importantly, he wants to

clear his mind from past trauma. He is escaping "a remembrance, of persecutions and possible agonies, of bold urgencies" that disturb him (33). On his last planned day in Kezi, he finds Thenjiwe, his Oriental woman, to assuage his pain. The narrator suggests she makes herself available to him: "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" (38). In fact, the narrator relates, "Thenjiwe had made him stay, he was certain, even though she had not said anything precise, nothing in words, but the way she, without parting her lips, held his attention" (41). Cephas, much like the scene in the Bulawayo bar, observes Thenjiwe from a distance and constructs narratives about her availability and intentions. In the past, however, he had not acted. Instead, trauma had established "NO TRESPASS signs and NO WORK signs" in the spaces that love might have occupied (32). In this way, her body helps him to reconnect parts of himself lost in the gridded streets and subaltern depths of Bulawayo. He tells her, "'When I am not touching you, I am nothing. I am not whole'" (45). Thenjiwe, like the country's hinterlands, acts both as a mother figure and lover. Once there he cannot return to his mother's womb, but in a chance encounter, in a moment of anonymity, he can occupy another's to remap his male identity.

In their relationship, however, Cephas also applies the spatial, colonial logic of the city, his lithic waypoint, to her body. It was one that traumatized him. Redeploying it in his sexual relationship with Thenjiwe symbolizes how the nationalist movement treated women.[14] Like the man in the Bulawayo bar, he divides her into parts and seems to archive her pieces in his memory. The narrator relates: "He loves her heels . . . He loves her fingernails. He loves each of her bones, from her wrist to her ankle, the blood flowing under her skin. . . . He loves most the bone branching along her hip" (37). His focus on her hipbone, like Sibaso's focus on the stone

virgin's, alludes to Nehanda, the female hero of the nationalist mythology. Both her hipbone and concrete of the city, however, in their hardness, represent loci for manipulation and control. In a later scene, he imagines stripping her skin from her body like tree bark. He pours milk over her body, and then tells her, "'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'" (44). The act is effectively a White-washing. It projects a fantasy of possessing colonial female body by stripping away her old African skin. He is transforming her body into an object for his own pleasure. His fantasy even extends beyond the grave. He admits quasi-necrophilic desires when he tells her that if she dies, "'I will dig your body up to the moonlight, so that I can touch this beautiful bone'" (45). After telling her this, he places his hand on her hip as if to take possession of it. He demonstrates that what he values about her is what he can own and what restores him. Thus, his visit recalls those of his earlier European counterparts where he ventures from concrete *ekoneni* of Bulawayo to the boulders of Kezi for the rural spectacle. In the process, he fulfills his Oriental sex fantasy with Thenjiwe who functions as a mother/lover figure to rehabilitate his shattered male subjectivity. In effect, he divides her, like the colonial streets divide Bulawayo, and turns her into an exhibition of colonial dominance and control, reproducing the colonial hierarchy in his relationship with her. During the oneiric trip, the narrative implies that he, and the country, might have found a potential location in which to plant the seed of family and nation. Recalling Boehmer's critique of African nationalist movements, the relationship seems to offer a nationalist map for a new nation founded in the hierarchies of the colonial state. However, when Cephas boards the bus to Bulawayo without Thenijwe, the orgasmic energy of the new relationship, of the new nation, proves no more than a fling.

Sibaso's encounter with Thenjiwe and Nonceba resembles that of Cephas's in that he too applies the violent spatial logic of his lithic waypoint, the Gulati Hills, to their bodies. His visit to Kezi and the sisters' room reenacts the sacrifice from the paintings of the stone virgins on the Mbelele Cave walls. He effectively turns the room into the king's tomb where he immortalizes his lost nationalist aspirations by decapitating Thenjiwe and raping and cutting the lips from Nonceba, mangling their bodies much like war did to the soldiers in the Gulati Hills. Despite the violence of Sibaso's acts, Vera draws connections between him and Cephas in their engagement with the women's bodies, and their apparent motivations to highlight the logic of domination inherent in colonial and nationalist ideologies. Like Cephas, Sibaso engages the women in parts to objectify and control them. For Sibaso, however, he is following the instincts he learned in the traumatic ecosystem of the civil war. The scene in which he rapes Nonceba resembles his description of how the space of the Gulati Hills forced him into submission as he entered them. With Thenjiwe decapitated in the next room, the narrator relates:

> He clutches her from the waist, his entire hand resting bodily over her stomach. He presses down. He pulls her to him. She hesitates. He forces her down. She yields. She is leaning backward into his body. He holds her body like a bent stem. He draws her waist into the curve of his arm. She is molded into the shape of his waiting arm—a tendril on a hard rock (68).

His manipulation of Nonceba's body mirrors how the vegetation and rocks required him to duck, bend, and crawl through Hills. They even take on characteristics of plants and rocks in that she conforms to him. He acts, the narrator says, like a "predator, with all the fine instincts of annihilation. She, the dead, with all the instincts of the vanquished" (69). His predatorial engagements with her body resemble Cephas's archivist dissection of Thenjiwe's. Sibaso

focuses, like Cephas, on the hips. He uses them to control her body as he forces her to perform for him, extending control to other parts of her body. The narrator explains: "he pulls her down to himself, holding on to her wrists" and "his fingers part her lips, dry skin, find her tongue" as if to silence her (70). She understands that "she is nothing to him. An aftermath to desire" (69). Sibaso's rape of Nonceba seems unthinking and instinctual. He reproduces many of the same movements the Gulati Hills required him to perform and treats Nonceba like one of the women painted on the Cave walls. In doing so, as Cephas imposed colonial space on Thenjiwe, he too imposes the space of wilderness and war on Nonceba.

Sibaso, like Cephas, uses the women to heal from past trauma. Vera seems to suggest he is both victim and perpetrator, and perhaps, perpetrator because he was a victim. In the aftermath of colonialism, she seems to imply there were "no bad parts" of the nation-state; there were only traumatized ones. [15] For this reason, much of Sibaso's interaction with the women appears like a casual encounter, or a dance. Nonceba's description of Sibaso is that of a nondescript man. After she watches Sibaso decapitate her sister, she suggests that "he is an ordinary man" (72). He is wearing a blue shirt with grey buttons and khaki pants. She describes his outfit as "a safe attire. A shirt you can trust, with buttons you can trust" (72). From his appearance, she believes that she will survive. She thinks, "he wants to be held by her; he needs it" (72). Sibaso's desire for companionship also appears in his interactions with her. The narrator explains that he first touches Nonceba's body "as though it were something he has taken away without permission, guiltily, yet like a kind act" (68). During a break in the violence, the narrator says, "He bends. Away from her. He pulls a stool from the entrance of the house, as though getting ready for amiable conversation" (69). Later, she describes him, "leaning the rest of her body into himself, a companion" (70). The scene almost seems like a domestic one, as if he is returning to his Mother

Africa; however, war has distorted Sibaso's ability to relate to people to the extent that the stony domination he learned in the Gulati Hills is all he knows of companionship.

Sibaso's murder of Thenjiwe also portrays a longing for companionship in war. Vera suggests he is as much of a victim as a perpetrator. After he decapitates her, he dances with her body as if she were a bride.[16] Nonceba describes his actions as if they were bodies without minds:

> Nonceba sees the right arm pull back and grab the body by the waist, a dancing motion so finely practiced, it is clear it is not new to the performer. . . . The body falls forward and he stumbles and pulls the body back. . . . the knees buckle forward, and the body twirls on its heels, the legs together, then dragging sideways—a soft ankle held to the ground" (75).

He engages Thenjiwe's body in a poetic dance that suggests deranged enjoyment of choreographed movements, yet much like Nonceba's rape, the movements are premised on control and domination that he learned from war. They resemble those he learned from the Cave walls. The narrator explains Sibaso's conflation of the two: "He sees her dancing heels, her hands chaste dead bone, porously thin, painted on a rock. . . . 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 painted memory" (78). After the successful anti-colonial struggle, Sibaso's ZAPU rebel group lost the nationalist struggle. Excluded from Zimbabwe's present, Sibaso seeks to recover a lost past by reenacting the virgin sacrifices made for past kings. In doing so, he imposes the lithic space of a feminized wilderness and war on the gender-neutral space of Kezi. His acts resemble Cephas's nonviolent imposition of colonial spatial logic on Thenjiwe, his Oriental sex fantasy. By linking the two lithic waypoints, Vera

demonstrates how nationalism reproduced colonial domination by both elevating women as symbols of precolonial Zimbabwe and victimizing them in redefining the power structures of the new Zimbabwe.

Remapping the Lithic

The novel, however, does not end with nationalist violence. It depicts how Nonceba and Zimbabwe initiate the process of healing from trauma by remapping the affective lithic waypoints of the nation and imagining a more equitable future. After a hospital stay in Bulawayo, Nonceba returns to Kezi, which has become an epicenter of the nationalist struggle. After independence, the Thandabantu Store, specifically, was targeted because female soldiers, gender-defying figures, encamped close by and hung out on the veranda. Government soldiers burned it and militarized the road between Kezi and Bulawayo such that Kezi became, as Cephas describes it, a "'naked cemetery'" (159). Nonceba, too, seems to petrify, as she teeters between life and death, consumed by memories of the attack and the resultant trauma. Shifting between material and mental states, however, is not new to Nonceba. Sihle describes stone having always been part of her essence. She tells Nonceba that her mother birthed her on a rock on her way to the river—"suspended between water and stone," between life and death (115). Thus, in her experience of trauma, she seems to indurate towards her lithic origins. Drifting in and out of consciousness, Nonceba describes the sounds of the town from her bed and slowly imagines herself hardening into the shape of the Gulati Hills. Nonceba relates, "I lie on the bed, listening to my body turning slowly into stone" (123). Later, cradled in Sihle's lap, she notices "the skin on my mouth breaks and cracks like clay" (124). Unable to speak, she explains, "I close my mouth, breathing deeply in, till my words dissolve. I hear my teeth touch, hit—a beat of stone" (124). Then, the next morning, she watches from the window as a storm passes, and the raging

wind, like the thoughts in her head, “circles and whips against the rock repeatedly, sharp, grinding, unable to move or hollow the stone” (125). Instead, she finds, like the stone, “my mind is quiet” (125). She retreats inside herself, a momentary place of safety from the external world, the locus of her suffering. Like Kezi, on “the faint line between life and death,” Nonceba amidst her trauma starts to harden into the country’s fossilized past, the Gulati Hills. Sibaso, who returns to the Hills after finding someone new occupying his house in Bulawayo, describes the figure into whom she is potentially transforming. The moon, he lyrically describes, “gives a profile of the hills, the shape of a woman, whole, above the rocks. A still figure, a woman of stone” (142). In his description, Sibaso implies that the woman in the profile of the hills is still “whole,” undisturbed, and intact. In the aftermath of her sister’s death and her own assault and rape, Nonceba feels the possibility of Sibaso’s vision manifesting in her mind and body. The trauma threatens to indurate her into passive stone and to silence her desire to resist Sibaso’s patriarchal nationalist future.

Through her recovery, however, Nonceba, returns to her name and her memories, which enable her to process her petrifying trauma and embody the fluidity of water. In chapter fourteen, the narrator relates that Nonceba wakes as if from a dream to her room. She starts to recognize the pieces of her identity: her “calico” dress (137), her sandals, her suitcase, which reads “Nonceba Gumede” in White paint (138). Collecting the memories of her past, she determines that “she must order her thoughts” (137). Alluding to Sihle’s story of her birth, she insists, “the water, the mud—she must remember it all,” including Thenjiwe who wrote her name on her suitcase for her before she left town for school (137). Inspired by the memories and affect embedded in her suitcase, Nonceba exits her room to the open air where her eyes fall upon the

horizon, the Gulati Hills. As a symbol of her own and the nation's affective landscape, she observes as "the hills collapse" (139). She watches as

> the mist descends over the rocks of Gulati and softens their hardness: they are pliant, malleable, insubstantial. A boulder disappears, transforms, melts. Nonceba watches as stone dissolves like salt. The rocks turn to water and sky and lift when the mist lifts, and tremble, and descend. The rocks fade off, smoothed, no longer here, not there, not dark, not present. They are gone. They have lost their weight, their heaviness. They disintegrate into the air. No longer black shadows. Not sculpted beings. Not silhouettes. They are without shape, without resemblance to solid form. No hills or rocks in the distance. They are nothing. (139)

Obscured by the mist, the Hills, like her trauma-hardened self, dissolve to the fluid state of their birth, simultaneously releasing "Nonceba Gumede" from the stasis of her traumatogenic experience. Allegorically, the narrator's description also offers a counter narrative of the nation-state that dissociates it from its mythic origins of the stone virgins that require the sacrifice of the female body. When the light finally clears the mist, the Hills reappear not from the top but from their base. As the narrator describes, "The mist is completely gone from her eyes. A black rim emerges from the distance, quickly, harmoniously. Buried trees and rocks gain shape from the ground upward" (140). They rise anew from the earth free from the socio-political narratives of patriarchy, colonialism, and nationalism that would artificially impose order and control. Instead of these concepts, there is only silence: "she can live off this silence from the rocks" (140). The silence symbolizes the affective relations between Nonceba, the Hills, and the nation-state that prefigure open and equal relationships that will allow her to remap the lithic waypoints of her traumatic past into new possible futures for the nation.

At the end of the novel, Nonceba lives the possibilities of her new affective map as she moves in with Cephas, who feels guilty for leaving Thenjiwe, in Bulawayo. As strangers only linked by their love of Thenjiwe, they risk the land-mined road from Kezi to Bulawayo to allegorically reconnect the nation. Additionally, Cephas offers her a room in his apartment and transportation to the hospital for surgeries to repair her lips, the scar dividing her face, like the divided nation. Yet, in Bulawayo, Nonceba maintains the space of silence she established between herself and the Hills with the city and Cephas. Once a traumatic ecosystem, segregated by concrete and sandstone corners and grid streets, that relegated Black female life to the patriarchal dark spaces below ground, Bulawayo now facilitates the movement of Black women. A year after her move to the city, on her way back to Cephas's apartment from her new job at Joan the Florist, Nonceba in her practice of art remaps the city with its colonial street names much like Mrs. Dalloway in post-war London; however, instead of memories of death and trauma, Nonceba finds bustling life in formerly colonial edifices.[17] She passes "Standard Charted Bank" which now employs "black bank tellers and trainee managers newly graduated from the Economics Department of the University of Zimbabwe" (165). She passes "Edgars Clothing Store," which the narrator mentions "was the first large shop in Bulawayo to use black mannequins" (165). She passes "dozens and dozens of flower sellers" peddling in front of a garden built in front of City Hall on the location of the founding settler well, "the first water source" (166). Pausing at the flower sellers, the narrator notes that the flower "stems," like Nonceba and her new life, "are cut at a slant so that the pores are not damaged and the flowers can breathe" (167). Removed from the nationalist graveyard of Kezi, Nonceba, and seemingly the nation, remap the traumatic ecosystem of the city and discover space to extend the possibilities of their recovery.

Likewise, in the domestic space of Cephas's apartment, Vera reimagines a mutually beneficial relationship between men and women, much like the model of Sihle and her children's father in Kezi. It is a nonhierarchical space maintained through nonbinding attachment. As the narrator explains, "he gave her the bedroom across from his own" and allowed her to decorate it (170). Unlike Cephas's lovemaking in which he sought to control Thenjiwe by possessing her body for his own needs, Cephas allows Nonceba to select a picture for him to frame, and she directs him on its placement. The narrator relates, "They hammered a nail into the wall. He asked her how high she wanted the picture. She picked a spot and kept her finger there till Cephas was standing beside her. He marked the spot with a pencil. After the painting was raised, they both stood back and looked at it. 'Perfect,' she said. . . . This room is now completely hers" (170-1). For Cephas, Nonceba is not a replacement for Thenjiwe. Rather than inspiring unbridled desire, "Nonceba makes him steady"; the narrator says, she "has grown on him, that is all, like a good song" (176, 178). Crucially, he allows her to have her distance and the relationship remains undefined.[18] "If she decides to move out of the flat," he decides, "he will help her find another. He will even give her up" (178). Among the concrete and sandstone of the colonial city, they embrace the *ekoneni*—the corners—and remap their experiences of trauma. This means rejecting traditional and colonial lithic waypoints for dynamic relations that provide space for affective state changes, like the countervailing forces of water and stone, and equitable models for living ecologies, both between the sexes and in the nation.

Dust

Yvonne Adhiambo Owuor, in "Reading Our Ruins: A Rough Sketch" (2018), in her attempt to define "'post-coloniality'," offers two analogies for her task: a "survey of ruins" and an "autopsy" (15).[19] She explains the conjunction between the two endeavors by asserting that

"ruins" are the "material equivalent . . . of a corpse" (15). The "acts of time and/or violence" that lead to their demise, she elaborates, operate as a leveling and "equalizing" force (15). In other words, ruins and a corpse both reveal the temporal and material limitations of humans and the institutions they create. One example of a ruin she offers is the African nation-state. She charts its now familiar path in which it resisted colonial occupation only to adopt the tools of the colonizer to divide the nation between ethnic groups and to consolidate power in one. Specifically, the next generation inherited a 'post'-independence nation-state that still resembles the colonial state Fanon described in *Wretched of the Earth*: "Manichean and petrified" (15). The violence the colonial and post-independence states employed to structure the state blurred the line between perpetrators and victims and traumatized everyone involved. They passed down its history to their children in the form of generational trauma, silence, and stone.

In her reading, she also identifies the corpse, the charismatic African male savior whom the nation anointed to unite it and lead it out of its colonial past into an African future. He is the symbol of the African state and the avatar of its power. Fresh from its latest election cycle, she uses Kenya as an example where the prevailing debate about the qualifications of the two "private-school educated" presidential candidates centered on the presence or absence of their foreskin (18). The argument was about which condition left them "more male, virile and therefore properly anointed by God for leadership" (18). Two obvious assumptions underlie the debate: the leader of the Kenyan nation-state must be male, and the gendered structure of power is god-ordained, ahistorical, and thus permanent. Based on the election, Owuor wryly wonders "how and where to situate [postcolonial women] in a realm of such erudite musings?" (18). In other words, what are women's roles in the post-independence nation-state? Her question is rhetorical, but the answer is clear: women's place is outside the power structure. The Manichean

state not only divides and excludes ethnic groups from power but also women. Therefore, she suggests, the hope behind such a unifying, salvific figure is dead. In her survey of the ruins, in the findings of her autopsy, Owuor defines 'post-coloniality' as something of an impossibility not only because Africa has not escaped colonialism but also because it remains bound by patriarchy.

In this half of the chapter, I will expand on my analysis of how Vera applies affective mapping to remap the traumatic relations between Nonceba and the lithic waypoints of the Zimbabwe nation-state to heal from their violent, colonial past to include experiences of generational trauma among family and community. Owuor, in her anti-national allegory *Dust*, further excavates the vein of patriarchy in the corpse and lithic ruins of the family and the post-independence Kenyan nation-state to remap characters' relationships with stone and the traumatic ecosystem of the Kenyan nation-state. She, too, employs the "Mother Africa trope" to evince for readers the patriarchal foundations of the ontological hierarchies that associated women with the land and nation that enabled the construction of precolonial, colonial, and post-independence structures of the nation-state. More to the point, patriarchy across cultures, she contends in amending Fanon, was the original apparatus that enabled further differentiations between humans and the environment, humans and other beings, and races, instances of everyday and spectacular violence which form the traumatic ecosystem of the contemporary Kenyan nation-state. Owuor suggests, then, that healing from the trauma of family and nation starts with remapping relations between sexes. It means recognizing first that there are "no bad parts": that perpetrators are also victims and that violence is a symptom of trauma. It means constructing a safe space in which individuals can mourn their losses without reprisal. In this safe space in which men do not feel the need to defend their masculinity, Owuor demonstrates, individuals and communities can recognize the Self apart from the traumatic relations of their

ecosystems and remap themselves according to nonhierarchical relations that ensure the humanity of all. This process creates the conditions for what Fanon calls "true, authentic love—wishing for others what one postulates of oneself, when that postulation unites the permanent values of human reality"— that Owuor suggests might extend to relations among races, among humans and other beings, and between humans and the natural environment (*Black Skins* 41).

Recent writing about the novel approaches it from either feminist or environmental perspectives. I will combine these two methodologies to think through Owuor's counterintuitive assertion that the ruin is "the material equivalent . . . of the corpse."[20] Owuor repeats a version of the statement when Odidi, in the throes of death, his mind traveling between his childhood and the present, sees a vision in which he is explaining to his sister Ajany why they wander: "'sometimes we are places, not people'" (9). This second version, although slightly different because the people are alive, is no less paradoxical. But the parallels between her address and the novel are apparent. The novel opens with the corpse, Moses Ebewesit Odidi Oganda, a man whose life once promised new beginnings for family and nation, both emerging out of violent births. Son of minority Luo father, Aggrey Nyipir Oganda, a British loyalist who survived the Mau Mau rebellion of the 1950s, and a Turkana mother, Akai Lokorijom, Odidi rose to national prominence as the rugby star Shifta the Winger and idolized pan-Africanist Luo politician Tom Mboya who was assassinated in 1969. Like his idol, he embodied the latest, unified vision of post-independence Kenya, eschewing international opportunities in favor of working for the Kikuyu government as a civil engineer and building for its future. After the government sabotaged its own dam project, however, he lost faith in the post-independence future. He became a whistle-blower and retreated into the shadows of a Nairobi slum and a life of brigandage. He was gunned down by the government on a Nairobi tarmac concurrent with the

violence following the contested election of Kikuyu politician Mwai Kibaki in 2007. His assassination is a tragic and yet familiar end to Kenyan hopes for a male leader who might lead the bifurcated nation-state out of its generational trauma and self-consuming violent reprisals.[21]

Also in the first chapter, Owuor introduces readers to the ruins: the pink coral homestead of the Oganda family, Wuoth Ogik. Originally built by exiled British colonialist Hugh Bolton, it represents an alternative birthplace for nation-state in Kenya's northern frontier. The geographic location of the house is significant. The country's post-independence power and wealth resides in the south, the ancestral region of the Kikuyu ethnic group, where the climate supports a cool abundance, symbolized by its charismatic landscape—Mount Kenya, Lake Victoria, and the Rift Valley—and bustling population centers. In contrast, the north possesses one of scorched scarcity. Volcanoes and flashfloods sculpt the phenomena of its terrain—Mount Kulal, Lake Turkana, and the Chalbi Desert—and its vistas swallow its sparse population of ranchers and nomads. At overlapping moments, Owuor uses Wuoth Ogik to represent Kenya's attempts to organize these Manichean landscapes into a nation-state, housing both colonizer and colonized, members of different ethnic groups, and the patriarchal family structure. However, at the end of the novel, Ajany and Isaiah burn it down, suggesting that neither the patriarchal structures of the family nor the inherited colonial structures of the Kenyan nation-state are viable. Together, Odidi's corpse and Wuoth Ogik's ruins introduce the questions the novel poses: after the failure of family and nation-state, "what remains" and "what endures" (355, 362)?

In what follows, I will demonstrate how Owuor answers these questions for her readers through affective mapping. She uses Ajany, her main character, to excavate the patriarchal myths of family and nation from the "ruins" of the three lithic waypoints—the red cave, Wuoth Ogik, and the Nairobi tarmac—that function as homes for the Oganda family and allegorize phases of

the Kenyan nation-state ("Reading Our Ruins: A Rough Sketch" 15). Each 'home' is constructed from different phases of stone, or combinations of inorganic and organic matter, that are progressively weaker containers for their traumatic ecosystems formed by the violence of family and nation. The central victim in each of these myths of family is a woman—Ajany, Akai, and Justina—who represents different iterations of the "Mother Africa trope"—indigenous vessels of tradition and temptress-prostitute. Engendered by the Mother Africa myth and the systemic violence of the nation-state, the women in Odidi's life all believe that he represents the future and treat him as such and are initially devastated when they learn that they are "what remains." Eventually, however, they realize that they are the answer to the other question the novel poses—"What endures?" (362).

The Red Cave

A walkable distance from Wuoth Ogik in the Turkana region, the red cave houses a traumatic ecosystem shaped by the violent myths of the male protector of family and nation that enable subsequent myths of childhood innocence and national autochthony. The red cave, named thus because of the red clay that lines it, symbolizes the pre-colonial womb of Mother Africa. Owuor identifies their origins in a series of myths that Odidi tells Ajany to reinforce his status as the older brother and male protector and to cover up his broken promises. Readers first encounter the red cave during the fire fight at the beginning of the novel. Odidi flashes back to his and Ajany's childhood when they were on December holiday from the "down-country" boarding school in what Odidi called the "'*real* Kenya'" where they were bullied for their rural northern origins (13). Before the end of the break, they decide to visit a local spring they knew about "where smoke and water come from the ground" to search for its origin in the red cave. Previously, Akai told them the cave was "forbidden" (76). To dissuade them, she tells them a

"python" inhabits the cave and "all the red stone belongs to it" (76). If they encounter it, she warns, "it sucks spirit out and leaves shadows for you to rot in" (76). Of course, these prohibitions give it mythic status and make it even more enticing. Ajany knows that Akai says, "'There's bad in there'," but that does not deter Odidi, the stronger, older brother (12).

What the children find, however, is akin to an origin story. They enter the cave upright, hand-in-hand, but as they progress, the cave forces them to conform to its space, pushing them to the floor of the cave. "Mostly," the narrator relates, "they slithered on the hard cold ground, dark skin tones blending it, inching forward on knees and hands" (12). They travel through the cave, figuratively devolving, like four-legged creatures and then snakes. The color of their skin matches that of the ground, implying a distant inheritance. As they turn a corner into a chamber, light pierces through an opening and reveals the evidence of primordial occupants. The narrator's description of what they see is vague, but it implies both violence and mirth. On the walls, they see "yellow-and-red-shaded signs of bleeding spoors and giant footprints heading upward" and "the imprint of the world's first record of laughter—open-mouthed toothiness carved into ancient rock" (12). At first, the pictograms speak to them, and they join them in laughter, but then Ajany trips and falls on human bones. They find a finger and then a human skull. For readers, the proximity of the artefacts to the children suggests a Kenyan origin story but one that originates in the North, which Felix Mutunga Ndaka argues, resides "beyond networks of care," remapping Kenya's past (158). The encounter seems to reunite them with their distant relatives and even the dirt from which they were formed. It also provides an alternative to other founding myths, like Abrahamic religions' story of Adam and Eve or the Kikuyu story located near Mount Kenya of Mumbi and Gikuyu, where the deity gifts land to the man and provides him a woman with whom to propagate the earth with a chosen people.

Owuor, however, also alludes to the patriarchal violence of these founding myths that depict the male in the role of dominant protector and anticipate the Mother Africa trope. Immediately after the children discover the skull, Ajany panics because of its lack of a face. She associates it with "Obarogo, the blind bogeyman," a bedtime character Odidi concocted to satisfy his "desire to hear his sister scream" (13). The story warned her that "Obarogo, who needed eyes in order to see in the dark . . . sought out little girls whose eyes were open when they should have been asleep" (13). Although it resembles childhood play, Ajany's imagination blends the story with reality, and she is traumatized by it. The story teaches her other patriarchal myths that suggest disobedient females will be punished. A few nights later, Ajany climbs into bed with him, admitting that "Obarogo came. He wants my face" to which Odidi assures her "'I'll fight him. I'll punch his bones until *he* has a face'" (77). While endearing, Odidi's reassurance nevertheless communicates that she must rely on a male to protect her from her male aggressor, a point he emphasizes. She learns females are powerlessness within a male-dominated world.

In the cave, she enacts her training. After Ajany cathects her fears onto the anonymous skull, she immediately grabs onto Odidi's neck and freezes such that he must coax and carry her out of the cave. A few days after, she again dreams of Obarogo and returns to Odidi for protection. This time, however, Odidi becomes frustrated with the success of his myths—the lessons of her powerlessness—and implores her to "Stop it!" (13). He quickly realizes, however, that his myth had metastasized, and she is associating Obarogo with her fear of returning to school, a place he mythologized as the "'*real* Kenya'." To assuage her, Odidi leans into his role of protector and repeats another promise and myth he invented: after they graduate, he tells her, they will go "Far Away" where they might find 'home.' And yet, as the prologue demonstrates, Odidi broke this promise too. When they graduated he chose to pursue opportunities in Kenya

instead of following Ajany to Brazil. Now, in the novel's present, she is returning for his funeral to mourn her male protector. In Odidi's and Ajany's escapade to the red cave, Owuor demonstrates the mechanics of the patriarchal family structure in which, even in childhood play, females are trained to abdicate their power to males who promise to protect them in a male-dominated world, a myth that appears as timeless as the pictograms and as indestructible as the cave walls, one that enacts real-world violence but has no more substance than Obarogo.

Toward the end of the novel, Owuor reveals the more recent origins of the skeleton in the red cave that connects the patriarchal family structure not to an autochthonic past but to post-independence formations of the nation-state, founded upon the emergent Mother Africa myth. As the story progresses, the Kenyan community that had supported Odidi slowly gathers, like the rocks that are stacked on his cairn, at Wuoth Ogik to confront their own complicity in Odidi's death through their failed efforts to build a post-independence nation-state. In their mourning, they retrieve the skeleton from the red cave and bury it next to Odidi, marking it with a smaller cairn. Among those gathered, Nyipir and Akai confess that the skeleton is that of Hugh Bolton, the colonial architect and original owner of the homestead. With their admission, Owuor symbolically frames the scene: the two cairns represent the beginning in Hugh Bolton and end in Odidi of the patriarchal family and Kenyan nation-state. Owuor constructs the scene as an allegory of the Kenyan independence in which the male nationalist deposes his colonial master who emasculated him and retakes ownership over the land and the female—Mother Africa. Akai tells the buried history. At the time, Akai was Bolton's lover, who submitted to him to escape her patriarchal Turkana family. She represents the prostitute strand of the Mother Africa trope, the virgin land that colonizer sought to penetrate. Nyipir, who was working for Bolton after allying with the British during the Mau Mau revolt, also possessed romantic feelings for Akai. However,

she teased and emasculated him in preference for his more virile colonial master. In Akai's telling, she was sent by her family on foot across the desert with Hugh's newborn twins, who died in route, to claim her bride price. After she arrived, she confronted Bolton who tried to kill her, but Nyipir shot him "in the head," instead (350). After, he turned his gun on Akai, but she covered him in kisses and begged him, "'Help me'" (350). She had lost the protection of the males in her life, her step-father and British lover. The scene recalls an adult iteration of the promises Odidi made to Ajany, to protect her from the patriarchal myths he contrived.

In this version, Nyipir in effect agrees to protect her for access to her body. Panicked, they transported Bolton's corpse to the red cave where they "took him deep into the earth" (350). In the burial chamber, alongside their dead colonial master, the narrator relates, they consummated their pact in a symbolic act of decolonization: "Akai straddled Nyipir, tore off his clothes, covered in Hugh's blood" and repeated, "'Help me'" (350). Nyipir reclaimed his masculinity, and Akai acquired a new protector from the blood of empire. The next morning, they emerged, like Kenya from colonialism, a new family, presumably having conceived Odidi. After burying Hugh in the red cave, Nyipir from the Luo people and Akai from the Turkana people, assumed multiethnic ownership over Wuoth Ogik, the once British-owned property. Together, they "planted new myths" about its history on top of old ones because, like the Kenyan state, they changed nothing about the house they occupied. They simply relied on the maxim that "in Kenya's pre- and early post-independence days, anything was believable. And a story repeated often enough became fact" (351). For Nyipir and Akai, they realized in the colonial edifice what Odidi and Ajany imagined as "Far Away," a place to raise a family. However, for Akai, the new origin story better resembles Odidi's childhood myth of Obarogo, in which she exchanges one form of patriarchy for another. In their pact, Owuor suggests, independence

solidified the Mother Africa trope. Kenyan men founded both family and nation on the sacrifice of women's bodies and enclosed Mother Africa in socio-economic structures that protect her from other men, rendering her powerless while maintaining the myth of male sovereignty. The red cave, then, houses neither a boogeyman nor an autochthonic origin story but the stony silence of broken promises and buried trauma that the characters remap by bringing into the light.

Wuoth Ogik

Wuoth Ogik is the Oganda family's primary lithic "home" and allegorically a representation of the multiethnic Kenyan nation-state, a traumatic ecosystem structured by myths of gendered parental roles and post-independence unity. Termite-ridden in the novel's present, however, Wuoth Ogik is less secure of a structure than the red cave for secrets and susceptible to the destabilizing effects of patriarchy. Rather than solid stone, Hugh built it from inorganic and dead organic matter, a composite of "desert stone, coral, crushed obsidian, termite soil, doum palm, rods, acacia trunks, and a sprinkling of cement" that produced a pink hue that blended with the desert to feign an indigeneity that belies its recency and conceals the violence of its colonial construction (316). Owuor unravels the myths of family and nation it contains through different characters' descriptions of it. She introduces readers to it first through the eyes of Isaiah Bolton, Hugh's supposed son, who is visiting for the first time from England. Believing that he is connecting with his absent father for the first time, he treats the property like a pilgrimage site, a settler-colonial idyll that communes with the landscape.[22] The narrator describes him admiring the walls from the outside "to watch the coral tints that darkened as the light's mood shifted" (72). Then, he lies on the floor to glance at the ceiling and "imagined that the style was a paring down of a Kenyan bush aesthetic" (72). From every corner, he catches "glimpses of outside vastness" and hears the "four shrieking winds," evincing the meaning of its name—"Journey's

End" (72, 113). Inside, he searches for traces of his father's life and inhabits them, as if recovering part of himself. The narrator describes an alcove of the house as "womblike," an allusion to Odidi and Ajany's venture into the red cave, which implies Isaiah, too, is returning to his origins (53). Recalling Tayyib Salih's *Season of Migration to the North* (1966), unable to locate his father in walls, he finds him in the library. In the books, he discovers his father's name scrawled on the first pages, establishing ownership, as well as marginalia and sketches of "mountains, water, trees, and stick figures" he assumes his father added (73). He also gathers a "whiff of old cigar smoke" in the leaves and imagines he were "touching his father's hand" (73). He reads the "memory map" of the house as if it were a hagiography (53). Rather than evidence of colonial violence, he intimates that it emerged from the elements—the pink soil, the winds, and its scant water. The house, like its builder's colonial claims, feigns emplacement and a sense of "home."

Further iterations of the house's story, however, reveal its authenticity as a mirage. Isaiah's mother and Hugh's wife, Selene, for whom the house was a "*gift*," describes it in a letter to Isaiah as "*a house of gargantuan pretensions, a pink folly*," echoing her assessment of colonial Kenya more broadly (91). Ali Dida Haba, when he first encounters it while investigating Hugh's disappearance, sees it not as endemic but alien. In recalling his impressions, the narrator relates, he "wondered about it . . . soft pink of coral stone—where was that from and how did it get here? Blue patterns on intricate tiles around a dead fountain. What did they suggest? Who chose them? The house's name: Wuoth Ogik. Why?" (217-8).[23] Even the name, meaning "Journey's End," confuses him. Later, the narrator reveals that Nyipir suggested it as a joke when Hugh was searching for a name. In the boundless Turkana region, only for Hugh did the house represent a semblance of finality, evincing its and his pretensions. Rather than its environs, Wuoth Ogik was

built in the image of Hugh Bolton who attempted to impose it on those around him and colonial Kenya more generally.

Similarly, the library challenges Isaiah's "memory map." The books in the library are all of European origin, what Odidi describes as "Someone Else's Baudelaire" (53). [24] The novels, encyclopedias, and catalogues of colonial, scientific knowledge evince his colonial desire to conquer the northern frontier and Kenya. As Selene explains, "in time, whatever Hugh desired, he touched and claimed" (94). But, the list, mixing fiction with nonfiction, also reveals the mythic basis of that colonial fantasy. In addition, Ajany's memories demonstrate how the library, like the Kenyan nation, has reinforced colonial patriarchy by providing opportunities for its male citizens while it punished females for holding the same aspirations. The children innocently repurpose the library from a silent memorial to colonialism to a fount of possibility. Ajany, when reacquainting herself with its contents, notices some of the books are missing, specifically "the engineering and agriculture books—Odidi's preferences" (53). These are books Odidi used to pursue his engineering degree and with which he hoped to contribute to post-independence Kenya. However, her exploration of the books sparks a different memory from the library. She recalls practicing aloud her reading skills to impress her father with her education. Selecting Hugh Bolton's signature, she sounds out—"H-U-G-H, Hugg, Huff . . . Baba, what's a Hug-g B-Bolton?" (54). In her ignorance, "Hugh Bolton" only represents words on a page, briefly exposing their emptiness and powerlessness absent their owner. It also represents a fog-clearing moment in which Nyipir could have changed the trajectory of that history. But, for him, the name inadvertently speaks into existence a traumatic past that he and Akai have silenced. Upon hearing Hugh's name, he "strode over, and snatched the book from Ajany's hands, snapping it shut" (54). Rather than explain his pain, Nyipir transfers his trauma to Ajany as she

misunderstands the direction of his rage, attributing it to her stutter and failure to correctly read Hugh's name. She retreats to her room and "wept until she fell asleep in her brother's arms" (54). For Ajany, Obarogo, the violence of patriarchy and colonialism, inhabits the library books and the lithic walls of her 'home' and mediates her relationships with knowledge production and 'family.'[25] Like the books in the library, the house is "someone else's." In this way, Wuoth Ogik's lithic structure houses generational experiences of trauma whose silences perpetuate the original violence and the foundational myths of family and nation.

A "pink folly," the house also enshrines the patriarchal myths of parental roles and post-independence unity that both exploit the Mother Africa trope. While the family ostensibly lived in the homestead, they rarely occupied it. The narrator observes that the property gives off a "musk of neglect, and something else—as if the inhabitants whose memories drenched the walls had lived their lives within the house, but not *in* the house, and the house had never participated in the ebb and flow of their existence" (72). Indeed, leveraging his role as police officer, "stuck in the entrails of the Kenyan State," Nyipir rustled cattle and arms across the national borders, so Akai was left in the traditional female role to birth and raise their children and attend to the property with Galgalu the herdsman (342). His absence forced her to embody the first strand of the Mother Africa trope—"the pot of culture." Then, when they were old enough, the children left for boarding school, leaving her alone with Galgalu and the animals and motherly role truly became symbolic. While her husband and children were away participating in Kenya's future, she was left to herd cattle and to reside in the triggering edifice of her British abuser.

Akai, however, was never interested in this parental role. Growing up, she desired to be a man. She refused the roles of herding and cooking that her pastoralist clan reserved for women. Instead, she indulged in the excitement of "hunting, swimming, and challenging young men to

wrestling matches" (225). After her first menstruation, her family sent her to "a secluded place" to learn womanly skills: "manners, expectations, cooking skills, animal husbandry, pleasure, birth, how to sing, how to weep, how to raise children, how to invoke God, and how to kill a man" (225). Before her traditional education was complete, however, she escaped and pled with her stepfather to "initiate me into manhood" (225). In school, she imagined life as "a teacher and a traveler" and then a cattle rustler (225). After getting expelled from school for organizing a protest against the school's European menu, she took "off her shoes," symbolically rejecting her colonial education and walked south to find her stepfather (226).[26] Before she found him, however, she stumbled upon two men, Hugh Bolton and his assistant, Nyipir, bathing in "a seasonal watering hole" (226). Seeing an opportunity, she entered into a transactional relationship, trading her stepfather's protection for Hugh's, to escape the strictures of her culture's gender roles and to attain her own vision of the future. He was what she "wanted to be"—a cosmopolitan world traveler in control of his future (344). Instead, she became his prostitute/temptress Mother Africa trophy, a colonial possession and art object for him to mount on his walls similar to the big game trophies he sought in the bush.[27]

As a prostitute/temptress figure, Akai receives much of the blame for the collapse of the family and the unity of the post-independence nation. Christina Kenny argues that Akai's failure in motherhood is "emblematic of the failure of the Kenyan state to protect and nurture it's [*sic*] citizens" (20). And, the novel supports the conclusion that Akai was a neglectful mother, especially to her daughter, Ajany. The narrator explains, "she had not hoped anything for her fourth-born" (342). At her premature birth, Nyipir was away on business, and Akai had only Galgalu, the young ranch hand, to help her through labor. Once recovered, Akai refused to name the baby without Nyipir, so "she had wandered away from Wuoth Ogik, seeking news of Nyipir

at watering holes and centers of trade" only to leave the baby under a bush to die when she could not find him (342). After Galgalu and Odidi saved and named her Ajany, Akai refused to develop a relationship with her daughter, often referring to her as "That one" (75). Additionally, Akai had her "seasons of . . . disappearances" when Galgalu was left to raise the children (41). At the beginning of the novel, when Nyipir and Ajany arrive with Odidi's body, Akai responds to Ajany's appeals for emotional connection as a threat to her memories of Odidi by pointing an AK-47 at her. Even faced with the deaths of family and nation, she rejects her daughter to protect her trauma and guilt and to maintain an appearance of strength to buttress their crumbling exteriors for which she sacrificed her dreams to become a man.

The novel also supports the conclusion that Wuoth Ogik, the Kenyan state, was a tomb rather than a 'home' for the Oganda family, the Kenyan nation. Metaphorically, the women, its organic matter, who are sacrificed to hold together its inorganic walls, are destined to rot, petrified in its patriarchal structure. Selene, Hugh's wife, is the first woman sacrificed for its construction, and then Akai is sacrificed for its maintenance. While Akai refuses the limits patriarchy placed on her, she accepts its permanence and sacrifices herself to men to share in their socio-economic power and escape those strictures. For this reason, she accepts the matriarchal role that she has never wanted. However, the men in her life never fulfill their promises, and her sacrifices only strengthen Wuoth Ogik's walls. Her Turkana stepfather rejects her and her twins, Ewoi and Etir, who die in the desert; Hugh tries to kill her; Nyipir is absent. Therefore, when she delivers Ajany, the narrator relates, "she had nothing left to give" (342). Because she has sacrificed herself to men, Ajany is an impediment to her dreams. In the desert, in her search for Nyipir, when Ajany refuses to breastfeed, she thinks, "*At least I have a son*," placed Ajany "under a Mareer tree, and then . . . ran away" (342). Enclosed within the patriarchal

structures of family and 'nation,' she, too, decides to sacrifice a third woman, her own daughter, to attach her future to her son and preserve the termite-infested lithic waypoint, Wuoth Ogik, and, allegorically, the unity of the multiethnic Kenyan nation-state that Ajany and Isaiah will burn down at the end of the novel.

Nairobi tarmac

The "potholed" tarmac, the third lithic waypoint, outside of Odidi's pregnant partner Justina's Nairobi apartment represents the terminal 'home' for the Oganda family and Kenyan nation (11). A manmade amalgamation of tar and stone, it serves as a more utilitarian function for the patriarchal myths of family and nation by thinly paving over their ecosystems of violence and trauma to sustain the promise of a multiethnic, endemic future. But its brittle surface requires repair and cannot hide its "bitumen" smell of dead organic matter (11). Nor does it hide the evidence of new violence—Odidi's blood. Despite its distance from northern Kenya, the narrator juxtaposes Nairobi, in the aftermath of the 2007 contested elections, with the other two lithic structures, drawing comparisons between extinguished colonial and nationalist dreams of the past and present and the temptress/prostitute, Mother Africa figures, Akai and Justina, who corrupted them. And yet, it also provides Ajany, the Kenyan ex-pat daughter, the opportunity to conjure in stone the face of the patriarchal myths that have structured her life, to defuse their power, and to remap her own future.

In the novel's elastic time, these traumas collect in the dried pool of Odidi's blood that stains the nondescript Nairobi tarmac. In her investigation of his death, Ajany persuades Petrus to provide her a map to the location of Odidi's death. Petrus, whose name means rock in Latin, is ironically her father's colleague and hardened-torturer and embodies the emotional petrification of the post-independence state, the emotional distance required to treat friends as enemies. He

feels a strange familial obligation to help her to repay his guilt. Her desperate search for her brother and childhood protector resembles Akai and Nyipir's exit from the red cave and Isaiah's pilgrimage to Wuoth Ogik in search of his supposed father, Hugh, in their desires to recover the futures held by their promises of 'home.' When Ajany arrives at the murder scene, her melodramatic individual expressions of grief recall Isaiah's exaggerated supplications to the walls and contents of Wuoth Ogik. She acts as both grieving sister and rational detective, behaviors she has learned from her family to suppress her trauma; however, on the street, she has nowhere to hide her grief. Once she reaches the site, the narrator explains, she starts "crawling on the tarmac" (190). Then, in her role as sister-detective, Ajany starts collecting Odidi's blood like evidence from the crime scene—"scrap[ing] fragments . . . onto a small piece of paper" (189). Instead of a skeleton, she finds the remains of a flattened bullfrog, symbolizing Odidi's significance within Nairobi's present and the value the state places on citizens' lives. Whatever hopes he represented for Kenya's future had been squashed by nationalist forces vying for power. He is no longer Shifta the Winger but another casualty of the internecine struggle. The narrator makes this explicit, zooming out to the point-of-view of passers-by who view her as "another of the well-dressed insane" (190). They have become numb to the "unreasonable season" when " a small woman scrubbing blood off a potholed road is nothing to marvel at" (190). Quickly, however, Ajany transitions from an objective detective to a dutiful sister, fulfilling her sibling promises. She shares in his suffering by vomiting on the tarmac, adding her fluids to Odidi's. As if to draw him into her, she rests her head in his blood, "listening and waiting" (189). She applies water to the stain to remove it "with her fingers and hands" (189). Initially, her efforts appear like those of her parents to hide Hugh's body; however, they more closely resemble Isaiah's religious rituals. In the view of all, she holds "vigil over a spot of road [to] . . . cleanse the condemnation,

the persistent loneliness of a brother" (190). In her supplications, she reclaims her memories from the street, allowing it to "become tarmac. Become nothing" (190). She believes that removing his blood also removes its stains of trauma. She is only moved from her spot by an "orange cement" truck, perhaps like the one that squished the frog (190). It evinces the modernizing city and state with the technology to crush and reshape stone, to dominate its present, and yet in the context of the violence stemming from Odidi's death and the contested elections, it also symbolizes a nation moving on, more interested in burying its trauma under cement, pulverized limestone.

Subsequent scenes, providing others' perspectives on the lithic site, evince the complexity of the traumatic ecosystem, and challenge the patriarchal protector myth that Ajany upholds during her vigil. She has yet to learn that the blood-stained tarmac is located outside of Justina's room where he was residing, and that while she mourns, she is being watched by that community for whom the tarmac harbors different experiences of trauma. Justina, Odidi's pregnant partner, also visits the location daily and jealously observes Ajany. She believes, "his blood should belong to *her*, hers to decide when to clean" (190). Rather than confront her, however, she enlists her community. As the cement truck barrels towards Ajany, Justina's hairdresser neighbor, who had earlier greeted Ajany with stony silence, drags her from her vigil and into her salon where she washes and styles her hair. Then, as she leaves the salon, a "kiosk man" calls her by hers and Odidi's last name, Oganda, and tells her to see Justina (192). When Ajany questions him about Justina's identity and where to find her, he points her back to the woman in the salon who just fixed her hair. In effect, Ajany is being turned in circles. The cognitive map she received from Petrus provided her with the requisite information about streets and buildings, but it lacked the affective map that shaped the traumatic ecosystem of the neighborhood. These relationships also

influence the residences' experiences of trauma. In contrast to Ajany's penitent displays, people in the neighborhood have learned to mourn more discreetly. Justina, despite daily visits to the site, only leaves a lily on the blood stain. During Ajany's interactions with the kiosk man, the narrator explains the reason for the residents' subdued displays: "Like most citizens, he is now careful about small, unconsidered talk. . . . His cultural roots had not mattered before the chaos—not in the city. Now most citizens understated ethnic roots, overemphasizing Kenyan-ness" (192).[28] Because of the violence in the city, they are reluctant to draw attention to their ethnic differences. The spot on the tarmac where Odidi was killed truly represents a palimpsest of traumatic experiences. Ajany, who had been out of the country, overtly displays her own emotions, but her experience is not that of the local community. For it, the tarmac retains the historical trauma of the colonial and post-independence periods and shapes their more subdued response to Odidi's death.

The admixture of Odidi's blood and tarmac outside Justina's apartment also represents an evolution of the temptress/prostitute Mother Africa strain in which the woman maintains control of her body and supports herself outside of patriarchal structures of family and nation. Owuor weaves Ajany and Justina's emerging hostile relationship with the similarly hostile one Ajany has with her mother, Akai. In both relationships, Justina and Akai regard Ajany as an interloper to Odidi's legacy, which they cast as the nation's future.[29] Initially, Justina's response to Ajany is quizzical because her wealthy family could support her and the baby, but the narrator explains through Justina's backstory that her experience with family was largely traumatic. The picture of her life is partial but evocative, shaped by "Disease. Job loss. Death" (199). Her own passions for art and mathematics were interrupted by the familial obligation to care for her mother (199). Like Akai, she has sacrificed her dreams to perform a gender role. From this sacrifice, she has learned

to value herself and her body and to charge for her female services. 'Family,' much like nation for those like Nyipir and Odidi who were betrayed by it, became a business. She met Odidi at a club, Twilight 333, and established a mutually beneficial relationship where Odidi paid for sex and a place to hide from the police in the currency of oil paints.[30]

Her interactions with Ajany are also transactional. Shortly after her encounter with the kiosk man, Ajany visits Justina in her apartment, but she does not welcome her. The narrator relates, "the woman gives her a side glance, offers nothing" (193). As Ajany adjusts to the social situation, she sees Odidi's effects throughout the room. Like Isaiah in Wuoth Ogik, she reaches for them, to touch and hold what was once his, and Justina quickly becomes possessive of them. Justina repeatedly tells her "'Don't . . .'," but Ajany touches anyway (194). Her prohibition includes the in-utero baby. Initially, she places Ajany's hand on her stomach, which elicits a smile between them, but the situation degrades when Justina admits she wanted to meet Ajany "'To know what it would do to me'" (195). When Ajany questions the outcome, Justina states, "'You're nothing to me'" (195). She continues to press Justina for her time and stories, but the relationship turns transactional. As if a customer rather than a family relation, Justina insists she must pay for those privileges. In effect, she is asserting her ownership over Odidi and their unborn child, inverting the patriarchal family structure that Ajany is trying to claim. They are *her* 'family,' *her* iteration of the nation's future. Consequently, the relations between the two women are shaped by patriarchal and post-independence violence. Ajany's claim to what is left of Odidi's life threatens to draw Justina back into the patriarchal family structure. At the same time, her rejection of Ajany's familial claim reenacts Akai's rejection of Ajany. At stake is the unborn child, who in the context of the national struggle, represents the future direction of the nation, one that also promises to be shaped by generational trauma. Thus, Owuor depicts how the two

Mother Africa strands collide on the blood-stained tarmac, the third lithic waypoint, and extend the patriarchal violence across space and time to create a traumatic ecosystem that shapes the affective relations between individuals and communities, citizens and the nation, including the unborn.

New Lithic Waypoints—Hugh's Bust and Desert Cairns

In "a Nairobi guest room," a short distance from Justina's apartment, Ajany cathects Odidi's broken promises, feelings of familial rejection, and generational trauma into a fourth lithic waypoint, a plaster bust of Hugh Bolton (264). Unlike the other lithic waypoints, however, the bust allows Ajany to materialize in a fragile cast of "*Plasticine dust. Oil-based clay*" and wire the invisible figures of hers and the nation's trauma. It represents a female-created work of art that demonstrates her self-possessed agency and disempowers the Mother Africa myths of patriarchy and colonialism (254).[31] Inspiration for the bust emerges from her violent confrontation with fellow expatriate, Isaiah Bolton, at the door of her Nairobi guest room that evolves into recuperative, nonprocreative sex act in which, the narrator relates, their "lonelinesses spill and mix" (250). In the scene, Owuor stages what appears to be a repeat of earlier, traumatic ones: Nyipir and Akai's sex in the red cave and Ajany's vomiting vigil over the blood-stained tarmac. Instead, the guest room, a rented, heterotopic space, provides an entirely different affective ecosystem, unshaped by the myths of patriarchy and colonialism in which both characters mutually orient and remap, rather than sacrifice, their bodies. Owuor is clear, however, that their healing is not their own. Amidst the sex, the narrator universalizes them, calling them "a man" and "a woman," and projects their relationship into a future when they "will grope secrets, share unanswered questions and infinite presences. They will also dance between tombs of demoniacs" (253). They become an everyman and an everywoman, exorcising

their past traumas through mutual exploration rather than patriarchal domination, presenting a model for the future of Kenya and perhaps greater humankind.

In addition, Ajany discovers a model in Isaiah's body to exorcise hers and Kenya's demons—Obarogo and Hugh Bolton's skeleton. Ajany gathers in her memory the bone fragments from the red cave, her map of Isaiah's body, and a picture of Hugh's face Isaiah gave her. "Composing herself," the narrator explains, "she touches [Isaiah's] face . . . tugging at skin" (265). The syntactical ambiguity suggests that as she is "composing herself" and the bust of her colonial haunt, she is externalizing the patriarchal myths—childhood innocence, parental roles, and the scaredness of male life—that have shaped her traumatic relationship to family as well as those of the Kenyan nation—its autochthony, multiethnic unity, and endemic future—that were housed in its lithic waypoints. Her creation, however, is not just for her remediation. The stone composite, the narrator relates, "transfixes two people," herself and Isaiah (266). The lithic bust holds both of their experiences of trauma without collapsing them into hierarchies of importance. In an anonymous motel room in Nairobi, a once vibrant city, built on hopes of a pan-African modernity and now collapsing from patriarchy into the ruins of ethnic strife, the scene presents hope for a new founding narrative, one that weds the progeny of colonialism's perpetrators and victims in the construction of the face of their traumas. The bust offers them opportunities for healing that opens toward new landscapes and potential routes to nonhierarchical ecosystems of family and nation.

The cairns that Owuor scatters throughout the novel also symbolize this process. As the house collapses, those gathered at Wuoth Ogik construct two to mark Odidi's and Hugh's graves. They function as two new waypoints, stacked from the ground up, recalling Nonceba's vision of the Gulati Hills emerging from the fog and modeling a non-hierarchical building method. They

mark “The Journey’s End” for old maps of ‘family,’ ‘home,’ and ‘nation’ and orient those who would like to chart different paths. In the novel, cairns are frequent and subtle features of the landscape. Ali and Isaiah encounter them while searching for Akai and Nyipir’s cattle. Galgalu, expelled from his clan, stumbles on Wuoth Ogik by following cairns during the day and stars at night. Similarly, Ajany, in listening to Nyipir talk of her missing uncle and grandfather, describes how “cairns would mark the way, stones to create bridges to connect *absent* to *now*” (298). Like Odidi’s blood on the tarmac, they mark places where “elastic time” stretches thin, linking the past to the present and locations across space. Moreover, despite their random shapes, they are intentional. The narrator describes the construction of Odidi’s cairn much like that of a traumatic ecosystem. When contemplating Odidi’s cairn, Nyipir imagines one “‘Seven and a half meters across the base’” made from “black, white, and brown stones . . . ‘A stone garden’” (45). In his wait for Akai to return so they can bury Odidi, he breaks stones and “sorts out the bigger rocks from the small” (125). Yet, its construction is not entirely under his control. Guests arrive and add to the monoliths. Even, the narrator notes, “unknown and unseen wanderers have added stones to Wuoth Ogik’s new graves. Nyipir counts these, seven,” suggesting the affective force of their presence even to those uninvolved with the traumatic experiences (327). Much like regional and even human history, the structure rises stone by stone with those that came before supporting those who came after. However, unlike other lithic human constructions such as the Nairobi tarmac and Wuoth Ogik or the concepts of ‘family,’ ‘home,’ and ‘nation,’ the cairns are not held together with binding agents. Only gravity maintains their stability, permitting future change without enacting violence on the whole. Their hierarchical structures are also limiting. Stacked too high or too steeply, rocks will fall, toppling to the ground or settling into their angles

of repose. Like scars on the landscape, the cairns mark historic wounds but offer no foundation upon which to rebuild.

Among these cairns, healing and remapping occur. After careening between the lithic waypoints of trauma—the red cave, the Nairobi street, and Wuoth Ogik— the perpetrators and victims from the families' and Kenya's histories settle around Odidi's and Hugh's graves.[32] Here the narrator relates, they open up about the pain they suffered and caused in their efforts to build 'family' and 'nation.' Trauma from patriarchal and colonial exploitation emerges as the common villain. Among the Kenyan people, there are "no bad parts." The shared intimacy opens space for reconciliation, and, as the novel closes, the characters form new and unexpected pairings: Nyipir and his torturer Petrus set off in search of his brother and father who never returned from Burma; Akai-ma and Ali Dida Hada "walk until, one day, near a gorge with secret, sweet water streams, they cross into a land where the fire makers lived" (362); and Ajany and Isaiah, after they burn Wuoth Ogik to the ground, leave for North Horr only for a flashflood to sweep them to "the tip of the water" (363). Reconciled perpetrators and victims leave Wuoth Ogik to remap theirs and Kenya's futures among its stone.[33]

Conclusion

In their novels, both Vera and Owuor employ the aesthetic of affective mapping to reimagine the male colonial and nationalist maps of Zimbabwe and Kenya that forced Africans into the interstices of the state and, as Stratton argues, abstracted women as symbols of nation while exploiting their bodies and silencing their voices in shaping it. Recalling Great Zimbabwe, each orients their national allegories by lithic waypoints—"the concrete and sandstone" of Bulawayo, the Gulati Hills, and Kezi as well as the red cave, the tarmac of Nairobi, and Wuoth Ogik—that collapse time and space, symbolizing the apparent permanence of those ontologies.

Instead, they erode the precolonial, colonial, and nationalist founding narratives mythologized by each, revealing the fluidity of social and material relations, to open possibilities for new more inclusive maps. Vera, through Nonceba and Cephas's budding relationship in post-independence Bulawayo, imagines a new future in which men and women live free of patriarchal norms and contribute equally to repurposing the colonial structures of Bulawayo for Zimbabwean flourishing. Owuor, writing after failed Kenyan nationalist projects, is less optimistic for the colonial invention of Kenya. The Biblical exodus and flood that ends *Dust* suggests the necessity of something like a blank canvas free of colonial lines, the traumatic fissures of the colonial past that carved up the region, on which new artists, perhaps the man and women who survive the flood "as if newborn" or the twins born to a woman in the final pages, might paint the region in their own images (363).

As they remap the lithic waypoints of Zimbabwe and Kenya, they also map the history of trauma—their nation's traumatic ecosystem. They locate its origins both in the distant past, evinced by the petroglyphs in the Gulati Hills and the red cave walls, and in the systems of hierarchy, such as patriarchy, class, and racism, that impose societal structures on groups of people through mechanisms of inclusion and exclusion. Crucially, both mechanisms, recalling Garuba, are sources of trauma. The mechanism of exclusion, like that Cephas experiences in colonial Zimbabwe and Hugh Bolton experienced in Britain's class-based society, wounds the male victims' self-perceptions such that their beliefs about themselves—their positions within social structures—no longer align with their experiences of the world. They no longer feel safe. To ease their pain, they reach for security. Rather than acknowledge their trauma, they repurpose the same mechanisms of inclusion and exclusion to assert their prior conceptions of themselves often at the expense of an established Other. In the novels, the members of different ethnic

groups or political factions like Sibaso and Nyipir as well as the women like Thenjewe, Nonceba, Akai, and Ajany are their victims. The excluded men, shaped by their traumatic ecosystems, impose new hierarchies, patriarchal structures such as 'family' and 'nation,' that ensure their dominance and security through new exclusions. Vera largely represents the individual effects of these traumatogenic experiences especially in Nonceba's and Cephas's paths to healing. Owuor, however, expands the scale of trauma. Like cracks that fragment stone foundations, she demonstrates how individual trauma spreads insidiously through affective relations among communities, between generations, and across oceans. Hugh and Selene feelings of exclusion within Britain's class system, pass to Akai and Nyipir, who transfer their traumas to Odidi and Ajany.

Building on current theorizations of trauma, however, they also depict how trauma is embedded in the lithic, specifically the stone waypoints, like Great Zimbabwe in East Africa, that orient the different traumatic ecosystems in their novels. Instead of purely psycho-social phenomena, the materiality of stone enables different experiences of trauma to be co-present without collapsing into one another and releases trauma from the limits of time and space. In *The Stone Virgins*, the Gulati Hills provide Sibaso, however misguided, reprieve from his trauma in the atavistic past, the sacrifice of stone virgins painted on the walls of Mbebele cave and Nonceba a model for healing in the Gulati Hills that emerge from the ground in the morning fog. In *Dust*, the red cave haunts Ajany's mind as the ghost of her traumatic childhood and Nyipir and Akai's postcolonial marriage. The bloodied tarmac outside Justina's room shapes Ajany's response to the trauma of Odidi's death and the community's response to the ethnic violence of Kenya's post-independence nation-building. The rock cairns throughout the landscape mark familiar waypoints and memorials but also carry meaning for strangers, opportunities for them to

share in the unknown sorrows of past lives and appreciate their own proximity to the surrounding dust. As we imagine our own climate futures, Vera and Owuor chart routes towards healing that locate trauma not in people but in our hierarchical relations and solutions in ecologies that open our psycho-social models to our affective interdependence with the material world, and in particular, stone.

Notes

[1] Arias 115

[2] In "Explorations in Animist Materialism: Notes on Reading/Writing African Literature, Culture, and Society," Harry Garuba argues these animist logics have been present in African literature, a genre he calls, "*animist realism,*" which he suggests includes magical realism, since colonialism. It employs techniques of orature, such as cyclical time and animist cosmologies, to represent the aftermath of colonialism and to imagine postcolonial futures. More than that, authors often represent the premodern past and modern present as concurrent presents and place them in conversation to provide glimpses of how the animist unconscious influences "contemporary African society" (280). Building on Garuba's argument, Cajetan Iheka argues some African literature evinces an "aesthetics of proximity" in its "narrative structures" and imaginaries in which communities share spaces and attributes with "other components of the ecosystem" (22). These representations often foreground how enchanted nonhuman lives whether plants, animals, or spirits participate in and shape the worlds they share with humans, closing the ontological distance between them. In doing so, "proximity," Iheka suggests, "allows us to focus not on their peculiarities but on their common attributes, including suffering and morality," and expand the political sphere and the lives that are valued (23).

[3] In Africa, Harry Garuba in "Mapping the Land/Body/Subject: Colonial and Postcolonial Geographies in African Narrative" explains that when faced with the challenge of rebuilding the nation, the African male subject redeployed the colonial hierarchy to dominate others, especially women, to rehabilitate their emasculated, fragmented selves in myths of family and nation. Anne McClintock in *Imperial Leather* argues that nations elevate men at the expense of women to the extent that nations are "sanctioned institutionalization of gender difference" (353). Thus, they function as "the symbolic bearers of the nation" while they are excluded from "national agency" (354).

[4] Seigworth and Gregg (2010) argue that affective and cognitive functions are inseparable.

[5] A few other scholars discuss the human/nonhuman relations in the novel. Nana Wilson-Tagoe in "History, gender and the problem of representation in the novels of Yvonne Vera" argues that in the Shona worlding of Vera's novels "land is inextricably bound with consciousness and being" (163). Although she does not discuss *The Stone Virgins*, in "Crossing into the Space-Time of Memory: Borderline Identities in Novels by Yvonne Vera," Ranka Primorac also draws on Shona cosmology to argue for the permeability of the physical and non-physical worlds in Vera's novels (*The Place of Tears* 77). Vera, herself, in an interview with Primorac describes the rock paintings in the Gulati Hills as "the language of rocks" (161).

[6] Critics like Lily G.N. Mabura, James Graham, Ann Willey, Caroline Rooney, and Terrence Ranger discuss the landscape and nation and often associate it with the female body. Others such as Meg Samuelson, Annie Gagiano, Sofia Kostelac, Eleni Coundouriotis discuss trauma and the female body.

[7] Sarah Nuttall also comments on how the colonial architecture at once increased visibility for administrative control and created a racially "fragmentary world" for its inhabitants (179). Raquel Baker describes "ekoneni" as a "strategy of figuring postcolonial subjectivity" (138).

Meg Samuelson describes the architecture as "geographical violence" intended to create spaces of exclusion ("Yvonne Vera's Bulawayo" 23).

[8] Ann Willey also notes the similarities between the colonial architecture and the male gaze (140).

[9] Although we never learn the man's identity, Cephas similarly dissects Thenjiwe's body when he meets her in Kezi.

[10] James Graham comments that "a patriarchal obsession with women's sexuality, and specifically control of their reproductive bodies, has been naturalized through the politicization of land and cultural memory in Zimbabwe's history" (360).

[11] In "Entering the Oppressor's Mind," Annie Gagiano argues that Vera's depiction of Sibaso represents a broader historical trend in which Zimbabwean war veterans used women to rehabilitate after war (52).

[12] Most scholars who compare Cephas and Sibaso focus on their mutual sexual interest in the female hipbone, which symbolizes Nehenda and their attempts to control the female body to remediate their own traumas (Ranger 213; Driver and Samuelson 109, 112; Kostelac "'The body is his pulse and motion'" 82; Norridge 53; Coundorouriotis 210). A few scholars offer more positive readings of Cephas's and Thenjiwe's fling. Caroline Rooney distinguishes between Cephas and Sibaso, arguing the former "wishes to lose himself in the beloved" while the latter "seeks to absorb the other" (154). Grace Musila argues Cephas and Thenjiwe's relationship is "based on reciprocity and shared passion" (335). While Cephas and Sibaso are clearly different characters, I agree with Driver and Samuelson that Vera creates moments that invite readers to confuse them, particularly in the first scene depicting Sibaso's attack when Vera withholds his name and the similarities in their lovemaking (109). The confusion between them becomes important later in the novel when it presents the opportunity to demonstrate how Cephas's attitude toward women has changed.

[13] Kostelac argues that the novel portrays the "scapegoating" of women who "bear the material wounds of these ideological struggles" ("'The body is his pulse and motion'" 78).

[14] Driver and Samuelson argue that Cephas and Thenjiwe's relationship is also like that of the king and the stone virgins in the cave painting (110).

[15] A few other scholars have noted Vera's sympathetic portrayal of Sibaso complicates the victim/perpetrator dichotomy (Gagiano 53; Kostelac, "The Voices of Drowned Men," 127). Kitzito Muchemwa, however, argues that Vera's sympathetic portrayal approaches excusing Sibaso's violence (201).

[16] Gagiano suggests Sibaso treats Nonceba like a bride or lover (53). Vera in an interview has also commented on the intimacy of Sibaso's murder and rape (Bryce 224).

[17] Samuelson describes how Nonceba's act of walking the city initiates a dialectic in which "city and subject . . . are constantly and creatively remade" as a space for women (28). Primorac in "Crossing into the Space-Time of Memory" argues that for women in Vera's novels "movement is synonymous with resistance" (91).

[18] A few critics point to Cephas's project to build a model of the kwoBulawayo beehive hut as one for equitable relationships between men and women and the nation (Driver and Samuelson 113; Ranger 216). Others simply emphasis Cephas and Nonceba's cohabitation as such a model (Kostelac, "'The body is his pulse and motion'," 85; Graham 364).

[19] Owuor originally presented this article as the keynote address for the 17th Triennial Conference of the Association for Commonwealth Literature and Language Studies on 21 July 2016.

[20] Several scholars have written about how Owuor's attention to the material environment—her nonhuman aesthetic—in the national allegory answers these questions. Broadly, these critics argue that her aesthetic expands time and space beyond the existential limits of the Kenyan nation-state and collapses its hierarchical foundations, opening its future to novel constructions of community. Ng'ang'a Wahu-Muchiri describes Owuor's aesthetic as anthropomorphism, which she uses to "foreground agency in climactic elements" (74). Amy Rushton observes that Owuor represents "memory as an elemental force, one which makes its physical mark on the landscape" (58). Others label her aesthetic as vitalism or animism. Russell West-Pavlov argues that the landscape in the novel "cradles the human in an ongoing, processual action of support, a support that is suffused with reciprocal pulls of affect" (296). Birgit Neumann, who has written about the novel in support of interventions in Afropolitan World Literature and narrative form in the Anthropocene, argues that Owuor's aesthetic frees community from the bounds of the nation-state and the human entirely. She claims the novel places Kenya's founding events within an animist cosmology, a time and space that collapses the distinction between the life and nonlife and endows both with mind and spirit. In doing so, Owuor challenges the Western dualisms that colonialists applied to the colony and that the post-independence government adopted to contain the nation's plurality of humans and nonhumans and to perpetuate the power of those who possessed it. Expanding the space and time of nation to the animist world, Neumann argues that the novel does not represent nation but imagines pluralistic communities "'without unity'," which Neumann believes more "ethically" represent global existence (26).

[21] Neumann also suggests that Odidi's death symbolizes that of the country ("Afropolitan World Literature" 22). Ndaka also argues Odidi's death represents what Grace Musila has identified as an "'assassination trope'" in "'Kenyan public memory'" (153).

[22] Okoth also notes how the house "appears as an organic outgrowth of the land on which it stands" (9).

[23] A couple of other critics note that Wuoth Ogik's materials belie its native appearance. Neumann argues that it encompasses the global ("The Worlds of Afropolitan World Literature" 20). Okoth describes the house as an act of "colonial consolidation" and "the wish-fulfillment of a white settler position" (9).

[24] Ndaka helpfully points to V.Y. Mudimbe's analysis of the colonial library, which he describes as a violent archive of European knowledge/power that justifies and reinscribes the colonial hierarchical structures (156).

[25] Similarly, Ndaka argues that "the house [and its colonial origins] is . . . estranged from the intimate makings of 'home' for its black inhabitants. Instead, it carries phantoms and ghosts of others' lives" (155). Amy Rushton also points out how the novel unsettles the "affective concept" of 'home' (47). Neumann contends the instability of the narrative world questions the plausibility of 'home' as a "stable point of origin" ("The Worlds of Afropolitan World Literature" 20).

[26] Wahu-Muchiri points out that Akai's physical traversal of boundaries represents her cultural and social ones as well. Akai fits within what Tabitha Kanogo, a Kenyan historian, describes as the experience of women during colonialism who were freed from traditional social limitations that enabled them to travel, which also opened new mental and emotional vistas as well (8).

[27] Thando Njovane points out, she became his Sara Baartman, the "Hottentot Venus" whose nude portrait was displayed in European museums as an "object of the colonial gaze" (12).

[28] Christina Kenny in "'She is made of and coloured by the earth itself': Motherhood and Nation in Yvonne Adhiambo Owuor's *Dust*" provides some insight that might help explain the

narrator's comment. She explains that in Nairobi, "Kikuyu accented English is a language of authority" (16). It represents, along with Nyipir's torture scene, how Kikuyu-ness was equated with Kenyan-ness (16).

[29] In "Fragments Towards an Impossible (Domestic) Genre of the Human in Kenyan Crime Fiction," Wairimũ Mũrĩithi points out the conflict between Ajany and Justina is also one of class (116).

[30] Mũrĩithi explains this type of sex work, called *malaya* sex work, emerged in the 1920s when prostitution was criminalized. In this relationship, customers often lived with prostitutes and posed as husbands to avoid authorities (107). The postcolonial state adopted a similar black-market tolerance of the profession (109).

[31] In this scene, Owuor seems to revise the patriarchal ending of Negritude Kenyan writer Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o's *Grain of Wheat* in which Gikonyo, a male character, imagines carving a woman with child.

[32] Gagiano also discusses the gathering as a moment when characters confront their "moral failures and political and personal betrayals" (12) that lead them to "forgiveness of others and an acceptance of loss" (16). Rushton emphasizes "the importance of rehabilitating history" in the novel for healing (60).

[33] Rushton and Neumann both argue, the novel imagines, borrowing a term from Mbembe, an Afropolitan future, that recognizes and embraces the panoply of identities that construct 'nation' and 'Africa.'

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