INTRICATE FICTIONS: CARTOGRAPHY AND THE CONTEMPORARY AFRICAN NOVEL

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ABSTRACT

Intricate Fictions: Cartography and the Contemporary African Novel examines the relationship between narrative and mapping practices in recent African novels. Considering the continent's well-documented history as a site of cartographical projection, I ask how its literary output remaps this space in the years following colonial rule. This project responds to calls for increased attentiveness to space in African literature, employing an interdisciplinary methodology that puts critical cartography into conversation with African literary criticism and globalization studies. I trace a trajectory from post-independence novels writing against colonial depictions of the continent to contemporary novels interested in engaging the instability concomitant with globalization and its attendant diasporas, migrations, and challenges to epistemological categories such as the nation. These novels develop what I term dynamic cartography, a mode of space-writing characterized by fluidity, disjunction, and mobility. This study brings to the fore a corpus of works that embody the spatial tensions of the contemporary era, raising provocative questions about our metageographical and cartographical tendencies. As absolute frameworks of time and space give way, new modes of space-writing continue to blur the boundaries between the map and the novel, offering further avenues of analysis. Ultimately, I pursue these avenues in order to contend that as global space becomes increasingly dynamic, so too do the genres that represent that global space. Contemporary African novels, composed with a profound awareness of geographical transformation, are thus also positioned at the forefront of generic transformation.

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“The map is not the territory,” Alfred Korzybski wrote, commenting on the discrepancy between an object and its representation. These acknowledgments are merely a map of much larger territory.

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CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

MAPPING AFRICA: COLONIAL AND CONTEMPORARY CARTOGRAPHIES

In the months leading up to the 2014 Modern Language Association (MLA) Annual Convention, the organization proposed a "new map" that would split the African Literatures division into Southern African and Sub-Saharan African divisions (Olaniyan et al). Although acknowledging the MLA's "admirable goal" to "to do away with categories that are 'mostly Eurocentric,'" a number of African literature scholars opposed the division on the grounds that it "firmly re-entrenches the old racialist separation of Africa into 'Arab' and 'Sub-Saharan' or 'Black' Africa, the latter being the 'real' Africa. Then it tendentiously carves out a 'White' Africa, which it masquerades as 'Southern' Africa against 'Black' 'Sub-Saharan' Africa" (Olaniyan et al). In other words, these scholars viewed the proposed changes as one more in a series of misguided attempts to impose borders on a space that has long been denied cartographical autonomy. The disagreement over this proposed new map highlights the difficulty faced by those who study and write about Africa, a supposedly fixed geographical entity that nonetheless resists easy categorization.

This project asks how African literature, particularly the novel, writes the slippery space of the continent. In doing so, it looks to fill a gap in a field that has often emphasized the form's historical, political, and linguistic valences at the expense of its

geographical concerns.[1] As will be explored in detail below, African novels since independence have been deeply engaged with space, place, and geography. In attending to these issues, the novels generate their own literary maps that challenge the borders and divisions imposed by outside forces.

"An Unknown Upland"

Over a century before the MLA's well-intentioned attempt to re-map African literature, another group with less admirable goals also proposed a new map of the continent. In November 1884, a number of European ambassadors met in Berlin to negotiate trade routes and other matters pertinent to their commercial and political interests on the continent. The Berlin Conference served as a pivotal moment for this period, which has since come to be known as the Scramble for Africa; or, as Ato Quayson pointedly puts it, "the scrambling *of* Africa" (344, emphasis mine). This partitioning of the continent between European powers was facilitated by imperial maps' tendency to depict the interior as "blank space" that effectively erased local populations and opened the region to conquest (Stone 58). The borders imposed after the Berlin Conference were "an anomalous and anachronistic geographical framework" whose effects are still being felt today (Griffiths 204). However, the Berlin Conference represents only one in a series of outside attempts to map the continent in graphic and literary fashions. It is worth noting that the Oxford English Dictionary lists the first use of the term "cartography" in an 1859 entry on Central Africa for the *Journal of the Royal*

[1] For a concise overview of the field and its central preoccupations, see Simon Gikandi's "The African Example."

Geographic Society of London. In short, the continent has long been a site of cartographical projection.

In *The Philosophy of History*, G. W. F. Hegel famously claimed that Africa had no history; it was “the land of childhood, which lying beyond the day of self-conscious history, is enveloped in the dark mantle of Night” (91). However, his discussion of Africa also has a less-noted geographical emphasis. Hegel divides Africa into three regions: “European Africa,” the “river region of the Nile […] which is in connection with Asia,” and “Africa proper,” which he calls “an unknown Upland” (91-92). Although Hegel’s treatment of Africa is brief—he determines in the introduction to “leave Africa, not to mention it again”—it seems he could not resist the temptation to make his mark on those blank spaces that were so appealing to figures such as Richard Burton, David Livingston, Henry Morton Stanley, Rider Haggard, Joseph Conrad, Mary Kingsley, and others (99).[2] What these figures share is a commitment not only to exploring Africa, but also to publishing their stories. Some wrote travelogues and memoirs, while others translated their experiences into fiction.[3] Regardless of genre, these texts cumulatively wrote and

[2] Conrad’s Marlowe puts it thus in *Heart of Darkness*: “Now when I was a little chap I had a passion for maps. I would look for hours at South America, or Africa, or Australia, and lose myself in all the glories of exploration. At that time there were many blank spaces on the earth, and when I saw one that looked particularly inviting on a map (but they all look that) I would put my finger on it and say, ‘When I grow up I will go there.’ The North Pole was one of these places, I remember. Well, I haven’t been there yet, and shall not try now. The glamour’s off. Other places were scattered about the Equator, and in every sort of latitude all over the two hemispheres. I have been in some of them, and . . . well, we won’t talk about that. But there was one yet—the biggest, the most blank, so to speak—that I had a hankering after.”

[3] In addition to *Heart of Darkness*, some titles include Burton’s *First Footsteps in East Africa* and *Wanderings in West Africa*, Livingstone’s *African Journal 1853-1856*, Stanley’s *In Darkest Africa*, Haggard’s *King Solomon’s Mines*, and Kingsley’s *Travels in West Africa, Congo Francais, Corisco, and Cameroons*.

rewrote the space of the continent, allowing their less-mobile audiences the opportunity to participate in this cartographical projection as well.[4]

These publications were only one aspect of a larger interventionist plot on the continent. Many of the related initiatives benefited from the veneer of philanthropy. In his study of the Royal Geographic Society's work in Africa during the Victorian era, Clive Barnett writes, "European explorers are seen to be slowly rolling back the frontiers of ignorance, establishing the facts about Africa and laying the basis for the banishment of barbarism at the same time" (242). Fifty years after the Berlin conference, Graham Greene left England and set off on a tour of Liberia, the details of which he later wrote up in the travelogue *Journey Without Maps*. Among other things, Greene's title refers to the difficulty he faced in finding detailed maps to help him plot his journey through the country's interior. Of the two maps he does locate, one leaves the interior blank, and the other, produced by the United States War Department, fills the interior with only one word: "Cannibals" (Greene 45-56).[5] The studies produced by the Royal Geographical Society, the U.S. War Department map, and the images presented in a variety of other

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[4] This participation involved more than just reading. In their introduction to *Archives of Empire Vol. 2: Scramble for Africa*, Barbara Harlow and Mia Carter point out that "Nineteenth-century forms of entertainment included the popular lecture circuit, with travelers like Henry M. Stanley and Mary Kingsley able to fill the house" (xix).

[5] While it is possible Greene did not search exhaustively, perhaps intent on preserving his titular metaphor, the "Cannibals" map illustrates the contradictory nature of maps, which purport to be scientific documents but are in reality constructions invested with political, and, in Greene's era, imperial agendas. By portraying the Liberian interior as cannibalistic and dangerous, the map reinforces notions of African savagery routinely cited as justification for European expansion. Patrick Brantlinger's "Victorians and Africans: The Genealogy of the Myth of the Dark Continent" traces the shift from depictions of the noble savage to the barbarian during the era of expansion. For more on colonial depictions of Africa, see Christopher Miller's *Blank Darkness*, which posits an Africanist discourse parallel to Said's notion of Orientalism; see also Bassett and Jarosz.

documents served both to obscure the continent and to reveal it to those who would appropriate its many resources.

The Cartographical Imperative in African Literature

Because of this history of cartographical projection, I suggest that there is a cartographical imperative in the field of African literature, a call to limn the geographical and spatial resonances of the cultural production of the continent. A deep-rooted preoccupation with space and place in the literature and the novel's transcendence of the continent's geographical boundaries also contribute to this cartographical imperative.[6] The central question that animates my project is this: how do African novels written after independence reassert control over the spatial narrative of the continent? More specifically, what are the spatial concerns and contentions of the contemporary African novel, written in an era that has been described as postcolonial, globalized, and transnational?

I answer this question using an interdisciplinary methodology that puts African literary criticism into conversation with critical cartography and globalization studies, and using the terms of this conversation to explore three waves of Anglophone African fiction.[7] The first wave, early post-independence novels of the 1950s and 1960s, works to fill in the blank spaces of the map, illuminating what many saw as the dark continent. The

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[6] Eileen Julien describes the African novel's traveling tendencies as a form of extroversion. She suggests that the extroverted African novel is "a particular type of narrative characterized above all by its intertextuality with hegemonic or global discourses and its appeal across borders" (681).

[7] As with most overarching paradigms, the three waves formulation is far from perfect. However, African literary critics regularly employ tripartite classifications to distinguish broad shifts in the field in the years since independence. For a critique of such tendencies with reference to the Nigerian novel specifically, see Hamish Dalley's "The Idea of 'Third-Generation Nigerian Literature': Conceptualizing Historical Change and Territorial Affiliation in the Contemporary Nigerian Novel."

novels of the second wave, written during the period of post-independence corruption and disillusionment with national frameworks, interrogate the map and its externally-imposed borders. The third wave, novels published within the last twenty years, deconstructs the very premise of the map as a stable, scientific document. These contemporary novels develop what I call dynamic cartography, a mode of space-writing characterized by fluidity, mobility, and disjunction. Dynamic cartography does not refer exclusively to matters such as the redrawing of borders or changes in nomenclature and rule; such modifications have been the norm since the earliest days of mapping. Rather, it suggests that the very nature of space is being reconceptualized. As the world simultaneously shrinks and expands due to phenomena generally subsumed under the broad category of globalization, what was once considered fixed is now mutable. Addressing the geographical and cartographical elements in these novels reveals how literature participates in generating these mutabilities, disjunctions, and dynamisms.

The geography of the 21st century is strikingly different than that of earlier periods. While borders have always been porous and contested, recent technological and socioeconomic developments have led to heightened mobility and fluidity. In their emphasis on the dynamic, rather than static, capacities of space, contemporary African novels sit at the intersections of critical debates on 21st century geographical currents, from migration and diaspora to gentrification and cyberspace. This study brings to the fore a corpus of works that anticipate how these currents will reshape commonly held metageographies in the coming years, much as the First World-Third World divisions of the Cold War gave way to the Global North and Global South at the end of the 20th

century.[8] My primary goal is not simply to show how these novels deploy maps and other cartographic ephemera to negotiate and mediate geographical upheavals, but to articulate how the novel itself can function as a form of cartography, a representation of space that conditions our understanding of the world. Ultimately, I argue that as space becomes increasingly dynamic, so too do the forms that represent space. As they reflect unsettled geographical borders, these texts begin to unsettle formal borders. Thus, I position the contemporary African novel at the forefront of generic transformation.

Dynamic and Disjunctive Spaces

The term cartography at its most basic refers to the process of representing space on a two-dimensional plane, following certain scientific and mathematical guidelines. However, maps have always been more than objective, scientific documents. As cartographer Philip Muehrcke phrases it, cartography is "an intricate, controlled fiction" (295). In other words, a map is a text like any other, open to interpretation and deconstruction. Geographers working in the 20th century embraced this premise, and eventually established the field of critical cartography. In 1989, J. B. Harley published the essay "Deconstructing the Map," with the goal of "break[ing] the assumed link between reality and representation which has dominated cartographic thinking, has led it in the pathway of 'normal science' since the Enlightenment, and has also provided a ready-made and 'taken for granted' epistemology of the history of cartography" (152). Harley's ultimate goal, in this essay and others, was to "search for the social forces that

[8] I borrow the term metageography from Martin Lewis and Karen Wigen, whose *The Myth of Continents* works to problematize commonly held geographical frameworks such as the continental scheme and First/Second/Third World divisions.

have structured cartography and to locate the presence of power—and its effects—in all map knowledge" (152). While some geographers resisted Harley's call, many others found it a productive method for considering space and its representation.[9]

In *Space, Place, and Gender*, feminist geographer Doreen Massey takes issue with philosophically-derived notions of space as static and time as progressive, contending instead that space is dynamic and relational (4). Massey goes on to suggest that the local and the global are mutually constitutive and embedded, and that geography must strive to reconceptualize space along these lines. In doing so, she follows thinkers such as Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, who describe the map as "open and connectable in all of its dimensions; it is detachable, reversible, susceptible to constant modification. It can be torn, reversed, adapted to any kind of mounting, reworking by an individual, group, or social formation" (12). The inherent flexibility Deleuze and Guattari locate in the map implicitly challenges Harley's assertion of the map as a "spatial panopticon," moving the discussion past its Foucauldian beginnings (Harley 244). Geographer and postmodern theorist David Harvey further theorizes spatiality in his work on space and time. He establishes three spatio-temporal approaches: absolute space and absolute time, relative space-time, and relational spacetime. While absolute space is "fixed and immovable," relational spacetime is "the point where mathematics, poetry, and music merge, where dreams, daydreams, memories, and fantasies flourish" (134,

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[9] In the introduction to a posthumously-published collection of Harley's essays, J. H. Andrews argues against Harley's "cartographic positivism," suggesting that his work is notable for its "intellectual light-footedness and literary skill" more than for any cartographic "rigor and precision" (5, 32).

139). Understood thus, the map becomes a mode of registering human experience and expression across multiple dimensions.[10]

These approaches to space and to visual representations of space gesture toward the possibilities of dynamic cartography, possibilities for connection, adaptation, and emerging mobilities. However, others draw attention to the problematic disjunctions of the global era. Arjun Appadurai describes the situation thus: “people, machinery, money, images, and ideas now follow increasingly non-isomorphic paths […] the sheer speed, scale, and volume of each of these flows is now so great that the disjunctures have become central to the politics of global culture” (37). The disjunctive nature of space results in diaspora and deterritorialization, displacement and statelessness, and increased polarization between national and subnational groups (37ff). Appadurai understands globalized space as a series of scapes—ethnoscapes, mediascapes, technoscapes, fincancescapes, and ideoscapes—that operate according to their own logic and generate new disjunctions, or treacherous gaps and disconnects between groups (33-36).

These conflicting and commingling patterns of dynamism and disjunction engender increasingly fluid and unstable geographies. Reflecting on such shifts and their relationship to postcolonial literature, Quayson suggests that “Many of the most common ideas that circulate in the field, such as colonial encounter, neocolonialism, nationalism and postnationalism, hegemony, transnationalism, diasporas, and globalization are organized around often unacknowledged spatial motifs” (342). Quayson’s comments, and his calls for increased attention to these spatial motifs, echo a growing trend in literary

[10] I use the term “registering” here to contrast with terms typically associated with mapping such as measuring or charting in order to suggest the ephemerality of any condition represented by a map. Paradoxically, however, a map’s material implications may endure for some time.

criticism of attending to space and related issues such as geography, cartography, setting, and place. Quayson's observation that "Colonial space making is first and foremost the projection of a series of sociopolitical dimensions onto geographical space" has critical implications for the study of literature in formerly colonized regions, offering new avenues of analysis centered on the imbrication of geographical and sociopolitical issues (344).

Previous examinations of the relationship between the novel, the sociopolitical, and the geographical have largely centered around the novel's role in nation-building, with figures such as Benedict Anderson, Frederic Jameson, Aijaz Ahmad and Homi Bhabha developing various threads of the conversation.[11] However, it is increasingly clear that the moment of literary nation-building in Africa has passed, with figures such as Helon Habila describing the current generation of African writes as "postnational," noting a move beyond the "almost obligatory obsession of the African writer with the nation and with national politics" (viii). Habila's conception of the postnational adds one more term to the many—including most prominently the transnational and the globalized—that attempt to describe the shifting geographies of the 21st century.

This project intends to pursue the avenues of analysis gestured toward by Quayson and others by exploring the relationship between the geographical and the sociopolitical within the contemporary African novel. The novel's role in Africa has always been fraught. As Simon Gikandi explains, the African novel is at the center of "a set of paradoxes that inform and haunt its authority" ("The African Example" 14). These

[11] Anderson's analysis in *Imagined Communities* emphasizes the role of print culture, while Jameson and Ahmad famously debated the novel's tendency toward national allegory. Meanwhile, Bhabha's *Nation and Narration* explores "The emergence of the political 'rationality' of the nation as a form of narrative" (2).

paradoxes include the oral/written interface, the role of English in the continent's subjugation, and the absurdity of lumping the many regions of the continent together. However, as Gikandi notes:

> the novel has become the quintessential genre of postcolonial writing, creating the parameters for the African imagination and providing vistas into the culture of colonial modernity and its postcolonial consequences. In effect, the novel has come to function as the central register of the experience of societies emerging from the tutelage of colonialism; it has served as both the narrative of liberation and the mode for imagining the future. (14-15)

Thus, for Gikandi, the tension created by these paradoxes does not diminish the novel's significant purchase as a form for African authors and audiences. Rather than a derivative form rooted in the past, the novel is generative, mobilizing the present and conceiving the future. With these concerns in mind, then, I rearticulate my central question: What geographical futures does the African novel imagine, and how does it arrive at these futures?

The First Wave: Illuminating the Dark Continent

After independence, African novels staged a literary reoccupation of the continental map, populating it with individuals and communities, emphasizing a connection to the land and its role in sustaining lives, and fostering national solidarity in order to transcend colonialist ideologies. A map has many narrative functions; it describes, represents, and, as the reader studies it, it tells a story about the space it depicts. For too long, imperial and colonial maps of the continent told stories of darkness and emptiness. By shedding light on the communities obscured by these maps, the novels introduced intimate, local narratives into the discourse of the continent. That these novels

were available at all was due in part to Chinua Achebe's influence and his involvement in the Heinemann African Writers Series. Until that point, publishers focused their efforts in Africa primarily on textbooks. James Currey, who worked on the African Writers Series, described the situation as follows:

> When the Series was started, it could not be foreseen that the secondary-school examination boards would prescribe books by young living Africans. The exam boards were still based in Cambridge, London, and Durham. Like Oxford University Press, they preferred their authors dead. However, in the heady years of independence, new examination boards were set up in Africa. […] We did not know that the examiners would so delight in raiding the African Writers Series to prescribe texts. (4)

Thus, the novel played a central role in affirming and developing an ethos of independence and a distinctive postindependence educational program.

As indicated by Habila above, many of these narratives were deliberately engaged with solidifying national frameworks as a way of asserting autonomy after bitter fights for independence. Invoking Anderson's formulation, Susan Andrade writes, "Appropriating the language and narrative form of the colonizers, African novelists as diverse as Camara Laye, Chinua Achebe, Ferdinand Oyono, Mongo Beti, Ousmane Sembène, Kateb Yacine, Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o, and Alex La Guma imagined communities, invented traditions, and wrote themselves into History and Literature" (3). Andrade argues that even novels explicitly concerned more with the domestic than the public sphere nonetheless develop "an analytic perspective on collectivity and national politics" (1). The critical attention to nationalist literature foregrounds the novel's role in constructing an archive that challenged the Hegelian narrative. However, these readings tend to overlook the cartographical work performed by these texts, the ways in which they redrew the map of the continent.

This literary assertion of control over the spatial narrative of the continent took many forms. Texts such as Grace Ogot's *The Promised Land* (1966) and Bessie Head's *When Rain Clouds Gather* (1968) focus on working the land, while Cyprian Ekwensi's *Jagua Nana* (1961) and Achebe's African trilogy (1957-1964) map the traditional-modern dialectic onto an urban-rural spatiality. Ngũgĩ wa Thiongo's *The River Between* (1965) brings Kenya's mountain ridges and rivers to life, while Ayi Kwei Armah's *The Beautyful Ones are Not Yet Born* (1968) gives a vivid account of decay and corruption in a postcolonial Ghanaian city. Alex La Guma's *A Walk in the Night* (1962) takes readers into Cape Town's crowded districts during apartheid, while Ousmane Sembène's *God's Bits of Wood* (1960) follows the Dakar-Niger railway line and the numerous communities that depend on it. Sembène's text is particularly instructive here, as its materialist emphasis suggests the absolute inseparability of geography, politics, and identity. The novel, which fictionalizes the true story of a railway strike in Senegal in the late 1940s, alternates place names and character names in its chapter titles, suggesting, to borrow from a familiar cry, that the personal is positional. The culminating scene of the novel is a long, difficult march toward Dakar, in which the women of the community painfully and determinedly cover the distance traveled so easily by the trains they have come to rely on. The march, slow but steady, signals the group's long history with the landscape and their familiarity with its idiosyncrasies.

In each of these texts, and in many others, small corners of the continent are made real to readers: climates, environments, and topographies are explored; population trends and individual movements are traced; roads and villages are given names and inhabitants. By writing and locating characters and communities, these novels created a political

cartography that invigorated the continent's literary tradition. In one sense, these texts fit the paradigm of "writing back" to the West, deliberately challenging narratives of savagery and darkness.[12] At the same time, however, they were very much written for local audiences, carrying on a tradition of story-telling that long predates independence.[13]

Second and Third Waves: "Aeroplanes Bridge the Skies"

In the following decades, excitement over independence was replaced by disenchantment, and the aforementioned "anachronistic geographical framework" began to reveal itself in ongoing border conflicts and regional tensions (Griffiths 204). The novels of this era shifted their emphasis to interrogate national corruption and international conflicts, moving from the lived space of the local community to the sociopolitical milieu of the global stage. Ama Ata Aidoo's 1977 prose-poem *Our Sister Killjoy* epitomizes this period. *Our Sister Killjoy* tells the story of a Ghanaian woman named Sissie who receives a fellowship to travel and work in Germany and Britain. As Sissie reflects on her journey, she notes, "It is a long way from home to Europe. A cruel past, a funny present, a major desert or two, a sea, an ocean, several different languages apart, aeroplanes bridge the skies" (Aidoo 8). This statement employs a playful geography, fusing time and space, language and topography. Sissie's formulation suggests that space is not a simple matter of distance, but can be experienced along multiple registers. In the closed-off world of the airplane, the distance between Ghana

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[12] The "writing back" paradigm is detailed in Ashcroft, Griffiths, and Tiffin's *The Empire Writes Back: Theory and Practice in Post-Colonial Literatures.* For one example of a deliberate challenge to Western narratives, see Achebe's "An Image of Africa."

[13] The oral tradition is, of course, where this story-telling originates, but African writing also existed long before independence. For more on pre-independence writing and publication, see Currey 21.

and Europe passes quickly and blindly, a bizarre compression that renders actual meters and kilometers irrelevant in the face of cultural and historical forces. *Our Sister Killjoy* maps the paradoxically increasing and decreasing distances of late twentieth century flight patterns and geographies, revealing the continuities and discontinuities therein. The long slow march from village to city made vivid by Sembène has been replaced by a quick shuttling across oceans.

My first chapter explores the transition from the era of the march to the era of flight, reading Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o's *Petals of Blood* and Chinua Achebe's *Anthills of the Savannah* as representative of this moment. Both novels employ the figure of the road to introduce elements of instability and ambiguity into their carefully observed settings. The road serves as a paradoxical geographical element, one that enables mobility but also increases visibility and allows for exploitation. *Petals* and *Anthills* disagree over whether this mobility and visibility are largely detrimental or might be leveraged for productive connection. Read contrapuntally, they anticipate the contours of the approaching era, and the dynamisms and disjunctions to come. Chapter 1 also explores the relationship between geography and genre, noting that these two novels situate themselves intentionally within the tradition of the African novel and thus affirm its significance. Both novels also contain realist and modernist tendencies, and thus speak to contemporary debates about these genres and their ideological attachments. Ultimately, I suggest that in addition to exploring unsettled geographies, these texts also work to unsettle the modernist/realist binary, looking ahead to the generic shifts that develop in the novels that make up the rest of this study.

The following three chapters trace these geographical and generic shifts through contemporary texts, noting especially how they track the dialectic between dynamism and disjunction. Chapter 2 argues that Moses Isegawa's *Abyssinian Chronicles* challenges the coherence of the nation in its emphasis on the geographical and political instability of postindependence Uganda. Simultaneously, the novel rewrites spatial codes of maturity through its development of an unmoored protagonist who undergoes rites of triangulation rather than initiation. The metaphor of triangulation is particularly apparent in the novel's penultimate section, "Triangular Revelations," which centers on the geographical instability of the Luwero Triangle, a contested region between Uganda and Tanzania whose borders constantly shift, creating an uncanny and unhomelike geography for its residents. As it depicts this uncanny geography, the novel also unsettles the spatial narrative of the coming-of-age tale. The classical *Bildungsroman* tends toward a circular framework, a story of departure and return. In the postcolonial coming-of-age novel the protagonist is often suspended in a liminal state, stuck on the threshold. Mugezi follows neither of these trajectories. Instead, he leaves Uganda for Amsterdam, where he acquires a British passport, reflecting the often arbitrary nature of national designations. Mugezi ultimately develops a migrational spatial practice that allows him to keep moving, continually triangulating his own position.

Chapter 3 explores migration and diaspora, arguing that Dinaw Mengestu's *The Beautiful Things That Heaven Bears* develops a relational narrative model in order to frame a global story, the Ethiopian diaspora, within a local moment of geographical change, the gentrification of Washington D. C.'s Logan Circle neighborhood. I develop this relational reading by connecting Edouard Glissant's work on the poetics of relation

to Harvey's conception of relational spacetime. The novel's protagonist, Sepha Stephanos, struggles to compose a grand narrative of his life that he describes in cartographical terms, but the coherence that he seeks eludes him and he is forced to come to grips with a fragmented narrative, a new kind of map that can only be read relationally. Sepha, who fled Ethiopia as an adolescent after his father's death, occupies multiple positionalities: he is both exile and immigrant, located and displaced. However, none of these terms adequately encapsulates his experience. Instead, as Sepha moves through the streets of Washington D.C., the novel's fragmented and shifting timelines map an absence that exists at the center of his story. *Beautiful Things* also moves through a series of intimate and distant spaces, employing different literary modes—the ironic, the material, and the memorial—to distinguish these spaces from each other. Thus, the narrative embodies relation across literary and spatial registers.

Finally, Chapter 4 discusses Adaobi Tricia Nwaubani's *I Do Not Come to You by Chance* as it explores the paradoxes of cyberspace, an ambiguously geographical entity with the ability to both open up a zone of connection and simultaneously to reify existing spatial systems. This access and connection across great distance provides the novel with its central spatial concern. *Chance* is set in the world of Nigerian 419 scams, and represents a contemporary take on the picaresque that allows its protagonist to remain seated in front of a computer, the bulk of his adventures and misadventures taking place in cyberspace. Kingsley, the protagonist, does some physical traveling, but he is most dynamic in his emails, which highlight the intersection of fiction, illusion, and artifice the novel provocatively asserts. Indeed, the novel itself functions as a version of 419, targeting its readers' sympathies rather than their wallets. This chapter performs a close

reading of the fictional 419 emails contained within the text, arguing that Kingsley and his peers deliberately append the identity of a stranger in order to allow for reassuring borders to be drawn in the bewildering zone of cyberspace. However, building on critical work attuned to the materiality of cyberspace, the chapter also explores the implications Kingsley's virtual journeys have on his literal mobility, and the ways in which 21st Century mobilities map onto long-standing patterns.

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Ultimately, because of this trajectory—from illuminating to interrogating to deconstructing the map—my project suggests that the African novel is uniquely poised to grapple with the circulations of an increasingly globalized era. Simultaneously, these novels offer a method for considering African literature that does not rely on externally imposed divisions. Rather, as they write dynamic cartographies and embody a parallel set of literary shifts and redefinitions, what these novels suggests is that the condition of possibility for the contemporary African novel lies not in its location on a map, but in the ways it moves through the disjunctive spaces of the globalized era.

CHAPTER 2

‘WE ARE ALL OF THE ROAD NOW’: TRANSITIONAL CARTOGRAPHIES IN *PETALS OF BLOOD* AND *ANTHILLS OF THE SAVANNAH*

When a young teacher named Karega first arrives in Ilmorog village in Ngũgĩ wa Thiong’o’s *Petals of Blood*, he is troubled by his students’ lack of geographical consciousness. The students think of Kenya “as a city or a large village somewhere outside of Ilmorog” (*Petals* 131). Eager to increase their awareness, he teaches them to sing:

> I live in Ilmorog Division which is in Chiri District; Chiri which is in the Republic of Kenya; Kenya which is part of East Africa; East Africa which is part of Africa; Africa which is the land of African peoples; Africa from where other African people were scattered to other corners of the world. (131)

This song provides the students, largely isolated in their remote village, a sense of their position “as part of a larger whole, a larger territory containing the history of African people and their struggles” (131). Karega’s envisioned pan-African geography seems imminent in the final section of the novel due to the construction of the Trans-Africa Road, which promises to link Ilmorog “to the many cities of our continent” (311). Once the road is complete, Ilmorog transforms from a remote village to a bustling economic center, no longer isolated from the rest of the continent. The Trans-Africa Road changes the community, bringing outsiders in and scattering its residents.

Ten years after *Petals of Blood*, Chinua Achebe published *Anthills of the Savannah*, which also employs the road as a symbol of transformation. The novel is set

primarily in Bassa, the capital city of the fictional state of Kangan.[14] Near the end of the text, Chris, one of the central characters, travels out of the city and reflects on the "simple, always-taken-in-vain reality" that "Bassa was not Kangan" (Achebe *Anthills* 189). In other words, the capital city, with its cocktail parties and foreign diplomats, has little to do with the rest of the country. Indeed, as Chris sits on a bus named *Luxurious* and journeys down the Great North Road, "the ensuing knowledge seeped through every pore in his skin into the core of his being continuing the transformation, already in process, of the man he was" (189). Chris's transformation centers around his realization that, in spite of his own membership in an elite group of cosmopolitan intellectuals, "This world belongs to the people of the world not to any little caucus, no matter how talented" (215). This realization echoes Karega's desire for a more expansive perspective that looks beyond one's immediate surroundings. In both of these novels, critical transformations are enabled by the presence of a road, a geographical feature that symbolizes modernity and progress and that engenders expansion, both material and perspectival.

However, both narratives also imbue the road with a deep sense of ambiguity: the road allows Ilmorog to be exploited and brings Chris to his death. Both novels thus map the delicate balance of connection and division, of contact and conflict, that plays out along the road. In doing so, they participate in a tradition of African writing that reflects on the image of the road and its role in the life of the continent. One of the most significant texts to engage this symbol is Wole Soyinka's *The Road*, a two-part play

[14] In a 1987 interview with Achebe, Jane Wilkinson raised the question of the relationship between Kangan and Nigeria. Achebe admitted that he included references to Nigerian names and figures, but that he set the book in a fictional location that it might "have this possibility of application elsewhere" and that it might be read as a metaphor "not just for one country but for a whole continent" (qtd. in Lindfors 148).

about a group of drivers and touts who occupy the "AKSIDENT STORE," an enterprise that sells detritus gathered from crash sites (1). As Lindsey Green-Simms points out, "For Soyinka, the road, associated with its patron god Ogun—also the god of metal, iron, new technology and transition—is a site of both creation and destruction" ("No Danger No Delay" 53). While *Petals* and *Anthills* do not deal with the violent accidents depicted in *The Road*, they do employ the road as a symbol of transition and further reveal its creative and destructive tendencies.

This chapter first examines the use of the road in *Petals* and *Anthills* in order to argue that the texts mark a transitional period in the way Anglophone African novels write space. *Petals* and *Anthills* are deeply concerned with spatial elements such as landscapes, journeys, and cartographical systems, and share this concern with many novels of the postindependence era. However, these two texts move away from the communal cartographies of that era and towards the dynamic, disjunctive cartographies of the contemporary era. Their emphasis on the road, and on the mobility and encounter it enables, anticipates the global circulations and flows of the twenty-first century, revealing new patterns that contrast with the image of scattering Karega used to describe earlier diasporic movements. Next, I consider how *Petals* and *Anthills* also speak to ongoing debates about the role of the novel in Africa and to the relationship between genre and geography. While a recent strain of critical work productively explores the links between modernism and spatiality, I contend below that the more mimetic subgenres of realism resonate with dynamic cartography precisely because the

contemporary experience of space reveals its unsettling tendencies more starkly when rendered through a realist lens.[15]

Postindependence Patterns

Writing for the *Geographical Review* in 1962, Ena Yonge remarks, "Pity the map curator who must cope with the ever-increasing flood of atlases—national, regional, topical, special, even 'photographic'!—streaming in from all over the world" (407). The ensuing survey details this influx of atlases region by region, providing insight into the cartographical emphases of the time. The section on African maps mentions eight distinct atlas projects in various stages of development and with varied aims: the *Atlas du Cameroun* emphasizes environmental elements such as geology, rainfall, and temperature, while the *Ghana Population Atlas* tracks "population distribution, density, and change" (420). Although the first atlas Yonge mentions is a Spanish production that maps "the European discovery and settlement of Africa," the other atlases are commissioned by various institutes and programs in the newly independent nations (419).[16] In a rare editorial comment, Yonge notes that the provincial maps in the *Atlas of Kenya* contain an "overemphasis on the road pattern" (421). This contrasts provocatively with her earlier statement that "It is appropriate, perhaps, to start our 'tour' through Europe with a road atlas" (407). For reasons about which one can only speculate, Yonge,

[15] For one account of the relationship between modernism and space, see Susan Stanford Friedman's "Planetarity: Musing Modernist Studies." For an account of the oscillating critical investments in modernism and realism with regard to the African novel, see Susan Andrade's "The Problem of Realism and African Fiction."

[16] These include, for example, the *Institut de Recherches Scientifiques du Cameroun* and the University College of Ghana (Yonge 420).

a map curator for the American Geographical Society, considers an emphasis on roads appropriate to Europe but not to Africa.

What can be stated without speculation is that, unlike, for example, the environmental and geological elements in the *Atlas du Cameroun*, a road is a man-made object. Its presence on a map suggests not only human occupation, but also a certain level of infrastructural development. It implies the presence of vehicles, commerce, and the trappings of civilization. The road has material as well as metaphoric significance; its construction requires carving, blasting, hammering, and tarring. These material procedures transform the landscape and require the production of new representations of that landscape, new maps to track the new roadways. While Yonge may have found all that is implied by an emphasis on the road pattern in Kenya out of place in 1962, a similar survey conducted twelve years later mentions thirty-five atlases produced in or about Africa, including two road atlases published by the oil companies British Petroleum and Shell (M. Murphy "Atlases"). These atlases not only sustain an emphasis on roads but also reveal the commercial impetus behind the transformation of the landscape.

During this period, when the number of atlas projects grew from eight to thirty-five, a similar pattern can be observed in the production of Anglophone African novels, which were being written, published, and read in rapidly increasing numbers.[17] The novels of this era, often implicitly addressing colonialism's spatial and cultural functions,

[17] The Heinemann Writers Series alone published 270 titles between 1962 and 1984 (Currey 22). James Currey writes, "In the four years from 1970 to 1973 we published an average of twenty books a year. A lot for a single publisher. Not many for a continent" (22). However, these numbers represent significant growth compared to publication of African novels before independence; prior to 1962, "practically no creative work by Africans appeared" on London publishing lists (2).

mapped the continent in a literary fashion that runs parallel to the geographic mapping described by Yonge and Murphy, although without the parallel commercial and material implications. These novels, following in the wake of Amos Tutuola's *The Palm-Wine Drinkard* and Chinua Achebe's *Things Fall Apart*, covered the literary map with fully developed communities such as Umuofia, Kala, and Oguta, demonstrating for their readers the fallacy of imperialist depictions of Africa as blank space. [18] Additionally, these novels provided narrative evidence of the transformations effected by the roads that may appear innocuous on maps. With their development of the motif of the road, *Petals* and *Anthills* testify to these transformations.

Petals is the story of Ilmorog, a remote outpost whose residents live a hardscrabble existence, relying on the land for sustenance. The narrative proceeds through the perspectives of four recent arrivals in the village: Munira, a teacher sent to resurrect the struggling local school; Abdulla, a Mau Mau fighter turned shopkeeper; Wanja who moves to Ilmorog in order avoid her troubled past in Nairobi; and Karega, a young man recently expelled from a selective private school. The relationships between these four figures evolve over a period of twelve years, and eventually each plays a role in Ilmorog's transition from impoverished village to bustling financial center. This transition, made possible by the Trans-Africa Road, affects each character profoundly. While the cosmopolitan setting of *Anthills* is markedly different from the rural setting of *Petals*, the narrative proceeds similarly, shifting through the perspectives of three members of the city's elite: Chris, the Minister of Information in His Excellency's cabinet; Beatrice, who attended university in England and now works in the Ministry of

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[18] These villages are at the center of, respectively, *Things Fall Apart*, Mongo Beti's *Mission Terminee*, and Flora Nwapa's *Efuru*.

Finance; and Ikem, editor of the local newspaper, who is inclined to write confrontational editorials about the state of affairs in Kangan. The novel's plot revolves around the increasingly corrupt dictator Sam, who prefers to be known as His Excellency. When one of Ikem's pieces leads to unrest in the city, he disappears and Chris is forced to flee. Although Chris does not survive the trip, he passes a coded message to Beatrice which suggests that the Great North Road has shown him the way forward for Kangan, reflecting his newly expanded perspective referenced above (Achebe *Anthills* 215).

Although these novels were published ten years apart and address different geographical regions, they have many similarities. Indeed, *Anthills* appears in many ways to be patterned after *Petals*. Both express disillusionment with the increasing corruption of the postindependence era, both employ a shifting narrative perspective that moves between a core group of several men and one woman, and both locate their final act on the road. The similarities in these novels are remarkable for several reasons, not least of which is their authors' public disagreements about the best direction forward for postcolonial Africa. Leonard Podis and Yakubu Saaka, writing in 1991, describe the "significant gap" between the two authors' ideologies, explaining that, for Ngũgĩ, Achebe "failed to provide sufficiently radical critiques of neocolonialism or propose revolutionary solutions" (104). Perhaps the most significant disagreement between the two concerns language; in *Decolonizing the Mind*, Ngũgĩ rejects English as a viable language for African literature, while Achebe maintains his position on the possibilities of manipulating English to represent the postcolonial situation. These different approaches are reflected in the authors' portrayals of roads and national space in the two novels, as *Petals* is ultimately pessimistic about utilizing these impositions for positive

development, while *Anthills* suggests that strategic manipulation of imposed cartographies can yield worthwhile results. In spite of these differences, however, Podis and Saaka note a "confluence of vision" in *Petals* and *Anthills*, suggesting that, "Like Ngũgĩ, Achebe has turned his attention to the challenge of envisioning a radically new society out of the elements of a usable African past" (105). This notion of a "usable African past" surfaces regularly in discussions of the literature of this period, revealing an ongoing concern with history (105).

Much of the scholarship that addresses the novels of the immediate postindependence era emphasizes storytelling's capacity to access the past, to recuperate a sense of history often occluded by Enlightenment depictions of the continent as ahistorical.[19] This mode of reading has its most vocal champion in Achebe himself, who describes his novels as a counter to the problematic way in which "the history of Africa became the history of alien races in Africa" (qtd. in Lindfors 157). He continues, "the real history that had been going on since the millennia was virtually forgotten—especially because it was not written down" (157). By his own account, then, Achebe's work has a historicizing dimension. Ngũgĩ credits Achebe's work in this direction, describing how Okonkwo and his peers "were a vivid image of the fact that Africa was not a land of perpetual childhood passed over by history as it passed from East to West to find its highest expression in the Western empires of the twentieth century" ("Moving the Centre" 3). Ngũgĩ's own writing also demonstrates how "Hegelian Africa was a European myth" (4). For Ngũgĩ, "the recovery of the Kenyan history of anticolonial

[19] For more on the relationship between postcolonial writing, history, and memory, see Edwards 129-138.

resistance becomes a central project […] which thereby seeks to help provide his fellow Kenyans with a usable past upon which to build a viable present and future" (Booker and Juraga 282). Podis and Saaka echo this point in their argument that "both *Petals* and *Anthills* signal important attempts by their authors to reestablish the potency and relevance of African traditions as a source of value and stability for the future" (105). Thus, both the authors—in their own assessments and in their critical reception—emphasize history as the aim of narrative.

Despite this emphasis on history, these authors' works also foreground space and geography, suggesting a parallel relationship between narrative and cartography. Jane Wilkinson suggests to Achebe in an interview that *Anthills* posits the novelist as explorer rather than teacher, and Achebe concurs (qtd. in Lindfors 141). In another interview, Achebe discusses reading practices using travel as a key metaphor. He explains, "Our people have a saying that the man who's never traveled thinks that his mother makes the best soup. Now we need to travel" (173). Both the explorer and the traveler are spatially-oriented figures who expand their perspectives by moving beyond borders. For Achebe, the novelist must also cross borders. Likewise, Ngũgĩ posits a spatial framework for his overarching literary contributions; he explains that his novel *A Grain of Wheat* "celebrated the more than sixty years of Kenyan peoples' struggle to claim their own space" and was part of a "process changing the political map" ("Moving the Centre" 3). In another formulation that gestures toward cartography, he asserts that this literature—his own along with that being published across Africa and in Asia and South America—"was part of that struggle for the right to name the world for ourselves" (3). In other words, literature is a form of mapping, of representing and naming space. Below, I

discuss how Ngũgĩ and Achebe perform this literary-cartographical work in their novels, both in their texts' attention to geographical elements in broad strokes and their particular development of the motif of the road.

"Eat or you are eaten"

The geography of *Petals* centers around Ilmorog, which is located in a stunning natural setting of mountain ridges, rivers, and plains near the Rift Valley. Chapter Four opens with a description of this landscape, claiming, "Ilmorog ridge, as it drops into the plains along which Ilmorog river flows, must form one of the greatest natural beauties in the world" (*Petals* 80). The narrative explains that ongoing awareness of the history of this setting "can only depend on legends passed from generation to generation," and indeed, many of these legends are related within the pages of the novel, often by Wanja's grandmother Nyakinyua, as part of an evening's entertainment (81). Apollo Amoko, addressing this passage and the geographical details it contains, suggests that "Ngũgĩ seems to be calling for a cognitive remapping of Kenyan history on the basis of an Afrocentric reading of the secrets of its landscapes as well as an engagement with its rich oral history" (79). The oral histories contained in the novel perform this remapping, revealing the various iterations of the village throughout its history. In each of these iterations, Ilmorog's location with reference to the rest of the continent is critical, as it is in Karega's song discussed above. In other words, the cartographical vision asserted in *Petals* is both intimate and expansive, focusing on Ilmorog but situating it within a larger pan-African space. Additionally, in detailing the various phases of Ilmorog's history, the novel generates a cartography that "cuts across time lines," writing a kind of deep space

that contrasts with the atlases and maps that “are essentially an event on a time line” (L. Murphy “Metaphor” 95). The various histories that emerge in the pages of the novel contextualize Ilmorog’s contemporary dilemma.

Critical to the village’s various iterations is Ilmorog’s location on a “natural highway joining Kenya to the land of the Sphinx and to the legendary waters of the River Jordan in Palestine” (*Petals* 81).[20] This formulation maps Ilmorog not just geographically but culturally, as part of a mythico-spiritual narrative. The natural highway prefigures the Trans-Africa Road constructed in the latter pages of the novel, suggesting that it is not so much a change in substance that the road brings as a change in scale. Ilmorog has always been part of a network of spaces linked by a road, but the character of the road—whether a natural highway or a construction engendered by “imported expertise and equipment”—is the key factor in determining what kind of transformation it will generate (311). The transformations Ilmorog undergoes are sparked by a series of arrivals—or, considering that the first three sections of the novel take their titles from the William Butler Yeats poem “The Second Coming,” by a series of comings. The Yeats poem, with its dark references to Christian mythology, conjures an uneasiness around the notion of comings that *Petals* embraces, as each subsequent arrival brings new “terror and instability” (81). The narrator also notes pointedly that “present-day historians, following on similar theories yarned out by defenders of imperialism, insist we only arrived here

[20] In another road-oriented formulation, Bruce Berman and John Lonsdale write that “In the ten years between 1895 and 1905, ‘Kenya’—if such a retrospective concept may be permitted—was transformed from a footpath 1000 km (600 miles) long into a colonial administration” (13).

yesterday" (80). The novel proceeds to present an alternative to this "script of colonial historiography," which insists on a narrative of recent arrival (Amoko 80).[21]

As a counter to this narrative, *Petals* relates the myth of Ndemi, the original settler of Ilmorog. The narrator explains:

> Ilmorog […] had not always been a small cluster of mud huts lived in only by old men and women and children with occasional visits from wandering herdsmen. It had had its days of glory: thriving villages with a huge population of sturdy peasants who had tamed nature's forests and, breaking the soil between their fingers, had brought forth every type of crop to nourish the sons and daughters of men. (*Petals* 145)

In its earliest days of occupation, Ilmorog's relationship to the land was one of mutual sustenance. This relationship originates with Ndemi, "the founding patriarch," who first chose a "life away from the udder, dung and urine of cows on the long trail across plains and mountains, life away from the bull with bells around its neck leading the others to the salt-lick and the waters" (146). Ndemi is the subjects of legends that describe his ability to master the land, and the current residents of Ilmorog still sing about "He who tamed the forest" (146). Ndemi's taming of the forest turns Ilmorog into a utopic space in which the people and the land work together rather than at cross-purposes.

Following Ndemi, Ilmorog suffers an "onslaught" of "land- and soul- grabbing" outsiders, each of whom imposes a different kind of relationship between the land and those who live on it (82). First, "Lord Freeze-Kilby and his goodly wife," who intend to "change Ilmorog wilderness into civilized shapes and forms that would yield a million seedlings and a thousand pounds where one had planted only a few and invested only a pound" (82). In contrast to Ndemi's approach, taming the land that it might provide nourishment, Freeze-Kilby's imposition exploits the land and depletes its resources. After

[21] For more on the contemporary debates over such historiographies, see Amoko (67-108).

Freeze-Kilby's imposition of exploitative agricultural processes, the novel describes the arrival of another outsider, the shopkeeper Ramjeeh Ramlagoon Dharamashah, who introduces commerce and notional convenience by setting up a store and bringing in outside goods. Dharamashah's store further distances the residents of Ilmorog from the utopic relationship with the land established by Ndemi, as they begin to purchase goods rather than raise them themselves. Eager for cash to fund such purchases, the young people of the village look elsewhere for work, leading Nyakinyua to refer to them as the "Going-away generation" (253). Together, these comings build to the difficulties faced by the contemporary Ilmorog. The remaining villagers are unable to sustain themselves and the village continues to shrink, with the drought serving what feels like a final blow.

The final comings are those of the novel's four protagonists, each of whom tries in his or her own way to become part of the village, but also introduces new ideas. It is their presence that prompts the village to send a delegation to Nairobi in hopes of receiving aid for the drought, a journey that draws the attention of the local Minister of Parliament, Nderi. Nderi's reaction to the villagers makes explicit a cartographical tension that undergirds the novel. The MP is initially uninterested in Ilmorog, happy to serve a region "so remote from the city that he was hardly ever troubled by endless complaints from his constituents" (209). However, eager to put on a good show in front of his colleagues, he delivers a stirring speech that he concludes with the cry, "We must put the name of Ilmorog on the national map. Uhuuuru! Harambeee!" (219). *Uhuru*, the Swahili word for freedom, and *harambee*, the official Kenyan motto that refers to grassroots development, are terms that evoke an ethos of nationalist pride and self-help. This cartographical imperative echoes through *Petals*, usually spoken by some self-

interested party. For example, shortly after his arrival in Ilmorog, Munira visits the school superintendent upon whose office wall hangs "a map of Chiri district with the location of the various schools marked in with drawing pins" (15). Upon greeting Munira, the superintendent "glance[s] at the pin-dotted map," a gesture Munira reads as condescension. From that point on, Munira expresses a desire to "finally put Ilmorog Full Primary School on the national map" (295). This approach contrasts with the perspective championed by Karega in the song that opens this chapter. While Munira and Nderi are interested in raising Ilmorog to prominence, so that it stands out from its surroundings, Karega is interested in the community developing a holistic relationship with its surroundings and becoming part of a larger pan-African universe. These contrasting cartographical approaches foreshadow the tensions that will arise when the Trans-Africa Road is built, offering the potential either to connect Ilmorog to the rest of the continent or to raise it from its surroundings that it might more easily be exploited.

The history of Ilmorog is written in its geography. With each subsequent coming of outsiders, the relationship between the residents and the land evolves, until neither can sustain the other. Because of this rupture, the construction of the road is a moment full of promise for the villagers, who hope it will bring back the going-away generation and return them to the earlier "days of glory" (145).

Part Four of *Petals* is titled "Again…La Luta Continua!" The phrase, a rallying cry during the Mozambican struggle for independence, translates to "the struggle continues" and can be read as a reference to the struggle brought about by the Trans-Africa Road. The chapter opens with an explicit invocation of the rhetoric of the Road, which promises near-miraculous union:

> The Trans-Africa road linking Nairobi and Ilmorog to the many cities of our continent is justly one of the most famous highways in all the African lands, past and present. It is symbolic tribute, although an unintended one, to those who, witnessing the dread ravages of crime and treachery and greed which passed for civilization, witnessing to the resistance waged and carried out with cracked hands and broken nails and bleeding hearts, voiced visionary dreams amidst sneers and suspicions and accusations of madness or of seeking pathways to immortality and the eternal self-glory of tyrants. They had seen that the weakness of the resistance lay not in the lack of will or determination or weapons but in the African people's toleration of being divided into regions and tongues and dialects according to the wishes of former masters, and they cried: Africa must unite. (311)

This passage serves as a succinct but comprehensive history of colonial oppression and postcolonial struggle, referencing the racist and imperialist civilizing mission, the violent upheavals that led to independence, the corruption that followed, and the ongoing debate over language. The passage also suggests that the chief impediment to overcoming the ravages of the past is continued linguistic and geographical division, an acceptance of the barriers established by the Berlin Conference of 1884. In *Decolonising the Mind*, Ngũgĩ asks, "What was the route from the Berlin of 1884 […] to what is still the prevailing and dominant logic a hundred years later?" (9). As Clara A. B. Joseph points out, Ngũgĩ "traces that 'route' through a pedagogy that insisted on one language, namely English" (57). Here, the route from the Berlin Conference to the present day serves as a conceptual and transhistoric road, a passageway that carries an ideology that suppresses "a fundamentally African culture" (57).

By contrast, the Trans-Africa Road as a contemporary route through the continent promises a united Africa. The pan-African vision that emphasizes unity rather than further regionalism is a spatial system the novel proposes as a contemporary alternative to postindependence divisions. The novel acknowledges that the days of the "natural

highway" connecting Ilmorog to the larger continent have passed, as have the days of the utopic relationship between the peasants and the land (*Petals* 81). The Trans-Africa Road asserts itself as a potential means of connection, a route that might join regions divided by colonialism. Additionally, the atmosphere of hope surrounding the road brings about a renewed linguistic energy in the form of orature. While it cannot erase the route that English has cut through the linguistic map, the road at least negotiates a revitalization of the "rich oral history" Ngũgĩ sees as central (Amoko 79). The opening pages of this section, which describe the road's construction, are littered with songs, chants, and call and response expressions. The children demonstrate geographical and linguistic unity as they sing, "Over the mud/Over the tar/Over the air/From Luanda to Nairobi/From Musimbiji to Cairo/From Dar to Libya/We all help one another" (*Petals* 312). The narrator explains, "And so they would go on, varying only the names of the cities of Africa, their Africa!" (312). The construction of the road allows them to internalize the lesson Karega tried to teach earlier, giving them a sense of connectedness to the continent and of their deeper African identity.

However, like earlier movements for pan-African solidarity, the unity promised by the road fails to fully materialize, demonstrating the novel's cynicism regarding easy rhetoric in the face of widespread systemic injustice.[22] Rather, "abstracted from the vision of oneness, of a collective struggle of the African peoples, the road brought only the unity of earth's surface: every corner of the continent was now within easy reach of international capitalist robbery and exploitation" (311-312). Following this disappointment the narrative briefly switches to second person, ironically emphasizing

[22] Oliver Lovesey traces the "shift in [Ngũgĩ's] ideological location" over the years, arguing that, nevertheless, "Ngũgĩ's concerns over four decades are remarkably consistent" (140).

the communal just as the community itself is at the point of rupture: “Well well…we are all of the road now” (312). This statement formulates a new spatial mode of existence, the condition of being “of the road” (312). The novel’s final chapters detail this condition, revealing that being “of the road” requires adapting to an individualistic ethos that undermines the communal heritage of Ilmorog. The primary characteristic of the new spatial system introduced by the road is one of cleavage. Out for a walk one evening, Munira notes that Ilmorog ridge is “now cleaved into two by the Trans-Africa Road” (323). This cleavage is both material and spiritual; during the construction phase, the priest Mwathi’s residence is “razed to the ground,” the villagers watching in fear and waiting for retribution that never comes (315). The village splits into two groups, Old Ilmorog and New Ilmorog, and although these groups share geographical space they exist on separate planes. In short, the Trans-Africa Road runs two ways: it puts Ilmorog on the map, but that inscription creates a wound the text suggests has little chance of healing.

Along with the deep divisions between Old and New Ilmorog, the road generates a new capitalist ethos in Ilmorog. Under the guise of development and progress, surveyors arrive to carve up the land and redistribute it unevenly, changing a community into a group of individuals forced to live by motto “eat somebody or you are eaten” (345). This motto is voiced by Wanja, who, it must be noted, first attracts outside interests by brewing a local spirit, Theng’eta, and selling it after a plane crashes near the village and draws onlookers. Wanja’s entrepreneurial endeavor is not inconsistent with Old Ilmorog—it is a small-scale operation based on a method passed on to her by Nyakinyua, one of Old Ilmorog’s most respected elders. However, once it becomes clear that there is money to made off of Theng’eta, capitalism arrives in force in Ilmorog,

introducing a spatial logic of private property and commerce rather than a logic of shared space and shared futures. The African Economic Bank sends a mobile van with a loudspeaker to explain these changes to the residents: “Demarcation. Title deeds. Loans. Fencing the land. Barbed wire. One or two grade cows. Kill or sell or cross-breed the others” (318). The construction of the road thus facilitates further material imposition on the landscape, in the form of fences and barbed wire.

This new spatial logic is most cogently communicated in a newspaper announcement Munira comes across:

> KANUA KANENE & CO
> Valuers & Surveyors, Auctioneers
> Land, Estate & Management AGENTS
> Acting on instructions given to us
> by Wilson, Shah, Muragi & Omolo Advocates
> on Behalf of their client, African Economic Bank, charged
> With powers of sale as conferred upon them. We shall
> Sell by public auction…all that piece of land
> Situated in New Ilmorog…property of Mrs. Nyakinyua. (326)

The corporate tone and piling on of bureaucratic labels obscure the real story: Nyakinyua, the old woman whose stories sustained the group during the long journey to Nairobi, who served as a living record of the village’s history, has lost her home. The newly anointed power brokers of Ilmorog, invisible behind the abstract title “AGENTS,” have conspired against the residents of Old Ilmorog, convincing them to take out loans they can never repay. Nyakinyua’s fight to prove that “Her land would never be settled by strangers” ends in her death, and symbolically in the death of Old Ilmorog (328). In addition to Nyakinyua’s predicament, the newspaper announcement reveals how space is now encoded in Ilmorog. Whereas the original value of the ridge lay in its beauty, in its position as “one of the most glorious and joyous sights in all the land,” it is now

evaluated purely in terms of capitalist logic (80). That the land now requires valuers, surveyors, and auctioneers suggests how much has changed in this latest iteration of Ilmorog.

The laborers who built the road chanted as they worked, singing, "We are opening a highway/Is it for good?/Is it for evil?" (315). Karega's final reflections offer an answer; he describes the new space brought about by the road as "A system that bred hordes of round-bellied jiggers and bedbugs with parasitism and cannibalism as the highest goal in society" (409). To be of the road is to tacitly accept the logic of "eat or you are eaten" (407). Thus, *Petals* describes a series of comings that each results in a different relationship between the peasants of Ilmorog and the land they occupy, from the mutual sustenance envisioned by Ndemi through the mutual cannibalism brought about by the Trans-Africa Road. In doing so, it illustrates one element of the changes brought about by the developments of the twentieth century. Arjun Appadurai, writing about globalization and disjunction in this period, argues that "the central feature of global culture today is […] mutual cannibalization" (307, 308). The road consumes and generates further consumption; as Ben Okri would phrase it years later in a reworking of a Soyinka poem, it is a famished road.[23]

Amaechina: "May the path never close"

While the cartographical framework of *Petals* is transhistorical and centered on a single small community, *Anthills* establishes a more polarized social cartography that demonstrates how privilege is spatially coded. As noted above, the novel is set in a

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[23] Soyinka's poem "Death in the Dawn," about happening upon a car accident, includes the lines "May you never walk/When the road waits, famished."

fictional nation called Kangan that is undergoing a familiar postindependence struggle with corruption and dictatorship. *Anthills* spends the bulk of its time with its three protagonists, Ikem, Chris, and Beatrice, who move in the cosmopolitan circles of the capital, Bassa. While each senses the deep rifts in the country between the elite and the rest of society, they are unsure how to best to address the problems. Ikem uses his position as the editor of the newspaper to challenge his old friend Sam, now the head of the state, while Chris serves as a member of the cabinet, recognizing Sam's descent into tyranny but unwilling to confront him directly. Beatrice, who knows each of the three men, observes their trio from outside and tries to show Chris, whom she is dating, how their upbringing and wealth distance them from many of their countrymen. However, Beatrice herself struggles to relate to her housemaid, Agatha, whose commitment to the church Beatrice finds baffling. Although the three protagonists share space with the maids, taxi drivers, market women, and policemen, their ideological and economic differences place them, essentially, in a world apart.

The arrival of a delegation from the northern region of Abazon, currently suffering a paralyzing drought, brings these layers of privilege and distance into focus.[24] The Abazonians, who live a more provincial lifestyle than the cosmopolitanism favored in the capital, demonstrate the truth of the statement Chris reflects on near the end of the novel, that "Bassa was not Kangan" (Achebe *Anthills* 189). The distance between Bassa and the rest of Kangan is material as well as ideological. Paoi Hwang, in an article addressing the role of landscape in *Anthills*, points out that "whilst the people of Abazon

[24] There are echoes here of the Ilmorog delegation's journey to Nairobi in *Petals*, which adds weight to the notion that *Anthills* is in some respects patterned after *Petals*.

are suffering from severe drought, the presidential palace flaunts an artificial lake that could have supplied numberless districts with water" (168). Hwang goes on to suggest that "the landscape that is associated with the elite is always green," pointing to the greenery not only at the Palace, but also, for example, on Beatrice's balcony, which is covered with potted plants (168). By contrast, Hwang notes that the landscape of the savannah and the anthills that dot its surface appears brown (167). The color-coding Hwang traces through the novel is a vivid visual representation of the socio-geographical divide in the country.

Anthills does suggest that there are some possibilities for bridging this divide, and it does so most directly in the figure of Ikem. Ikem's ability to mediate the distance between the elite and the rest derives from two critical factors: first, he is originally from Abazon; and second, he works as a journalist. For these reasons, Ikem agrees to meet with the Abazonian delegation, and the ensuing conversation suggests that the best vehicle for bridging the sociogeographical divide is storytelling. The meeting opens with "a kind of master of ceremonies" who takes charge of the gathering and proceeds to level multiple criticisms at Ikem for his lack of participation in the Abazonian community in Bassa (Achebe *Anthills* 111). The harangue continues until one of the elders of the delegation speaks. He begins with a series of anecdotes and illustrations aimed at explaining how each person has his own role, and that Ikem's role is not to sound the battle cry or take up arms, but to "tell[…] the story afterwards" (113). The elder explains that he has come to believe that the role of the story-teller is the most significant, explaining,

> [I]t is only the story can continue beyond the war and the warrior […] It is the story that outlives the sound of war-drums and the exploits of brave fighters. It is the story, not the others, that saves our progeny from blundering like blind beggars into the spikes of the cactus fence. The story is our escort; without it, we are blind. Does that blind man own his escort? No, neither do we the story; rather it is the story that owns us and directs us. (114)

As the Abazonian elder notes, the story is a guide, an escort.[25] It functions not only to recall history and connect the past to the present, but also to guide those searching for their way in the present. In other words, the story-teller has a spatial function as well as a historical one, guiding the community through the confusion of paths and roads open to it.

Stirred to action by the elder's appraisal of his role, Ikem returns home and composes an editorial titled "Hymn to the Sun." Like the story of Ndemi that drives Ilmorog, Abazon also has a founding myth, which Ikem draws on to address the contemporary political situation. The hymn veers from metaphoric to lyric to mythic, deeming the Sun the "Single Eye of God" sent to scorch the earth. The Sun does away with morning, and her "velvets of soft elusive light and necklaces of pure sound lying coil upon coil down her resplendent breasts: corals and blue chalcedonies, jaspers and agates veined like rainbows" (28). Once morning is no more, "The trees had become hydra-headed bronze statues so ancient that only blunt residual features remained on their faces, like anthills surviving to tell the new grass of the savannah about last year's brush fires" (28). Toward the end of the piece, he writes, "And now the times had come round again out of storyland," explicitly referencing the delegation and their request for aid (30). This passage, which appears in its entirety near the beginning of the novel and then

[25] Here, the elder functions as a mouthpiece for Achebe himself, adding the metaphor of the storyteller as guide to the explorer and traveler figures discussed above.

is referenced again near the end, when Chris reads over it and realizes its power, tells the story of a familiar cycle filtered through a familiar landscape. The natural resources of the land—the agates, jaspers, and chalcedonies—are stripped away upon the arrival of a powerful new element. The hymn can thus be read as an allegory for colonialism as well as the subsequent hopes and disappointments of independence.

The hymn also contains an explicit reference to the title of the novel, and suggests that the anthills—sturdy, permanent features of the savannah landscape—fulfill the role of storyteller. In an interview with Jane Wilkinson, Achebe explains that in the savannah, anthills are the only structures that survive the fires of the dry season, and thus serve as "remnants, […] experienced structures of indestructible earth" (qtd. in Lindfors 148). The anthills prompt Chris to reread Ikem's hymn; they "set him off revealing in details he had not before experienced how the searing accuracy of the poet's eye was primed not on fancy but fact" (Achebe 194). Chris experiences this revelation, and others, in the novel's penultimate chapter, titled "The Great North Road." As with the Trans-Africa Road in *Petals*, the presence of this road at the conclusion of the novel marks a transition, a new mode of being. However, whereas in *Petals* being "of the road" is a dark vision of mutual cannibalization, in *Anthills* the road offers a path forward.

The discovery of this path is the result of several grim events: Ikem disappears, likely murdered by His Excellency's forces, and Chris realizes he is also a target. After spending a few evenings in a crowded room with the family of Braimoh, a sympathetic taxi driver, Chris boards the *Luxurious*, a bus covered with with religious messages and signs to protect its inhabitants on their journey. Having already been humbled by the friendship and struggle he discovered in Braimoh's household, Chris is "now fully

reconciled to his new condition as a wide-eyed newcomer to the ways of Kangan," and yet, the *Luxurious* and the Great North Road will open his eyes even more. Chris observes as the forest gives way, "unbelievably, to open parklands of grass and stunted trees, […] wide panoramas of space stretching to a horizon where tiny trees on distant hills and against clear skies formed miniatures Japanese gardens (189). Eventually, "The march-past of dwellings in descending hierarchies continued until the modest militias of round thatched huts began to pass slowly" (191). The Great North Road reveals the cartography of Kangan, its centralized privilege organized around Bassa, and inclining into modesty and poverty the further one journeys outward.

As the journey continues, the narrator observes, "Even the asphalt on which *Luxurious* sped towards the North told its own story of two countries" (190). The road functions here as a storyteller, connecting Chris to the deeper truths about his country. The road also becomes an ally in the journey, "forcing the elegant and beautiful *Luxurious* to lurch from side to side in order to avoid the deepest ruts and potholes" (190). Chris does not mind this discomfort, as it "curtail[s] the recklessness of the *Luxurious*" (190). This staggering and lurching progress contrasts with the bus's earlier practice of forcing smaller cars off the road, "bullying" them without concern for the passengers' safety (190). The bus, with its grandiose claims about its own status and disregard for both its residents and those who stand in its way, reflects His Excellency's government, ostensibly dedicated to serving the people but instead disregarding their needs. The only real check on the bus's power is the road, which tells its story and thus invokes Ikem's role as antagonist to His Excellency. Ultimately, the Great North Road fulfills the critical role of storyteller, which the Abazonian elder describes as "chief

among his fellows" (114). While the road does not replace the anthills as the dominant storytelling feature of the landscape, its presence engenders a different kind of storytelling, one perhaps more suited to the current moment than the anthills. The virtue of the road is its ability to transport, to take a person from one place to another and reveal not only the stories of the savannah but also the stories of the city. The critical difference between these two entities are at the heart of the geography of the novel.

The road's appearance as a new kind of storyteller mirrors another development that takes place in the novel. Early on, Chris, referring to himself, Ikem, and Sam, tells Beatrice, "We are all connected. You cannot tell the story of any of us without implicating the others" (60). Beatrice responds, "you fellows, all three of you, are incredibly conceited. The story of this country, as far as you are concerned, is the story of the three of you" (60). As Robin Ikegami points out, each of the three protagonists represents a different kind of storyteller in the text. Chris "wants to present a story that is believable because it is objective, factual" (496). Ikem, on the other hand, "privileges passionate engagement in storytelling" (497). Finally, Beatrice focuses on "the connections between people, the interconnectedness of it all" (502). To return to Achebe's own analysis: like the grass which "soon grows taller than [the anthills]," Chris, Ikem, and Sam "think that the world began with them, that the world is always green" (qtd. in Lindfors 148). Beatrice, for all her sniping at Agnes and her considerable affluence, sees the situation more clearly. And at the novel's conclusion, it is Beatrice who remains standing. The final passages of *Anthills* take place in Beatrice's living room, at the naming ceremony for Ikem's daughter. Beatrice, stepping into a traditionally masculine role, chooses the name Amaechina, meaning "May-the-path-never-close"

(Achebe *Anthills* 206). Those in the room realize that Amaechina represents "The Shining Path of Ikem," but the name refers not just to a path into the past, a connection to the memory of Ikem, but to a new path forward for the country. The gathering in Beatrice's living room, a group made up of figures from all levels of Kangan society, reflects this new path forward.

Thus, while the Great North Road brings Chris to his death—he is shot on the road after trying to intervene in the rape of a young woman—it also shows him the truth of Beatrice's observation. With his final breath, he sends a message to Beatrice: "the last green," which she explains is a joke they share that references a nursery rhyme that reads: "One green bottle hanging on the wall/And if one green bottle should accidentally fall/There'll be no green bottles hanging on the wall" (Hwang 171). Beatrice teases Chris that he, Ikem, and Sam are like the green bottles, up on the wall and removed from the real Kangan. By the end of the novel, Ikem and Sam have already fallen, and Chris realizes that he is falling as well. The moment of death provides clarity, as Chris recognizes that the people should govern themselves rather than be ruled by a distant elite. The Great North Road has shown Chris the "story of two countries" and how they might begin to be knit together (Achebe *Anthills* 190). The novel invests the road with the power of the storyteller, giving it a role in effecting this transformation.

As noted above, in African literature more broadly, the road serves as "a site of both creation and destruction" (Green-Simms "No Danger No Delay" 53). Taken together, *Petals* and *Anthills* demonstrate both of these tendencies. The roads that appear in the final moments of these two novels mark a transitional moment in which established geographies give way to unsettling spaces of conflict and unexpected encounter. The

construction of the Trans-Africa Road and the ensuing exploitation of Ilmorog results in a conflagration that both clarifies and destroys relationships and lives. Chris's journey on the Great North Road leads to an act of heroism but ultimately ends in his death. The ambivalence both novels display in their treatment of this symbol suggests that it is not the road itself that will determine the future. Instead, the road offers a choice between different routes for newly independent nations, and the chance to create new patterns.

Geographies of Genre

In spite of their ambivalence about the road and its potential for division, both novels conclude with an invocation of the communal: *Petals* with a vision of worker solidarity and *Anthills* with Amaechina's egalitarian naming ceremony. Above, I argued that *Petals*' geographical vision situates Ilmorog with relation to the rest of the continent in a pan-Africanist gesture, while *Anthills* seeks to mediate the geographical and ideological polarities between the elites in Bassa and the rest of Kangan. In other words, both novels craft communal cartographies that affirm the impetus behind Karega's song: to see one's own location as it coheres within a larger whole. In this final section, I argue that the novels also self-consciously situate themselves with reference to a larger body, the corpus of African literature. I have already noted that both engage longstanding traditions in their use of myths and orality. However, as I will discuss below, the novels also implicitly and explicitly invoke the more recent tradition of the Anglophone African novel, using narrative and extranarrative gestures to assert the significance of this form. Additionally, these texts raise the question of the relationship between geography and form, anticipating a generic instability that mirrors their anticipation of cartographic

instability. These dual instabilities are not a matter of coincidence. Rather, as the nature of space and the experience of space become more dynamic and disjunctive, the subgenres of realism that attempt to represent space mimetically also become more dynamic and disjunctive.

One of the most over extranarrative gestures in *Petals* occurs in the final chapter, when Abdulla notes that his adopted brother Joseph is reading Ousmane Sembène's *God's Bits of Wood*. Because *Petals* contains many references to real-world figures, this reference to Sembène may not seem particularly notable. However, most of the figures the novel references are Kenyan political activists and agitators.[26] The reference to a Senegalese filmmaker and novelist thus adds a transcontinental dimension to the text's real-world referents. Ngũgĩ and Sembène's shared ideological and political concerns have long been recognized by critics: both authors espouse a Marxist philosophy and in many of their works depict the plight of the African laborer.[27] Thus, it is possible that the reference to Sembène simply acknowledges a fellow comrade in the anticolonial struggle. However, I read this reference to *God's Bits of Wood* as a deeper expression of pan-African and literary solidarity that emerges in the novels' shared plot elements and narrative structures. Although they differ in many particulars, both novels tell the story of small communities struggling to survive in an increasingly dehumanizing capitalist system. Furthermore, both communities decide on the same course of action to seek

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[26] These include, for example, a reference to Koitalel, Kang'ethe and Kimathi, three leaders in the fight against British Rule (*Petals* 409). Koitalel arap Samoei led the Nandi rebellion and was murdered in 1905; Joseph Kangethe was a leader of the Kikuyu Central Association starting in 1924, and Dedan Kimathi led the Mau Mau uprising in the 1950s. For more on these histories, see Lovesey. There are multiple literary allusions throughout *Petals*, and the novel makes explicit reference to Achebe's *Things Fall Apart* and Okot p'Bitek's *Song of Lawino*, both of which are on Munira's bookshelf (56).

[27] For more on these two authors and their shared commitments, see Ngumoha and Tsabedze.

redress: a long march across the countryside and toward the regional seat of power. In Sembène's novel, a fictionalized version of a 1947-48 railroad strike in what was then French West Africa, the women who are in many ways most affected by the strike embark on a four day march from Thiés to Dakar. The echoes in *Petals* are unmistakable, as not only does Ilmorog embark on a multi-day march to Nairobi, but it is Nyakinyua, a woman, argues most forcefully in favor of the march. Another similarity between the texts, and one that *Anthills* also shares, is the use of shifting and communal narrative perspectives.[28] In some respects, then, *Petals* is patterned on *God's Bits of Wood* just as *Anthills* appears to be patterned after *Petals*. Ngũgĩ's naming of Sembène brings these shared patterns into sharp relief, and manages to succeed where the Trans-Africa Road fails: by developing these resonances, *Petals* writes a route across the continent that brings about unity rather than division.

Achebe's gesture toward the larger community of African writers functions differently than Ngũgĩ's, not through an intertextual reference but written into the premise of the novel. *Anthills* was published during a period in which feminist critiques of male-authored African literature were increasingly sharp. For example, Florence Stratton traces the trope of "Mother Africa" through even ostensibly feminist texts such as Nuruddin Farah's *From a Crooked Rib* and through *Petals*, and argues that a "mastertext" emerges that "actually elaborates a gendered theory of nationhood and of writing, one that excludes women from the creative production of the national polity, of

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[28] *God's Bits of Wood* and *Petals* have an omniscient narrator who shifts focus between locations (Sembène) and protagonists (*Petals*). *Anthills* employs a similar strategy, although also occasionally employing first-person narration.

identity, and of literary texts" (122). Beatrice is a deliberate response to such critiques.[29] Achebe speaks directly to such concerns in an interview about the novel, stating:

> I think we must […] find a way in which the modern woman in Africa will have a role which is not just something we refer to once in a while, but brings her talents and her special gifts to the running of affairs. This is one of the things that I was tentatively exploring in *Anthills*. I think that one of the ways we can do this is to allow the women to speak on this issue. It's not enough for men to work out what women should do now." (qtd. in Lindfors 150).

In constructing the character of Beatrice, Achebe participates in a wider movement aimed at opening up the Anglophone African novel to a group that had been marginalized in his, and many others,' earlier texts.[30] The inclusion of a strong female character demonstrates not only that Achebe is deliberate in including women in his work, but that he is aware of and responsive to broader debates in the field.[31]

Thus, in their self-conscious invocations of the field of the African novel, both authors implicitly suggest that the form has value for postindependence Africa. This runs counter to arguments, such as those discussed in the introduction above, that the novel functions as yet another Western imposition on the continent. Indeed, in recent years the debate has shifted from formal questions about the authenticity of the form to generic questions about the ideological underpinnings of modernism and realism, two of the more dominant generic strands in the field.[32] These questions are particularly significant in

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[29] Although Stratton's essay was published after *Anthills*, the critique was ongoing.

[30] While Ali Erritouni argues that "The central position Achebe assigns […] to Beatrice is not borne out by the action of the novel," the fact remains that Achebe sees his work as an intervention in this respect, and thus accords the novel a level of power in addressing the problem (Erritouni 51).

[31] Sembène performs a similar gesture, not only in his writing but in his filmed works.

[32] There are also a number of critically-acclaimed magic realist texts in the field, with Ben Okri's *The Famished Road* serving as the most obvious example. However, this genre operates differently in Africa than it does in other postcolonial regions such as South America and the Indian subcontinent,

light of what Douglas Mao and Rebecca Walkowitz describe as the "expansive tendency" of the new modernist studies, which "seeks to widen the modernist archive by arguing for the inclusion of a variety of alternative traditions" (737). As part of this project, Gikandi argues that "it was primarily—I am tempted to say solely—in the language and structure of modernism that a postcolonial experience came to be articulated and imagined in literary form" ("Preface" 420). Gikandi points to "explicit" and "indirect" modernist allusions in the work of such influential figures as Wole Soyinka, Christopher Okigbo, and Achebe (420).[33] In essays such as these, modernism is posed either explicitly or implicitly as the other of realism, experimental where realism is conservative and energetic while realism languishes.

However, following closely in the wake of such new modernist claims is a renewed recognition of realism's vitality, particularly on the continent. Susan Andrade traces a genealogy of realist and modernist impulses in African literature and criticism and suggests that, in response to an early valorization of realism because of its "political commitment," now "The literary critical pendulum has now swung violently: anti-mimeticism is valued more than mimeticism; it is understood to be sophisticated and complex" (183). Andrade refers to Kwame Anthony Appiah as one one example of a critic invested in modernism, explaining that for Appiah, "realism was conservative as a form, and its particular political ideology was nationalism" (184). However, she argues

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leading some to argue that the term may need modification before being applied in an African context. For more on this debate, see Gaylard.

[33] In the preface to a special issue of *Modernism/Modernity*, Gikandi notes that Achebe's titles *Things Fall Apart* and *No Longer at Ease* are references to Yeats's "The Second Coming" and T.S. Eliot's "The Journey of the Magi," respectively. He does not mention Ngũgĩ here, but *Petals of Blood* contains references to both of these poems in its section titles: "Walking," "Toward Bethlehem," and "To Be Born." Christine Pagnoulle reads the second part of *Petals*, also titled "The Journey," through the lens of Eliot's poem.

convincingly that Appiah and others ignore a number of realist novels that do indeed express disillusionment with nationalism.[34] For Andrade, realism deserves "a properly critical appraisal" because it "continues to be a popular and vibrant mode of writing for Africans and the rest of the world" (184). A recent special issue of *Modern Language Quarterly* takes up this critical appraisal, addressing the question of "peripheral realisms," which the editors see as a correction to the "unexamined expansion of modernism to fill the space of the contemporary and the global" (Esty and Lye 274). Ultimately, the included essays put pressure on binaristic approaches to the modernist/realist opposition. As Andrade and other contributors demonstrate, many texts, from Virginia Woolf's *To The Lighthouse* to Ayi Kwei Armah's *The Beautyful Ones Are Not Yet Born* display both modernist and realist tendencies. In his foreword to the issue, Joe Cleary argues:

> nineteenth-century realism already contained latent modernisms that broke strongly to the fore only in conditions of systemic crisis and that twentieth-century modernisms may equally have contained latent realisms that may yet find novel articulations in new media or new generic modalities in further moments of crisis. (268)

Petals and *Anthills* both contain modernist elements in their experimentations with temporality and language, and yet their attention to the sociopolitical has a distinctly realist expression; thus, they affirm Cleary's contention that these genres cannot be entirely disconnected.

The editors of the *Peripheral Realisms* collection ultimately conclude that, in spite of modernism's critical cachet, "realism has become a useful term again, marking a shared investment in theorizing the referential function of the text" (Esty and Lye 277-

[34] In particular, Andrade discusses Ayi Kewi Arma's *The Beautyful Ones Are Not Yet Born* as a realist and yet simultaneously anti-nationalist novel.

278).[35] This project performs that theorizing, asking how realist texts represent space in a period of cartographical instability. The selected contemporary texts argue for new, dynamic ways of writing space. These texts are primarily realist, although many contain elements that tend toward modernism; while generally adhering to mimetic representation in terms of content, they may employ nonlinear timelines, fragmentation, and elements of pastiche. These novels demonstrate the possibility, if not of "collaps[ing] the distinction between realism and modernism," at least of acknowledging that these distinctions are often drawn too firmly (Cleary 268). In other words, they show how just as geographical borders are both undermined and reconstituted in an age of air travel, cyberspace, and multinational conglomerations, so to are generic borders. Each of the following chapters not only demonstrates how the novel under analysis tracks geographical shifts, but also generic shifts. As *Abyssinian Chronicles* undermines the geographical category of the nation, it also undermines the spatial logic of the *Bildungsroman*. *The Beautiful Things That Heaven Bears* develops a geography of relation, but also carves out a new generic space somewhere between the immigrant novel and the city novel. Finally, *I Do Not Come to You by Chance* explores the material impact of virtual geographies while also constructing a new cyber-enabled version of the picaresque.

[35] Esty and Lye's contention that "The newly current realisms of writers like Pramoedya Ananta Toer and Amitav Ghosh also throw into relief the realisms that were there all along underneath the crust of global modernist discourse: those of Saadat Hasan Manto, Chinua Achebe, Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o, Nadine Gordimer, Raja Rao, Maryse Conde, Tsitsi Dangarembga, and Tayeb Salih, for example" perhaps betrays their disciplinary investment in modernism, as the vibrant scholarship surrounding these figures suggests that for many, they were never buried "underneath the crust" at all (Esty and Lye 275-276).

CHAPTER 3

RITES OF TRIANGULATION IN MOSES ISEGAWA'S *ABYSSINIAN CHRONICLES*

Nearing the end of his life, Serenity, a character in Moses Isegawa's *Abyssinian Chronicles*, declares that Uganda is "a land of false bottoms where under every abyss there was another one waiting to ensnare people, and that historians had made a mistake: Abyssinia was not the ancient land of Ethiopia, but modern Uganda" (440). Serenity's cynical invocation of Abyssinia makes a deft—and pessimistic—political move: rather than acknowledging the proud history of the Ethiopian Empire, Serenity posits a Ugandan Abyssinia characterized by the abyss, a geographical feature of untold depth and measure, unable to be contained by latitudinal and longitudinal coordinates, and with no clear outlines or solid borders. In proposing that the term Abyssinia better describes the land of his birth than the name Uganda, Serenity also resists a given label and replaces it with his own experiential designation, calling attention to the arbitrary relationship between titles and the entities to which they refer and suggesting that naming results in a slippage, or loss of meaning. Serenity's pronouncement about Uganda and Abyssinia undermines the practice of cartography, of assigning a singular name to a distinct space and charting it two-dimensionally. This move is particularly barbed in light of the problematic history of imperialist and interventionist mapping on the continent, a legacy that Serenity's son Mugezi, the novel's protagonist, later invokes with a reference to the Berlin Conference. Such gestures and allusions, which resonate throughout *Abyssinian Chronicles*, enact a deconstructive cartography that leans into the slippages of

meaning rather than obscuring them, unmapping the nation rather than drawing it definitively.

The connection between the nation and the novel has been delineated by Benedict Anderson, Homi Bhabha, and others, who argue that the form serves as a tool for imagining the nation. *Abyssinian Chronicles* puts the form to different use, as a tool for un-imagining the nation and chronicling its failures and instability. Throughout the novel, characters search for stable ground unsuccessfully: the very landscape changes; hills rise and are flattened; towns, villages, and estates are annihilated. Mugezi observes rains so intense that "the swamp swelled and seemed to divide into many smaller, fiercer swamps"; later, he notes "The disappearance of the old village and the oozing of the houses into the swamps" (51, 442). In another passage, he describes the volcanic activity that created Kampala, explaining:

> The seething, kidney-shaped bowl functioning as the taxi park had originally been a volcanic hill. During the last active phase two things happened: the hill shattered, creating this valley, and the surrounding valleys were transformed into the seven round-topped hills at the core of the city of Kampala. (51)

These passages describe a shattering, shifting space that is impossible to map.

Mugezi's reading of the landscape fuses time and space and reveals the inherent instability of geographical features when seen from the perspective of one who lives among them rather than one who charts them from a distance. As Mugezi journeys throughout the novel, his largely unplotted movements serve to engender a space-writing from "down below," privileging the "migrational" perspective of the walker or traveler rather than the "aloof" perspective of the cartographer (Certeau 93). The very real and ongoing geographical uncertainty in *Abyssinian Chronicles*, engendered by political and

environmental factors, is a critical undercurrent of the novel that continuously challenges notions of stability, arguing instead for a strategic recognition of instability. In emphasizing the instability of geographical features and the limitations of official labels, *Abyssinian Chronicles* argues for a more fluid understanding of spatial categories and designations. It challenges not only the name Uganda, but the very epistemological categories upon which the contemporary map is based.

Abyssinian Chronicles was published in Dutch in 1998 and in English in 2000.[36] The novel was well-received by both popular and academic audiences in Africa and abroad, selected as one of the Top Ten Books of African Literature 1984-2004 in *World Literature Today*, and chosen as one of "Africa's 100 Best Books of the 20th Century" by the Zimbabwe International Book Fair. Reviewers describe the novel as "masterful" and as "a torrid river of a book," and recognize it as a significant contribution to contemporary African letters (Noor 127, Vazquez 127-128). While extensive critical analyses of the novel are few as yet, those that do exist tend to focus on its negotiation of issues such as trauma and identity, as well as its status as a work of "historical fabrication" (Armstrong 128).[37] Indeed, while the novel is primarily a narrative of Mugezi's childhood and adolescence, it is simultaneously an imaginative narrative of post-independence Uganda.

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[36] While first published in Dutch, Isegawa wrote the novel in English. It was then translated for initial publication. For more on the novel's publication history, see Vazquez.

[37] At the writing of this chapter, a search for "Abyssinian Chronicles" in the MLA database yields only four results. Of these, one is an interview with Isegawa which includes a brief analysis of the text (Jones); one focuses on the novel's discussion of female genital excision (Bekers); a third examines the text's treatment of trauma and cultural memory (Armstrong); and a fourth makes brief reference to *Abyssinian Chronicles* as an African novel confronting the AIDS epidemic (Hawley). In addition to these, several reviews of the novel have been published in both popular and academic venues.

The *Chronicles* is constructed as a singular novel consisting of seven books, each of which follows Mugezi through a particular phase in his childhood and early adulthood.[38] Book One, "…1971: Village Days," provides an account of Mugezi's family, focusing primarily on the relationship between Serenity and Padlock, the grim zealot who marries Serenity after being expelled from a nunnery for child abuse. Books Two and Three, "The City" and "Amin, the Godfather," detail Mugezi's childhood years in Kampala as he struggles with his parents' tyrannical ways and discovers his unique ability to overthrow dictators. In Book Four, "Seminary Years," Mugezi continues his struggle against authority while pursuing his studies. Book Five, "Nineteen Seventy-Nine," turns its attention to the political upheavals of that year, as Mugezi and those close to him undergo multiple traumas.[39] Books Six and Seven, "Triangular Revelations" and "Ghettoblaster," follow Mugezi as he grows increasingly disheartened by the opportunities available to him in Uganda and departs for the Netherlands. Throughout the *Chronicles*, the stories of Mugezi and his family play out against a background of events such as the Ugandan Civil War, the Indian expulsion, religious declarations, border conflicts, and the growing AIDS epidemic. The novel's expansive scope lends itself to any number of critical lenses; in particular, politico-historical, psychoanalytical, and gender-focused readings are warranted. However, taking my lead from the novel's multiple invocations of the relationship between space and narrative, not least of which is the title itself, I focus on its treatment of geography and genre.

[38] In accordance with the text, I will use the term "book" when referring to one of these seven sections. When referring to the work as a whole, I will use "novel" or "text."

[39] 1979 saw the Uganda-Tanzanian war and the overthrow of Idi Amin. For more on this period, see Mutibwa.

Mugezi's movements around Uganda and abroad unsettle not only cartographical norms but also generic ones, chronicling the abyss at the center of the nation and simultaneously remapping the coming-of-age narrative. My analysis first considers the novel's engagement with the classical *Bildungsroman* and the postcolonial coming-of-age novel, arguing that *Abyssinian Chronicles* contests the way that codes of maturity are spatially organized in both of these subgenres.[40] Rather than a coming of age defined by return, or arrested at the threshold, the novel develops a coming of age characterized by ongoing mobility. This migrational coming-of-age plays out most keenly in the novel's final two books, "Triangular Revelations" and "Ghettoblaster." These books trace the increasingly fraught relationship between identity and geography in an era of deep cartographical instability. Having come of age in a nation built on externally-imposed borders, Mugezi ultimately discards those borders and becomes a global migrant at the cusp of the twenty-first century. Likewise, the novel transcends formal borders, offering a way past the liminality and stasis that characterizes many postcolonial coming-of-age stories.

Abyssinian Chronicles as Migrational Coming-of-Age Novel

Mugezi's difficult coming of age drives the novel's structure and plot. Narratives tracing the evolution of a protagonist from childhood to maturity have a long history. These coming-of-age novels—or, in the European tradition, *Bildungsromane*—are often organized around an individual's journey away from the secure space of the home,

[40] I use the phrase "liminal coming-of-age novel" as an alternative to "postcolonial coming-of-age novel" because of the emphasis on spatiality implicit in the term "liminal."

through various rites of passage, and toward a stable, grounded maturity. In recent years, this genre has proven especially provocative for writers interested in articulating the myriad challenges to coming of age in a postcolonial milieu, such as the tension between tradition and modernity and the hybrid state of the postcolonial child. A critical difference between these two traditions, the European and the postcolonial, is evident in their treatment of spatial elements. Franco Moretti, writing on the *Bildungsroman*, discusses the "all-pervading spatio-temporal dispositif of reversal: the return back, to a place, a time, a character or an event which enables the restoration of the truth about oneself and one's life" (210). Ethnographer Arnold van Gennep, whose study on the rites of passage has been influential across many fields, describes this return and restoration as a rite of incorporation.[41] In such novels, then, maturity is coded spatially, with the protagonist's return to a literal or figurative point of origin signaling completion of the journey. Upon return, the protagonist completes his or her incorporation into the social system through marriage or work, and, critically, an end to the wandering that drives the action of the novel.

Conversely, the postcolonial coming-of-age novel emphasizes not a return but a suspension, often leaving the protagonist in a liminal state.[42] Vilashini Cooppan, writing on Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o's *Devil on the Cross*, describes its ending as "one of those inconclusive, arrested, deferred, and yet for all those reasons, *possible* endings so prevalent in the literature of neocolonial disillusionment" (185). This inconclusivity,

[41] For more on van Gennep's work with reference to postcolonial writing, see Dodgson-Katiyo and Wisker.

[42] Jed Esty traces an earlier temporal remaking of the classical *Bildungsroman* in what he calls "colonial novels of frozen youth," which include Olive Schreiner's *The Story of an African Farm*, Rudyard Kipling's *Kim*, and Joseph Conrad's *Lord Jim*, among others (Esty 423).

arrestedness, and deferral is a key feature of many novels written in the generations following independence, which tend to focus on the protagonist's liminal position between tradition, represented by family and rural life, and modernity, represented by Westernized education and the city. Wangari wa Nyatetũ-Waigwa, for example, argues that the Francophone-African *Bildungsroman* is more accurately described as a novel of threshold; she writes:

> The liminal novel, then, is a novel of coming of age in which the rite of passage, either overtly depicted […] or implicitly evoked […] remains suspended in the middle stage. At the close of the novel the protagonist is still in the middle of his quest, either still moving towards what supposedly constitutes the final stage in that quest or having consciously suspended the adoption of a final stance. (3)

This suspension on the threshold of maturity interrupts the spatial dynamics of the classical *Bildunsroman,* serving to highlight the instability and uncertainty of the postcolonial world.

Two examples of such liminal or threshold novels include Ken Bugul's *The Abandoned Baobab* (first published in French in 1982 as *Le Baobab Fou*) and Chris Abani's *GraceLand* (2004). In these novels, the journey to maturity is figured geographically, beginning with a move to the city or abroad. This geographical dislocation serves as a form of trauma, producing—or, in some cases, magnifying—a rupture in the protagonist's relationship to community or family. Ken, the protagonist of *The Abandoned Baobab*, leaves her unhappy home in Senegal and travels to Belgium on an academic scholarship. Once there, she leaves school behind and becomes a popular figure in the local arts scene, although her popularity stems almost exclusively from her exoticism; one of her friend explains, "*You are a Black woman*, you could make yourself a fortune" (Bugul 104). As her estrangement from her family and home weighs

increasingly on her mental state, Ken begins to abuse alcohol and drugs, turns briefly to prostitution, and finally returns to Senegal and to the baobab tree at the heart of her ancestral village. The tree, which throughout the novel has served as a symbol of strength and continuity, has died in her absence. The novel concludes here, with Ken facing the symbol of her own inability to rejuvenate herself. In a strict sense, the geographical journey is complete, but the symbolic return and incorporation back into the life of the village has not been achieved.

GraceLand also tells the story of a young person who leaves his home behind and moves to an urban center, only to suffer the consequences of geographical dislocation. Elvis, the teenage protagonist, spends his days traveling around Lagos and dancing for tourists in the hopes of making a little bit of money. The novel intersperses these chapters with interludes from his childhood in the village of Afikpo. This structural oscillation between the traditional, familial space of the village and teeming, globalized Lagos emphasizes the traditional-modern divide that is often coded as urban-rural in the postcolonial novel. After a series of traumatic events, Elvis secures a passport and plans to move to the United States. The novel concludes as the plane departs, leaving Elvis literally suspended in midair. In this novel, Elvis's liminality and inability to transcend the threshold manifests itself in physical and mental trauma, and the only way out is through the complete suspension of the physical and mental self. Sarah K. Harrison employs the language of alienation, estrangement, and paralysis in her reading of the novel, providing additional frameworks for thinking through such arrested narratives (97).[43] In both *GraceLand* and *The Abandoned Baobab*, as well as in other novels such as

[43] Harrison focuses on *GraceLand*'s negotiation of the urban, but also discusses Abani's use of the

Ama Ata Aidoo's *Our Sister Killjoy* (1976), Ben Okri's *The Famished Road* (1993), and Tsitsi Dangarembga's *Nervous Conditions* (1998), the hybridity and instability engendered by postcolonialism serves to geographically dislocate the adolescent protagonist, leaving him or her on the threshold but unable to cross it.

Abyssinian Chronicles offers an alternative to the postcolonial coming-of-age novel because it refuses to leave its protagonist in the liminal stage. However, it also avoids the narrative of return described by Moretti, essentially reordering spatial codes of maturity. In particular, the novel traces a form of maturity that emphasizes dynamism rather than stasis, continued movement rather than settling down. By following Mugezi to Amsterdam and tracing his evolution there, it parts ways with narratives that saw migration to the West as a kind of death, often represented by delusion or loss of status.[44] Adapting Certeau's notion of the migrational figure noted above, I read *Abyssinian Chronicles* as a migrational coming-of-age narrative. At its conclusion, Mugezi is neither abandoned on the threshold nor has he returned to his community. Rather, he embraces continued mobility.

In order to grasp the significance of this intervention, it is necessary to consider the implications of the standard trajectories present in the *Bildungsroman* and the liminal coming-of-age novel. The trajectory of return noted by Moretti maintains the status quo

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Bildungsroman; she writes, "By invoking and subverting the form of the Bildungsroman, Abani exposes the discrepant trajectories of development that exist within a single city, suggesting the untenability of national models of development which perpetuate a "First World"/"Third World" hierarchy. Through his narration of the experiences of a young slum-dweller who fails to meet the *Bildungsroman*'s generic expectations of "formation," "education," and "coming-of-age," Abani further demonstrates that both state and society inhibit progress in their frequently violent promotion of inflexible measures of development" (97).

[44] See the discussion of Ken Bugul as a "Black woman" above. Aidoo's Sissie experiences similarly reductionist encounters.

of the existing social structure, as it results in the protagonist's geographical incorporation into the community. Upon returning and reaching maturity, the protagonist is no longer free to roam about at will, but is bound to the community through economic and familial ties. Having undergone the rites of passage, it now falls to the protagonist to play his or her role in propagating the stability of the community. In order to do this, the protagonist must remain where he or she is and forego further movement. The emphasis placed on the rite of incorporation in the *Bildungsroman* makes it at heart a conservative form, or, in Moretti's words, "the great bourgeois form" (ix).[45] In the liminal coming-of-age novel, the protagonist's inability to move beyond the threshold stage prevents incorporation but offers no alternative, resulting in the inconclusive conclusions Cooppan describes above.

In contrast to both of these patterns, the instability occasioned by continued movement serves as a threat to the existing social structure and a refusal to be incorporated. *Abyssinian Chronicles* offers an alternative, a rite, we might say for the moment, of nonincorporation. Mugezi does not return to Uganda, but neither does he remain on the threshold. Rather, as he moves through increasingly disjunctive and shifting geographical regions, the threshold is continually displaced. Mugezi continues his migrations, refusing a settled, bourgeois maturity. His continued mobility is a deliberate unsettling of expectations, and he acknowledges as much in his final moments, relishing the opportunity to define a new trajectory of dynamism in the midst of displacement. In order to trace this spatial intervention, I turn my attention to the novel's

[45] While Moretti is speaking here of tendencies which contradict this notion, he ultimately concludes that the *Bildungsroman* remains "deeply entwined with one social class, one region of the world, one sex" (Moretti x).

final two books, "Triangular Revelations" and "Ghettoblaster," in which Mugezi undergoes various rites of passage and realizes this migrational maturity.

Rites of Passage and Uncanny "Revelations"

The journey from youth to maturity may be described as the journey of self-discovery. In this version of the *Bildung*, maturity is signified by the attainment of knowledge or wisdom, a process sometimes referred to as finding oneself.[46] This colloquialism envisions self-knowledge spatially, as a way of describing one's position in relation to the multitude of components that make up the social milieu. "Triangular Revelations" describes Mugezi's repeated attempts to locate himself in a vocation, a romantic relationship, and in his own family. During this phase, however, he encounters a series of triangular obstacles that prevent him from accomplishing this self-location. The triangle functions as a motif in this book along two registers. First, it appears in a variety of incarnations, each representing a rite of passage Mugezi must undergo. Second, if Mugezi's desire to find a stable self in this book can be described as an effort to locate himself, then in geographical terms, the book reads as Mugezi's attempt to triangulate his own position within society. In "Triangular Revelations," Mugezi attempts to map himself in relation to his family, his village, and his prospects, but finds his cartographic impulse thwarted, as the geographical, genealogical, and biological maps he relies on are increasingly undone.

The choice of the triangle as the representative symbol of this difficult period, one

[46] In the classical *Bildungsroman*, maturity is often marked by either marriage or death; in the succeeding generation, "maturity now means one thing only: *knowledge*" (Moretti 139).

that adds another dimension to the novel's articulation of the spatial, is not random; as will be discussed below, there is a very concrete geographical basis to the triangles that cause so much grief. However, in emphasizing this symbol, *Abyssinian Chronicles* taps into an uneasiness that pervades triangular metaphors across discourses. Perhaps the most common triangular metaphor in contemporary popular discourse is that of the love triangle, which describes a relationship between two parties that is destabilized by the introduction of a third figure. This use of the triangle illustrates why the figure is often considered inherently unstable. When triangles are invoked as descriptors of geographical phenomena, they often describe sinister or violent spaces.[47] Additionally, geographic triangulation refers to a methodology critical to surveying space and assessing difference, with all the attendant concerns associated with such practices.[48]

In mathematical terms, the third vector of the triangle opens up a newly defined space, creating an expanse where previously there existed only a linear connection between two points. This newly opened space allows for renewed consideration of the original elements, as the instability engendered by introducing a third element into a stable pairing calls for redefinition and rearticulation of preexisting borders and relationships. This move from linear connection to triangulation introduces the possibility of dynamic interaction. To put it in critical terms, the notion of triangulation is provocative in that it transcends the binaristic thinking that often constitutes knowledge, in which one element is defined in contrast to its opposite. By introducing a third

[47] Examples include the Bermuda Triangle, Algeria's Triangle of Death, and Uganda's Luwero and Kagera Triangles, which are described in *Abyssinian Chronicles*.

[48] For a thematic treatment of the role of geographical surveys in exerting control over geographical regions, see Brian Friel's *Translations*.

element, triangulation moves toward a dialectical mode of thinking. The process of sublation, which is central to dialectical thinking, manages to both preserve and alter the initial concept. The events of “Triangular Revelations” function dialectically, pushing Mugezi to redefine and rearticulate his position, holding in tension the various elements that demand his energies.

Earlier, I described Mugezi’s continued mobility as a rite of nonincorporation rather than of incorporation. That Mugezi does not return to the village and undergo incorporation can also be read as a dialectical movement. At the same time, Mugezi sees himself as the corporeal representation of the village (Isegawa 388). In incorporation, two separate entities become one, a coherence that dialectics challenges. In a dialectical system, these two entities work on each other such that a third entity is generated out of the original two. Mugezi’s choice to be of the village but not in the village mirrors this third option, neither incorporation nor liminality but ongoing movement, oscillation, and tension. Mugezi triangulates his position by generating this triangular mode of maturity. Thus, I argue that as migrational coming-of-age novel, *Abyssinian Chronicles* replaces the rite of incorporation with a rite of triangulation.

“Triangular Revelations” brings the novel’s focus to the geopolitical instability that characterized Uganda in the years following independence, the result in part of imperialist cartographical intervention. As historian Christopher Wrigley explains:

> With hindsight it can be seen that of all the new African states Uganda was going to be the most difficult to govern. Four kingdoms, one much larger than the rest, plus one pseudo-kingdom (Busoga) and a collection of tribal communities […] it is hard to see how this amalgam was supposed to work.” [49] (159)

[49] For a first-hand account of the process of establishing one of these borders, see Blake.

Indeed, border conflicts with Tanzania as well as internal struggles for control resulted in widespread suffering. Not coincidentally, the shift of power from Milton Obote to Idi Amin and then back to Obote is often described as the Obote-Amin-Obote II Triangle.[50] In addition to emphasizing the geopolitical, Book Six also develops a biological undercurrent, employing the triangle to suggest the embeddedness of the geographical and the biological. In this book, bodies and borders are ripped apart, transgressed, and subjected to symptoms represented by multiple triangles. The politically contested zone known as the Luwero Triangle, a love triangle, and the AIDS epidemic each leave their mark on Mugezi and on those around him.

In the preceding books, Mugezi has been made to suffer—and learned to resist suffering—at the hands of his parents, his religion, and his government. At the conclusion of Book Five, "Nineteen Seventy-Nine," a post-adolescent Mugezi is recovering from a violent rape at the hands of three women, guerilla fighters he refers to as "The Infernal Trinity" (Isegawa 339). The women attack Mugezi on his way home from a friend's house one evening, calling him to the side of the road and then knocking him over the head and dragging him into an abandoned building. This incident occurs exactly as Mugezi is "feeling inviolable once more," noting that he "had survived the dark days without a body scratch" (338). After the incident, Mugezi realizes he has "become another statistic in our family history. I too had been violated, and my tormentors had

[50] For more on this period, see Mutibwa and Okoth.

escaped unscathed" (340). The revelations referred to in the book's title continue this pattern of violation, as three critical triangles serve as traumatic rites of passage.[51]

The first of these triangles is the Luwero Triangle, a disputed geographical region that suffers horribly under Obote's second regime.[52] As events in the region escalate, Mugezi explains that the Triangle is the "mathematical configuration of death" (344). In a passage which describes the Luwero Triangle's ever-shifting borders, and its "uncanny" and "magical" ability to "contract[…] and expand[…] at will," Mugezi explains:

> sometimes the Triangle stretched precariously to within a few kilometers of the city center, and sometimes it contracted devilishly to its wet core, hundreds of kilometers away. The village locked between Mpande Hill and Ndere Hill was among the many areas on the periphery of the notorious Triangle. (344)

The village Mugezi refers to here is his birthplace, site of his family's clan land. Its location on the periphery of the Triangle renders it vulnerable to attack, and eventually to complete destruction. Mugezi's use of the term "uncanny" here is telling, as it invokes the notion of the *Unheimlich*—the unfamiliar or unhomely.[53] The Luwero Triangle becomes unfamiliar as its borders shift. Its residents are literally made homeless; they are "displaced and […] moved from town to town" (344). Indeed, all of the major events of "Triangular Revelations" are uncanny, taking the familiar and making it strange. This tension can be observed in a variety of spaces: the home, the body, and the other's body.

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[51] In addition to describing the relationship between the three characters that share the bulk of the narrative (Mugezi and his parents Serenity and Padlock), the triangle is invoked with reference to the Trinity (both Holy and Infernal), as a metaphor for the female sex organs, and in Obote-Amin-Obote II Triangle.

[52] A second disputed geographical region, the Kagera Triangle is described in Book 5. Mugezi calls it "a diabolical mathematical invention" (Isegawa 295).

[53] For an extended analysis of the uncanny in postcolonial literature, see Cooppan's *Worlds Within: National Narratives & Global Connections in Postcolonial Writing*, particularly the chapter "National Imaginaries, Global Flows, and Uncanny Repetitions."

Throughout the book, Mugezi realizes that entities he assumes to be stable contain discomfiting revelations.

The uncanny menace of the Triangle, along with the rape, inculcates a sense of fatality in Mugezi. He states, “I felt I had a pact with Death. Death was a demon locked in the Triangle, where it would remain. The Infernal Trinity had imbued me with a crass bravado bordering on a death wish” (345). Although Mugezi does not know it at the time, other insidious triangles are quietly taking shape in the bodies and villages of the region, threatening to realize this death wish. As he encounters each variation on the triangle, the accompanying revelations produce changes in him and drive him further into the abyss, toward an increasing instability and mobility. In order to escape these triangles, Mugezi must continue shifting his position, redefining himself as the entities around him reveal their uncanny nature.

In the short term, Mugezi’s spirits are lifted by a developing relationship with a young teacher named Jo, a refugee from the Luwero Triangle. Mugezi describes their lovemaking as moving “deeper into the marshes of love and the triangle of life” (357). In the meantime, the Triangle continues to evolve, “contracting and expanding like a birth canal” (347). These two metaphors bring the biological and the geographical into even more intimate relation, reinforcing the twin themes of this stage of Mugezi’s development. Mugezi’s time with Jo, however, is cut short after the revelation that she is his half-sister, born to another woman shortly before Serenity’s marriage to Padlock. Here, the notion of the uncanny surfaces again, as the exposure of this uncomfortable secret leads Mugezi directly back to his difficult childhood. Neither Jo nor Mugezi wishes to maintain the relationship in the face of this incestuous triangle, and the two part

ways. This sequence of events also reinforces the notion of perspectival mapping that underlies so much of the *Chronicles*. In this case, the map in question is the genealogical map, which may appear static when viewed by an objective eye, but looks quite different from the perspective of Mugezi, Serenity, and Jo. The difficulty of pinning down relationships in the face of the uncanny is an implicit theme throughout "Triangular Revelations," particularly as the narrative turns to address the spread of disease at the end of the book.

Reflecting on his time with Jo, Mugezi surmises, "It seemed we were both looking for an anchor to steady us in these turbulent times" (352). In a later passage, he uses a different stabilizing metaphor, describing his emotional state after his breakup with Jo as "rootless" (374). Both of these metaphors suggest that, at this point in his development, Mugezi still yearns for a traditionally settled maturity, one which allows him to remain in the region where, in spite of various uncanny developments, he feels most at home. In other words, as he undergoes the rites of passage of sexual awakening and the trauma of the Triangle, he looks ahead to a time when he can be incorporated into the community. This search for stability drives Mugezi's actions throughout "Triangular Revelations," until the many revelations finally sever his geographical connection to the home that is no longer very home-like at all. Upon severing this connection, Mugezi also abandons his search for stability, embarking on his migrational journey.

After breaking up with Jo, and before members of Mugezi's family begin to notice symptoms of HIV, geopolitical forces continue to unsettle the region. During this period, Mugezi joins his former classmate Lwendo, now a second lieutenant in the army, in a blackmail scheme against corrupt businessmen. Lwendo leverages the rampant

corruption in the country to his own ends, using his assignment as overseer of goods and their transport to blackmail businessmen tempted into pirating these goods. Lwendo brings Mugezi along for backup, and the two travel the region, "making […] long, arduous journeys to obscure places" (382). One of these journeys takes them to Mugezi's village. As they approach, Mugezi sees "old men and women who had refused to flee […] their elbows tied behind them in the triangular *kandooya* configuration" (386).[54] Kandooya, a torture method, is yet another triangle the text invokes, suggesting that the instability of the Luwero Triangle is not simply a geographical oddity but an uncanny force touching even the physical bodies of those in its ever-shifting reach. Compounding this uncanniness is the scene that greets Mugezi upon arriving at the village:

> Rain always followed a severe bombardment. Rains poisoned with the wrath of the dead fell, and the swamps swelled, flooding and submerging the surrounding areas. They undermined house foundations and made the ruins rot and crumble. They carried the ooze to the bottom of Mpande Hill in swirling waves and washed away the history of the village. Thunder and lightning struck and, coupled with the relentless rain, broke open burial sites, filled them with water and destroyed what remained of that legacy. Elephant grass eventually took over, growing over courtyards, graveyards, everywhere. By the time we went to investigate the need for aqueducts to control the mighty Mpande swamp, the village was no more, its memory a dark ooze seeping from the sides of the two hills. (387)

Mugezi's hometown is irrevocably changed, one more casualty of the Triangle. In his discussion of this period of Uganda's history, Phares Mutibwa relates an incident in which a soldier, describing the devastation of a town caught in the violence, declared that the town "would be 'wiped out from the map of Uganda'" (138). This cartographical erasure suggests an abyssinian quality, a swallowing up of entire villages and towns. The text's continual linking of the geographical with the biological is deployed to great effect

[54] *Hostile to Democracy: The Movement System and Political Repression in Uganda* explains that "the hazardous and outlawed *kandooya* method (involving the tying of the arms tightly together at the elbows behind the back) […] can cause paralysis" (Human Rights Watch 123).

in this moment, as Lwendo, attempting to defray Mugezi's anger, tells him, "You are the village. It lives in you" (Isegawa 388). Later, on a final visit, Mugezi acknowledges this point, stating, "I had swallowed the village, its spirit, every worthy bit of it, and my job was to rebuild it elsewhere" (408). Here, Mugezi's return epitomizes the rite of triangulation; rather than incorporation into the village, Mugezi undergoes a process of sublation, assimilating parts of the village into his own identity.

Having proceeded through two rites of triangulation, one romantic and one geographical, Mugezi is now confronted with the third and final prong of the triangle. This third trauma, and the triangular biohazard symbol it evokes, represent a deadly union of the geographical and the biological: infectious disease. The final pages of Book Six narrate the early days of the AIDS epidemic in Uganda, as Mugezi observes its spread through the towns and villages near him, and its eventual incursion into his own family. Mugezi begins to notice "a mysterious disease which slimmed people down to the bones" (396). Eventually, he explains, "the disease got a medical name—AIDS—but remained Slim to us" (396). Adopting his father's tendency to replace an official name with a more experientially-based term, Mugezi refers to the disease as Slim even though he is aware of its technical designation.

In asserting that this section draws together the biological and the geographical, I read AIDS as inherently spatialized. Because of its infectious nature, the HIV virus spreads along geographical vectors, and is particularly enabled by the increased mobility of the global era.[55] Mugezi tracks the disease geographically as well, noting, "It had

[55] Doctors working to unravel the mystery of the disturbing new illness spreading through San Francisco in the early 1980s theorized a "Patient Zero" as they mapped possible routes and connections between those who had contracted the disease. Eventually, Patient Zero was revealed to be a flight

started in southwestern Uganda, in the remote Rakai District, about fifty kilometers from Masaka" (396). And, echoing theories that located the disease's origin in some undesirable demographic, he continues, "The theory was that this witchcraft was punishment meted out by Tanzanian smugglers who had been cheated by their Ugandan counterparts in the seventies and eighties when smuggling was rife in those marshy areas" (396).[56] Mugezi's interest in locating and explaining the origin of the disease functions as his attempt to bring order out of the chaos it engenders; essentially, he tries to map its spread both geographically and genealogically as it moves through his family.

Priscilla Wald discusses the role of mapping in attempts to discover the origin of AIDS, noting, "The search for the (African) origins of HIV manifests a geography of disease that is complemented in the suggestions of diaspora and implicit kinship [...] Since the mid-nineteenth century, maps have helped chronicle the spread and often locate the cause of epidemics, and they are staples of contagious disease narratives" (692). Wald triangulates the relationship between "Grammar, Genes, and Geography," analyzing the rhetoric invoked by those invested in genetic mapping as a way of studying the disease. Making the connection even more explicit, she asserts that "Geneticists [...] are cartographers of a sort" (681). The imbrication of genetics and mapping provides another dimension for the book's incorporation of the biological and the geographical, as

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attendant who had spread the disease to many not only in San Francisco, but also in the cities along his flight routes. Particularly in its early spread, AIDS was a traveling disease with strong geographical undertones. For more on the early days of the epidemic, see Shilts.

[56] HIV/AIDS has been a politicized disease since its early days, as various populations suffered disproportionately and were charged with moral and behavioral failings leading to the spread of the disease. An early term used to describe the disease in the United States was GRID, which stood for Gay-Related Immune Deficiency. In subsequent periods, the disease has been read in regional as well as demographic terms, as various parts of the world become centers for the spread of the disease. These "hot zones" often reinforced stereotypes about the regions they described. Early suspicions that the disease originated in Africa were built upon "Racist stereotypes of primitive, hypersexual 'natives' who supposedly exacerbate the pandemic [...] in scientific accounts of the pandemic in Africa and elsewhere" (Tomso 444).

Mugezi's narrative tracks the disease's spread along his family tree. However, his attempts to map its spread are frustrated by its capricious nature, suggesting once again the failure of cartography to account for the vagaries of the abyss.

Like the storms that slowly break down the physical elements of his village until it is wiped off the map, Slim wears down the familial and social geographies of Mugezi's homeland. He states:

> It struck at the heart of the social fabric and stretched to the breaking point the tenuous bonds of extended family. It made towns quake with the fevers of arrested development, and the villages sob with the woes of unfulfilled potential. It made cities retch with the talons of unassuageable pain, and the villages writhe with the stench of green-black diarrhea. (Isegawa 396)

The language in this passage, of bonds breaking, fabric rending, and communities destructing, suggests a collapsing cartography, an implosion of the systems and trajectories that maintain order.

Mugezi also describes the disease's spread on a largely local level, never broadening his scope to include more distant regions. In this, he continues the limited geographical focus that characterizes much of the first six books of the novel. While the critical tendency is to read Mugezi as, if not metonymic of Uganda, then at least as a "parallel" to the national story, it is more appropriate to read Mugezi in more geographically limited terms, as the bodily representation of his particular village rather than the nation as a whole (Jones 85). The geography of the national has little appeal to Mugezi; it is a paradigm that his regional focus subverts and in some sense ignores. Just as Serenity dismisses the term Uganda in favor of Abyssinia, Mugezi dismisses the geopolitical entity of the state in favor of the particular region and village he considers

home. In other words, the structures undergirding the geopolitical map break down, just as the structures undergirding his family do the same.

The movement of AIDS across these towns, villages, and cities demonstrates how the erosion of geographical stability is echoed by the erosion of biological stability. Like the contracting and expanding Luwero Triangle, the disease operates according to its own logic rather than according to familiar patterns. It is an inherently unmappable phenomenon, in spite of attempts to plot its spread. One of the particularly insidious aspects of Slim that emerges in these pages is its unpredictability, evident in the path it takes through the family of Mugezi's Uncle Kawayida. Kawayida maintains relationships with three daughters from the same family, a family that consists of thirty-one sons and daughters. Mugezi notes that Kawayida is "happy to be inside their loving triangle," once more linking the bodily and the spatial (Isegawa 400). When one of these sisters contracts Slim and dies, followed by sixteen of her siblings, Mugezi and everyone else expects Kawayida and the two sisters he loves to follow. However, these three remain healthy, leading Mugezi to wonder if Kawayida has "a freak chance, some special gene" that might prevent him from contracting the disease (402).

Mugezi hopes that he shares this resistant gene with Kawayida, as well as with his Aunt Lwandeka, the woman with whom he lives and works and who he respects more than any other member of his family. When Lwandeka develops the disease, its evasive nature is again apparent, as it seems to toy with her health and expectations. First, a "monstrous pimple" leads to fevers and paralysis, and then she recovers (410). Next, she develops a "belt of death," a ring of sores around her midsection. When she recovers from this attack, Mugezi bitterly notes, "It was like a game" (410). Eventually, the fevers

return, bringing with them horrific nightmares and countless painful symptoms that finally leave her “a bundle of bones” to be “buried by multitudes” (414). Mugezi narrates her physical as well as mental deterioration, emphasizing the shame she feels for contracting the disease, the pain at the distance it creates between her and her children, and the “evils of guilt” that “smothered her in their sulfurous blaze” (412). Mugezi’s own mental state at this point is evident in his chronicling of the disease’s toying with Aunt Lwandeka; he resents the family members, parishioners and priests who intensify her guilt only slightly less than he fears the miserable death that does not come quickly enough.

Andrew H. Armstrong, in one of the few essays addressing this text, describes the disease’s progression through Lwandeka as moving from “the physiological to the psychological to the illogical” (134). He describes the AIDS passages in the novel as “grotesquely realistic,” and notes that in this section, “The representationality of language and the rationality of subjectivity are challenged” (134). In focusing on the virus’ challenge to reason and logic, Armstrong’s account nicely emphasizes the “delirium” Mugezi observes in Lwandeka; I would add that Mugezi feels the effects of delirium himself (134). The difficult images of Lwandeka’s final days are related with a tone of incredulity, a disbelief at each new symptom and horror visited on her body. As with Jo and with the village, a source of comfort and peace for Mugezi turns into the unrecognizable and uncanny, recalling Serenity’s words about the ever-deepening snares of the abyss.

Mugezi’s experience watching the virus debilitate his family functions as a final rite of triangulation. He emerges from the experience changed, newly aware of life and

death, having completed the transition from adolescence to adulthood. Although he does not contract the disease himself, his first-hand observations give him knowledge of the disease and initiate him into the group of those who have been deeply altered by it and managed to survive.[57] Thus, in "Triangular Revelations," Mugezi undergoes the journey to maturity in a manner coherent with the literary tradition of the coming-of-age novel: he undergoes rites of passage including sexual initiation, distance from home, and a close encounter with death. He faces the unknown and the uncanny and emerges changed. In the classical *Bildungsroman*, the narrative would conclude shortly after, most likely with Mugezi's entrance into the work force; in the postcolonial coming-of-age novel, Mugezi's departure at this moment for Amsterdam would be a likely end point. However, *Abyssinian Chronicles* transcends the confines of this tradition by pursuing the narrative of another journey, one that redefines the mode of being for the mature protagonist.

Blasting Through the Threshold

If "Triangular Revelations" charts Mugezi's attempts at self-mapping, "Ghettoblaster" follows him beyond the threshold of maturity and through a process of studied unmapping. In this final book, Mugezi travels to Amsterdam and is confronted by neocolonial cartographies of power and by his own position as an unwitting geographical representative. The category of the national, which manifests itself in the historical details of the earlier books, emerges fully in these passages only to be complicated by distance and perspective. Mugezi chafes at these encounters, at the representational role imposed on him by others, and at the constrictions of state-engendered boundaries. In

[57] See Attree for more on AIDS as a rite of passage.

“Ghettoblaster,” Mugezi wrestles with the notion of geographical and national identity, finally settling on a fluid identity in which Abyssinia looms large.

Mugezi’s sense of himself as a Ugandan does not emerge until he travels to Europe. As a child, his grandfather’s lectures about political events fail to captivate him. Mugezi notes, “I listened to his political discourse and memorized the main points without understanding them; then, at the end, he made me defend the British, the Indian and the African sides of the national argument” (Isegawa 113). Amusingly, Mugezi conflates Africa and Uganda here, a recourse to continental rather than national paradigms. The immediate concerns of the day are much more important to a young Mugezi than national politics, whether the demands of his younger siblings—he refers to them corporately as “the shitters”—or the hunger that gnaws at him while at seminary (90). As a young man working with Lwendo, he realizes that he knows little beyond his own region, stating, “I went over the map of northern Uganda in my head. It was one thing to know the names of towns, the cash crops produced and what people did and fed on, but it was terra incognita in real terms” (391). This reflection also highlights the difference between cartographical knowledge and, in Mugezi’s terms, “real” knowledge of a space (391). In Amsterdam, Mugezi is forced to understand himself as a Ugandan, a development that brings the ongoing discussion of *Abyssinian Chronicles*’ engagement with the liminal postcolonial novel into sharper focus. That literature of the Third World tends toward nationalist allegory has been hotly debated, but what can it is clear that many novels of the Global South are concerned with questions relating to the national.[58] If Uganda is an assumed category at the outset of this novel, it is ultimately replaced by

[58] For the original debate, see Jameson and Ahmad.

Abyssinia. As noted above, this is not the proud, independent Abyssinia, but an amorphous and treacherous state. This is a transgressive concept, one that, as Serenity points out, continually gives way and reveals hidden depths.

A helpful method for apprehending Isegawa's careful negotiation of the relationship between protagonist and nation in *Abyssinian Chronicles* is through a comparison to Salman Rushdie's *Midnight's Children*. Many critics and reviewers of *Abyssinian Chronicles* comment on the similarities between the two novels, both of which narrate the experiences of male children whose lives reflect the story of newly independent nations.[59] Both novels are expansive in plot, voice, and spatio-temporal elements, and endow their protagonist-narrators with an occasionally omniscient perspective. Additionally, individual scenes in the novels are so similar as to belie coincidence; for example, both Saleem and Mugezi relate experiences of hiding in the washroom and watching as their mothers relieve themselves (Rushdie 161-162, Isegawa 66). Thus, in both broad and intimate strokes, the novels share many elements and have prompted critics to make observations such as, "Mugezi […] is handcuffed to history a la Saleem" (Noor 127). Saleem's role as a figure for India has been documented extensively, with the most blatant piece of evidence being the concurrence of Saleem's birth and India's independence. Because of the "absurd salience" of Saleem's midnight birth, "Saleem *is* the new nation" (Mukherjee 56, Kane 98). Isegawa's approach to the relationship between protagonist and nation in *Abyssinian Chronicles* is more ambiguous. Mugezi's birth contains little narrative heft, buried in the middle of Book One: "Eleven

[59] Reviewers and critics who reference *Midnight's Children* in essays dealing primarily with *Abyssinian Chronicles* include Armstrong, Jones, Noor, and Vazquez, a high proportion when one recalls how few such essays exist.

months into the marriage [Serenity] still had no invitations for job interviews. Then I was born" (Isegawa 51). The narrative suggests that Mugezi and Uganda are roughly the same age, but refrains from providing the exact date of Mugezi's birth, obscuring the historical connection and problematizing the notion of Uganda's birth.[60]

In addition to a looser historical connection, the geographical connection between Mugezi and Uganda differs from that of Saleem and India. Saleem's very face is a map of India, with his nose resembling the Deccan peninsula, the "stains" of his birthmark on each temple serving as East and West Pakistan, and even a drip of mucous representing Ceylon; his classmates tease him with the refrain "Sniffer's got a map-face" (Rushdie 229-231). There is no such bodily connection made between Mugezi and any cartographical rendering of Uganda; his body is most present in the text as a receptacle for Serenity's blows. In this, one might read Mugezi as a figure for the body politic of the nation, which suffered trauma under the Obote-Amin-Obote II Triangle, but not in any geographical sense. Rather, Mugezi's connection is most clearly to the land itself, a connection passed down through his parents. Serenity is "the heir apparent to his father's estate and the miles of fertile clan land it included" (Isegawa 4-5) Padlock, for her part, is repeatedly described with reference to geographical features; the text refers to her as "Another unclimbable Mpande Hill," compares her to the swamp, and reveals that she nibbles clay during her pregnancies (64).

The distinction here is critical: while Saleem represents an imposed geography, complete with political—or, one might say, artificial—boundaries between nations,

[60] The mention of Mugezi's age and the year of his birth occur near the end of Book One, some 25 pages removed from the narration of his birth. In other words, while the careful reader will be able to deduce that Mugezi's birth and Uganda's independence likely occurred in the same year, the text itself does not emphasize this fact.

Mugezi's connection, by virtue of his parents, is to the land itself rather than to any externally-derived partitioning of the land. To put it more clearly, Saleem's connection is to the map of India, while Mugezi's is to the hills and swamps of his village and the trauma he shares with his people. This comparison is intended to demonstrate that, while *Midnight's Children* is an obvious, and oft-noted, referent for *Abyssinian Chronicles*, their different treatment of the nation is perhaps more significant than their shared features. In writing a protagonist who comes of age in a newly independent nation and yet does not represent the nation itself, Isegawa inserts a critical distance between narrator and nation. This distance allows Mugezi to move beyond Uganda, and, as happens in "Ghettoblaster," to allow that movement beyond to become his driving force.

Mugezi's first experience in Amsterdam effectively destroys any illusions he has about his location in the global economic system. "Ghettoblaster" opens with Mugezi departing Uganda under the auspices of an international aid organization, Action II, and traveling to the Netherlands, where he is forced to recalibrate his understanding of his position on the global map. Mugezi arrives in Amsterdam with Lwandeka's death fresh in his mind, ready to fundraise for Action II. While his time profiteering with Lwendo demonstrates that he has no compulsions about illicit employment, the aid organization's methods disturb him deeply. He is horrified by the images used to play on Western sympathies; he describes them as "The worst in international beggary, image pillage, and necrophilic exploitation" (420). Those who work in the aid industry are "cartels" and "sharks," manipulators of an economic system preying on the less fortunate (420). The triangular motif of the previous book surfaces again, as the economic system evokes the currents of the Atlantic slave trade.

In this section, Mugezi's internal monologue takes on a caustic tone, and his thoughts are littered with disturbing images: "festering wounds," "pus-soaked bandages," "fly-bejewelled tragedies," "colonizing carrion, shit and putrescence" (420-421). This imagistic prose, rife with rhetorical and emotional flourishes, allows the reader deeper access into Mugezi's adult psyche than any other moment in the novel. In contrast to the earlier scene in which Mugezi's rape at the hands of the three female guerilla fighters is described in baldly numerical terms—"the ordeal lasted approximately twenty minutes […] My penis got pulled very roughly some forty times. My balls were kneaded very violently twenty times. My skin got ripped thirty times"—Mugezi's telling of his first day in Amsterdam is characterized in deeply personal terms (340). He returns to his hotel room, where he "burie[s] his face in the pillow and scream[s]" (421). More than his own rape, Mugezi recognizes these patronizing images as an affront.

Although the entire enterprise is offensive to Mugezi, one image in particular makes it impossible for him to continue with the organization: "the picture of a young skeletal woman" in whom he immediately sees Lwandeka (421).[61] Mugezi recognizes that this image will attract donations and he can project the ensuing geography: the money "would trickle down to the continent and then it would come back in the form of international debt servicing and repayment. So the continent was like Aunt in her last days: the little sustenance that went in via the mouth oozed out of the rectum" (421). The alignment of Lwandeka and the woman in the photograph with the continent, an alignment instigated by Action II as much as it is made explicit by Mugezi's narration,

[61] As Armstrong notes, Isegawa's depiction of AIDS also renders Lwandeka "a figure of abjection […] or gross spectacle to the eyes of the spectator" (134). However, Armstrong continues, "by challenging meaning and the ethics of representation, [Isegawa] has forced a reconsideration of the nature and role of narrative or fictional representation" (134).

introduces the notion of representationality that Mugezi wrestles with throughout this final book.

Additionally, the global system mapped out by such organizations as Action II, and their real-world counterparts, places Uganda within a neocolonial hierarchy. These systems exploit national identity in a way that Mugezi instinctively recognizes and rejects. The Action II images prompt Mugezi "to revise and jettison much of [his] old knowledge" as they reveal a distorted version of reality, one that exploits his own experience (420). This is Mugezi's first opportunity to observe his homeland from a geographical and sociopolitical distance. While the images misrepresent Uganda, they are nonetheless accepted as truth, leading Mugezi to alter his understanding accordingly; he understands that Action II is exploiting him for his nationality and forcing him into the warped global hierarchy that places him at one of the lowest levels. These early moments in Amsterdam unsettle his ability to locate himself on the global map, as Action II operates according to a cartography in which the Global South recedes in both significance and distinctiveness, serving as an amorphous zone of need symbolized by the pictures he so resents. Tellingly, after narrating his departure from Action II, the novel depicts Mugezi staring at a subway map, attempting to pinpoint his location in this new city. He states, "The map of the metro track that chiseled through the sprawling ghetto looked like the letter Y, or a broken rosary" (422). The metro map, like a broken rosary, offers Mugezi no comfort, and the choice of metaphor suggests his disillusionment with institutions and systems of belief.

The experience with Action II inculcates a sense of nationalism in Mugezi, and he decides to seek out "Little Uganda, that cocoon of Ugandans in exile" (422). The term

cocoon is evocative here, suggesting both confinement as well as comfort. Additionally, the cocoon invokes the notion of coming of age, serving as the space for transition from juvenile to adult status. Mugezi, having already undergone the rites of triangulation that lead to maturity, finds himself overly confined in Little Uganda, national affinity offering no real sense of connection. The borderlines that held no appeal for him when he lived within them also fail him abroad. The occupants of the neighborhood have a "resilience and optimism" that Mugezi finds stifling, and he begins to explore beyond its borders, spending increasing amounts of time "nightcrawling" around the ghetto (427, 428).

The question of representationality and his status in relation to the nation and the continent continue to pester Mugezi in these early days in Amsterdam. Having failed to find a place in Little Uganda, Mugezi decides to "reach[…] out to Africa in diaspora," particularly through a relationship with a Caribbean woman named Eva Jazz (429). The couple's conversations circle around identity, further puncturing Mugezi's mental map and recalibrating his understanding of global hierarchies. Mugezi's assumption that their shared status as members of the diaspora will interest Eva in the particulars of his homeland is proven false, as for Eva, "Uganda sounded too obscure a place to merit even cursory interest, and Africa was a Pandora's box of horrors and shames best left untouched and condemned to the depredations of dust, termites, cobwebby neglect and calculated silence" (433). In a moment that speaks to Eva's disinclination to distinguish Mugezi's story from other stories told about the continent, he explains, "Whenever I tried to show that where was more to a people, a continent, than its sum total of ills, she would slap me repeatedly with female circumcision" (433). Eva's post-Pan-Africanist perspective suggests that she has molded her own identity not along racial lines, but

according to her preferred cultural and social markers. Mugezi, having left Little Uganda behind, still struggles to locate markers by which he can mold his own identity, offering personal, local stories to Eva only to have them disregarded because of her perception of his national and continental affiliation.

Isegawa's own words on this topic offer some context through which to read Mugezi's struggles. In a conversation with Ugandan scholar Mahmood Mamdani, Isegawa discusses his experience leaving Uganda and realizing his Africanness for the first time. He states:

> When you first leave Uganda for Europa, you think, "At last, I'm free to do what I want." But when you arrive there, you become African for the first time, in a sense. Because you are responsible for Somalia! They call you up and say, "What do you think about Somalia?" And you can't say, "I'm Ugandan, I have nothing to say about Somalia." You have this big, huge chunk of experience to defend—and you will defend it, because nobody else is defending it. […] You become a sort of ambassador and for the first time you become conscious of what Africa means. Of what Uganda means. (qtd. in Vazquez 144)

Mugezi's experiences in Amsterdam thus far have made him conscious of what the terms Africa and Uganda mean and how these areas are viewed by a European or diasporic audience. Critic F. Njubi Nesbitt references this interview to explain how, "It is in exile that a Nigerian Igbo, a South African Zulu, and a Kenyan Kikuyu suddenly and unequivocally become Africans," an experience he terms "Africanity" (71). This Africanity illustrates the shifting and relational nature of geography: to those Mugezi encounters, Uganda and Africa are indistinguishable, and his national identity is of little interest. Mugezi maps himself as a member of his village, the swamps, the clan land, and Kampala, while those he encounters see only the broad contours of the continent.

Eva's unwillingness to distinguish Mugezi's home and experiences from stereotypical representations of the continent is echoed in Mugezi's subsequent relationship, with a woman he meets in a cemetery while working as a gravedigger. The two move in together, but eventually Mugezi "start[s] to resent having to defend the whole African continent, or the whole of Uganda, or the entire black race" (Isegawa 459). He continues, "I refused to become a self-styled ambassador, the external explainer of Amin's or Obote's or some other tyrant's atrocities" (459). As the relationship disintegrates, Mugezi characterizes their problem as one of personality; for Magdelein, "character was unchanging," while for Mugezi, "life was lived day by day, and the actions of yesterday might have nothing to do with what happened the following day" (461). He continues, "Life was a journey of discovery, and character was a variable that kept veering left and right in search of the perfect way for a particular day" (461). Such observations suggest that Mugezi sees existence as an unmapped journey rather than a teleological movement from birth to death. This perspective on character and life as a continual movement along different trajectories echoes Mugezi's migration across Uganda and in Amsterdam, where continued movement and adaptability is a mode of coping with external instability.

That character is not fixed but dynamic is a realization Mugezi shares with Serenity, who, upon entering middle age, "was shocked to discover that character was not a monolithic rock which stopped moving somewhere in one's late twenties, anchored by a wife and children […] He found himself in flux" (124). In the accompanying commentary to an interview with Isegawa, Jacqui Jones highlights this passage to suggest that one of the effects of *Abyssinian Chronicles* is to destabilize the notion of identity.

She explains, “Isegawa attempts to convey the notion of an unstable subject,” one “constantly in flux and subject to the pressures of context” (Jones 100). The term instability here deserves further attention. In *Abyssinian Chronicles*, instability is not equivalent to the pejorative term unstable, which connotes mental or emotional struggle or shortcoming. Rather, instability is stripped of evaluative content; it simply describes a dynamism that characterizes identity and existence. Mugezi epitomizes such dynamism, as he negotiates a mature state that nonetheless resists the return and settling of the classical *Bildungsroman*. This dynamism is a critical coping mechanism not only with regard to identity, but also for negotiations of space and critical cartographies. Mugezi’s dawning recognition of his Africanity in the eyes of the Global North—that his local story is of no interest and his larger region has been reduced to a monolithic zone of tragedy—spurs him to embrace a dynamic cartography in which space is shifting and mutable, and which allows him to manufacture his own map which transcends metageographical designations such as First and Third Worlds, Global North and Global South.

Looking out of Magdalen’s window, Mugezi can “feel the ghetto beckoning, pulling [him] back to Little Uganda,” but he also realizes he “never belonged there anyway” (Isegawa 457). Rather than searching for a place to belong, or to settle, Mugezi acquires a British passport because it will allow him continued mobility. He is shocked at the ease with which he is offered “the choice of becoming a British, American, Spanish or Portuguese citizen!” (453). That these particular identities are available for purchase amuses Mugezi. He continues:

> The powers that had parceled out Africa among themselves at the Berlin Conference in 1884 had done it without even stepping foot on the continent. Me, I had traveled all the way to Europe, paid for everything I used and now was about to pay for my citizenship. (453)

This passage, in addition to officially severing the connection between Mugezi and Uganda, invokes the arbitrary partitioning Africa underwent during colonialism. The entity known as Uganda is a result of such partitioning, but it holds little sway for Mugezi, who evinces no regret at leaving Uganda behind and buying his way into a new identity. In doing so, he engages in a remapping of the contours of the countries with which he now identifies, whether legally, ethnically, or socially. As a child, when Mugezi first moved from his family's village to Kampala, he declared, "I carried the village with me, and it would remain so for the rest of my life" (136). Mugezi brings the manifold experiences and geographies of the local with him on his global journey, extending the space of the village to the cities of Europe in a gesture of critical unmapping, or deconstructive cartography.

The novel concludes with Mugezi at the train station, observing the hundreds of travelers streaming in and out of the doors and declaring, "Abyssinia was on my mind" (462). The scene has echoes of Saleem's final moments in *Midnight's Children*, as he envisions himself on Independence Day, "train-tickets in [his] pocket," and in the midst of a "crowd without boundaries" (Rushdie 462). Although the superficial details of the scenes—crowds of people, references to trains—are similar, the two protagonists observe the crowds from very different perspectives. Mugezi signals his distance from the nation by using the term Abyssinia, and notes his position on a metaphorical "precipitous hilltop" (Isegawa 462). Saleem, on the other hand, signals his continued embeddedness

with the nation, and is ultimately overwhelmed by the crowd, reduced to "specks of voiceless dust" (Rushdie 463). In these similar yet critically different conclusions, each text posits a theory of nation that resonates with the other. In order to maintain one's voice and move past the threshold, a distanced perspective is critical. Saleem, one with the nation since birth, cannot achieve this distance. Mugezi, having always maintained a tenuous relationship with the nation, moves decisively away from it.

And yet, in leaving Uganda, Mugezi does not leave everything behind. Borders have given way, national ties have been destabilized, and what now stands before him is vast chasm through which he can continue his migration. He watches as

> People of all nations and colors poured into the great city like ants streaming toward predestined locations in subterranean tunnels […] There was motion and inversion everywhere: the invaders were being invaded, the partitioners being partitioned, the penetrators getting penetrated. The mixing and juxtaposition of people became mind-blowing, the destinations and points of departure mythic. (Isegawa 462)

This is a dynamic vision, one in which identities are adopted and exchanged, formed and reformed. It is likewise a vision of fluidity and mobility, one that echoes Mugezi's own experiences throughout the text and challenges the idealization of stability. When Mugezi reflects on this vision and thinks of Abyssinia, he crystallizes the paradox of dynamic cartography. When spatial and geographical features are recognized for their shifting and arbitrary nature, the fluid state of the contemporary global dynamic becomes clear. Mugezi, the embodiment not of a nation but of a specific place, concludes, "I had found myself a stone to lay my head on, an enchanted hilltop made of boulders from all corners of the globe" (462). Mugezi's migrational mental map recognizes that the corners of the globe are as unbound and mobile as he is himself.

CHAPTER 4

"HOW DID I END UP HERE?": MYTH, MATTER, AND MEMORY IN *THE BEAUTIFUL THINGS THAT HEAVEN BEARS*

The scene that concludes *Abyssinian Chronicles* encapsulates that novel's engagement with dynamic cartography: it is a vision of teeming movement in which Mugezi represents a contemporary, migrational mobility that undermines the borders between Global North and Global South. Once possessed of a passport, Mugezi lays claim to "all the corners of the globe," a move that reorients space around his itinerant perspective (Isegawa 462). Like Mugezi, Sepha Stephanos, the protagonist of Dinaw Mengestu's *The Beautiful Things That Heaven Bears* (*Beautiful Things*) is an East African living abroad. However, Sepha's situation is defined not by mobility, but by stasis. Sepha, who fled Ethiopia as an adolescent during the political turbulence of the 1970s, now lives an increasingly circumscribed existence in Washington, D. C.'s Logan Circle neighborhood, a neighborhood he is initially drawn to because, because, as he says:

> it was all I could afford, and because secretly I loved the circle for what it had become: proof that wealth and power were not immutable, and America was not always so great after all. The neighborhood, and by extension the city, had fallen, and every night I could see and hear that out of my living room window.[62] (Mengestu 16)

[62] While the novel does not include specific details about the political situation in Ethiopia that prompted Sepha's departure, the timeline makes it clear that he left during the aftermath of the 1974 revolution that deposed then-emperor Haile Selassie and resulted in the rise to power of the military group known as the Derg. In the years that followed, which included the period known as the Red Terror, many Ethiopians fled to the United States. In particular, many relocated to the Washington, D. C. Metropolitan area, which, according to the 2000 census, is home to "approximately 22 percent of all Ethiopians in the United States" (Chacko 491-492). The novel does not clarify the exact year in which it is set, but is most likely set in the late 1990s or early 2000s. Sepha's age, and the date of his departure from Addis, are referenced only obliquely; he allows that he is "on the verge of middle age" and that he has been in America for "nearly two decades" (Mengestu 115, 93).

Sepha's attachment to this fallen Circle suggests his own trajectory: while Little Uganda serves as a portal for Mugezi's entry into global diasporic circulations, Logan Circle functions as a metaphor for Sepha's circular path, his noncomformity to the preferred immigrant narrative of upward mobility. And yet, despite Sepha's immobility, the novel mobilizes a narrative approach that brings literary and mapping practices closer together. In *Beautiful Things*, space is a story to be told, constructed out of myth, matter, and memory.

In one of the novel's pivotal scenes, Sepha observes a tourist couple in the small convenience store he operates as they consult a map of the city. Sepha, seemingly eager to experience the city as a tourist rather than as an immigrant, leaves his store empty and follows the couple out of Logan Circle. The first-person narrative renders the journey in explicit geographical detail, naming streets, restaurants, and businesses. Eventually, Sepha makes his way to the suburb of Silver Spring, Maryland. Here, in a building filled with other Ethiopian families, he visits his Uncle Berhane's apartment and goes through Berhane's papers, recalling his own early days in the country. Seated on the floor, surrounded by letters and documents, he notes, "The bedroom is a wreck now. I've forgotten the importance of maintaining order. The letters are scattered around me in a semi-circle that begins chronologically and dissolves into carelessness" (126). Sepha realizes he has always struggled "to maintain structure and order" and ventriloquizes Berhane, who exhorts him to "Begin from the beginning […] Begin there, and then you can move on with your life point by point" (126).

This advice does not cohere for Sepha, perhaps in part because Berhane's trajectory seems stunted itself. Instead, increasingly bewildered, Sepha wonders, "How did I end up here? […] Where is the grand narrative of my life? The one I could spread out and read for signs and clues as to what to expect next" (147). Sepha's choice of words here conjures up a specific image: he does not envision a narrative to be opened up and read as a book would be, but a document to be spread out and analyzed as a map. Sepha's conflation of narrative and map suggests that he sees his life through a spatial, rather than chronological, lens. He wants to spread this spatial narrative out on the floor and search it for clues, perhaps beginning by placing a finger on Addis Ababa and tracing his path, looking for the spot where he lost his sense of orientation. Sepha's need for this narrative map is juxtaposed with the position of the tourists in his store. The tourists are unsure at the moment of their exact location but have a map at hand and a clear purpose; Sepha knows his geographical location, but lacks any sense of his larger trajectory.[63]

Mapping Absence

Sepha's desire for a grand narrative invokes a sense of order defined by continued progress. Instead, as the novel makes clear, his story is one of disruption and dislocation; it does not follow a clear path that can be traced on a map. The trauma of his departure from Ethiopia, following his father's death at the hands of soldiers, severs his connection

[63] A discussion of the figure of the tourist is beyond the scope of this chapter, but for a review of the various manifestations of the tourist in 20th century writing and criticism, see the chapter "'This Question of Moving': Modernist Exile/Postmodern Tourism" in Caren Kaplan's *Questions of Travel*. Kaplan writes, "Tourism […] is a product of the rise of consumer culture" and "signifies […] the mark of everything commercial and superficial" (27). The presence of these tourists in Sepha's store, a consumer space that does not contain enough consumers to meet Sepha's needs, sets up a pointed contrast between his and their experiences of Washington, D. C.

to his family and home. His years in Washington, D. C. are characterized by half-hearted attempts to better his situation that end up going nowhere. The journey from Ethiopia to Washington D. C. is glossed over entirely, an elision that makes vivid Sepha's confusion over how he ended up here.[64] Indeed, the novel's fragmented and circular narrative mirrors Sepha's trajectory, in which a clear beginning and ending are absent. Instead, the novel is all interstitial, an attempt to map the space that opens up between beginnings and ending. Other elements of the story are also absent, including several of its characters: Berhane is referred to often but never appears, while Naomi, a young girl Sepha befriends, appears primarily through a retrospective narrative lens that makes her current absence all the more poignant. Rather than a grand narrative that begins at the beginning, Sepha's story circles around loss and absence, both sentimental and spatial.

As he sits on the floor of Berhane's apartment and relives the trauma of his father's death, Sepha experiences the paradoxical geography of the exile, a figure defined by loss and absence, who "may wander the world yet always end up in the same place, because he carries with him, in his mind, his past and the city from which has escaped physically but can never escape psychologically" (Weiss 10). Sepha's psyche and his body occupy different locations, and as a result he suffers from an inability to track his

[64] Sepha explains that, after his father's death, his mother insisted that he leave Ethiopia. He mentions making his way to Kenya and then coming to the United States, but does not include any of the particulars of the journey. In addition to compounding his sense of displacement, this absent narrative resists certain tropes and subverts audience expectations about what a narrative of departure from Africa should contain. In an entry on the admittedly playful blog *books i done read*, a disappointed reader writes, "I really wanted [*Beautiful Things*] to be good. And maybe it's because I'm white and middle-class, and I like reading about refugees fleeing war-torn countries because it makes me grateful, and there wasn't nearly as much fleeing or war-torn country as the back flap of the book led me to believe I'd be getting" ("raych"). Mengestu's second novel, *How to Read the Air*, continues to develop the tension between audience expectations and narratives of escape. The protagonist, a teacher, spends hours crafting a story for his students about his father's escape from Ethiopia, a journey that contains incredible adventures but is almost entirely fictionalized. The novel presents this fictional story alongside the much more mundane, but true, story of the protagonists' parents' road trip across Illinois, generating a contrast that subtly indicts those who prefer the fictionalized narrative.

own narrative. Throughout the novel Sepha occupies multiple positions not only in terms of his physical and psychological beings, but also in terms of his relationship to his new country. Sepha is both immigrant and exile, two geographical conditions with critically different emphases. The narrative of the immigrant is one of arrival and occupation, a story of acclimation and possibly even assimilation. In some respects, Sepha, with his modest shop and dreams of expansion, is a classic version of the immigrant eager to capitalize on the promises of the American Dream. At the same time, however, his forced departure from Addis places him in an exilic state, a narrative often organized around departure and a sense of loss centered on the home space. Many contemporary versions of exile involve a degree of autonomy. Karen Caplan, whose *Questions of Travel: Postmodern Discourses of Displacement* theorizes the ubiquity of terms such as exile and immigrant as critical metaphors, argues that the modernist trope of exile privileges a Euro-American framework in which "middle-class expatriates adopted the attributes of exile as an ideology of artistic production" (28). In other words, these privileged figures leverage the "shock[…] of displacement" into "significant experimentation and insights" (28). As exemplars of this figure, Caplan points to Hemingway, Auden, and Nabokov (29). This relatively autonomous and Westernized model contrasts significantly with Sepha's exile; in addition to the geographical contrasts, Sepha was too young and too traumatized by guilt over his role in his father's death at the time of his departure from Ethiopia to maintain any sense of agency in the transition or use it to claim some kind of artistic privilege. Because Sepha's narrative does not fit neatly into either of these categories, immigrant or exile, he is doubly dislocated, unable to fully occupy the space in which he finds himself.

Just as Sepha occupies multiple positionalities, both immigrant and exile, Ethiopian and American, the novel occupies multiple generic and metatextual spaces. Reviews and analyses of *Beautiful Things* often remark on its arresting geographical realism. Aliki Varvogli, in a monograph addressing issues of dislocation in contemporary American fiction, writes,

> Mengestu's first novel was an immigrant novel, but it was also a Washington, D. C. novel. Its vivid description of streets and neighbourhoods and the lives that were lived in them made this an important novel about the nation's capital, and the ways in which its characters interacted with their environment gave the novel a texture that is rarely found in the immigrant novel. (119)

Varvogli's comments regarding the novel's categorization as both an immigrant and a Washington D. C. novel highlight the difficulty of defining this text according to any singular metric. It shares an emphasis on geographical realism with texts such as James Joyce's *Ulysses*, written "with an encyclopedic memory and a map," and Karen Yamashita's *The Tropic of Orange*, which "began as a map, a spreadsheet developed in Lotus" (Bulson 81, Mermann-Joswiak 5). However, this geographical realism is balanced by a modernist narrative style that employs temporal experimentation in the form of intersecting and fragmented timelines that heighten the sense of loss at the center of the text.

In addition to the multiple generic spaces occupied by *Beautiful Things*, a blurb on the novel's cover from the *New York Times Book Review* demonstrates another register of the text's multiple positionalities, describing it as "A great African novel, a great Washington novel, and a great American novel" (Nixon). In other words, the novel's geographies, whether textual or metatextual, cannot be disentangled. The texture Varvogli describes above is the result of such intertwined geographies, and further

suggests *Beautiful Things*' investment in the relationships between subject, space, and story. Additionally, by depicting Logan Circle in the midst of upheaval due to gentrification, the novel draws attention to the fact that D. C., like the Addis Ababa of Sepha's memory, is geographically unstable. These two cities emerge entangled in Sepha's consciousness, both equally subject to the pressures of dynamic cartography.

The novel is Sepha's story, and his treatment of the various spaces reveals his location in relationship to them. Within the Circle, the novel explores a number of contrasting spaces: Sepha's shabby apartment, his small shop, and a Victorian mansion being renovated by Judith, a new neighbor. Beyond Logan Circle, the narrative moves through the streets and monuments of Washington D. C., Berhane's apartment building in Silver Spring, and Sepha's memories of Addis Ababa. Additionally, the text interrogates the myths surrounding the spatial constructs of America and Africa. Each of these spaces exhibits a different narrative approach. For example, Sepha's approach to the streets of D. C. is largely mimetic, an attempt to generate intimacy by accurately reflecting the city's geography.[65] By contrast, his memories of Addis take on a dreamlike quality as a way of keeping difficult memories at a distance. His treatment of Africa is entirely different, using an ironic mode that speaks to his wryly-observed experiences as an African immigrant in the United States. And in the intimate interiors of Logan Circle, a

[65] The notion of generating intimacy through geographical realism is explored more fully in Eric Bulson's "Joyce's Geodesy," which argues, "Instead of reading this map—both the one which Joyce used and the one critics have grafted second-hand from his novel—in terms of its factual details and uncanny exactitude to the city of Dublin in 1904, it can be read rather as both a structuring principle and an abstraction for the exiled Irishman living abroad intent on a confrontation with the colonial past […] Joyce's 1906 "wish" for a map and his decision to map-out Dublin is nothing short of a political gesture that allowed him to bring Ireland to the world and give Ireland back to the Irish" (Bulson 83).

materialist approach sharpens the reader's awareness of Sepha's financial marginality in a culture of excess. These varied spaces emerge in relationship to each other, generating a rich narrative map. In tracking Sepha's failed attempts to create a grand narrative out of these spaces, the novel demonstrates the fragmented and disjunctive nature of his spatial existence.

In this chapter, I analyze these overlapping and fragmented spaces and how they are revealed through their relationship to each other. This cartographical mode moves away from absolute frameworks of linearity and locatability and toward a framework of processes and flows. However, it must be noted that while the novel demonstrates both the dynamism and the disjunction of contemporary spatial experience, *Beautiful Things*' preoccupation with space is initially most evident in its aforementioned geographical realism. The novel not only names actual Washington, D. C. locations, but also contains a level of cartographic detail such that the reader can visualize a map of Sepha's movements. For example, as Sepha describes his neighborhood, he names the other streets that intersect with Logan Circle, including Rhode Island Avenue, Vermont Avenue, and 13th Street. He explains that each "hits the circle like the spoke of a bicycle wheel" (Mengestu 73). This description employs an elevated perspective, describing the streets as they would look from above, or on a map. The use of this perspective reinforces the notion of Sepha as a dislocated subject, always experiencing his surroundings at a remove. Ultimately, this geographical realism acknowledges the significance of absolute, mappable space, but also contrasts with the other spatial modes in the text in order to present a more comprehensive geography. These varied geographies rub up against each other, generating a kind of spatial tension that contributes to Sepha's stasis.

Against Linearity, Toward Relation

The comprehensive geography the novel generates can be characterized as a geography of relation. By this, I mean that *Beautiful Things* constructs a geographical framework that operates by developing spaces through their relationship to each other. Throughout the text, spaces and settings emerge at varying scales and are related in varying modes. In order to characterize the effect of Sepha's geographical realism as it relates to Washington D. C., it must be placed in context with the way he treats distant spaces such as the city of his birth and the African continent as a whole. Simultaneously, the interiors of Logan Circle are best understood when they are read together, rather than as distinct, isolated spaces. Each of these locations receives careful attention, and is treated with a different register of realism, nostalgia, and irony, generating narrative relation as well.

In utilizing the term relation this way, I draw on the work of two contemporary theorists, poet Edouard Glissant and geographer David Harvey. Glissant's elaboration of a "poetics of relation" is most explicitly linked to questions of language and modernity in the Caribbean, but its central concept "is both a philosophical stance, a practice, and a poetics. The main premise of this *poetique de la relation* is that any one situation, individual, or entity is open, related, and relatable to any other" (Velázquez 184).[66] Glissant builds on this idea of openness and relatability to write against linearity and toward "A science of inquiry" that "leads to following through whatever is dynamic, the relational, the chaotic—anything fluid and various and moreover uncertain" (137). This

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[66] For a helpful take on how Glissant's thinking changed from his earlier work in ways that led to this conceptualization of relation, see Britton.

methodology places linearity—which we can read as a corollary to Berhane's "begin from the beginning" approach—in opposition to inquiry (Mengestu 126). Sepha's approach—driven, in fact, by his inquiry "How did I end up here?"—proves throughout the novel to follow this relational methodology (147). The trauma imposed by the war and violence in Ethiopia during his childhood dislocates Sepha, rendering him unable to enact the trajectory epitomized by the grand narrative of his new homeland, the American Dream. Instead, from his position on the outskirts of the Circle, Sepha develops an alternate spatial narrative that speaks to the dislocated subject for whom the terms exile and immigrant do not fully capture the shifting geographies of the 21st century.

Harvey's conceptualization of relational spacetime also productively moves the discussion of time and space away from absolute metrics and toward a theory of "space as materially sensed, conceptualized, and lived" (134).[67] Harvey develops his notion of relational spacetime through the work of mathematician Alfred Whitehead, who writes, "the fundamental order of ideas is first a world of things in relation, then the spaces whose fundamental entities are defined by means of those relations and whose properties are deduced from the nature of these relations" (qtd. in Harvey 137). Whitehead's

[67] Harvey distinguishes three forms of space in relation to time: absolute space and absolute time, relative space-time, and relational spacetime. He writes, "Absolute space is fixed and immovable. This is the space of Newton and Descartes. Space is understood as a preexisting, immovable, continuous, and unchanging framework (most easily visualized as a grid) within which distinctive objects can be clearly identified, and events and processes accurately described" (Harvey 134). Absolute space is the realm of quantifiable distances and measurements. Relative space-time, "mainly associated with the name of Albert Einstein […] is preemininently the space *of processes and motion*. Space cannot here be understood separately from time. History and geography cannot be separated" (135). Relative space-time engages multiplicity, circulation, and perspective (135). One implication of this shift, from absolute to relative, is that "Measurability and calculability become more complicated," because "There are multiple geometrics from which to choose" (135).

framework suggests the futility of defining space as singular, or as existing apart form the network of other spaces, histories, and processes that generate meaning. These relational conceptions of space are useful in reading texts such as *Beautiful Things* because they allow the reader to consider space not only in terms of setting, but also as it is constituted by the "disparate influences [that] flow from everywhere to everywhere else" (Harvey 137). The novels I read in this project as developing dynamic cartography emphasize the spatial fluidity Harvey describes; *Beautiful Things* adds an additional layer to this mode of space-writing by emphasizing space's relationality.

My reading of relation in this text has several emphases. First, following Glissant, it incorporates the notion of relationship, of two or more entities brought into being by their position in relation to each other. While it is the relationships between spaces that give this novel its cartographical interest, the relationships between characters drive its plot and attest to Sepha's psychological, as well as geographical, dislocation. The most significant relationships in the novel are those between Sepha, his neighbor Judith, and her daughter Naomi, as well as between Sepha and his friends Kenneth and Joe, fellow African immigrants working in D. C. Each of these relationships is characterized by deep feeling on Sepha's part, but also by an inability to commit himself and fully enter into relation with another person. His awareness of the financial disparity between himself and Judith drives them apart, and in the aftermath he writes letters to Naomi but never sends them, even when she writes to him and begs for a response. The relationships between Sepha, Kenneth, and Joe do not fall apart in the same way, but they keep each other at a distance, carefully refraining from revealing their vulnerabilities to each other. The novel opens with the three spending an evening together in Sepha's store, an event

that has "become a routine" but not a commitment; he explains, "Sometimes only one of them comes. Sometimes neither of them. No questions are asked because nothing is expected" (Mengestu 1). These flawed and failed relationships, particularly when considered alongside Sepha's emotional and physical separation from his family, are further evidence of his tendency to move in circles.

Relation also serves as "the action of giving an account of something," functioning as a synonym for narrative ("Relation").[68] The story that Sepha tells is his relation, an account of his life organized by a spatial logic. As the novel proceeds, the elements of his story do not so much fall into place as float freely and occasionally come into contact in order to deepen the narrative. The novel's plot and pacing heed Glissant's call to "renounce […] linearity's potent grip," as is evident in the following brief overview (137). The central plot concerns a series of events that take place from September to May. During these months, the effects of gentrification in Logan Circle become more pronounced, as demonstrated by the arrival of Judith and Naomi. Naomi and Sepha strike up a friendship, and he and Judith embark on a tentative romantic relationship. Eventually this relationship falters, and class tensions in the neighborhood increase, resulting in Judith and Naomi's departure. Sepha falls into a deep depression, and his already tenuous financial situation worsens. When Sepha receives a notice of eviction one morning in the weeks following their departure, he abandons his store and sets out on a journey across the city that leads him to Berhane's apartment. At the novel's conclusion, Sepha returns to Logan Circle and observes his store from a distance.

[68] I arrived at this reading of relation via Sonia Velázquez's articulation of the "*conte-relation*," which she defines as "a theory of storytelling" that "challenges the totalizing and totalitarian regime of History and assigns to the *conteur* the task of creating a legitimating space for underlying histories to emerge" (Velázquez 184).

Although the journey to Silver Spring takes place chronologically at the end of the plot, it is narrated in chapters that alternate with chapters detailing the developing relationships between Sepha, Naomi, and Judith. This overarching story that gives the novel its central plot is also interspersed with fragments from beyond the September-May period. Several of these fragments depict Sepha's friendship with Kenneth and Joe, while others describe Sepha's walks through the neighborhood and the city and his recollections of the events that drove him away from Addis.

The nonlinear progression of the story reveals the outcome—although not the events leading up to the outcome—of various plotlines central to the fall chapters. For example, it is clear from quite early in the novel that Sepha and Judith's relationship will not continue, but the details of that storyline are revealed gradually. Because the passage of time proceeds at different paces in each thread, the storyline seems to speed up and slow down, as chapters jump ahead six months in time but detail the events of only an afternoon. The nonlinear storytelling, which moves backward and forward in time, takes detours through Sepha's memories, and then circles back and picks up the narrative thread, makes it a temporally relational story as well, serving as a corollary to the overlapping and fragmented spaces the novel depicts. Taken together with Sepha's explicit desire for a grand narrative, this mode of storytelling serves to foreground the act of narration, or relation.

In addition to portraying interpersonal relationships and foregrounding narration, the novel enacts relation in its emphasis on dual geographical processes, diaspora and gentrification. The gentrification of Logan Circle that drives the overarching plot is a particular and local story, but told through the eyes of an exile-immigrant, it is

contextualized by fragments that reference distant issues such as the Ethiopian diaspora and the struggles of postindependence Africa. Both gentrification and diaspora are processes driven by social and economic factors, and both are inherently geospatial. Paul Tiyambe Zeleza writes that diaspora "simultaneously refers to a process, a condition, a space and a discourse" (41). He adds that it is a way of "naming, remembering, living and feeling group identity moulded out of experiences, positionings, struggles and imaginings of the past and the present, and at times the unpredictable future, which are shared across boundaries of time and space" (41). In this account of the phenomenon, we can see echoes of Harvey's description of relational spacetime, as diaspora is tinged with diachronic and synchronic elements that make the disentangling of time and space impossible. The same can be said of gentrification, a process of change over time that is marked by particular moments or events. By grounding the novel in both of these processes, Mengestu reveals how small- and wide-scale circulations of capital, people, and narratives are central to the contemporary experience of space. Additionally, the novel employs relation as a way of mediating distance, which answers Kaplan's call for "theories of location that do not set up binary oppositions between the global and the local" (18).

Critically, gentrification also reveals the disconnect between the representation of space and the experience of space. During his walks in Logan Circle and the surrounding areas, Sepha describes the changes that have occurred as a result of the influx of wealthy newcomers: the restoration of the General Logan Statue, empty windows displaying "Coming Soon" signs, the presence of white faces and moving vans. In other words, the visual and lived experience of the space has changed, but a standard map of the

neighborhood would not look any different. The disconnect between the unchanging map and Sepha's lived experience of the space that surrounds him demonstrates cartographical disjunction and the problem of representation. As Sepha tracks the changes brought about by gentrification, Logan Circle becomes a space he constructs out of memory as much as a space he experiences materially. In moving back and forth between these histories, spaces, and narrative modes, he maps his own increasing sense of absence from that space, his earlier sense of belonging shattered by the realization that he can no longer afford to remain.

Mythic Space: African Dictators and American Dreams

In its opening pages, *Beautiful Things* invokes and then punctures some of the most recognizable myths attached to two major metageographical constructs, America and Africa.[69] By drawing on these grand narratives and revealing their illusory nature, the novel connects narrative and space, suggesting that neither the map nor the myth reflects reality. In opening scene, Sepha, Kenneth, and Joe share a quiet evening in Sepha's store, their easy conversation revealing hard truths about the lives of Africans in America. The friends refer to the Africa using an ironized discourse of stereotypes and racialized language, exhibiting a fraught relationship with their geographical homelands and their current residence. In their dialogue, and in Sepha's introduction of his friends, they brandish nationalities and associated stereotypes with the studied weariness that comes from years of living on the margins of an ostensibly egalitarian society. Sepha explains

[69] I use the term "constructs" here not to suggest that these categories have no material purchase, but that the novel's treatment of them reveals the narratives that circulate around these regions, suggesting that they are stories as much as they are spaces.

that in their early years in the city they worked together as valets at the Capitol Hotel, where “Kenneth became Ken the Kenyan and Joseph, Joe from the Congo” (Mengestu 1). He continues, “I was skinnier than I am now, and as our manager said, I didn’t need a nickname to remind him I was Ethiopian” (1). This joking reference to malnourishment and famine sits on the page a pointed but unremarked introduction to the years of troubling commentary Sepha has endured.

As the narrative continues, Sepha and his friends make similar comments themselves, in an ironic reappropriation of stereotypes. Sepha notes:

> Kenneth looks Kenyan […] He’s six feet tall, but it’s only in the past two years, since he got his job, that he’s ever weighed more than a hundred and fifty pounds. When he’s drunk, he lifts up his shirt, blows out his stomach, and pats his protruding belly proudly. ‘God bless America,’ he says with each pat. (3)

Kenneth’s comment about America here is the inverse of the manager’s comment about Ethiopia: Ethiopia is characterized by famine, while America is the land of plenty. When Joe arrives late, Kenneth comments, “Africans. Congolese. You can never trust us to be on time” (4). The friends’ ostensibly light-hearted deployment of these stereotypes suggests a long history of subtle racism that they have learned to deal with using irony as a coping mechanism. Thus, the opening pages of the novel establish an existing set of myths concerning these two spaces, and uses irony to suggest that these myths are inaccurate. By invoking these geographical myths in relation, the novel shows that two spaces often depicted as the inverse of each other are both constructed out of clichés and stereotypes.

Having invoked some common stereotypes about Africa, the novel proceeds to skewer them further, as the three play a favorite game. The game involves the map of

Africa that hangs on the wall of Sepha's store, demonstrating the relationship between visual representatons of space and misapprehensions about the space represented. The premise is simple: "name a dictator and then guess the year and country" (8). Sepha explains, "We've expanded our playing field to include failed coups, rebellions, minor insurrections, guerrilla leaders, and the acronyms of as many rebel groups as we can find—the SPLA, TPLF, LRA, UNITA—anyone who has picked up a gun in the name of revolution" (8).[70] As with their geographically-based nicknames and use of stereotypes, the game uses irony as a means of coping with difficult realities: each member of the group has left Africa and in one way or another pursued the American dream, but continues to feel the absence of his home and relationships there. And yet, in America, the continent is viewed largely through news stories describing political upheaval and instability, a sweeping gesture that masks the diversity of experience and connection the friends have lost.

Sepha describes what happens after the game begins:

> Kenneth walks over to the map of Africa I keep taped to the wall right next to the door. It's at least twenty years old, maybe older. The borders and names have changed since it was made, but maps, like pictures and journals, have a built-in nostalgic quality that can never render them completely obsolete. The countries are all color-coded, and Africa's hanging dour head looks like a woman's head wrapped in a shawl. Kenneth rubs his hand silently over the continent, working his way west to east and then south until his index finger tickles the tip of South Africa […] With his other hand he draws a circle around the center of Africa. He finds his spot and taps it twice. (7)

Kenneth's quasi-reverential approach the map, and Sepha's acknowledgment of its nostalgic resonance in spite of its cartographical inaccuracies, contrast with the

[70] These acronyms stand for, respectively, the Sudan People's Liberation Army, the Tigrayan People's Liberation Front, the Lord's Resistance Army, and the União Nacional para a Independência Total de Angola or National Union for the Total Independence of Angola.

lighthearted tone of the conversation and the game, adding another layer of irony to the proceedings. The game trades on the continent's notoriety abroad, often highlighted by the media at the expense of other narratives, and thus echoes the trio's tendency to ironically embrace their position as racialized, stereotypes representations of "the dark continent." It posits the continent as a space of continual remapping, as the coups the three friends quiz each other about represent both failed and successful attempts to redraw border lines. The scene also implicates those who know little of African geography and even less of the skirmishes that drive the game. The map thus epitomizes the irony that permeates the novel's opening scene, at it conveys meaning far more layered and complex than that it purports to represent.

However, running beneath the layers of irony and ignorance swirling around the map is a bittersweet narrative of loss and encounter. The map allows the trio to stage an interaction with home, as the reverential way Kenneth runs his finger over its surface suggests a much deeper connection in the guise of a pointed game. Although their game concerns chaos, violence, and dramatic political upheavals, the map itself serves as a comforting symbol, a two-dimensional image with clear borders and a veneer of stability. Sepha acknowledges the inaccuracies in his map, but refrains from replacing it with a new one, preferring the nostalgia of an out-of-date document. This nostalgic map, with no pretense of accuracy, serves a narrative function for the three, providing a mediated interaction with their shared histories that allows them to reflect on their own stories. Likewise, the game provides a way of interacting with this space without delving too deeply into the scars each carries.

As they sip their scotches and find their inhibitions loosened, they no longer need the map or the game to mediate this connection. Sepha notes, “Inevitably, predictably, our conversations find their way home” (9). As they discuss home, Kenneth objects to Joseph’s suggestion that their memories, “like a river cut off from the ocean […] will slowly die out” (9). Kenneth continues,

> ‘I can’t remember where the scar on my father’s face is. Sometimes I think it is here, on the left side of his face, just underneath his eye. But then I say to myself, that’s only because you were facing him, and so really, it was on the right side. But then I say no, that can’t be. Because when I was a boy I sat on his shoulders and he would let me rub my hand over it. And so I sit on top of a table and place my legs around a chair and lean over and I try to find where it would have been. Here. Or there. Here. Or there.’ As he speaks his hand skips from one side of his face to the other. (9-10)

The gesture echoes the earlier moment when Kenneth traced his hand over the map, suggesting that both the map and the scar prompt a similar reaction, a desire for connection to a distant place and time. Like the map, Kenneth’s father’s scar is an inscription on space, but one that, due to the passage of time and vagaries of memory, resists being located. Kenneth’s desire to remember, to map the scar on his father’s face, anticipates Sepha’s desire for a grand narrative thread. Both Kenneth and Sepha are unsettled and dislocated, searching for something permanent to orient themselves. In their nostalgic reflections of the past and their ability to cover up old wounds, the map and the scar function similarly. And yet, neither inscription tells the whole story. In order to really tell their stories, both inscriptions must placed in context to various other narratives, effecting revelation through relation.

While the game of coups and the map that inspires it demonstrate problematic myths about Africa, the American Dream is represented in the text by a different

cartographical element, the monuments that to many make up the central features of the D. C. landscape. Sepha recalls how he, Kenneth, and Joe would pass the time after work "perched on one of the benches across from the White House, or on the tree-lined paths leading up to the Lincoln Memorial" (46). He continues, "I knew that Joseph and Kenneth both spent hours standing in front of Lincoln's massive, imposing figure […] During his first few months in America, Joseph had memorized the Gettysburg Address off the memorial's walls" (46). To the recent immigrants, these monuments represented the American Dream, a promise of equality and freedom. Working in this neighborhood, their daily experience of the city's geography is literally monumental. The monuments serve as indicators of permanence, material manifestations of the stability promised by the American myth, a tantalizing dream for these dislocated friends. However, in the present day, Sepha is drawn in his wandering to different kinds of monuments, ones that represent the double-sided nature of capitalist development in the city. Sepha walks down P Street, drawn to the shops and cafes that line the sidewalks, but equally nostalgic about the seedy storefronts and fast food joints that used to fill the space. As he registers the current environment, Sepha reflects on what has been lost, his wanderings generating a layered map of presence and absence.

Thus, the trio's early attempts to capitalize on the American dream, to claim upward trajectories by attending university, taking on new jobs, and starting a business, are thwarted by the realities of capitalism, the "regret, longing, and unease" that result from "material disadvantage and spatial constraints" (Olopade 142). Sepha, Kenneth, and Joe eventually realize that immigrants experience a different geography of the city than do tourists. Sepha notes, "It's been years since either of them has gone near those

buildings, and how could you blame them? Reality has settled in, and they're both still waiting to recover" (Mengestu 47). Each clings to some vestige of the dream and brandishes a specific level of success: Kenneth works as an engineer, Joseph wears his university sweatshirt and writes poetry, Sepha has his store. However, these achievements cover over deeper wounds: Kenneth is lonely and drinks excessively, Joseph works as a waiter and cannot finish a poem, and Sepha's store is falling out from beneath him.

Thus, in these opening moments of the novel, two major geographical regions and their accompanying myths are introduced and immediately problematized: Africa as the land of hunger and dictators, and the United States as the land of plenty. As the novel continues, these myths are further undermined and challenged. The text explores these two geographical myths in relationship to each other—the promise of the American Dream is contextualized by the stereotypical discourse of African dictators. As the text narrows its scope from the continents to cities, streets, and neighborhoods, it continues to employ a relational approach, allowing the contrasts and similarities between spaces to tell their own stories.

Material Space: Gentrification in Logan Circle

Having established Africa and America as related spatio-cultural myths, the novel turns its attention to a series of intimate spaces that ring Logan Circle: Sepha's store, his apartment, and Judith's house. This portion of the novel employs a materialist mode in order to demonstrate the tensions running through the Circle. The contrast between Sepha's dingy store and apartment and Judith's "shining big house" suggests not only

their respective socioeconomic positions, but also Sepha's limited mobility against a backdrop of transformation (209). In addition to deepening its exploration of various forms of relation—spatial, narrative, and human—the Logan Circle story also plays with temporal relation, using Sepha's retrospective narrative voice to distance him from the story's events. This temporal disjunction serves as another means of mapping absence in the text; in this case, Sepha's absence from his own story.

The power and limitations of story-telling in spaces overdetermined by material objects is a significant theme in this portion of the novel, made most explicit by Sepha's description of his days spent reading to escape the loneliness of his days in the often-empty shop. One of the books he reads, V. S. Naipaul's *A Bend in the River*, was given to him by Joe when the store opened, and is inscribed with the words, "To a new beginning, Sepha. The journey is not over yet" (39). Ironically, however, the store has trapped Sepha in a cycle of near-poverty. Dayo Olopade reads *Beautiful Things* alongside *A Bend in the River*, suggesting that both books are "powerful treatise[s] on the ways in which space, money, and time intersect as a multiply generated geography to speed or stop the inevitable project of self-imagining" (135). The self-imagining Olopade refers to here echoes Sepha's desire to spread out the narrative of his life and make sense of it. If in this novel subjects and spaces become more significant and more resonant through relation, Sepha's years of sitting alone in his store, methodically counting cash at the end of the day in hopes of breaking even, have dulled his sense of himself as a subject in relation.

Olopade also notes that Sepha's "behind-the-counter life has been marked by a lack of connectivity and of mobility—a spatial complaint" (141). While Olopade's reading focuses on the novel's engagement with capitalism and thus highlights economic

mobility, it also recognizes the way economic mobility and social mobility are linked in a classed space. Sepha has largely contented himself with virtual mobility through reading in the period leading up to Judith and Naomi's arrival in the neighborhood, but with their arrival, virtual mobility begins to seem a poor substitute for social mobility. Sepha is initially ambivalent about the gentrification of Logan Circle; he welcomes the potential increase in customers, particularly customers with more money to spend, but he also laments the changes in the character of the neighborhood. He describes Judith's house as "a beautiful, tragic wreck of a building," seeing the beauty in its decayed state rather than in its potential for development (Mengestu 15).

However, Sepha and the other residents of the circle become entranced by the changes. He notes, "There was more than just a sense of mystery to its transformation. There was some something that bordered on the miraculous, the impossible" (209). When Judith invites him for dinner, he accepts the invitation eagerly. As he dresses, the narrative pauses to relate the story of his cuff links, originally his father's. He explains,

> What I can remember is him holding them out to me and saying with a slight, sarcastic lilt to his voice, 'Someday this will all be yours.' I don't think he ever actually intended for them to become heirlooms. They were just cheap cuff links from an old, decaying regime, but you hold on to what you can and hope the meaning comes later. (50)

And, considering the reverence with which Sepha handles them, it appears that they have transformed from trinkets to talismans. These transformations, each miraculous in its own way, occur differently. Judith's house is transformed by the material resources she invests, while Sepha's cuff links are transformed because of the story behind them.

In the Logan Circle, Sepha attempts his own transformation. Although material differences between himself and Judith prove too difficult to overcome, he does have some success in the transformation made possible by narrative.

Once inside Judith's house, the narrative catalogues all the objects the house contains that signify not just wealth, but a level of taste:

> Kandinsky and Rothko prints over the sealed-up marble fireplaces; long, elegant dining tables made to look as if they had been hand-carved out of a single block of wood; walls that were painted a subtle shade of gold […] The leather couches, chestnut colored and densely packed, were separated by a wooden coffee table that had at least fifty small drawers along its side. It was all so solid, so comfortable, and familiar, as if Judith had deliberately picked only pieces of furniture that had proven their ability to withstand time. (53)

This scene depicts a particular kind of wealth: intentional rather than ostentatious, comfortable and functional rather than garish and showy. By contrast, when Sepha returns home later that evening, he looks around his apartment and notes, "The entire place was shabbier, smaller, and more desolate than I remembered, as if while I was eating dinner someone had entered my apartment and stolen a few years off the furniture" (59). Again, the narrative catalogues the contents of the space, noting a couch "draped with heavy blue fabric […] to cover up the unknown stains and worn armrests," and a rug whose "ends were so frayed that at least twice a month I had to trim a piece off to keep from tripping on the loops of extended thread" (60). Where the objects in Judith's house are comfortable and welcoming, Sepha's house is full of objects that he has no relationship with. However, when Judith appears at Sepha's apartment late one night, she declares that he has "a great sense of space" and laments the "walls and walls of stuff" in her own house (85). Amused, Sepha offers a toast to furniture. It is an ironic toast, a mock celebration of an object unworthy of the gesture. This small moment of irony

reverberates against the other ironic moments in the novel, particularly the irony deployed by Sepha and his friends as a way of distancing themselves from their disappointments about America.

The novel thus presents a contrast not only between Judith's and Sepha's homes but also between the objects with which they fill those spaces. Both have taken care in furnishing and maintaining these spaces, but at such different scales that the similarities are difficult to discern. While the two are extremely intellectually compatible, the difference in circumstance proves too much for them and their insecurities drive them apart. When Sepha jokingly tells Judith he prefers "small and cheap" to her "simple and elegant," she replies, "That's too bad […] it looks like you've gone and picked the wrong family" (134). The ostensibly light-hearted comment proves insurmountable, reinforcing the narratives of class and value that each has tried to ignore. Olopade reads this scene to suggest that "The end of their affair remains, sadly, capitalistically reinforced" (145). Objects and matter intrude; their individually appointed spaces marking too significant a difference to overcome.

Sepha has more luck with Naomi, as the two build their relationship around story-telling. In one of the novel's early scenes, Naomi asks Sepha to tell her a story. In response to Naomi's request, Sepha asks for clarification: "What kind of story?" and, having been informed that it should be "funny" and feature animals, proceeds to invent "an entire alternate universe populated exclusively with animals" (30). As the days pass, this alternate world becomes more detailed: the main characters are two monkeys who own "the largest grocery store for miles," and have "a house on the lake, stocks, cars, and more friends than they know what to do with;" they throw "lavish parties" and are "the

toast of the jungle" (31). Although the monkeys are the center of this world, "Henry the chauffeur" quickly captures the storytellers' imaginations to the extent that Sepha remarks, "Some afternoons, he was all we talked about" (31). The fantastic world that Sepha and Naomi share slowly begins to alter the store, transforming it into "a hybrid working and living space, reclaiming the psychic terrain destroyed by the capitalist schism between laboring body and self" (Olopade 149). Critically, the world Sepha and Naomi create still seems to operate according to the class systems they observe in the real world, but in shifting their focus from the wealthy monkeys to the chauffeur, they opt out of the typical obsession with wealth and power.

In addition to telling stories, Sepha and Naomi also read together; they read novels such as *The Brothers Karamazov* as well as the *Atlas of the Modern World*. In fact, during one of Naomi's earliest forays into Sepha's store, her attention is arrested by Sepha's map of Africa. He asks if she knows what it is; in response, "She shook her head in contempt and didn't say a word" (Mengestu 27). Sepha reflects, "Of course she knew, and I was made a fool for asking" (27). He offers her a version of his life story, showing her Ethiopia and Addis Ababa, explaining that his family still lives there. Naomi asks about Sepha's mother and brother and Sepha's relationship to them. On an initial reading, this scene is simply an anecdote about Sepha and Naomi's growing interest in and affection for each other, but, considered in relation to the later scene in Berhane's apartment, it anticipates Sepha's tendency to see his life story in cartographical terms. Because Sepha narrates the novel, Naomi is something of a cypher. However, her clear knowledge of the map coupled with the later revelation that her father is from Mauritania, suggests that she may also see the map as part of her own story. In telling stories, reading

books, and sharing their interest in maps, Sepha and Naomi mobilize the power of narrative to transform space, while Sepha and Judith are unable to transcend the material differences in their separate spaces.

Judith's observation above about Sepha's sense of space is perhaps more accurate than either of them realizes; Sepha's keen sense of space is in many ways the driving force of the entire novel. However, Sepha's sense of time is keen as well, and his deployment of temporal frames as the narrator adds a layer of temporality to the novel's geography of relation. The retrospective narrative position of the fall chapters compounds the sense of time's relationality, as the shifting tenses and layers of narrative framing can alter the meaning of certain moments. For example, Sepha describes the following scene in which Naomi enters his store:

> Once inside, she took a swipe at a piece of hair that had fallen in front of her eyes, and as she stood there in light gray slacks and a frilly button-down blue shirt, it was possible to see for a second at least one of the women I imagine she's going to become (25).

This statement is explicit about how the experience of time is often not absolute, about how the future can impede on the present. Sepha looks at Naomi and sees a future, or futures, for her; or, to put it differently, Naomi's future selves intrude on Sepha's vision of the current reality. However, the structural frame of this moment is relational as well; Sepha narrates this moment from his position the following May, and thus he is recalling his leap into the future from a nearer future. There is a temporal ambiguity, then in the phrase "I imagine." Is this Sepha in the store with Naomi imagining her future, or is it the Sepha of several months later, knowing he has lost Naomi, and projecting her future lives that do not contain him? The reader's inability to answer this question infuses the novel

with a deep ambiguity, as it becomes increasingly clear that the narrator is unlocatable with relation to the temporal unfolding of the story's events. Many scenes throughout the text play with these dual narrative voices, Sepha in the moment and Sepha the retrospective narrator.

This disjointed temporality occurs in a later passage, once again centered around the relationship between Sepha and Naomi. The two are reading out loud in the store, and Sepha reflects, "I thought about how years from now I would remember this with a crushing, heartbreaking nostalgia, because of course I knew even then that I would eventually find myself standing here alone" (103). This sentence can slip by, but a careful reading reveals the temporal layers at work. Sepha the retrospective narrator tells the story of a past self who is projecting a future self beyond the awareness of the retrospective narrator. The "eventually" of this statement has already come to pass, and yet it is also timeless. The effect of such moments is to enhance the relationality and entangledness of the story, as well as the sense of loss at its center. In such moments, the novel becomes layered temporally as well as spatially, formally as well as thematically. This layering and restrospective narration also gestures to the dynamic at work in the final set of spaces the novel engages, which both, although they exist on different sides of the globe, are invoked through memory.

Spaces of Memory: Addis Ababa and Silver Spring

The temporal layers that shade certain moments in the Logan Circle portion of the text introduce a sense of distance between the events of the novel and the narration of these events, positing a relationship between memory and space. In the portion of the

novel that details Sepha's journey to the Maryland suburb of Silver Spring, the novel engages memory more explicitly. In this plot thread Sepha relives the events leading up to his escape from Addis. Silver Spring, where he spent his first few years after arriving in the United States, is home to a community of diasporic Ethiopians that remind him of those days and of what came before them. If the spatial dynamic that characterizes Logan Circle is gentrification, a process the novel approaches through objects, then the spatial dynamic that characterizes Silver Spring is diaspora, a process the novel approaches through memory.

The Silver Spring portion of *Beautiful Things* suggests that spaces are constructed out of memories as much as they are out of objects and matter. Harvey suggests that a relational understanding of spacetime allows one to assert the significance of phenomena often overlooked by those who emphasize direct measurement; he writes, "Dreams and memories cannot be dismissed as irrelevant because we cannot quantify and measure their spacetime" (139). The space of diaspora cannot be measured, but it can be sketched out through memories and dreams. In the Silver Spring apartment building, full of families who have left their homelands in search of a new life, the memories of what Sepha calls "a vanishing culture" exist in tandem with the dreams of a better future, resulting in a space that looks both forward and backward (Mengestu 118). This portion of the narrative also contains significant absences, suggesting that the lack of memory, the choice not to recall figures and events, is another way of manipulating space.

The portion of *Beautiful Things* that concerns Silver Spring is structured as a journey. Because of the nonlinear narrative format, the journey from Logan Circle to Silver Spring and back appears in fragments throughout the novel, generating a curious

tension between the stuck Sepha of Logan Circle and the mobile Sepha who moves through the city. As with many other elements in the text, the relationship between these two figures engenders a more comprehensive understanding of Sepha's state. As the later Sepha journeys outward, reliving his recent and distant memories, the deeper reasons for his immobilization in Logan Circle become clear; not simply economic constraints, but the weight of his past and his "intense sense of dislocation" as a "transnational subject[...] who no longer conform[s] to the older pattern of immigration and assimilation" become more vivid through the contrast (Varvogli 120, 93).

Considering Sepha's multiple dislocations, it is worth noting again that his journey to Silver Spring is prompted by a map. As mentioned at the beginning of this chapter, a tourist couple enters Sepha's store carrying a map of Washington D. C. After chatting with Sepha for a few minutes, the couple decides to walk west on P Street, which Sepha notes is his favorite of the streets that intersect with Logan Circle. He reflects on the "sidewalk cafes and restaurants, three used-book stores, wine shops, flower shops, and cheese shops," and then, when the couple leaves, follows them out of the store (Mengestu 73). The sequence of events, and Sepha's almost tender narration of the comfortable dynamic between the couple, suggests that both their relationship and the cartographical reminder of the space just beyond the Circle jolt Sepha out of his stasis and work in concert to lead him outward. Sepha follows the couple along P Street to Dupont Circle, describing the city as he sees it and as he remembers it, recognizing that many landmarks "have obediently made way for newer and better things" (75). The evolving cityscape thus opens the path to memory, and suggests that particular spaces are shadowed and informed by their earlier iterations.

While Sepha sits in Dupont Circle, a motorcade passes, blaring sirens that remind him of Ethiopia and prompting him to pay a visit to his Uncle Berhane. As Sepha makes this journey, he compares Washington, D. C. to his hometown:

> As a capital city, [Washington, D. C.] doesn't seem like much. Sixty-eight square miles, shaped roughly like a diamond, divided into four quadrants, erected out of what was once mainly swampland. Its resemblance to Addis, if not always in substance, then at least in form, has always been striking to me. As a city, Addis wasn't much larger. Ninety square miles, most of which was a vast urban slum built around the fringes of a few important city centers. The two cities share a penchant for circular parks and long diagonal roads that meander and wind up in confusion along the edges. Even the late-afternoon light seems to hit D. C. the same way. (173-174)

The distinction Sepha makes between substance and form here is suggestive, as it indicates his understanding that space is defined and appraised along multiple measures: numerical, experiential, and relational. Sepha understands D. C. on its own terms but also as it relates to Addis, his experiences in both cities filtered through each other. The journey out of Logan Circle and into the city pushes Sepha toward an encounter with the distant space of his homeland. Sepha's instinctive comparison of D. C. to Addis, rather than comparing Addis to D. C., suggests that Addis is still his point of departure. Although physically distant, Addis is psychologically immediate: another spatial relationship that cannot be explained in absolute terms.

As the metro journeys toward Berhane's apartment, Sepha explains that his uncle "came to D. C. two years before me after having disappeared in the middle of the night without telling a single person" (97). Sepha reflects on his uncle's house in Ethiopia, a "sprawling ranch […] on the edge of a ridge with sweeping views of the valley below" (96). It is a house Sepha can hardly trust himself to recall; as he explains, "It's difficult to remember that places like that ever existed. They seem conjured, the fictitious dream of a

hyperactive and lonely imagination" (96). The disbelief Sepha expresses here suggests just how hard he has worked to keep this dreamlike memory at bay, unwilling to let the spaces of his previous life encroach on the new one he has attempted to build in Logan Circle. Additionally, it shows that memory itself is unstable, and that he distrusts spaces that are largely constructed around memories. Sepha's tendency to compartmentalize his memories of Ethiopia functions as a defense mechanism that allows him to move on, but as the memories flood in, it becomes clear that even at great distances, the spaces intrude on each other and on his psyche. Sepha describes Berhane's estate as suffused with quiet splendor, inspired by a Frank Lloyd Wright design and redolent with the kind of peace that exists with a certain level of luxury and wealth. By comparison, Berhane's apartment in Silver Spring is modest, although, as Sepha explains, "I believe he took as much time preparing its rooms as he did studying the design for the house" (117). The effacement of Berhane's house, and life, in Addis, contrasts with the novel's account of the gentrification of Logan Circle; while one space gives way to upheaval, another is built up on the other side of the world. These juxtaposed narratives depict a world constantly in flux, with places that disappear or change irrevocably but linger in the memories of those who occupied them.

The apartment building that Berhane now lives in is brought into being by memory and diaspora. Sepha explains, "There are twenty-eight floors to the building, and of those twenty-eight floors, at least twenty-six are occupied exclusively by other Ethiopians who, like my uncle, moved here sometime after the revolution and found to their surprise that they would never leave" (115). He notes that the building is "an entire world made up of old lives and relationships transported perfectly intact from Ethiopia"

(116). He continues:

> The hallways on every floor smell of wat, coffee, and incense. The older women still travel from apartment to apartment dressed in slippers and white blankets that they keep wrapped around their heads, just as if they were still walking through the crowded streets of Addis. (116)

The occupants of the building have transformed it into a satellite of Ethiopia; as Varvogli notes, the building represents a “type of dislocation: the Ethiopian community transported almost intact to the American capital” (121). Once inside the building, Sepha enters the elevator, where he overhears “rumors of infidelity, abuse, drugs, unemployment,” as well as a lament that “With enough time […] there won’t be any Ethiopians. They’ll all become Americans” (Mengestu 118). Sepha interprets the conversation as “proof of a vanishing culture” (118). Just like Berhane’s house, the decaying portions of Logan Circle, and the D. C. landmarks that have made way, places vanish but leave traces, lingering behind the veil of memory. Cultures may vanish, but they also resurface in memories, recollections, and dreams.

Berhane’s apartment complex is implicitly concerned with the world of dreams, another of the novel’s invocations of the myth of the American Dream. Sepha’s own journey resonates with this myth, as he arrived in Silver Spring fleeing a nightmare and departed chasing a dream. Only when he is in the apartment complex, a scene that appears more than halfway through the novel, does he dwell on the events that led to his departure from Ethiopia. Sitting on the floor in Berhane’s room, surrounded on all sides by fellow members of the Ethiopian diaspora, Sepha finally acknowledges the memories he has tried to ignore for the past twenty years. The story is grim: in the days following the Ethiopian Revolution, soldiers entered the Stephanos house and found pamphlets

from a group called Students for Democracy. Although a then-sixteen-year-old Sepha had brought the pamphlets into the house, his father takes responsibility for them and is beaten and taken away from the house. He never returns. Sepha concludes the narration:

> The next day, at my mother's insistence, I left home. I took nothing with me but a small red cloth sack stuffed with all of the gold and jewelry my parents owned. I pawned and traded each item in order to make my way south to Kenya. By the time I crossed the border, the only items I had left were my father's cuff links. (130)

The callback to the cuff links returns the reader briefly to Logan Circle, to Judith and Naomi, and to the role of objects in mediating relationships. Sepha's only physical link to his father are these cuff links, but when he is in a space suffused with memory, he is able to reestablish an emotional connection to his father.

Intriguingly, Sepha's journey from Addis to D. C. receives no further development in the text. The journey from Logan Circle to Silver Spring is related in concrete geographical detail, down to the exact streets and subway lines Sepha travels. At the same time, as he gets closer to Berhane's apartment, he undergoes a mental journey back to the moment of departure, moving through his memories first by noting the similarities between D. C. and Addis, then by recalling his Uncle's journey, and finally reliving the terror of his father's capture. However, there is no explicit retelling of his journey from Kenya to Washington, D. C., a strange absence at the center of Sepha's narrative. The geographical realism that asserts an intimacy with Washington, D.C., and that appears in the comparison between D. C. and Addis, is abandoned when it comes to discussing the discussing the distance in between these two cities. Sepha's refusal to describe this period in his spatial narrative creates a pointed absence in the text and places an abyss between the two cities in which he has spent his life. Because he refuses

to narrate that story, he cannot trace his trajectory across the world, contributing to his sense of dislocation.

The Silver Spring apartment building is also constructed around absences—the vanishing elements of the home culture, the relations who were not able to make the trip, and those, like Sepha, who have moved out and "become American" (118). Berhane himself is absent, never appearing in the novel except via Sepha's recollections. Berhane's absence echoes the more disturbing absence of Sepha's father, and raises the question of genealogy, another form of mapping. Sepha's inability to trace the narrative that led him to Silver Spring is compounded by the missing figures in his familial map. Sepha recalls how, in his early years in the city, he would carry on conversations with the memory of his father:

> I walked home with my father across the spare, treeless campus of my northern Virginia community college. We talked for hours. […] I couldn't have asked for a better listener than my father. We talked and saw more of each other during my first two years here than in all of the years we spent living under the same roof. (176)

The shared space of the home does not generate intimacy, but distance, absence, and death conspire to create an intimacy that never existed in life. As Sepha recalls those early days, he realizes that he "left home for good" when these conversations with his father ceased, suggesting that for him, home is not a location but a relationship (177). Considering the difficulty Sepha has in maintaining relationships, it is unsurprising that he has been unsuccessful in creating a home for himself in Logan Circle.

Sepha's eventual decision to move out of the apartment against Berhane's protests demonstrates how completely that space is generated by memory. For Sepha, it is not simply an apartment, but a constant call to remember and a portal to the other side of the

world. Here, the distant spaces and times of the past infiltrate the present. Sitting in the apartment years later, he explains, “I could never find the guiding principle that relegated the past to its proper place. I can step in at any moment and see the house exactly as it looked that day, with the midafternoon sun spilling in through the front windows” (127). In a Maryland suburb, a world away from the streets of Addis, Sepha finds himself in his childhood home. Memory confers on particular spaces the capacity to be transported across distance and time. This portability allows those such as the building’s residents to create a home space wherever they go, but it also threatens to trap them in their memories. Sepha’s choice to leave Silver Spring and move to Logan Circle is thus a kind of escape, but the power his past holds over him is evident when he returns. In this moment, the pattern of fragmentation and relation that suffuses the novel reveals the complexity of Sepha’s stasis. The visit to Silver Spring and, by memory, to Addis, show that Sepha is not just stuck vertically, unable to ascend the socio-economic ladder, but also horizontally. As he notes in the book’s final moments, he is “stuck *between two worlds*” (228, emphasis mine). Reliving his memories brings those two worlds together, moving him out of his static position and towards the inquiry that drives the narrative. However, Sepha’s movement is complicated by his unwillingness to explore certain paths and a tentative attitude that leaves him, ultimately, right where he was at the beginning of the novel.

Conclusion

At the end of the novel, Sepha returns to Logan Circle. As he makes his way, he says, “I can’t help but think of what I’m doing as going home. ‘I’m going back home.’ I

say the words out loud as I turn left on Massachusetts Avenue" (174). He begins to speak to his father again, explaining that he has "dangled and been suspended long enough" (228). That the journey has led Sepha to consider Logan Circle home is encouraging, suggesting that the confrontation with his own past in Berhane's apartment has begun to heal the rupture caused by his earlier trauma. However, the final passage sounds a note of uncertainty. In this moment, the distinct temporal and narrative threads converge. Sepha is no longer narrating the story from a future position, but relating it in the moment. As he approaches the Circle, he says, "Right now, I'm convinced that my store looks more perfect than ever before. I can see it exactly as I have always wanted to see it. Through the canopy of trees that line the walkway cutting through the middle of the circle is a store, one that is neither broken nor perfect, one that, regardless of everything, I'm happy to claim as entirely my own" (228). The ironic thread woven through the various narratives emerges once again, as Sepha's words are undercut by the knowledge, both his and the reader's, that the store no longer belongs to him. The novel ends here, with Sepha imagining his perfect store from a distance. It is only in loss—of Judith, Naomi, and perhaps even the store itself, that he can access this sense of relationship to it.

The ambiguity of this ending places the reader in the position of either filling in the narrative and constructing an alternate ending for Sepha's story, or accepting the uncertainty of his final position. It is possible to envision Sepha borrowing enough money from his uncle and friends to pay his overdue rent and convince his landlord to revoke the eviction, allowing him to continue working toward that grand American Dream. However, it is also possible to read Sepha's final comments about his store as a break with reality. An earlier scene revealed that the store had likely been looted in his

absence, and thus in addition to being under an eviction notice, is far from perfect or unbroken. Sepha's deliberate refusal to engage this possibility has a desperate note, suggesting that he might act on suicidal tendencies he previously confessed to feeling (142). Both of these options are logical responses to the various clues and suggestions contained in the text.

However, it is also possible to treat the novel not as a puzzle to be put together, or a hidden message to be deciphered. If one reads the final passage exactly as it is presented, without attempting to push the narrative further than it is willing to go, the conclusion makes one thing clear. In those final words, Sepha creates a fictional space for himself, telling himself a story in which the store looks like it does in his dreams. Rather than any triumph or tragedy, the novel suggests that Sepha is still distanced and dislocated, and that his tendency to escape into fiction now operates not just by reading books in the store, but in his practice of everyday life. This ambivalent ending demonstrates how the contemporary experience of space, both fluid but also full of unsettling disjunctions and dislocations, can engender not just mobility but stasis. Sepha remains suspended in his own geography of relation, telling a spatial story that ultimately encircles him.

CHAPTER 5

419 FRAUD AND CYBERSPATIAL PARADOXES IN *I DO NOT COME TO YOU BY CHANCE*

"DEAR FRIEND."[71] These two seemingly benign words open an email sent by Kingsley Ibe to an unknown recipient. Kingsley, who takes pride in his correspondence, does not use the words lightly. Rather, along with the other carefully cultivated details and rhetorical gestures contained in the email, the words are specifically designed to negotiate intimacy and distance, fact and fabrication, the virtual and the material. The closeness signified by the term "FRIEND" is undercut by the lack of personal address, and the sentiment conveyed by the word "DEAR" is in direct opposition to the author's ultimate intent. Kingsley, it turns out, is a practitioner of 419, an advance fee scam named after the section of the Nigerian penal code under which it is prosecuted. The scam typically comprises emails promising untold riches to the naïve recipient who provides access to his or her bank account. Kingsley presents himself as a friend in order to set this process in motion, and in doing so, he straddles the boundary between insider and outsider. The mention of friendship suggests the email is written by an insider, but in addressing it in general terms rather than using the recipient's name, he simultaneously alerts savvy readers to his outsider status. The content of the email, which spins a sad story and promises great wealth, also functions paradoxically, appealing to both the greed and the benevolence of the recipient. This space—the contested territory between friend and enemy, neighbor and stranger, benefactor and mercenary, is what Kingsley negotiates as he moves through the world of 419.

[71] For the sake of accuracy, I have preserved the capitalization as it appears in the original text.

This chapter follows Kingsley's journey through the illicit alleyways of cyberspace as depicted in Adaobi Tricia Nwaubani's 2009 novel *I Do Not Come to You by Chance* (*Chance*). Kingsley narrates the novel, a caustically humorous depiction of contemporary, cyber-enabled 419, which traces his evolution from poor engineering student unable to secure employment to wealthy 419 entrepreneur. As the novel begins, Kingsley's father Paulinus falls ill and then succumbs to his disease, a set of circumstances which catalyzes Kingsley's evolution. The bills associated with Paulinus's hospital stay force Kingsley to request assistance from his Uncle Boniface, otherwise known as Cash Daddy. Cash Daddy, a 419 mogul in Aba, presides over a cadre of scammers who systematically bilk *mugus*, or easily duped foreigners, out of significant sums of money. Although Kingsley initially rejects the fast cash and lavish lifestyle of 419, he eventually joins the organization and discovers that he has quite a talent for composing scam emails. Several of Kingsley's masterpieces appear in their entirety within the pages of the novel, and these, combined with the narrative's playful engagement of the picaresque, complicate what on an initial reading might appear to be a straightforward realist novel.

A close examination of these emails, nine of which appear in the pages of the novel, reveals an engagement with deeply engrained notions of global capital and privilege. The 419ers, cognizant of the possibilities and limitations of such notions, ultimately unsettle longstanding trajectories, working to reroute capital and to instigate a shift in the location of privilege. While their method is an updated version of a classic

scheme, their medium is entirely contemporary.[72] Acutely aware of the possibilities offered by the connectivity of cyberspace, the scammers manipulate connection in order to script alternate metageographical narratives. As internet technologies developed in the late 20th century and early 21st century, some theorists argued that cyberspace was a phenomenon beyond geography.[73] What *Chance* shows, however, is that the linked and expansive nature of cyberspace allows its users to map and remap the material world by way of the virtual. In the case of the 419ers, these mappings are carefully calibrated fictions that borrow and subvert the tropes of colonial and postcolonial cartographies while working within a contemporary apparatus. In what follows, I analyze the rhetoric of 419 in *Chance* in order to discuss how the novel positions its characters and readers through its layered fictions and argue that *Chance* qualifies conceptions of an amorphous cyberspace. In focusing on an illicit and intensely geographical pursuit enabled by cyberspace, *Chance* shows how the boundaries between the virtual and the material as well as between the fictional and the real are in dialogue and in tension. Cyberspace, always already in flux as its users generate new nodes of connection, thus pushes for a dynamic reconceptualization of space and geography in the 21st century. Simultaneously, it challenges its readers to consider the role of fiction in 419, and to wrestle with the boundaries between the two. The novel straddles two fictional modes, the realist and the

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[72] The classic scheme is known as the "Spanish Prisoner" scam, and shares many features with contemporary 419. An 1898 *New York Times* article explains how the letters promise great wealth to the recipient if he or she will provide funds in advance, and describes the letters as, "written as fairly well-educated foreigners write English, with a word misspelled here and there, and an occasional foreign idiom" ("An Old Swindle Revived").

[73] Dodge and Kitchin's *Mapping Cyberspace* provides a helpful review of such arguments.

picaresque, and thus calls on the reader to ponder just how much of Kingsley's narration can be believed, and how much might be additional deception

In depicting not only the virtual encounters between the 419ers and their *mugus* but the physical encounters that naturally follow, *Chance* serves as a corrective to readings of cyberspace that characterize it as an entirely disembodied realm.[74] Indeed, as visual culture theorist Jennifer González asserts, internet users are not disembodied subjects but "appended subjects" (299). González, whose work considers the function of race in online avatars, defines an appended subject as "an online persona understood as somehow appended to a real person who resides elsewhere, in front of a keyboard" (299).[75] Conceiving of users as appended subjects helpfully prevents one from slipping into an overdetermined separation of cyberspace and "the real world," two regions which are increasingly embedded and mutually constitutive. However, I would like to suggest that the notion of appended subjectivity works on another level, in that internet users have the potential to append themselves to various identities in the somewhat nebulous zone of cyberspace. Indeed, "'passing' (or pretending to be what one is not) in cyberspace has become a norm rather than an exception" (300). The value of passing to the 419ers is evident: they shift identities with each email sent, portraying figures with different genders, ages, backgrounds, and agendas, taking on identities such as the dispossessed widow, the deathbed zealot, or the frustrated developer. But beyond this form of simple passing, or identity fraud, the 419ers also engage in a more sophisticated

[74] For more on embodiment and cyberspace, see Foster and Keep.

[75] This image is increasingly outdated, as users are now able to access the internet via mobile platforms such as smartphones and tablets. This mobile access only underscores González's point about appended subjectivity, as such data-networked devices bring the subject and the online world into even closer, and more bodily, contact.

negotiation of appendage, rhetorically positioning their recipients such that they also append themselves to various identities. This rhetorical maneuvering is one of the key elements of 419 as depicted in *Chance*, and suggests some of the linguistic and performative complexity of the pursuit. Viewing internet users as appended subjects, with reference to both the inseparability of the material and the virtual and to the negotiation of identity, allows 419 to emerge as a referendum on the limits and possibilities of cyberspace.

In addition to its commentary on the negotiation of cyberspace, *Chance* is also deeply rooted in a concrete place and time—Nigeria in the early days of the 21st century. While advance fee fraud is not an exclusively Nigerian phenomenon, the practice is widespread there and looms large in the cultural imaginary. In *The Pan-African Nation*, historian and anthropologist Andrew Apter traces the origins and development of 419 in Nigeria, arguing that the oil boom and bust of the 1970s and 1980s led to "social dislocations," and to a kind of "passing and deceiving" that is at the root of 419 (232). Apter's analysis of various instances of 419 ultimately posits the fraud as a performance, one requiring skill in the "dramaturgical arts" (232). Because of the historical nature of his study, Apter focuses on the roots of 419 in Nigeria and does not address contemporary incarnations of the fraud, which, as *Chance* demonstrates, take advantage of technological developments such as email and online banking. However, Apter's identification of the performative aspect of the fraud is worth considering in light of the largely virtual nature of contemporary 419. Kingsley, in his capacity as a 419er, is a skilled performer and author. As the narrator of his own story, he also draws on these skills. In an essay that addresses the picaresque elements in the fast-growing genre of the

child-soldier narrative, Maureen Moynagh notes that the picaresque utilizes an "autobiographical guise," and that "In this act of insurgent self-fashioning, the rogue […] claims redress for the injustices he (or she) has suffered, while confessing his role in a morally bankrupt economy" (52). Kingsley's narrative, like his emails, proceeds along a similar arc, employing a careful rhetoric of victimization and criminality.

Prompted by González's remarks on appended subjectivity and cyber-passing, Apter's discussion of passing and performativity in the practice of 419, and the novel's engagement of the picaresque, I begin this chapter by analyzing the rhetoric of 419 put forth in *Chance*. The novel develops this rhetoric through its depiction of virtual and actual encounters between the scammers and their targets, and is premised on the role of the stranger as a figure for self-definition. The scammers eschew passing as insiders, instead emphasizing cultural and geographical difference in order to appeal to their targets' deeply engrained beliefs about global hierarchy and privilege. Thus, they position their targets to append certain identities such as the benefactor or the mercenary, identities the scammers then exploit. Next, I turn to the material effects of 419, considering its role in relation to the global economic system and its paradoxical mode of both resisting and reaffirming the power of the market. Finally, I examine two forms of privilege made possible for Kingsley by the wealth he derives from 419, education and mobility, and discuss the limits placed on these forms of privilege. Ultimately, I argue that *Chance* suggests that cyber-based 419 creates a space enabled by the virtual but constitutive of the material, a space in which conventional cartographies, economic trajectories, and hierarchies of privilege are unsettled and reworked.

Before turning to the emails that appear in this fictional treatment of 419, it is perhaps worthwhile to establish what is known about the phenomenon itself. Because of the criminal nature of 419 organizations, official information about their operations, lifestyles, and methods is difficult to find.[76] In one of the few published studies about these scams, social scientist Harvey Glickman notes that, "Interviewing scammers resembles infiltrating the mafia" (464). Those who fall for the scams may hesitate to report them; thus, numbers of actual losses tend to be estimates. The recent estimates that do exist suggest that 419 scams cost Americans around $100 million in 2000, and cost victims $4.2 million globally in 2007.[77] While a few sensational cases have made headlines, for the most part the general public is aware of but not particularly threatened by the practice, and may not realize the extent to which the perpetrators' lives, and those of their communities, are affected.

Along with the political, legal, and economic factors that drive such scams, perhaps the most significant intervention in recent years is increased access to cyber technologies: "The invention and spread of the internet and e-mail have transformed the effort into a globe-girdling blizzard of instantaneous importuning" (473). The increased incidence of 419 has led to an increasing presence in popular culture and the media.[78] While in many cases 419 functions simply as a quick punchline, some extended treatments do exist. It is a popular theme in Nollywood productions, which, as Lindsey-

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[76] In her afterword, Nwaubani thanks her 419 contacts "for kindly or inadvertently allowing me a peep into your surreal world," suggesting at least some level of access (Nwaubani 402).

[77] See Glickman and Benzon for more.

[78] For an informal list of 419 mentions across various media, see http://tvtropes.org/pmwiki/pmwiki.php/Main/FourOneNineScam.

Green Simms points out, tend to critique the illegality of the endeavor if not the motivations behind it ("Postcolonial Automobility" 201-206). Petina Gappah's "Our Man in Geneva Wins a Million Euros," a short story in the collection *An Elegy for Easterly* (2009), deals explicitly with 419, as does Lauren Beukes's *Zoo City* (2010). Recent academic work also focuses on 419, emanating from fields as distinct as political science, cultural studies, sociolinguistics, and anthropology.[79] Considering that 419 relies on fiction in order to sustain itself, it is perhaps appropriate that a sustained fictional treatment of the fraud has much to contribute to this developing conversation.

As a novel centered around an adolescent's coming-of-age, *Chance* is also part of a long tradition of Anglophone African novels that utilize the form of the *Bildungsroman* to engage questions of tradition and modernity.[80] Novels from Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o's *Weep Not, Child* (1964) and Tsitsi Dangarembga's *Nervous Conditions* (1988), to contemporary examples such as Chris Abani's *GraceLand* (2004) and Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie's *Half of a Yellow Sun* (2006), represent the traditional-modern tension in terms of education. In such texts, young people struggle to situate themselves in turbulent worlds and look to education, formal or informal, as a way of securing their chances. Indeed, in *GraceLand* and *Half of a Yellow Sun*, references to books litter the pages, and the two protagonists are readers whose tastes range from film theory and math journals to Rainer Maria Rilke, James Baldwin, and Frederick Douglas. These texts depict education as a critical resource for economic and social mobility.

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[79] See Glickman, Blommaert and Omoniyi, and Smith.

[80] For an overview of this tradition, see Amoko. For a discussion centered on the tradition in Nigerian novels, see Hron.

In *Chance*, however, education is revealed to be one more status symbol available for purchase, and one that does not necessarily improve one's prospects. Kingsley is a successful student, but has no luck securing a job. His parents, educated abroad, are still unable to protect the family from falling into poverty. Eventually, Kingsley decides to concern himself not with bound tomes but with the ephemeral, circulating fictions of 419. In turning its attention away from the classroom and the classics and toward the cyber, *Chance* inaugurates a new tradition in which education is figured as problematic, or even, as in the picaresque, "perverted" (Close 19). This perversion of education runs counter to a fairly widespread glorification of education in the Anglophone African novel, and suggests that for a certain kind of protagonist, the chat room, rather than the classroom, is the space in which upward mobility may be conferred.

In the following section, I analyze the emails portrayed in *Chance*, considering the intersection of fiction, illusion, and artifice the novel provocatively asserts. In these fictional emails, *Chance* playfully engages an ongoing debate about the potential literary value of actual 419 correspondences. To suggest that emails written with the sole purpose of ensnaring gullible victims and cheating them out of their money can be considered a literary genre is problematic, and yet, as Neil Jordan Smith points out, 419 emails are "cultural objects" that "can be productively analyzed as a form of popular interpretation and critical cultural commentary regarding corruption in Nigeria" (29, 35). By fictionalizing this material that is, technically, already fiction, *Chance* calls attention to the literary skill involved in crafting such texts, and emphasizes the genre's rhetoricity, fictionality, and engagement with discourses of power. Because the emails contained in *Chance* mimic many of the gestures scholars note in real 419 emails, the line between

fiction and reality is increasingly blurred. This layering of illusions functions as a sleight of hand reminiscent of 419 itself. This fictional doubling complicates the apparent straightforwardness of the novel, invoking the unreliable narrative strategies of the picaresque and positioning the reader as a potential mark as well. Rather than their bank accounts, the novel targets its reader's sympathies as they accompany Kingsley on his journey.

Virtual Encounters: Soviets, Strangers, and Samaritans

Nwaubani's depiction of millennial Nigeria mediates the grim realities of poverty and disenfranchisement with a caustic sense of humor, satirizing institutions such as the church, the medical community, and the political realm. Each of these, ostensibly high-minded and attuned to the needs of the people, is revealed to be as grasping and cash-concerned as the scammers, suggesting that Kingsley's evolution from poor engineering student to wealthy 419 entrepreneur is less a character failing than the predictable result of his milieu. However, the novel also implicates the wider global community in its depiction of the greedy and cynical Westerners who respond to the emails. The interactions between the 419ers and their *mugus* undermine aspirational depictions of cyberspace as a global village and posit instead a global marketplace in which capital circulates hierarchically and those at opposite poles of privilege underestimate each other at their own risk. The 419ers use the internet to find their targets, but trust that these targets will fail to use that very same resource figure out that they are being scammed. Meanwhile, the *mugus* project a lack of mobility onto the scammers, assuming that the social and financial freedom of movement they possess themselves will not be leveraged

against them. In both cases, these figures underestimate the leveling effect of cyberspace.[81] Cyberspace is a zone of encounter, and as with all encounters, the outcome depends less on the space in which it takes place than on the agendas of those involved.

The emails Kingsley composes once he embraces his role as a 419er are the amusing highlight of an already humorous novel. The pastiche of carefully chosen details, manipulation of clichés and sympathies, and appeal to both the exalted and the baser elements of human nature constitute a genre that rewards careful consideration. The narratives conceived by the 419ers in their pursuit of gullible readers share certain features one might consider tropes of the genre. The appearance of these tropes emphasizes the fact that 419 is essentially a rhetorical endeavor, one which deliberately positions the audience, or reader, with relation to the speaker, or author. The tropes the 419ers rely on in order to achieve this positioning include the recourse to dated geopolitical paradigms as well as appeals to various identities they hope to cultivate in their readers.

Additionally, these emails highlight the way that cyberspace replicates the negotiation of proximity and distance that the 419ers must keep in constant tension. The 419ers rely on technology to place them in virtual proximity to any internet user, and claim intimacy through their forms of address and suggestions of assumed ideological solidarity: they denounce corruption, present themselves as joint participants in a benevolent endeavor, or claim a shared religion. However, the scammers are also pragmatic about the value of maintaining a certain distance from their targets: while

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[81] This shortsightedness on the scammers part is made clear when one of Kingsley's peers, Azuka, disappears after meeting with a mark in Iran. Kingsley realizes that the mark has figured out he is being scammed and warns Azuka not to make the trip, but Azuka refuses to listen (354-360).

positioning themselves as friends, they also emphasize cultural and geographical difference in order to play on their targets' sympathies.

The first 419 email that appears in *Chance* is read by Kingsley while waiting to speak with Cash Daddy. It is written by "Ignatius Soyinka," an "Astronautics Project Manager," and tells the story of Nnamdi Ojukwu, "the first ever African to go into space" (Nwaubani 122-123). Ojukwu, an Air Vice Marshall, was chosen to take part in a Soviet space flight in 1989. When the dissolution of the Soviet Union ended the mission, the Soviet crew members returned home, but "being a black man from a Third World Country, AVM Ojukwu's place on the flight was taken up by cargo, which the Soviet Union authorities insisted was too valuable to be left behind" (123). While Ojukwu "is in good spirits," he nevertheless misses his family and hopes to return to Nigeria (123). The email then details the $35,000,000 USD in back pay accumulated by Ojukwu and explains how the recipient can assist in accessing the funds and, presumably, share in them as well.[82] Recognizing the ridiculousness of the tale, Kingsley "giggle[s] endlessly about the Nigerian astronaut stranded in outer space" as he returns home that evening (123).

The email's author hopes for a more sympathetic response from its recipient. In addition to attempting to elicit sympathy for Ojukwu as a man separated from his family by truly exceptional distance, the author places the blame for this separation on the Soviet Union, the antagonist par excellence for the West during the Cold War era. Soyinka gives the narrative a ready-made enemy, hopefully prompting the reader's righteous indignation against the exploitation of this "black man from a Third World Country"

[82] I say presumably here because Kingsley's reading of the email is cut off abruptly.

(123). This is where it all coheres. The phrase incorporates both racial and geographical signifiers, each of which suggests a long history of oppression and disenfranchisement. The reference to the Third World recalls a cartographical system that places the west—or First World—in an intellectually and financially superior position to the subordinate nonwest—or Third World—which is subservient, backwards, and in need of rescue. The use of Cold War cartography ignores the political changes that have occurred since the fall of the Soviet Union, and relies on the ongoing perception of a First World/Third World dichotomy. In doing so, it pushes the *mugu* to adopt the identity of the savior figure. The heroic Westerner rescuing the native from his backward or savage milieu is a classic trope of the colonial era, and it is one that 419 consistently employs.

The pointed use of Soviet-era details in the Ojukwu email suggests that its author understands the enduring appeal of these racialized and geographically stereotypical notions. In other words, the 419er must exhibit a keen sense of both global hierarchies and of human nature, and must deploy this understanding strategically in developing his or her rhetoric.[83] Jan Blommaert and Topi Omoniyi argue, based on their collection and analysis of more than one thousand 419 emails, that such documents demonstrate sophisticated manipulation of language, genre, and technology and that they serve as a provocative source of data for reflections on "what language does in globalization contexts" (575). In the *Chance* emails, language is a tool for story-telling that rewrites and revisits particular histories and geographies, unafraid to employ problematic notions of superiority and subordination in order to instill a sense of privilege. At the same time,

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[83] My research did not yield any information about the actual gender breakdown of 419ers, but all of the 419ers presented in *Chance* are male. As an alternative, see Lauren Beukes's *Zoo City*, whose protagonist is a female practitioner of 419.

the novel itself trades on the current stereotypes surrounding 419 in order to engage its reader's sense of privilege. Kingsley's sad tale of family tragedy and poverty is a much more believable set of circumstances than Ojukwu's stranding in outer space, but a similar mechanism is at work as the novel, also a tool for story-telling, manipulates language and genre.

In addition to manipulating their targets' sense of privilege through colonialist and Soviet-era rhetoric, the 419ers' use of language is designed to compound the target's sense of intellectual superiority. Although Kingsley initially works hard to erase any linguistic markers of difference, correcting spelling errors and employing perfect grammar, he eventually realizes, "The level of language in our emails did not matter [...] It was just the purist in me. Apparently, *mugus* were never really surprised to see an African emitting dented English" (Nwaubani 206). In fact, as Glickman notes, error patterns are often employed intentionally in 419 emails in order to preserve the myth of the sender's ostensible identity:

> Some part of the initial allure of the stories may be in the poor grammar or awkward word choice and phrasing […] scammers are, in fact, playing upon a racist stereotype: that Africans are childlike, intellectually unsophisticated, innocent in business ways, and probably corrupt. (464)

Kingsley's instinct about *mugus* is correct, and these instincts continue to serve him well.

The first email of Kingsley's that appears in *Chance* demonstrates his facility not only with language, but with the tropes of the genre and the peccadilloes of human nature. His chosen subject line is "REQUEST FOR URGENT HUMANITARIAN ASSISTANCE/BUSINESS PROPOSAL" (Nwaubani 178). The backslash here is critical, and can be read as a key symbol of 419. It separates the two appeals, yet links them in a

curious tension, just as 419 attempts to do in making connections while emphasizing difference. It joins the warring impulses of philanthropy and greed that Kingsley hopes to exploit in his *mugu*, as well as gestures toward the financial interests of many ostensibly humanitarian organizations. In this email, Kingsley takes on the persona of Hajia Mariam Abacha, the widow of General Sani Abacha.[84] Abacha's email details her desperation following her husband's death and the existence of "VARIOUS HUGE SUMS OF MONEY DEPOSITED BY MY HUSBAND IN DIFFERENT COUNTRIES ABROAD" (179). If the recipient helps her access these funds, he or she will be entitled to twenty percent of the total sum. The email's content compounds the tension signaled by the twin appeals of the subject line, asking the recipient to identify as both benefactor and mercenary in assisting a needy widow while profiting from the corruption of a highly stereotypical figure, the African despot. The complicity with corruption is unspoken in the email, but hovers just below the surface of the ensuing series of exchanges, and appeals to another classic figure in colonialist imagery: the profiteer. Along with the savior figure, the profiteer functions as an identity that will entice the target into responding.

The Abacha email is the first that Kingsley exchanges with Edgar Hooverson, one of two scams detailed at length in *Chance*. In subsequent emails, Kingsley takes on the identity of Abacha's brother-in-law, Shehu. Kingsley presents Shehu as a co-conspirator, suggesting to Hooverson that they "MUST WORK AS A VERY CLOSE TEAM" (202). In order to cultivate this partnership, he advises using the phrase "aluta continua" as a code in their email exchanges. Aware that Hooverson may not be familiar with the details

[84] The use of real names and personas is a common gambit of 419. See Blommaert and Omoniyi 594.

of the phrase, an anti-apartheid rallying cry that evokes the political milieu of earlier decades in a similar fashion to the Cold War references, Kingsley states explicitly "THIS IS MY CODE NAME OF CHOICE OWING TO THE FACT THAT MY FAMILY IS CURRENTLY ENGAGED IN A STRUGGLE AGAINST INJUSTICE" (202). The code suggests struggle and resistance, lending a sense of urgency and humanitarian engagement to the endeavor. Kingsley's reasoning for suggesting such a code once again reinforces stereotypical notions of criminality and backward behavior in Africa, as he refers to the "CORRUPTION" and "DEVIOUS" behavior rampant in Nigeria (202). Kingsley's emails confirm longstanding perceptions of the African continent, hinting at dictators and revolution, juxtaposing charity with corruption, and calling on the cynical philanthropy of the outsider.

After reassuring Hooverson about the money and positioning him explicitly as a co-conspirator against injustice and implicitly as a profiteer, Kingsley returns to the Abacha narrative, repeating some of the key phrases of Mariam's email: frustration, betrayal, trust. He then addresses the fact that the two are strangers and have no reason to trust each other. He broaches the subject carefully, positioning himself as the one taking a risk, and explaining away any potential dangers. He writes:

> YOU MUST UNDERSTAND THAT IT IS OWING TO FRUSTRATIONS AND BETRAYALS FROM PEOPLE VERY CLOSE TO MY FAMILY THAT WE ARE THROWING CAUTION TO THE WIND AND TRUSTING YOU DESPITE THE FACT THAT WE HAVE NEVER MET. BUT AS THE SAYING GOES, SOMETIMES STRANGERS ARE EVEN TRUER THAN FRIENDS. AFTER ALL, THE GOOD SAMARITAN WAS A STRANGER TO THE MAN HE HELPED. (203)

This biblical reference once again puts Hooverson in the position of the do-gooder, setting aside his prejudices to offer help to the cultural and geographical Other lying

bruised and prostrate on the side of the road. It is in Kingsley's interest that Hooverson understands their interactions through this paradigm.

Kingsley's invocation of the Good Samaritan parable recalls the earlier discussion of passing and appended subjectivity. As highlighted throughout this discussion, encounters in cyberspace allow for the adoption of alternate identities, a fact that the 419ers exploit both in creating their narratives and in positioning their readers to engage with particular archetypal figures such as the Good Samaritan or the colonialist pillager. However, on a more universal level, the 419ers and their targets carefully circle around the broad identities of insider and outsider, as can be seen in the emails' repeated references to friends and strangers. As I have argued, the 419ers in *Chance* negotiate this tension carefully, deliberately drawing on markers of difference as a way of baiting *mugus* by confirming their stereotypical notions of the Third World. As Apter explains, Nigeria's oil-rich past along with "the misguided sense that the 'third world' plays by flexible rules" may override doubts about the legitimacy of the proposals (227). However, considering that the "Nigerian" email scam has become familiar in the West, often prompting an immediate click of the delete button, one might assume that 419ers would benefit from positioning themselves as insiders rather than as outsiders, minimizing difference and claiming to be fellow residents of the Global North locations they target.[85] And yet, in both the novel and in actual 419 emails,[86] scammers continue to emphasize geographical difference from their presumed recipients.[87]

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[85] As Blommaert and Omoniyi show, many 419 emails emanate from locations other than Nigeria. However, the scam is indelibly linked with Nigeria in the popular imagination, and thus often referred to in those terms.

[86] During the writing of this chapter, the spam folder in my university email account regularly received 419 emails. While one claimed to be written by an air force officer in the UK, it was far more

An explanation for the continued purchase of difference and the outsider identity can be found in recent theoretical work addressing the figure of the stranger. Sara Ahmed's *Strange Encounters: Embodied others in postcoloniality* argues that "the figure of the 'stranger' is produced, not as that which we fail to recognise, but as that which we have already recognised as 'a stranger'" (3). She writes:

> The alien is hence only a category within a given community of citizens or subjects: as the outsider inside, the alien takes on a spatial function, establishing relations of proximity and distance within the home(land). Aliens allow the demarcation of spaces of belonging. (3)

This demarcation of space, I suggest, is the reason Kingsley and the other 419ers succeed. Cyberspace is not the completely borderless zone that it is sometimes assumed to be. However, it can be, particularly for the less savvy user, bewildering in its virtuality; the occasional user may feel as though she is being asked to find her way in a vast and uncharted expanse without the proper navigational tools.[88] For this user, an encounter with an undifferentiated figure does little to help clarify the situation, while an encounter with an identifiable stranger begins to draw in the lines on the map, setting up clear spaces of belonging and membership and helping to define the limits of a community.

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common to receive solicitations explicitly stating an African origin, whether a widow from Burkina Faso looking to dispose of her former husband's fortune to a worthy Christian recipient, the president of the Islamic Women Association in Ivory Coast checking confirmation of a bank payment of $4 million, or the personal account manager of a gentleman killed in a Kenyan Airways Crash.

[87] I emphasize that the recipients are only presumed to be privileged Westerners, because the scammers have no way of knowing who will receive their emails. Petinah Gappah's "Our Man in Geneva wins a Million Euros" explores this issue, telling the story of a Zimbabwean living abroad who falls victim to a 419 email.

[88] Internet browsing systems such as Navigator, Explorer, and Safari clearly trade on this notion.

Paul Ricoeur's work makes a similar point about the stranger as a means of self-identification. Referencing the community's unspoken "desire to live together," Ricoeur explains:

> It is precisely at this level of chiaroscuro that strangers emerge from their anonymity; in order to explain our collective identity we need to compare ourselves with others; that is when our prejudices tumble out […] Our understanding of ourselves only emerges from the implicit and only starts to elucidate itself when it becomes comparative, differential, oppositional. (40)

Chiaroscuro, the interplay of light and shadow that blurs the clear outlines between entities, is a helpful term for understanding cyberspace, where borders can become shadowy. The 419er performs the function of a stranger by serving as a figure against which the *mugu* defines himself and his community. In *Chance*, Kingsley uses the rhetoric of the Third World to push his targets toward a particular form of self-definition and identification that appeals to their assumptions and deeply held prejudices about Nigeria and the continent at large. Read thus, as a rhetorical engagement with the spatializing function of the stranger, 419 becomes a critical method of border manipulation and geographical definition in cyberspace.

In his response to the Abacha email, Hooverson validates Kingsley's use of the despot figure, writing, "it's at times like this I'm THANKFUL for the USA being such a free country where JUSTICE and the RULE OF LAW prevail" (Nwaubani 206). Clearly, the suggestions about the moral and political backwardness of Nigeria have found their mark. And for Kingsley, this is exactly the desired outcome; rather than bristling at the unfavorable views of his nation, he feels "A fresh rush of that good old thrill," and continues, "No one could accuse me of being dishonest when I addressed Edgar Hooverson as 'my dear friend' in my next email" (207). While Kingsley's remark is

clearly tongue-in-cheek here, it is prescient in noting that the line between stranger and friend is not always clear, particularly as he gets closer to some of his targets.

Thus, the emails depicted in *Chance* establish a rhetoric of 419 which links *mugus* to particular identities by drawing on stereotypical ideas of global hierarchies and privilege. Additionally, they invoke the discourse of the stranger in order to both establish and then transgress cyberspatial boundaries. In the following section, I discuss how the rhetoric of 419 mediates the face-to-face encounters Kingsley has with two of these *mugus*, encounters that have the potential to either disturb or reinforce the cartographies constructed in the emails.

Actual Encounters: Real Good Shots and Wash Wash

The first target Kingsley meets is a man named Winterbottom, a banker originally baited by Cash Daddy's right hand man, Protocol Officer. The meeting, which takes place in a London hotel, is a carefully staged encounter in which Kingsley, Protocol Officer, and Cash Daddy play certain stock characters. Protocol Officer poses as the CEO of a construction company hoping to build an international airport; Kingsley is an engineer; and Cash Daddy is introduced to Winterbottom as "Alhaji Mahmud, the minister of aviation of the Federal Republic of Nigeria" (231). The exact details of these positions are less significant than how the characters relate to each other: Kingsley and Protocol Officer become subservient minions when Cash Daddy enters, "genuflect[ing] for emphasis" and reinforcing the idea that the minister is "a bona fide Nigerian top government official" (231). The portrait is complete with Cash Daddy's fashionably late entrance and brash demeanor, which sets the stage for the ensuing performance.

Echoing the format of the emails, after officially greeting Winterbottom, Cash Daddy opens with a series of remarks that highlight cultural and geographical difference. These remarks are designed to play into Winterbottom's stereotypical understanding of the situation and affirm his superiority. Cash Daddy launches into a treatise on Nigerian tribal politics, first asking Winterbottom, "do you know what a nigger is?" (233). As Kingsley observes, "The white man recoiled, as if a viper had briefly flicked its tongue out of Cash Daddy's mouth" (234.) Cash Daddy's use of the word "nigger" is, of course, calculated—he knows it will produce a complicated emotional reaction in Winterbottom, a mix of surprise, guilt, and perhaps even a thrill of excitement at hearing the forbidden word tossed around so lightly. Having introduced this racialized narrative, Cash Daddy continues to develop its major points, explaining, "The Igbos are the niggers of Nigeria […] They've been maltreated and marginalized" (234). Cash Daddy then tells violent and tragic stories of the Biafran War, calls for tribal unity, and concludes with the statement, "My dear friend, it's at times like this that I understand why America had to fight the Cold War. You understand what I mean?" (236). Kingsley admits to himself that he does not know what Cash Daddy means, but "The white man, on the other hand, was several scales ahead of me in the evolutionary process. He understood perfectly" (236).

The irony that creeps into Kingsley's narrative here is pointed, considering how unlikely it is that Winterbottom does know what Cash Daddy means. The exchange is a performance on all sides, with sympathetic stories, credibility-enhancing details, and the language of development mixed together to great effect; it is a 419 email converted to a monologue, with the same strategies and maneuvers in play. As Kingsley observes the primary players, he notes, "I could see that [Winterbottom's] soul was being thoroughly

converted to *mugu*" (235). This conversion to *mugu*, which, as noted above, has a pejorative connotation, is an interesting notion. It suggests that Winterbottom is increasingly foolish to buy the whole act, that responding to an email offering a payout is one thing, but swallowing the too-good-to-be-true story in person is another.[89] Additionally, in suggesting it is his soul that is being converted, Kingsley employs a religious rhetoric which invokes the notion of morality. It is clear from Winterbottom's eagerness that his interest is in fleecing, rather than development. Just as the three 419ers play stock characters, the script and its promises are clichéd and overwrought; that Winterbottom indulges it demonstrates that his eagerness to believe the fiction trumps his critical faculties.

Winterbottom's belief, it turns out, is firm. Shortly after the meeting in London, money begins to arrive. This particular scam, due to Winterbottom's position as a banker, is larger in scope than many of the others described in the book. Winterbottom is told that he is working with a Nigerian company that has been awarded a $187 million contract to upgrade a small airport in Enugu to an international airport. Eventually, control of those funds will be given to his bank. Unfortunately, as Protocol Officer informs him, "government officials had insisted on a $10 million bribe" (245). Winterbottom sends the cash in four installments of $2.5 million. He also makes plans to visit Abuja. Upon arrival, he notes with some surprise, "Your country is beautiful […] Everything looks so well organized. This isn't what I expected" (246). Later, after Kingsley gives him a tour of "the modern mansions of Asokoro and the scenic streets of

[89] As Paul Benzon notes, the hyperbolic claims of 419ers are parodied in a popular 2005 song "I Go Chop Your Dollar," which suggests Nigerians' low opinions of those who fall for such schemes (Benzon 7). In the song, a 419er lists his accomplishments in building airports and stadiums, "claim[ing] the iconography of development" to an absurd degree (7).

Maitama," Winterbottom asks where he can get "some real good shots […] some real photos of real Africans" (247). He is delighted when Kingsley takes him to a nearby village, and spends the day "babbling with awestruck natives, listening to a bare-bottomed lad playing a bamboo flute, and taking photographs of men drinking *fura da nono* on raffia mats in front of their shacks" (248).

The cognitive dissonance Winterbottom experiences while driving through the financial capital of Abuja serves to underscore the play of actual and user-generated geographies in the novel. Cyberspace is in one sense an almost entirely rhetorical zone, a virtual space constituted by words and images. Within this virtual realm, Nigeria can be depicted as the epitome of a Third World nation: besieged by corruption, teeming with the disenfranchised, ripe for exploitation. Whether corruption and disenfranchisement actually exist is not the point; rather, it is that this depiction is simply a series of high-contrast images that allow little nuance or variation. Winterbottom's "real good shots" are as much a fiction as the 419 emails themselves—a manipulation and exploitation of certain facts, deliberately ignorant of others, generated to produce a specific reaction in the viewer. Kingsley's Nigeria is neither Abuja nor the nearby village, but a series of spaces that make up his day-to-day life, each with its own characteristics and irreducible to the "real Africa" that Winterbottom seeks. The trick of cyberspace is that it allows for any aspect of a certain region to be overemphasized, for a palimpsestic act of coding and recoding to take place, with images and phrases set in place in order to reinforce certain notions. Winterbottom and the 419ers generate selective images of particular spaces, each using a specific technology to create their narratives. These face-to-face encounters with Winterbottom demonstrate the ways that physical space and interaction can be as

fictionalized as the emails, and thus how 419 is more a rhetorical mode than a simple fraud.

The second *mugu* Kingsley meets is Hooverson, his target in the Abacha emails. Hooverson has developed into a fairly significant source of income; as Kingsley explains, he has a gambler's nature: "Every additional payment had simply increased his commitment, the need to win money had kept him going" (270). At this point, Hooverson has contributed a grand total of $133,100 to Kingsley's coffers, through payments for things like "customs clearance," "a security company tariff," "transfer of ownership," and other fees (270). The promise of $58 million has kept him going, but he is eager to receive his payout and makes plans to meet Shehu in Amsterdam. Once there, Kingsley and an associate posing as a scientist named Dr. Wazobia enact a variation of 419. In this scam, known as money washing or "wash wash," the target is presented with a large amount of cash that appears to be painted black and is told that it must be washed with a very expensive chemical. With Hooverson watching, Shehu and Dr. Wazobia wash the top row of bills, "leaving gleaming dollar notes behind" (279). Of course, as Kingsley narrates, "Only the first row of notes in the trunk box were real. The rest were old newspapers, painted black and cut to dollar size" (279). Just as the standard 419 email employs tropes of backward and uncivilized Africa, the "wash wash" scam implicitly suggests that the money is stained by its connection to corruption, but can be washed clean before making its way into Western hands. The black/white undertones are obvious, and considering that Wazobia informs Hooverson that a bottle of the washing chemical costs $70,000, it is clear that the price paid for legitimating dirty currency—shedding blackness—and gaining access to the globally sanctioned marketplace is steep.

The farce succeeds in whetting Hooverson's appetite, and he agrees to pay for another bottle of the washing chemical, stating, "The sooner we get this money out, the better it is for all of us," (280). As Kingsley notes, "Clearly, the time of pretense was over" (280). The pretense Kingsley refers to here is the Abacha cover story, that Hooverson is participating in the money washing out of concern for Mariam and her family. When Hooverson and Shehu encountered each other virtually, it was easy enough to maintain the fiction that they were engaged in a joint struggle against corruption, one which had the pleasant side-effect of providing Hooverson with astronomical wealth. However, when the encounters move into the material zone, this pretense falls away. During the initial washing of the cash, Kingsley observes as Hooverson "became a mental case. He started shivering and pacing like someone sleepwalking. All his ten fingers went into his mouth" (279). This narration of Hooverson's physical behavior demonstrates the effect produced when the virtual promises of 419 manifest themselves in the materiality of a human body. The rhetoricity that couches so much of the illegal activity falls away as the promised money begins to feel both closer and more distant. The pretenses of philanthropy and development disappear as the focus situates itself almost entirely on the second half of the equation: naked greed and promises of cold hard cash. As the increasingly intense interactions with both Hooverson and Winterbottom demonstrate, the further one gets into a scam, the more pronounced the scent of cash becomes, and the more the rhetorical apparatus surrounding the enterprise recedes. In the next section, I turn my attention from the rhetorical mode of 419 to its material manifestations, looking at the economic factors at play in the novel.

Cash Daddy Economics

To discuss the material aspect of 419 is, clearly, to talk about money. For Kingsley, an awareness of the financial stakes of the endeavor comes in stages. Kingsley's first success comes from baiting a Wisconsin woman, Mirabelle, who believes his story of a wealthy client dying unexpectedly in France without identifying a next of kin. If Mirabelle will serve as next of kin, she will be entitled to 40% of the client's estate. Of course, before the money can be received, she must pay a $4,500 fee "for the processing of the death authorization form" (181). When Mirabelle agrees, Kingsley is energized by success—he explains, "Like an addict, I was eager to recreate that thrill again" (177). When the money actually arrives, he wants "to jump, to shout, to run through the streets crying 'Goal!'" (181). The presence of the cash keeps him up all night, counting the notes over and over (182). After the reality of being flush settles in, his first priority is fulfilling his duties as *opara*, or provider, and he purchases "a jar of cooking gas, some new wrappers, and a bag of rice" for his mother (182). His ability to provide for her fills him with pride.

However, as Kingsley's correspondence with Mirabelle continues, another emotion begins to surface: guilt. Kingsley takes this guilt to Cash Daddy, and their ensuing conversation reveals Cash Daddy's philosophy of 419, which I term Cash Daddy Economics. Kingsley's concern arises from Mirabelle's mention that the money she has sent—which now totals $23,000—has come from a savings account dedicated toward purchasing a home with her current partner. Kingsley is deeply affected by this email, stating, "This note caused my heart to crack" (183). He wonders "what comforts the couple had forfeited in saving up to buy a house? […] Here was real life happening

behind the curtains of an email address" (183). The metaphor here is provocative—Kingsley links the virtual address with the notion of a home space, envisioning Mirabelle's life taking place in that private domain. Because of the connectivity of the internet, he has been able to enter that domain virtually, but her interest in purchasing a real home has given him pause, wondering about the material impact she will suffer because of this virtual connection.

When Kingsley broaches the matter to Cash Daddy, he responds in Socratic fashion, taking Kingsley through a series of questions aimed at establishing Kingsley's relationship to Mirabelle: "This woman…what's her name? [...] Is she your sister? [...] Is she your cousin? [...] Is she your brother's wife? [...] Is she your mother's sister? [...] Is she your father's sister?" (183-184). And finally, he asks, "Is she from your village?" Kingsley quickly grasps Cash Daddy's logic, which argues that obligation is conditioned by levels of intimacy; it extends in certain directions based on familial and geographic proximity, rather than toward all humanity. With this, the novel expresses a clear distinction between the notion of connection, which may take place between two distant figures thanks to technology, and relation, which is based in material circumstances such as kinship or shared membership in a geographically bound community. Essentially, Cash Daddy maps out lines of obligation along these material vectors. He envisions cyberspace as a zone occupied by two sets of users: those who are materially privileged, and those who want access to that privilege. For Cash Daddy, these two groups can be mapped onto a binaristic metageography of west/nonwest, or, following the rhetoric of the emails, First and Third Worlds. His aim, at least as he explains it to Kingsley, is to alter this map, using 419 to divert privilege toward his own region.

Cash Daddy continues to lecture Kingsley, delivering a treatise that invokes the discrepancy in global suffering, the welfare state, and finally, the slave trade. Such justifications for 419 are not uncommon—as Glickman notes, some see 419 as "compensation from white men for slavery and colonialism" (478). Cash Daddy puts the situation to Kingsley thus: "You, you went to school. Did they not teach you about slave trade? […] Who were the people behind it? And all the things they stole from Africa, have they paid us back?" (Nwaubani 185). Here, Cash Daddy continues to see things in First World and Third World terms, essentially justifying his illicit behavior through a re-deployal of colonial cartographies, mapping the West in the essentialized way that the West mapped Africa in earlier eras. When Kingsley continues to fret about Mirabelle, Cash Daddy loses patience and presents matters to Kingsley in zero-sum terms:

> Since you don't appreciate the opportunity God has given you to abolish poverty from your family once and for all, continue worrying about one [white] woman in America. Be there worrying about her and leave off your own sister and mother. (185)

Thus, Cash Daddy Economics tread a careful line between reparations and responsibility; he is both claiming his due and providing for others.

Even at this early stage of his involvement with 419, Kingsley has internalized the justification of responsibility: he practices 419 because he is the *opara* and it is his burden to provide for his family. However, he struggles to figure out how far his obligation extends towards others. The invocation of friends and strangers that Kingsley exploited in his emails becomes more concrete as he inadvertently gets to know his victims, suggesting the real intimacy that can develop in the connective zone. The difficulty Kingsley faces is in figuring out his own sense of obligation toward those he

connects to. While Cash Daddy draws these boundaries genetically and geographically, Kingsley struggles to maintain them in cyberspace. However, as Cash Daddy's words sink in, Kingsley decides that his primary responsibility is to his family, noting, "Mirabelle had her problems, I had mine" (185). From this point on, he embraces his role in securing material comfort and privilege for himself and his family at the expense of strangers on the other side of the globe.

Cash Daddy Economics emerges in response to an economic system in which, as he sees it, privilege is mapped on to certain regions and denied to others. In fact, as Benzon notes, this is a basic premise of 419, which "distort[s] the ethical presumptions of the market" (5). He continues:

> Through this distortion, it allows subjects within developing and nonwestern regions to attain technological and economic leverage in direct disregard of the legal, moral, and narrative contracts that are central to the neoliberal market discourse of the technologized west, and thus to make money through narrative work within a system that consistently writes them out of its own larger narrative of financial circulation. (5)

Read thus, 419 takes advantage of cyberspace to generate sites of resistance to a skewed global economic system. Benzon's comments also usefully highlight the role of narrative in 419; the scams use fiction to redraw the map of global privilege to some small degree. 419 thus functions as an alternative for figures like Cash Daddy, who understands himself and his work as remapping privilege. Cash Daddy turns historical and contemporary material realities into a narrative of disenfranchisement that justifies his work. And while much of his income goes toward treating his "elephantiasis of the pocket,"—he amasses astonishing amounts of luxury goods and personal wealth—he also sees himself as a philanthropist (Nwaubani 119).

Cash Daddy is explicit about leveraging the power accorded him by his 419 earnings toward a shift in the geographical location of privilege. He decides to run for governor of Abia State, and during a speech written by Kingsley, he promises “to attract foreign investors to ensure that Abia was given its rightful place on the map of the world” (250).[90] While this statement might be considered simply the colorful rhetoric of a political candidate, it nevertheless engages the notion of a hierarchical cartography, one in which prominence or centrality on the map is a direct reflection of power or importance. J. B. Harley discusses both the “rule of ethnocentricity” and the “rules of social order” when it comes to mapmaking, arguing that “Cartography deploys its vocabulary accordingly so that it embodies a systematic social inequality. The distinctions of class and power are engineered, reified, and legitimated in the map by means of cartographic signs” (156-158). While Cash Daddy may be speaking of a metaphorical map, his instincts are correct in that the mechanisms of cartography have much to say about the distribution of power.

Additionally, Cash Daddy’s desire to put his region in its “rightful place” suggests that while his methods thus far have been outside the legitimate marketplace, he now wants to move toward legitimacy. The move from duping *mugus* to attracting foreign investors marks not only Cash Daddy’s transition from 419er to gubernatorial candidate, but from outlaw operating outside the establishment to ostensibly legitimate businessman on the global stage. While his methods may be suspect, the aim of Cash Daddy Economics holds real appeal for constituents discouraged from engineering their own upward mobility due to economic and political conditions. That Cash Daddy must reenter

[90] In this statement, we hear echoes of similar comments made about Ilmorog in *Petals of Blood*. In both novels, being put on the map functions as a trope for rewriting capitalist hierearchies.

the system in order to pursue this aim demonstrates how cyberspace paradoxically opens up a site of resistance to global privilege, while simultaneously limiting that resistance because of its embeddedness within that very system.

Fast Cars, Philosophy, and the Limits of 419

In this final section, I examine two concrete forms of privilege that 419 provides for Kingsley and those around him: education and mobility. Although he spends much of his money on ultimately disposable luxury items such as brand name clothes and electronics, the access this money provides to upward mobility in terms of education and transportation is potentially constitutive of lasting privilege. At the same time, the limitations of education and mobility are significant. Although Kingsley moves from the brink of poverty to overtly wealthy, it becomes clear that the privilege 419 grants is little more than the "bourgeois self-fashioning" noted by Apter above, a self-fashioning that is more focused on the appearance of wealth than any permanent or widespread change (232). In demonstrating both the extravagant reach and the limitations of the material wealth afforded by 419, *Chance* troubles the notion of 419 as the truly resistant practice Cash Daddy insists it is. Rather, the novel suggests, 419 exists at the margins of the global market, but its beneficiaries are still constituted and subjugated by those markets.

The pages of *Chance* are littered with references to vehicles. Cash Daddy has a fleet of cars including a Mercedes-Benz, a Dodge Viper, and a Jaguar, and upon achieving financial success, Kingsley purchases a Lexus, a Mercedes-Benz, a BMW, and an Audi. For the 419ers, and for those who observe them, cars indicate status, success, and even temperament. For example, Cash Daddy responds to outburst against him by the

driver of a Datsun Sunny by admonishing Kingsley, "Don't mind him, don't mind him. […] Can't you see the type of car he's driving? If you were the one driving that type of car wouldn't you be angry?" (Nwaubani 321). While the flashy cars impress fellow 419ers, they can also mark their owners as outlaws within the social system. Kingsley's mother serves as a counterpart to Cash Daddy when she refuses Kingsley's gift of a fancy car because it confirms her suspicions about his work in 419. Indeed, within the novel, the most accurate way to judge whether or not a character is engaged in corrupt activity is by considering the car he drives.

Much work has been done on both the symbolic and the real mobility engendered by the automobile in the 20th century.[91] Green-Simms coins the term "postcolonial automobility" to describe the way the car is "much more ambiguous and multiply determined by the social and material realities of everyday life in the postcolony," and how, "like modernity itself, [the car] is a paradoxical and disjointed social experience" ("Postcolonial Automobility" 4). Thus, while the cars Kingsley and his peers drive symbolize wealth and status, they also serve as reminders of their illicit behavior and ultimately circumscribed mobility. The prestige associated with flashy cars in *Chance* echoes Green-Simms' observations about "the ideals and excesses of automobility" as depicted in the film *Boys Cot*, which treats 419 (205). Referencing the protagonists' Hummers and SUVs, she writes, "they have used technology to conquer space, and although the internet is the tool they have used to do so, their large automobiles remain the most recognizable signs of their success" (205). This juxtaposition of the internet and

91 For a summary of this work, see Green-Simms "Postcolonial Automobility" 4-10.

the automobile is, in essence, a juxtaposition of two forms of mobility: automobility and cybermobility.

Both of these forms of mobility have certain limitations: while cybermobility allows Kingsley and his counterparts to connect with, and exploit, others who are separated from them by great distance, their success is largely dependent on the naïveté of the recipient.[92] Likewise, automobility is contingent on a number of factors outside the control of the driver. Kingsley's ability to move around his environment is markedly different after he purchases his first vehicle. In the early pages of the book, he spends hours on a crowded bus, describing a "stench" that "almost made [his] intestines jump past [his] teeth and onto the floor" (Nwaubani 37). Acquiring his first vehicle is a sublime moment for Kingsley, as it signifies not only his improved financial circumstances, but his ability to move about on his own terms. And yet, the automobile is still constricted by the failing infrastructure of roads and endless traffic jams, or "go-slows" (307). In fact, the traffic is so bad that characters resort to the supernatural in joking about it; as Kingsley notes:

> There were many possible explanations for the atrocious traffic in Lagos—population explosion, insufficient mass transit, *tokunbo* vehicles going kaput, potholes in the roads, undisciplined drivers, random police checkpoints, and fuel queues. But in Cash Daddy's opinion, the go-slow started whenever the devil and his wives were on their way to the market. (307)

The infrastructural problems Kingsley describes in this passage, as well as the aura of supernatural bedevilment that surrounds traffic conditions, serve to undermine the speed, and quite simply the mobility, of the fast cars the 419ers so eagerly purchase.

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[92] More broadly speaking, issues of access undermine the promises of cybermobility as well, particularly in rural areas. For more on infrastructure and technology on the continent, see Limb, Kamssu, and Siekpe, and Ellzy.

As noted above, *Chance*'s depiction of the value of education is even more troubled. Unlike many African novels, it exhibits a cynicism toward education as the key to upward mobility by contrasting Kingsley's views with those of his parents. Kingsley's parents, Augustina and Paulinus, are firm proponents of formal education.[93] Their courtship, depicted in the prologue, is almost entirely concerned with education. Kingsley's father, known in these early pages as Engineer, woos Augustina with conversations about schooling, encouraging her to pursue a university education. For her part, upon hearing Engineer's treatise on evolution, "Right there and then, Augustina fell in love with his brain" (11). After wedding, Paulinus and Augustina obtain Master's degrees abroad, eventually returning to Nigeria to raise Kingsley and his younger siblings. The parents emphasize education above all else in their household. Paulinus declares, "Any child of mine who decides to be useless and not go to university has his own self to blame for however his life turns out" (18). Kingsley explains, "To my parents, education was everything. She was the recipe for wealth, the pass to respectability, the ticket to eternal life" (18). Paulinus uses a spatial metaphor to describe the opportunities offered by education, noting, "without education, a man is as though in a closed room; with education, he finds himself in a room with all its windows open toward the outside world" (19). Having received high scores on the university entrance exams and excelled in his course, Kingsley, who looks back and calls himself "brainwashed" by his father's enthusiasm for school, expects that he will be able to provide for his parents in their old age and shepherd his siblings to self-sufficiency by

[93] Nwaubani's choice of names for her characters is clearly intended as clues to their identities. Thus Paulinus and Augustina are allied with a classical Western tradition, Kingsley is interested in power, and Cash Daddy rejects Boniface, the name of a missionary saint, in favor of a name that signals his two primary interests: the acquisition of capital and the role of patriarchal caretaker.

supporting their own educational endeavors (20). However, he is increasingly disillusioned by the job market in Nigeria as offers fail to materialize and realizes that, contrary to his parents' belief, formal education is no longer the most direct route to wealth and mobility. This disillusionment makes his turn to 419 all the more predictable.

While Kingsley is pragmatic about the value of education, he does recognize it as a key indicator of status, particularly when accompanied by wealth. Having essentially sacrificed his chance at legitimate social status by working in 419 in order to provide for his family, he is insistent that his siblings attain keep up appearances in terms of education.[94] An encounter with a former classmate, Andrew, reinforces his insistence. Upon discovering that Kingsley has not received a Master's degree, Andrew gasps and exclaims, "Kingsley Ibe! You don't have a master's? I don't believe it! These days, you can't move forward in the world without one. I have a master's in Cyber Informatics from Rutgers, a master's in Tetrachonic Correlations from Cornell, a master's in Data Transmogrification from Yale, and next fall, I'll be starting my PhD with Harvard" (286). Andrew then tells Kingsley about his brother's seven postgraduate degrees, and his cousin "at Brown starting her third PhD soon" (286). The absurdity of this list of qualifications, including degrees in fields that sound suspiciously similar to the fictions used in 419, is not lost on Kingsley, who "felt like tipping him over a cliff" (286). The exchange demonstrates how education has to a degree been coopted into the mentality of 419 described by Apter, in which appearance and the performance of status matter far more than reality.

[94] While the book suggests that the 419ers can to a certain extent engender respect by virtue of their wealth, there is also a stigma attached to that wealth. Kingsley feels this keenly when a woman he is pursuing discovers his connection to 419 and refuses to see him. For more on the stigma of 419, see Smith.

Indeed, Kingsley has internalized the “bourgeois self-fashioning” at the heart of 419, as is evident in a moment late in the text (Apter 232). Kingsley’s sister Charity receives poor scores on her JAMB test (Joint Admissions and Matriculation Board), which puts her acceptance to university in doubt. Upon hearing the news, Kingsley visits a professor at Abia State University and negotiates a spot for Charity in the Department of Philosophy. In a moment that reveals much about his parents’ real views on education, he notes, “My father would never have allowed his daughter to enroll on such a worthless course, but studying philosophy was far better than staying home for a whole year, doing nothing” (Nwaubani 252). In other words, Paulinus’s championing of education has little to do with any deep love of learning, and everything to do with generating income and financial stability. Kingsley’s outright purchasing of a spot for Charity at the university suggests that he is far more cynical than his father, who at least championed earning a degree rather than paying for one. Cash Daddy has strong feelings on the matter as well, telling Kingsley to “just forget all the books you read in school and think smarter” (369). Ultimately, the view of education shared by the characters in *Chance* across the moral and intellectual spectrum is highly cynical and pragmatic; it is recognized as a means to an end and little more. Considering that the lack of available jobs is likely to keep Charity from legitimate upward mobility, her degree is destined to become a status symbol equivalent to the BMWs and Audis stuck in the go-slows.

Conclusion

The paradoxes of cyberspace have been noted by many: it is expansive yet limited, virtual yet inseparable from the material, transcendent of some boundaries and

engineer of others. The connective possibilities of cyberspace have generated new forms of mobility for previously circumscribed populations, while issues of access continue to deepen rifts between those who are plugged in and those who are not. Such a zone naturally lends itself to both the generation of new geographies and the transgression and sedimentation of preexisting ones. In each of these paradoxes lies an inherent dynamism, one with the potential to call for a reconsideration of geographical paradigms that have historically appeared static.

These paradoxes resonate throughout the pages of *Chance*. Kingsley manipulates Cold War metageographies in order to unsettle them, and moves in the margins of the system of global capital in order to reposition himself within that system. He relies on the connectivity of the internet to provide access and diminish the effects of distance, but emphasizes his own cultural and geographical distance in order to defraud those he accesses. Kingsley is a skilled performer and rhetorician, and a hardworking and successful student, but none of these attributes are able to provide him any kind of financial security until he begins practicing 419. Even after acquiring great wealth, he is limited by his circumstances. At the conclusion of the novel, Cash Daddy is murdered by a political foe, and Kingsley has used his capital to open a chain of cyber cafes. In spite of this legitimate business, however, Kingsley still practices 419, as in the final scene he takes a call from Winterbottom, who apparently continues to take the bait. Thus Kingsley maintains his position as a picaresque transgressor of borders, continuing to negotiate the space between legitimacy and fraud, friend and enemy, the virtual and the material.

EPILOGUE

In the introduction and four chapters that constitute this project, I have argued that contemporary African novels are writing a new kind of space, an endeavor I term dynamic cartography. Following the path outlined by *Petals of Blood* and *Anthills of the Savannah,* these novels challenge preexisting borders and frameworks, track the ways in which mobility and stasis are engendered and reinforced by new trends and technologies, and explore the relationship between virtual and material spaces. As they engage these fluid and disjunctive geographies, they also redraw generic lines. *Abyssinian Chronicles* develops a new spatial paradigm for the *Bildungsroman*; *The Beautiful Things That Heaven Bears* creates a relational narrative form out of a pastiche of the city novel and the immigrant novel; and *I Do Not Come to You by Chance* adapts the picaresque for the 21st century by revealing the generic conventions and rhetorical adaptability of 419.

While it would be overreaching to claim that all—or even most—contemporary African novels are engaged in this endeavor, it is clear that many recently published texts maintain an interest in the broad themes explored above. Several of these, published since I began this project, would reward further analysis within the methodological framework I employ here, which links African literary criticism, globalization studies, and critical cartography. I discuss a few of these texts briefly below, as a way of acknowledging that, given the necessary time and resources, they would likely find their way into this project.

Teju Cole's *Open City* (2011) shares literary DNA with Mengestu's novel, as both trace the steps of African immigrants in major U. S. cities. Cole's protagonist is decidedly more privileged and aloof than Sepha, spending hours walking the streets of

Manhattan and generating a contemporary, globalized take on the *flâneur*. Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie's *Americanah* and Taiye Selasi's *Ghana Must Go*, both published early in 2013, explore the lives of figures who move with relative ease around the globe, representing a new class of cosmopolitans, or, as Selasi terms them, Afropolitans. Adichie's Nigerian protagonist turns a sharp eye on race relations in Princeton and London, revealing how sociological categories are also challenged by shifting geographies. Selasie's novel tells the story of a Ghanaian family in Boston; the text explores how living in two worlds fractures family dynamics and the power a home space has to heal those wounds. Finally, NoViolet Bulawayo's *We Need New Names* (2013) shows the trauma of dislocation from a child's perspective. The novel argues that the dynamisms and disjunctions of globalization are felt deeply even by the youngest, as the children of the Paradise slum in Zimbabwe regard the Chinese businessman and Western NGO workers who appear in their world with equal suspicion. The narrative then follows its protagonist from Paradise to "Destroyed, Michigan," where a new set of concerns reveals itself. As these recent publications show, contemporary African novels continue to explore the relationship between stories and spaces, and cartography and the novel continue to discover shared terrain.

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