

The Geography of Narrative:  
Representations of Place in African Literature

By

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Dustin James Crowley

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Chairperson: Dr. Byron Caminero-Santangelo

---

Dr. Philip Barnard

---

Dr. J. Christopher Brown

---

Dr. Garth Myers

---

Dr. Paul Outka

Date Defended: April 17, 2013

The Dissertation Committee for Dustin Crowley  
certifies that this is the approved version of the following dissertation:

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Chairperson: Dr. Byron Caminero-Santangelo

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## ABSTRACT

Questions of geography have been prominent in the criticism of both African literature in particular and postcolonialism in general, including, for instance, issues regarding the nation, globalization, and the urban. Yet most discussions regarding these geographic concerns have remained dichotomous, resulting in criticism that fails to attend to the complexity with which African authors tend to represent the places of their writing. By engaging with a wide range of work in cultural geography, this dissertation develops what might be termed *geocriticism*, a model for understanding such geographic issues through the relations of space, place, and scale. With this model, the dissertation argues for ways to understand concepts like the nation or the local/global not as essential categories with set characteristics, but as relationally and historically particular constructs. By doing so, we can attend with more nuance to the ways African authors represent the conditions and relations of place in their narratives. The model of geocriticism developed in this dissertation elucidates the ways each of the authors discussed in some way understands the particular conditions and locations they write about as being influenced by large-scale entanglements with the continent and the world. Despite their geographic and historical breadth and varied representational strategies, they all in some sense engage with questions about “Africa” and its place-in-the-world, providing both multiform ways to understand the consequences of Africa’s position and various alternative visions for the continent and its constituent places.

This dissertation is dedicated to my beloved parents

Melvin and Debora

&

To my loving and longsuffering wife

Sarah

For their tireless encouragement and support.

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## Chapter 1

### Introduction: The Need for Geocriticism

“There never was an is without a where.”

—Lawrence Buell, *Writing for an Endangered World*

Lawrence Buell’s seemingly obvious declaration plainly states the reality of emplacement: all things in some sense *take place*, are rooted in and to an extent conditioned by a concrete materiality of place and environment. Even overtly discursive forms like identity or culture engage meaningfully with the places of their formation, as well as the relationships between places that structure a sense of difference and that help to shape and facilitate the nature of social and material relations. Ngũgĩ wa Thiong’o insists that culture itself derives from “the process of a people wrestling with their natural and social environment” (Ngũgĩ 27). Alongside the well-accepted axiom to think historically, then, we might add the imperative to think geographically, to be attuned to the geographical dynamics at work in social structures and relations through spatial relationality and material embeddedness and particularity.

By and large literary criticism has a checkered track record in thinking geographically. The literary discipline itself has long assumed a sort of geographic vision through its structuration into nationalist/regionalist categories (British literature, American literature, European literature). As theory began challenging the universalist assumptions within Western literature and criticism, literary study began dealing with even more difference and diversity, paying attention to the literature of more places (Latin America, Africa, Australia) and to the heterogeneity of all places producing literature (differences through gender, race, class). Many authors, critics, and theorists acknowledge the necessity to understand and declare their own positionality in this world of difference. To this point, such work has primarily foregrounded culture, history, language, or some other social/discursive distinction as the basis for analysis and

differentiation; still, one could argue literary study has attended to a basic understanding of the geographic spatialization of such differences.

More pressing than a simple recognition of difference (geographic or otherwise), however, is the need to recognize the way multiplicity manifests through relationality. The differences of culture, nation, or region matter principally because they find themselves interacting with each other, influencing each other. The medium for that exchange is geography, which in part helps us to examine notions of space, place, environment, flows, and borders as they pertain to those interactions. To its credit, postcolonial literary theory and criticism adopts geographic relations as one of its central concerns, challenging imperialism and colonialism that are, at their core, geographic endeavors. As a means to understand and counter the material and discursive efforts of imperialism, postcolonialism has introduced into literary theory a host of spatial concerns, concepts and metaphors: center/periphery, globalization, Global North/South, nationalism, localism, and many others.

Yet many of these same concepts are simplified or under-theorized in their adoption from geography into literary study. The case of African literature may prove instructive here: Nativist literature and criticism have often romanticized precolonial places as sites of “authentic,” homogenous, and ahistorical identities. They have subsequently—and problematically—embraced the nation and its hard boundaries as an expression of cultural authenticity and uniformity, an “inside/outside” construction that effaces difference within the nation and misses the dynamic fluctuations of historically derived places and identities. Discursive postcolonial interpretations expose such stable places as artificial (often arbitrary) constructions that are isolationist, sterile, and often oppressive. Taking from a common postcolonial move, many critics of African literature attack the nation by rejecting stable notions of place in favor of a

model of “space” that would allow for the freer expression and exchange of difference. Yet by doing so indiscriminately, they destabilize the ground for *any* collective difference, even the “local” sort they purport to defend. They ignore the material realities of place (even “arbitrary” nations) that make it more than simply discursive, that ground it in some social, environmental, historical particularity. In short, they struggle to negotiate a simultaneous defense of particularity, dynamism, an difference, and an insistence that no difference is essential or eternal. Their dismissal of any sense of stable, defensible place opens Africa to the forces of globalization and neoliberalism, disallowing the establishment of larger collectivities that might form the resistance to these forces and instead leaving the continent to be defined by the interests of imperialism, capitalism and so on.

In some very different ways, ecocriticism too has confronted what are basically geographic concerns, especially regarding the material, natural world in which our social forms and relations necessarily take place. At the same time, certain early forms of ecocriticism ignored that social world, focusing instead on nature as an (ideally) discreet phenomenon. Where they engaged social issues, it tended to be only so far as they intrude on pristine wilderness or idyllic pastoral relationships between nature and people who know how to appreciate and protect it. By turning a blind eye to social concerns, these forms of ecocriticism often had trouble effectively addressing the political and discursive forces at work in the relations between places and environments that produce the notions and shape of wilderness or pasture in the first place. Drastic changes have reshaped the field(s) of ecocriticism in recent years, drawing much more attention to the sociopolitical aspects of any discussion of environment; but the work is still ongoing, and careful consideration of certain geographical concepts will help deal with lingering baggage surrounding ecocriticism’s use of terms like “place.”

Taken together, postcolonial, environmental and African criticisms suggest a the need for more critical attention to key geographic categories in literary analysis generally, especially as they engage in discussion with each other on issues with geographic elements. Without a well-theorized geocriticism, literary studies will continue to encounter similar limitations in dealing with the relationality and materiality that play key roles in the social forms that more commonly draw our interest. Geocriticism in this sense would not supplant more traditional literary concern with cultural difference, socioeconomic or gender inequality, or any other social or discursive focus; nor would it substitute for ecocriticism and focus on specifically environmental concerns. Instead, it would investigate more directly and more clearly the points of connection between these fields: the conditions of those structures and relations as they arise from embeddedness in particular material environments and spatial relationships. In the following pages, I attempt to develop just such a geocriticism.

The geocritical approach proffered here relies on a specific model of *place* as a way to mediate between discursive and materialist approaches, with a particular eye toward postcolonial ecocriticism as an emerging field that necessarily draws both together. Geographic work on place has provided a coherent concept uniquely suited to act as fertile ground for this exchange. The model developed in this chapter sees place as the product of material and discursive forces working in tandem, a uniquely natural and social phenomenon. As such, places are irreducibly particular in the way human endeavors and environmental factors layer up historically at specific locations; yet they are simultaneously open to influence by relationships with other places, imbuing them with a dynamic relationality that resists attempts at essentialism or homogeneity.

By putting place at the center of this study, I hope to make postcolonialism's attention to spatial relations more directly applicable to environmentally-focused efforts, and reciprocally to

cast ecocriticism's focus on materiality in ways that make it accessible for interventions on postcolonialism's discursive emphasis. As the subsequent chapters of this study suggest, both the discursive and the material find special significance in African literature, yet have been unevenly addressed in the criticism. This model of place has the capacity to address the mobility, transgression, heterogeneity, discourse and systemic power that have characterized especially post-structuralist postcolonial criticism heretofore; at the same time, it provides a necessary check against unencumbered and uncritical disruption of all collectivity or material particularity. On the side of ecocriticism, the place model introduces language and concepts to address social factors and concerns that necessarily attend any ecological defense, enabling more clarity and flexibility in discussions on the often very large-scale spatial factors at play in producing more specific degradations. By adding notions of place to the conversation, we can analyze and perhaps evaluate the ways African authors often posit agency and resistance precisely through the adoption of place-based identities and concerns.

### **Finding Ground for Postcolonial Ecocriticism**

Given their complementary strengths and weaknesses, it stands to reason that postcolonialism and ecocriticism could be brought together productively as a ground for developing geocriticism. In recent decades, postcolonial theories and criticism have been at the forefront of challenging accounts of history, politics, economics, and culture put forth by imperialism and the Global North. More recently, postcolonial ecocriticism has added the environment to that list, seeking out ways to make explicit the inexorable connections in the colonial legacy between social and ecological ills in the Global South. Productive as these cross-cultural and interdisciplinary exchanges have been and will not doubt continue to be, finding

common ground between traditionally materialist ecocriticism and often discursive-focused postcolonialism is not without its difficulties. Ecocriticism began largely under the auspices of British and American critics with little concern for either cultural difference or theories of discourse that would highlight that difference in challenging their unmediated connection with the landscapes of their critical interest. Even where their interests align, postcolonialism has had its blind spots as well; as DeLoughrey, Gosson, and Handley succinctly put it, “Although ecocriticism overlaps with postcolonialism in assuming that deep explorations of place are vital strategies to recover autonomy, post-colonial criticism has given little attention to environmental factors” (5).

In diagnosing the problem, DeLoughrey et. al also suggest one potential solution for continuing to make postcolonial ecocriticism a more coherent field: bringing a geographical element to the theory, especially one focused on place. Both postcolonialism and environmental theories have predictably long histories of interaction with geography. Postcolonial theorists centrally deal with the geographic nature of colonialism and its transformative spatializations through concepts like center and periphery, de- and reterritorialization, and global flows of people, nature, resources, and ideas. Ecocriticism too shares a natural affinity with geography and the transformation of ecologies through human activity. Jonathan Murdoch goes so far as to define geography as “the study of relations between society and the natural environment” (Murdoch 1), closely paralleling many definitions of ecocriticism, including the oft-quoted summation in *The Ecocriticism Reader* where the authors claim it to be “the study of the relationship between literature and the physical environment” (xviii). By drawing on this familiarity with both fields, then, geography can help to more fully theorize postcolonial ecocriticism through models of place, which have been developed precisely to account for the

materialist and the discursive elements of human-environment interactions simultaneously and interdependently.

The need for competent discussions about geography, postcolonialism, and environment is especially poignant for Africa, where troubled nation-states and threatened ecosystems are mutually destabilizing, and where neoimperialist relations of transnational capitalism exploit and despoil local African environments and societies (Caminero-Santangelo and Myers 9). The nature of Africa's environmental and social justice challenges requires a geographically-informed perspective that can elucidate the often complex global and local factors and relations that manifest in particular conditions. At the same time, geographic models of place also provide a focal point for understanding the way African activists and writers resist those geographic relations and propose alternative visions of place and place-connections.

In some ways, introducing a specific focus on place to a tripartite convergence of geography, postcolonialism and ecocriticism seems common sense, given that each discipline already utilizes this concept in one way or another. Yet that is precisely the reason for a more full-fledged theorization of place, given its different understandings and uses across these fields. If models of place are to add productively to the development of postcolonial ecocriticism, place itself must first be studied in its own right and explored as it applies to the literature. To that end, the rest of this introduction will overview some pertinent development of concepts of place and space in postcolonialism and ecocriticism, especially as they might have been under-theorized or ignored altogether. It will also examine recent work on place in geography and strive toward a clearer analysis of place representations that can provide ways to better understand the geographic imaginaries underpinning the works of African writers.

## Geography and Postcolonialism

In *Postcolonial Spaces*, Andrew Teverson and Sara Upstone suggest seeing postcolonialism and geography brought together not through a conscious effort, but by a necessary relation right from the beginning. “In the field of postcolonial studies,” they write, “[...] space has *always* been central.” (1). They frame postcolonialism’s central concern with identity geographically, claiming that “place plays a significant role in how one defines one's own identity and, equally, how that identity is defined by others” (2). Given the machinations of colonialism, the often arbitrary establishment and manipulation of colonial/national borders, and the increasingly globalized relations between postcolonial places, these identities have become very complicated. The geographic legacies of colonialism, they argue, might best be understood as engendering “complex relationships between postcolonial individuals, families, communities, and nations and, indeed, a broader global consciousness” (3).

The study of geography itself has not been immune from confronting a more complex “global consciousness” as well. Faced with post-structuralist and postcolonial challenges, cultural geography in particular has been made to account for more complexity, difference, and the *production* of spatial relations in part through discursive practices. In *Geocriticism*, Bertrand Westphal makes clear that even fictional spaces have a sort of “weak ontology” (Westphal 37), that representations of place are “real” in their affect on material spatial relations, and vice versa. As a result, geography can no longer approach its subject with its former pretensions of objectivity or universality that characterized most Western academic pursuits before the discursive turn in the latter half of the twentieth century.

In both *Postcolonial Spaces* and *Geocriticism*, the interaction of postcolonialism and geography is facilitated by a particular post-structuralist bent that privileges notions of identity,

difference, discourse, and anti-essentialism. For Teverson and Upstone, the emphasis on a specifically post-structuralist theory in both postcolonialism and geography has been profoundly impactful, given the way it makes them “more, and not less, aware of the specifics of location and situation which they have sometimes under-emphasized” (*Postcolonial Spaces* 4). In spite of criticisms from many that post-structuralism often trends overly discursive and “off-ground,” they reject a need to offer “an alternative to the poststructuralist-influenced literary/cultural postcolonial theory”; rather, “postcolonial geography has led the way in illuminating the relevance of poststructuralist theories to both the interpretation of the physical reality of colonialism, and the material struggles of postcolonial societies” (5). Ultimately, they formulate the history of postcolonial geography as a mutually beneficial exchange between the disciplines, with geography shepherded away from objective empirical materialism and postcolonialism gaining an “understanding of material locations” that aids in “combining textual and material practice” (5-6).

I would suggest, however, that the exchange has remained unfinished, at least regarding criticism on African literature, where post-structural and more materialist forms of postcolonialism have often existed in separate trajectories. Because of its history with challenging and intellectually dismantling the nation, much postcolonial criticism approaches all geographic categories and sense of place with no small amount of suspicion; even domestic and urban scales are often subject to the same erosions and transgressions as overtly contested categories like the nation. In lieu of place or materialism, this scholarship on African writing draws on geography mostly in the form of somewhat abstract spatiality with a heavy emphasis on migration, mobility, hybridity, and other forms of deconstructive and destabilizing geographic relations. What is left, rather than physical and material locations, is a sense of situatedness that

is at best “social contextualization,” and often “many of those for whom physical embeddedness is a central issue concern themselves more with ‘bodies-as-places [...] than with emplacement within physical environments” (*The Future of Environmental Criticism* 65–6).

Even pointed efforts at incorporating geography into literary and cultural criticism have followed similar trends, as exemplified by Westphal’s groundbreaking work on the subject of what he calls “geocriticism.” While not directly postcolonial, *Geocriticism* is plainly a work of post-structuralist geography and cultural theory, centering on the notion of *transgressivity*. He begins with a discussion of “smooth” versus “striated” space, taken from Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari: the distinction “is analogous to that between heterogeneous and homogeneous space” (Westphal 39), where striation implies (restrictive) order and stability (“the space of the polis, politics, the policed, and the police”) and smoothness suggests (free) movement “[v]irtually open to infinity” (“nomadic space”) (39).<sup>1</sup> These types of space are necessarily in constant conflict with each other, as “smooth space is constantly threatened by the striating that civilized, settled society imposes [...] space is essentially heterogeneous, but it is always subject to homogenizing forces” (40).

Westphal gives hints about how this formulation might be applied to the (post)colonial situation when he casts striated space as city life, opposed to the “bedouinism” of smooth space (39). The space of authority and rules, striated space would be the realm of colonialism and imperialism, setting up a center/periphery structure as a static hierarchy, “which would forever fix the poles of reference (that is to say, the center and the periphery), the privileged center point and the infinite series of points that are situated in a more or less distant array” (49). Constructed this way, smooth space (as it naturally opposes striated space) necessarily becomes the space of

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<sup>1</sup> Westphal betrays both the postmodernist literary origin and application for his form of geocriticism and its embrace of “smooth space” when he celebrates the work of José Saramago as an example of this geographic vision:

resistance, the “marginal space of freedom” (47). Indeed, smooth space is privileged and celebrated throughout Westphal’s account, especially as it gives expression to transgression, which itself is “coextensive with mobility” (45). Mobility of this sort is enacted both through and *as* smooth space, crossing borders and mobilizing the periphery against the center, where it encroaches and disrupts “according to a law of interference” (49). This, for Westphal, is the essence of resistance understood geographically, spatially. As such, it should not be “an isolated or spontaneous action,” but rather a continuous *state* of “perpetual oscillation” that he terms *transgressivity* (49).

In keeping with its post-structuralist origins, Westphal’s geocriticism ultimately understands the challenge to hegemonic forces and the expression of difference through a deconstructive principle, where the “transgressive gaze is constantly directed toward an emancipatory horizon in order to see beyond a code and territory that serves as its ‘domain’” (47). All rules, structures, boundaries, fixities ought to be elided to make room for free movement. In this emancipatory vision, the result is rhizomatic disorder, “a territory rendered incessantly mobile” that will “eventually be governed (so to speak) by an almost impalpable deterritorializing and evolutionary dialectic” (52). Here, territory cannot be clearly demarcated, and so authority cannot take hold, identities cannot be fixed, exclusions cannot be justified or carried out.

Setting aside for a moment that Westphal’s geocritical deconstruction may well undercut any justification for studying specifically African literature from the outset, we can see many elements of his spatial representation mirrored in much of the criticism regarding African writers, especially where they are considered to be “postmodern” in some sense (see Chapter 4 on Nuruddin Farah). Even criticism focused on issues of place and particularity devolves into

similar appeals to free-flowing, abstract spatiality. In her essay entitled “Place and Placelessness in the Criticism of the New Literatures in English,” Yasmine Gooneratne initially alludes to Achebe in asserting “the African writer’s oneness with his or her place of origin” (Nightingale15); she also quotes Dr. Cecil Abrahams, who insists that a Western critic should begin his study of the context of African literature and being to contribute to the more difficult but rewarding task of analysing an African work within its tradition, its time, and its place. African writers and society are not flattered to be told how much they appear like writers and people in the West; that to us is but neo-imperialism. What we want to know is how you react to a work once you have understood its context. (15)

At the same time, however, she concludes, “Their commitment to a particular place—Africa—and to an African destiny may be a temporary stage in the development of African literature” (18). Any commitment to concrete contextualization seems to be undercut in her teleological vision for literature: “When temporal questions such as those of 'national identity' or 'negritude' have resolved themselves, a writer's true loyalties are revealed: and they belong to no country. ‘As a poet ... there is only one political duty, and that is to defend one's language from corruption’, said W.H. Auden” (18). She goes on to further parallel Westphal in her general lauding of movement and exile, the necessity for writers in fact to dissociate themselves from the places about which they write in order to gain this sort of poetic authenticity.

Outside African literature, we see similar trends throughout literary studies. Sten Pultz Moslund sums up the status of literary dealings with spatiality as falling short of a well-rounded geocriticism:

One of the most remarkable developments within cultural and literary studies within the last fifty years has been the liberation of notions like movement, migration, multiplicity, difference, and displacement from a subordinate status as mere exceptions to an archaic thinking of individual and cultural life as matters of identity and sedentary settlement. However, the drawback of the successful reassertion of these notions is that matters of physical places and human experiences of emplacement have been generally overlooked or too hastily devalued as less significant. (Moslund 29)

Eric Prieto points out the same privileging of space over place in post-structuralist and postcolonial theory, attributing it to a preoccupation with “the spatial distribution of power” through “impersonal networks” and structures (Prieto 16-17). Despite Teverson and Upstone’s insistence on increased attention to materiality and specifics of location, these structures are most often dealt with in the criticism as abstract and independent of particular conditions; resistance, then, is equally placeless, depending more on something akin to Westphal’s totalizing notion of transgressivity than on emplacement or particularity.

Consequently, and perhaps ironically, certain forms of postcolonialism undermine the very differences and localisms they hope to champion because they find agency only through disruption and fluidity. Arif Dirlik somewhat flippantly dismisses the spatial anti-essentialism of postcolonialism, calling it “an efficient way, under the circumstances, to defuse [...] claims to alternative possibilities” (Dirlik 40). Among those alternative possibilities are those that might rely on some form of collective identity and agency, or, in the case of environmentalism, those that would propose alternative human-nature relationships. Indeed, the sort of spatialized resistance enumerated above seems especially inimical to the concerns of a postcolonial

ecocriticism that are deeply invested in specific social-environmental conditions and relationships that cannot be reduced to the realms of discourse and fluid space.

### **Space, Place, and Scale**

For most geographers, any discussion of place still begins with space and spatiality, which for many are the more fundamental, underlying geographic concepts. For thinkers like Doreen Massey, spatiality is in fact similar in key ways to the geographic imaginary Westphal and others have gravitated toward. In her summative work *For Space*, Massey gives a list of foundational propositions about space that mirrors much of Westphal's geocritical approach:

[W]e recognise space as the product of interrelations; as constituted through interactions, from the immensity of the global to the intimately tiny. [...] we understand space as the sphere of the possibility of the existence of multiplicity in the sense of contemporaneous plurality; as the sphere in which distinct trajectories coexist; as the sphere therefore of coexisting heterogeneity. Without space, no multiplicity; without multiplicity, no space. If space is indeed the product of interrelations, then it must be predicated upon the existence of plurality. [...] we recognise space as always under construction. Precisely because space on this reading is a product of relations-between, relations which are necessarily embedded material practices which have to be carried out, it is always in the process of being made. It is never finished; never closed. Perhaps we could imagine space as a simultaneity of stories-so-far. (*For Space* 9)

The appeals here to heterogeneity and openness obviously harmonize with post-structuralist sentiment, and her formulation does indeed have its advantages as a platform or means of

resisting certain hegemonic forms similar to those suggested by Westphal and postcolonialism. For instance, she notes an anti-essentialism inherent in this definition of spatial relations. “Rather than accepting and working with already-constituted entities/identities, this politics lays its stress upon the relational constructedness of things [...] It is wary therefore about claims to authenticity based on notions of unchanging identity” (10). This understanding of the spatial nature of identity, then, pairs well with postcolonialism’s dismantling of nationalist and nativist claims to authenticity and the repressions of difference that tend to accompany them.

At the same time, Massey’s conception of space also clashes with Westphal’s, especially regarding the binary structure of his model (smooth vs. striated space). Her understanding of space as “the product of interrelations” means that space cannot be categorized so clearly. Even assuming smooth and striated space to be necessarily in relationship with each other (as Westphal surely does), these types of space themselves seem to act as already-constituted entities with certain necessary and transcendent characteristics. For Westphal, smooth space may be the realm that allows for the free play of heterogeneity, but Massey insists that the pre-existence of multiplicity itself reciprocally shapes space and spatial relations. Spatiality itself arises from the interactions of different trajectories, different relations that must be understood as “embedded practices” (*For Space* 9); by organizing all this difference under a totalizing vision of smooth space and transgression, Westphal’s transgressive spatiality erases, or at least supersedes, both the multiplicity of other spatial possibilities and the interrelations of its own production.

Massey calls such formulations “aspatial” spatiality, in that they propose a sort of grand narrative outside history and outside the productive relationality that necessarily characterizes space. She turns to certain narratives of globalization as an example, narratives similar in many respects to *Geocriticism*’s notion of transgressivity. Like the push for transgressivity,

globalization (in certain understandings of its processes and aims) occludes other trajectories and assumes everyone to be on the same path (even if it is the path toward absolute difference). Globalization, too, has been lauded as “total unfettered mobility,” free unbounded space,” “a powerful vision of an immense, unstructured, free, unbounded space and of a glorious, complex mixity” (*For Space* 81), the inevitable destination for a world incessantly more mobile and connected. Of course, such narratives are as much a discursive effort as any description of reality, “imaginative geographies which *legitimise* their own production” (84). They are practices of power that would mask their own implication with power relations. Indeed, whether it be in the service of transgressivity or globalization, Massey notes that mobility itself acts as part of spatial “power geometries,” acting to harm as much as privilege depending on one’s position vis-à-vis the control of flows (“A Global Sense of Place” 317).

In the case of Africa, examples abound regarding the dangers of “free-flow” discourses and the production of “smooth space” at the expense of structured places, cultures, histories, and ecologies. Much of the history of colonialism in Africa and elsewhere might be understood as a discursive, administrative, economic and military effort to break down “striated spaces” and established communities in order to produce a more abstract space out of which imperialism (and later capitalism) might operate. Most of Africa’s places were in some way “deterritorialized, stripped of their preceding significations, and then reterritorialized according to the convenience of colonial and imperial administration” (*Condition of Postmodernity* 264). More recently, even the remnant structures of colonialism themselves have been challenged by neoliberal discourses of “free markets” and the global free flow of resources and capital; buttressed by these discourses, many African nation-states have been crippled by structural adjustment programs that consequently allow for easier exploitation of Africa’s resources and ecologies by transnational

corporations and institutions like the World Bank and International Monetary Fund. In both cases, ideals of freedom, mobility, and unstructured space operate not to achieve Westphal's idyllic transgression, but the production of other spatial relationships shot through with power and as restrictive for many Africans as they are liberating for wealthy capitalists, tourists, and the like. Even where marginalized groups are the "beneficiaries" of transgressive movement, it just as often manifests through forces like war and refugeeism as it does anything to be celebrated ("A Global Sense of Place" 317).

Because he takes space itself to manifest in only a dichotomous standoff between smooth and striated, Westphal's alternative vision necessarily falls to absolute mobility and "free" space as the challenge to hegemonic striation, blind to the fact that space and spatiality of any sort are necessarily imbued with power, "co-constituted" as they are through and with the very sort of embedded relations and practices Westphal's vision attempts to escape (*For Space* 10; Murdoch 19). Transgression in and of itself cannot be understood as productive resistance, just as striated space (or what we might term *place*) cannot simply be dismissed as an obstruction to freedom, a "homogeneity" that must always be resisted. Indeed, by complicating our understanding of space and spatiality, we complicate by extension the assumptions of a dichotomous space-place relationship that have often structured geographic debates on such issues.

Much of the binary understanding about space and place corresponds to narrative arrangements that cast history into modern and postmodern eras. Modernity, with its focus on origins and authenticity, was a "world of bounded places" (*For Space* 81), which themselves were "(supposedly) inhabited by coherent and homogeneous communities" ("A Global Sense of Place" 315). From a postmodern perspective, then, places are closed and reactionary, false constructions aimed at ignoring, suppressing, or excluding the realities of heterogeneity and

dynamism. This has been an especially potent line of criticism levied against African nations, where accusations of the arbitrary nature and the harmful consequences of legitimating/policing such places and identities find ready and abundant examples. Even those intent on salvaging concepts of place admit to place conceptions being abused along these lines. Pointing to the Nazi example in Germany, Greg Garrard warns about the latent “social conservatism of an appeal to ancestry, family, and tradition” that often underlies defenses of place (Garrard 113); Lawrence Buell concurs, arguing that “place-attachment can itself become pathological: can abet possessiveness, ethnocentrism, xenophobia” (*Writing for an Endangered World* 76). Where place is understood to be defined by narratives of belonging and authenticity, it risks corollary narratives of *un*belonging and *in*authenticity, narratives that push toward the dreaded homogeneity of Westphal’s striated space. Seen this way, it seems clear why postmodernity and post-structuralist postcolonialism would be associated with space as a way to break down and reject the repressive world of places.

As with space, however, these representations and understandings of place are far from exhaustive; place itself is variably produced and experienced in line with the multiple trajectories that interact to produce spatiality. Indeed, rather than understanding place as something antithetical to space, geographers like Massey and David Harvey have developed models that show place as a necessary outgrowth of spatial practices and relations. Massey suggests, “If space is [...] a simultaneity of stories-so-far, then places are collections of those stories, articulations within the wider power-geometries of space” (*For Space* 130). Social relations and interactions build up historically from the streams of spatiality, forming places that are necessarily dynamic and heterogeneous. Place, then, might best be thought of as an “event” (*For Space* 140), “more like a verb than a noun” (*Future of Environmental Criticism* 75).

Of course, the challenge for many dealing with place is how to match that sense of mutability and internal multiplicity with a sense of uniqueness and (provisional) stability that tend to characterize our understanding and experience of place, and to anchor our defense of it. Indeed, it is the sense of specificity attached to place that makes it both the subject of and an enabler for resistance in anti-imperialism and environmentalism. Buell contends that “the more a site feels like a place, the more fervently it is so cherished, the greater the potential concern at its violation” (*Writing for an Endangered World* 56). Place acts as something to be cherished in ways space often cannot. As “particular or lived space” (Agnew 82), place is something specific to which we can ascribe meaning, distinctiveness and value; so “we speak of place-attachment rather than of space-attachment” (*Writing for an Endangered World* 59; *Future of Environmental Criticism* 63). There is a need, then, for ways to preserve a sense of uniqueness in dealing with place, even as we challenge modernist notions of closed, “authentic” places.

Massey’s answer to this challenge is to make that dynamism a constitutive part of places themselves: “What gives place its specificity,” she argues “is not some long internalized history but the fact that it is constructed out of a particular constellation of social relations, meeting and weaving together at a particular locus” (Massey 322). That constellation is necessarily linked outward with other places through spatial and temporal flows, what Harvey calls a “permanence” crystallizing out of those flows (*Cosmopolitanism* 191). He sums up the dynamic yet distinctive nature of places this way:

[Places are] “entities” that achieve relative stability for a time in their bounding and in their internal ordering of processes. [...] These permanences come to occupy a piece of space in an exclusive way (for a time) and thereby define a place—their place—for a time. The process of place formation (including that of

bounding and internal ordering) is, therefore, a process of carving out “permanences” from a flow of processes that simultaneously create a distinctive kind of spatio-temporality [...] But permanences—no matter how solid they may seem—are not eternal [...] Places are, in short, always contingent on the relational processes that create, sustain, and dissolve them. The coexistence of “multiple spatialities” in places undermines any simple, unitary sense of place. Nonetheless, at the end of the day, the emphasis has to be upon the bounded entity or “permanence,” the distinctive shape, form, and internal ordering a particular place acquires. (*Cosmopolitanism* 190)

Here Harvey reverses Westphal’s formulation; rather than the freedom of smooth space being threatened and obstructed by the static forces of homogenized striated space (Westphal 40), the stability of place as “permanence” is made necessarily provisional by its interactions with and production through the dynamism and plurality of spatial relations. Again, place represents an event more than a solid object, a continual place-making effort, where borders, rules, meanings, relationships, and flows in and out are constantly organized, negotiated, and contested as part of a “spatial politics” that “is concerned with how such chaos can be ordered, how juxtapositions may be regulated, how space might be coded, how the terms of connectivity [between places] might be negotiated” (*For Space* 151-2). Through this politics of place-making, places gain their distinctive, negotiated shape, organized to establish and maintain certain structures of power and movement and, according to Robert Sack, to accomplish certain projects (107). Such projects would equally include, say, the exploitation of natural resources by transnational corporations and efforts to resist the environmental degradation attendant to such exploitation. In short, places are sites of agency; to change a place (or how a place is understood)

is to change the possibilities of agency. Thus, the nature of place provides the means for both hegemonic control and the challenge to hegemony, not through the dissolution of place but through a project of alternative place-making that would enable new social and human-nature relationships.

The project of place-making does not and cannot operate in isolation, however; crystallizing as it does out of the processes of spatialization, the character of any place is shaped by its spatial with relations with other places “at a variety of interlocked and nested geographical scales” (Swyngedouw 129). Buell asserts that there is no place that “is either a hermetic unit or utterly a product of forces outside it” (*Writing for an Endangered World* 60); nor are places “stable, free-standing entities, but continually shaped and reshaped by forces from both inside and outside” (67). This historical development and porosity make for places that are multiple and outwardly-connected, not easily conflated with some ideal, insular “community.” In fact, because the relations that characterize place “extend over a certain material/social space [...] the issue of geographical scale emerges as central” when attempting to understand place and the internal and external forces that negotiate to produce it. We mistake place when we assume it to be simply “local,” either in terms of size or isolation; instead, space, place, and scale should be taken together to understand the way they stem from and produce each other in complex networks of interaction (McMaster and Sheppard 15). The notion of place itself is flexible enough to exist across several scales—both as places of different size (from a kitchen to a nation to Earth itself) and as points of connection in large, often non-contiguous networks, what Ash Amin calls “nodes in relational settings” (quoted in Murdoch 21).

For critics interested in the politics of place and place-based resistance, then, the upshot of scale is two-fold: first, we must recognize the various layers and linkages of external forces at

work in generating even the most local conditions, and how they work through different scalar configurations. These configurations can change as power shifts, and vice versa, producing both new places and new relationships between places (Swyngedouw 133). As a result, “The mobilization of scalar narratives, scalar politics, and scalar practices, then, becomes an integral part of political power struggles and strategies” (134). Which leads to the second consideration: how literary representations might be marshaled to manipulate the definition and boundaries of place and place-connections in order to gain more broad-based support. Buell suggests that “the difference between pious obeisance to lococentrism and a more critically aware place-connectedness is a sense of inhabiting different places simultaneously” through nested places and our own movements (real and imaginary) through linked places (*Writing for an Endangered World* 66). He quotes Val Plumwood in support of this notion, where she insists, “the goal of place-conscious and place-sensitive culture need not dictate a place-bound, stationary lifestyle of monogamous relationship to just one place” (*Future of Environmental Criticism* 69). Of course, how exactly one envisions dedication to one place extending across various scales of other places is part of the discursive political negotiation. According to Swyngedouw, “Scale mediates between cooperation and competition, between homogenization and differentiation, between empowerment and disempowerment” (134). Consequently, our geocriticism should also take into account the scalar configurations of place (both in its own boundaries and in its connections with other places) as part of the enabling backdrop for whatever projects of power and resistance are envisioned by the authors.

I would argue the conception of place outlined above satisfies to a great measure the post-structuralist admonition against dealing with essentialisms in our geographic analyses, while mitigating the push for a simplistic deconstruction of any (provisionally) stable geographic

categories or entities like places. Still, some worry that an exclusive focus on social construction in order to accomplish this anti-essentialist redefinition of place leaves open the possibility for place to be unduly eroded in its material, environmental makeup. Dirlik warns, “Porosity of boundaries is not the same as abolition of boundaries,” and that if we are “overzealous [...] in dislocating place from fixed location,” we risk coming to an understanding in which “there is nothing special about place after all” (Dirlik 22). He adds a measure of “groundedness in topography” to Massey’s constellation of social relations, reminding us about the “limitation set on the production of place by its immediate environment” (22). Erik Swyngedouw even goes so far as to equate place with “transformed nature” (131); as such, he does not displace the social elements of place, but adds to Massey and Harvey’s model of locative accumulation of social relations the “social appropriation and transformation of nature” (130). This transformation accumulates in reciprocal relationship with the social constellation, producing “historically specific social and physical natures that are infused by a myriad of social power relationships” (130). The palimpsest of social relations that construct a place are “mediated ecologically by the physical environments that they also mediate” (*Writing for an Endangered World* 60), making place distinct in the way it is “defined by physical markers as well as social consensus” (*Future of Environmental Criticism* 63). Any geocriticism of place, then, must account for the way the spatial manifestation of place necessarily combines the social and the natural in ways that are inextricably and reciprocally formative (Dirlik 18, Sack 108, Watts 143, Swyngedouw 129). Though Teverson and Upstone suggest it to be *fait accompli*, it is precisely this ability to deal simultaneously with the social and material/environmental that I argue much postcolonial criticism has yet to imbibe fully from geography.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>2</sup>It is worth noting that even post-structurally focused geography keeps this social/natural nexus at the forefront of its method. In his book *Post-Structuralist Geography: A Guide to Relational Space*, Jonathan Murdoch argues from the

## Place and Postcolonial Ecocriticism

It almost goes without saying that a post-structuralist postcolonial approach akin to Westphal's deconstructive transgressivity does little to address the concerns of nonhuman ecologies. Yet just as postcolonialism struggles at times to give appropriate attention to environmental factors, certain forms of ecocriticism and environmentalism have under-theorized social, political, and economic forces at work in their efforts. Murdoch suggests that environmentalism has tended not to address the complex and heterogeneous relations between society and nature, even while it stresses a more "ecological" view of interrelations generally:

[M]any environmentalists cling to the belief that nature can ultimately be separated from society. Thus, the objective of much environmental action is not to more deeply embed human action and human society in heterogeneous or hybrid relations; it is instead to diminish the impact of this society on natural entities by protecting nature from human interference. (Murdoch 108)

This same trend of "spatial demarcation" has been noted by many working in a burgeoning ecocriticism of African literature. By assuming a normative "pristine nature" that must be protected from indigenous and marginalized peoples, African conservation tends to erase "the extensive intertwined history of nature and culture in Africa and the creation of spaces of pure wilderness through the forced removal of those with long histories of inhabitation" (Caminero-Santangelo and Myers 7). Counter to this asocial conservationism, Garth Myers and Byron

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outset that geography is primarily concerned with "how society shapes, alters, and increasingly transforms the natural environment, creating humanised forms from stretches of pristine nature, and then sedimenting layers of socialisation, one within the other, one on top of the other, until a complex natural-social landscape results" (1). In turn, geographers work to understand "how nature conditions society, in some original sense of creating the people and raw materials which social forces 'work up' into culture, and in an ongoing sense of placing limits and offering material potentials for social processes" (1).

Caminero-Santangelo call attention to African authors at the forefront of offering “powerful alternative ways of understanding nature, conservation, and development” that center on “the link between environmental activism and social justice” (2). Their literature often goes unnoticed by an ecocriticism drawn to unmediated encounters with wilderness, idyllic pastorals, or literature overtly concerned with ecological issues; this ecocriticism has at times been blind to the politics and discourses of its own positions and deaf to the needs of social along with ecological justice within the African context.

Postcolonial ecocriticism, then, finds itself needing tools and methods capable of addressing the material and the discursive, the social and the environmental as relationally inseparable. It must resist an overly spatializing discursive approach that would efface or uproot long histories of inhabitation, and yet also counter ideas of apolitical, ahistorical environmentalism that would skirt the necessary role of power and the needs of marginalized and indigenous peoples most affected by Africa’s ecological hardships. Seeing environments as places (necessarily drawing together the natural and social as co-constitutive) and environmental issues of degradation and resistance as *emplaced* practices (taking on a grounded particularity while linked at various scales with external influences) provides a productive alternative to the way environmentalism has often been dealt with in Africa. According to Massey, “Places pose in particular form the question of our living together,” which is “the central question of the political” (*For Space* 151). By figuring questions of environment(alism) in terms of place, we keep the politics of living together (human to human and human to nonhuman) at the forefront of our understanding.

At the same time, postcolonial ecocriticism needs geographic tools that can illuminate the connections between the local and the global as they interact to produce these social and natural

conditions. In *Environment at the Margins*, Caminero-Santangelo and Myers assess Africa's social and ecological injustices and their geographical components:

Global environmental problems—global warming, overfishing of oceans, disposal of toxic waste—have already deeply affected many Africans. Yet most Africans are not the primary sources of these problems, nor do many Africans generally benefit from the resource exploitation that engenders them. More localized problems too are often shaped by global factors that are difficult for many Africans to address, in particular the shaping of local political, cultural, and economic conditions by the legacies of colonialism and (neo)imperial capital. Cycles of poverty resulting from these legacies have had substantial negative impacts on African environments, and in turn the resulting environmental conditions have been major factors in these vicious cycles. (9)

Clearly, dealing only with the local or even national or regional would miss and misunderstand key elements in the production of Africa's ecological crises, replicating the mistakes of earlier ecocriticism afflicted by what Rob Nixon calls "spatial amnesia." Only by getting outside of a "spiritualized and naturalized national frame" (Nixon, qtd in Caminero-Santangelo and Myers 4) can ecocriticism hope to be "more responsive to historical relationships of power, to colonial history and its effects, and to cultural difference" (Caminero-Santangelo and Myers 5). Yet we ought not simply dismiss the nation or any other place construct as we strive to deal with these large-scale, transnational forces. If anything, Ursula Heise argues, "in a context of rapid economic globalization," we should remember that "localism and nationalism can serve progressive political objectives and legitimate emancipatory projects" (6). By moving beyond understanding the geography of resistance as either the defense or dissolution of any particular

place or scale, we can focus on understanding how they interact to produce particular conditions or to enact certain alternative visions of place. The model outlined above, with its attention to both particularity and scalar flexibility/connectivity, does just that. It enables postcolonial ecocriticism to engage in what Harvey calls “militant particularism,” a form of resistance stemming from concerns about specific conditions in specific places, yet understood as at least partially the result of large-scale forces, often requiring equally large-scale response.

In order for concepts of place to become helpful to postcolonial ecocriticism in these ways, however, we first need to analyze the role of place and place representations in the literature. The case studies in the following chapters do not engage directly with representations of environmental concern or questions about human-nonhuman relations in African literature. They address instead the more basic geocritical questions about how African authors understand and represent place, and especially how they envision alternative notions both of African places and Africa itself as a “place-in-the-world” (Ferguson 4). My intention is to lay the groundwork for discussions about the geographic and discursive landscape of agency and resistance in which more specifically ecocritical concerns *take place*.

### **African Literature and Representations of Place**

To speak of “African literature” and “place” ought perhaps to seem odd; Africa is, after all, a large, complex, and hugely diverse continent, full of places as varied as anywhere in the world. Africa’s ecologies, histories, languages, livelihoods, cultures, nations—all the elements that would typically mark a clearly defined place or region constitute more difference within the continent than readily recognizable similarity. Still, we might recall that the concept of place

itself is entirely flexible, and can apply to any geographic effort we make at “bounding and attempting to control what takes place” in a certain territory (Sack 108). Because the definition and boundaries of “a place” are largely formed discursively and relationally, it can take any shape and encompass (and potentially efface) any number of constituent places and differences. What matters is that a conceptually bounded place have shared meaning, that it be “an instrument” created in order to “delimit and control an area or space” through rules that govern that place’s relationships with outside places and forces (107).

In other words, Africa exists as “a place” in large part because typically we speak “not of specific African nations, societies, or localities, but of ‘Africa’ itself” (Ferguson 2). As part of (neo)imperial discourse, “Africa” has indeed acted as an instrument for controlling the continent, legitimating “a history of unequal economic and political connections feeding off of and giving reality to an assigned geographical position” (Caminero-Santangelo and Myers 9). Needless to say, the way Africa is bounded and defined in most imperialist discourse marks it as a place of unique and pervasive deprivation, strife, and urgency. Caminero-Santangelo and Myers note the persistent view in the Western imagination of Africa as “a singularity constituted by absence—of time, civilization, or humanity” (8), an image that justifies Western control and exploitation while simultaneously serving as “a polemical argument for the West’s desperate desire to assert its difference from the rest of the world” (Achille Mbembe, qtd in Ferguson 2).

In turn, the construction of Africa as “a place” conceptually leads to material realities that mark the continent as a coherent place as well. More apparently concrete places within Africa (cities, regions, ecologies) are materially shaped through common economic, political, and environmental relations acting in concert with the discursive practices that homogenize the continent. In this way, “Africa” crystallizes as a physical and social permanence out of these

interactions and flows, constructed as a coherent place (discursively and materially) by a history of colonial and capitalist relations, engendering a reality that cannot simply be dismissed. As a result, we are left with “a continental predicament, and a discursive and imaginative object, that cannot be grasped simply as the sum of a series of localities” (Ferguson 4). If our concern is any one place on the continent, we must confront the reality of that specific place’s connection with and refraction through Africa itself as a place.

The question of “Africa” as a singular place is addressed straightaway in Chapter 2, “‘My Black Land’: Senghor’s Construction of ‘Africa’” which examines the geographic and environmental assumptions and blind spots in Léopold Senghor’s poetic and prosaic *négritude*. In particular, this chapter challenges assumptions by both Senghor and many of his (especially early) interpreters of people (Africans) and place (Africa) being connected in essentializing ways. The problem, I argue, is not with Senghor’s attempt to construct an overarching understanding of Africa in response to colonialist discourses that also lumped the continents places and cultures together. Rather, the limitations come from the means by which he develops and understands this “Africa” as an *essentially* uniform place, informed by notions of black Africans as a naturally coherent culture. I compare this treatment of “black Africa” with Senghor’s more nuanced treatment of *constructed* place in his ideas regarding Greater France and the “Civilization of the Universal” in order to suggest both the possibilities and the limitations for using Senghor’s poetic *négritude* as a basis for understanding “Africa” and pan-African connections after the onset of independence and nationalism on the continent.

For his part, Ngũgĩ wa Thiong’o also takes up notions of pan-Africanism and a Global South solidarity akin in scale to Senghor’s “blackness.” Yet as Chapter 3 argues, his conception of how to build and understand that large-scale connection differs significantly from Senghor’s

essentialist model. By focusing of questions of place and scale in his prose and literature, we see a more locally-grounded form of connection and global resistance to imperialism. Rather than a trajectory from the local to the global (and correspondingly from the realistic to the abstract) presumed by many critics, I argue that Ngũgĩ's approach is coherently "glocal," where local conditions are understood to be influenced by large-scale forces outside Africa, and global anti-imperialist resistance is necessarily built up from those small-scale relations. In that way, neither Ngũgĩ's pan-Africanism nor Marxism efface other geographic considerations like the nation. Indeed, I argue that even as Ngũgĩ repeatedly takes to task nationalist governments and abuses of nationalist rhetoric, the culturally grounded, heterogeneous nation remains a key element in his anti-imperialism.

Chapter 4, entitled "Cosmopolitan Somalia: Place and Identity in Farah's *Maps* and *Links*," takes up similar themes of nationalism in the postcolonial context. However, where Ngũgĩ premises his redefinition of productive nationalism along cultural lines (reviving Gĩkũyũ language through his literature and so on), Farah's reconfigured nationalism stems from a cosmopolitan and largely urban ethos. This chapter seeks to temper the tendency of critics to see Farah's literature as primarily postmodernist, deconstructing all sense of nationalism or stable collective identity and place. The analysis of *Maps* and *Links* demonstrates Farah's concern for the concrete conditions of place even where he challenges specific place divisions as arbitrary and oppressive. Rather than abdicating his narratives to understanding through post-structuralist metaphors of "space" and unfettered hybridity or indeterminism, I argue that he *reconstructs* a sense of people and nation through a cosmopolitan ethos of place as multiple and dynamic, yet grounded and specific. Exemplified by his representation of the urban, communal "Refuge" in *Links*, Farah rebuilds a sense of Somalia redefined away from the naturalizing claims of

nationalism and clan ideology and grounded in place-based relationships yet positioned within and connected to a larger sense of the world through Mogadishu as a world city.

The last chapter, “Half Slum, Half Paradise: Abani’s Global Cities,” also addresses the mutual articulation of the urban within the global and vice versa in Chris Abani’s fiction. Abani takes up similar issues of cosmopolitanism, yet with more ambivalence about the benefits of cultural *mélange* than in Farah’s reconstructive fiction. Abani represents the interactions of globalization and urbanization as producing ambiguous and highly variable, yet connected experiences of city life both in Africa and abroad. This chapter challenges simplistic analyses of the role of mobility and hybridity/cultural exchange in these narratives, noting that Abani portrays the causes and consequences of these phenomena as geographically differential and shot through with power, variously inflected by economic and political forces that alternately link together and segregate people and places, both globally and within the world’s cities. This is especially true for Africa’s cities, which take on a uniquely troubled character in part produced by Africa’s marginalized place in the spatial relations of globalization.

Some version of this last statement might be made about all four of these authors and their works, highlighting one argument threaded throughout the dissertation: In concert with (and made evident by) the model of place outlined in this introduction, each of the authors discussed here in some way understands the particular conditions and locations they write about as being influenced by large-scale entanglements with the continent and the world. Despite their geographic and historical breadth and varied representational strategies, they all in some sense engage with questions about “Africa” and its place-in-the-world, providing both multiform ways to understand the consequences of Africa’s position and various alternative visions for the continent and its constituent places.

What becomes clear in the following chapters is that the heretofore standard critical questions regarding geographic issues in African literature are ill-equipped to interrogate the complexities of this literature. Are Farah and Ngũgĩ nationalist or anti-nationalist? Is globalization good or bad for Africa? Should resistance to imperialism/global capital be primarily local or global? Analysis that asks these sorts of questions is premised on assumptions and evaluations regarding the *nature of certain categories* of place, spatial relationships, and scale. In the following chapters, I make an argument for shifting the mode of inquiry away from presumptions about the essential characteristics of any particular space or place, instead focusing on the more fundamental and flexible concepts of space, place and scale that inform the specific conditions and relations of each author's representation. By doing so, we can illuminate the complexity and variety of portrayals of Africa's geographic relations both between the authors and within each writer's corpus, which belies the dichotomous evaluations more typical in the criticism of African literature.

## Chapter 2

### “My Black Land”: Senghor’s Construction of “Africa”

“Because it is a symbiosis of particular determinisms... geographical and ethnic ... *négritude* is rooted in these and takes from them the colour of its original style.”

—Léopold Senghor, *Prose and Poetry*

As geographer Robert Sack claims, places are sites of agency, power, and control. They are organized to accomplish specific projects and to establish and maintain certain social relations within and between places (Sack 107). In the wake of colonialism and the contemporary context of globalization, then, the concept of *place* matters in Africa and in African literature. European imperialism developed disruptive and degrading discourses of Africa as a singularly dark and uncivilized place. Armed with these discourses, they dismantled previous forms of African places—from kingdoms to villages—and reorganized them into colonies suited to their administrative and economic interests, colonies that became the blueprint for independent nations. These nations have subsequently faced increasing urbanization and globalization that continues to change African senses of place and place relationships at some of the fastest rates in the world. The struggles of many regions, nations, cities, and rural areas within Africa to find prosperity, or even stability, suggests the necessity to break from the trajectories of colonialism and global capitalism that have shaped and positioned the continent as a whole to their purposes.

To change a place is to change the agency it enables, to create new power structures and new possibilities for relations and resistance. African literature has long been engaged in just such a re-imagination effort, providing counter-discourses that work to provide alternative senses of place and agency. By understanding how African authors oppose problematic senses of place and envision alternatives, we can explore the means by which they hope to empower African

peoples to overcome the dynamics of colonialism and global capitalism. As an early and influential example of such an alternate vision, Léopold Sédar Senghor's *négritude* poetry deserves special attention in this regard, both for what it tells about the development of African senses of place and for what it may offer by way of a model for contemporary efforts to deal with Africa as a whole.

Though sometimes overlooked in the body of his poetry, philosophy, and politics, Senghor's engagement with Greater France was just such an alternative place-making venture. He developed his *négritude* sensibility initially not as a means to agitate for African independence, but "to reconcile primordial Africanity with Western modernity and to secure a place for Negro-Africans within the [French] imperial nation-state" (Wilder 232). His poetry was intended to intervene on increasing conversation about just what shape that imperial nation could or should take, to change the discourse of colonialism in order to create greater agency for Africans in that nation, as part of the very construction and definition of that place. In doing so, however, Senghor's poetry often represents Africa in problematic ways that undercut political efforts at a more diverse understanding of place and place-based relationships within the continent. By relying on assumptions of place and culture as unmediated, natural, and continentally uniform, Senghor clashes with his own efforts to formulate Greater France as discursively, historically, and materially produced rather than given. By failing to extend the same understanding to Africa itself, Senghor's *négritude* leaves us with a model for dealing with the continent as a whole in ways that are problematically inflexible and adiscursive.

The difference in Senghor's poetical and political treatment of Greater France versus that of Africa stems largely from the perhaps curious divergence in the way he negotiates the universal and the particular in these places. Gary Wilder proposes that we best understand

*négritude* when we “attend to its dual character, which developed in relation to a doubled form of colonial government.” He goes on:

The Negritude circle recognized that because the colonial project itself worked to fix African difference, it was inadequate to critique only the universalizing side of colonial racism by affirming cultural difference. Conversely, because the colonial project used bourgeois individualism to undermine African societies, it was inadequate to critique the particularizing side of colonial racism by insisting on individual human rights. These writers sought to recuperate the emancipatory possibilities contained in both universalism and particularism. (203-4)

In order to negotiate the conflicting discourses of French colonialism, Senghor’s prose and poetry can be seen to argue for “a continual confrontation and yet at the same time a continual exchange of opinions between Europe and Africa” that he hopes will produce a synthesis of these ineffaceably different cultures (*Prose and Poetry* 53). Though his poetry evokes lines of distinction culturally and racially, his vision of the imperial nation resists the idea that they are lines of isolation politically or geographically. To the contrary, Senghor acknowledges the profound connection and exchange between Africa and the West, and argues for continued, more equal *métissage* between the two. By writing “African” poetry in French, he “portrays in himself the meeting point of Europe and Africa” (*Critical Perspectives* 33), a meeting point that strives to value especially the contributions of the black world to a synthesis of cultures in the “Civilization of the Universal.” To that end, his poetry cultivates “a conception of distinct black identity without advocating cultural or political separatism” (Wilder 232).

In Senghor’s geographic vision, then, “Greater France” would exist in parallel to the Civilization of the Universal: on the one hand, Senghor claims, “we are engaged in the same

destiny...if we want to live, we cannot escape the necessity of assimilation. Our milieu is no longer West African, it is also French, it is international; we should say, it is Afro-French” (*Prose and Poetry* 235). On the other, the “universal” character of the French imperial state would have to be reconfigured to account for the way that “the universal human being always and only exists in culturally mediated forms” (236). To encourage the development of culturally rooted French citizens, Senghor insisted that “education for Africans would necessarily have to focus on African culture, African civilization, and the African milieu” as distinct from European culture, civilization and milieu (237). The result, he hoped, would be a single political entity constructed out of nonetheless particular constituent places and cultures, a political assimilation through cultural association.

In representing Africa and Europe as the particular constituencies of this more universalist nation, however, Senghor accords them no such sense of dynamism or multiplicity internally. Within the imperial nation, Africa stands as the particular, a source of specificity, uniqueness, and difference that must be retained and valued even as it is incorporated into the “Civilization of the Universal” (*Prose and Poetry* 97). Where the scale shifts to Africa as the universal, however, particularities in the form of ethnic, social, cultural, or ecological difference are transcended in favor “the African personality.” Insipient throughout Senghor’s ruminations on Greater France is the persistent assumption that it be constructed from places and cultures that are already given, natural entities rather than historically and discursively produced. Even through colonial or national engagement, Africa retains its essential, spiritual, agrarian nature that stands in stark contrast to the natural, given condition of Europe. Where Africa is “my black land” in Senghor’s poetry, Europe is white and cold, provoking many references to snow. Senghor portrays Paris in particular and France and Europe in general as alien and alienating, not

only for the persistent racism he experienced but because he felt it to be a “world of stone, soulless and full of guile” (Mezu 15), a “dead world of machines and guns” (*Selected Poems* 9).

Even as he warms to France’s beauty, it remains a place of utter difference from home:

Ah! that light that the smoke from factories never succeeds in tarnishing. Blond, blue grey according to the season, the day, the hour, it remains always delicate and nuanced, illuminating trees and stones, animating everything with that spirit particular to Paris. [...] Yes, for me, Paris is first of all this, a city—a symbol of stones—looking out on a harmonious countryside of rivers, flowers, forests, hills. A countryside which portrays a soul befitting a man. And the whole thing is illuminated by the light of that Spirit. (Mezu 15)

Especially pertinent to the lingering contrast between “Europe” and “Africa” is that Europe is defined by “the resounding solitude of great cities” (*Selected Poems* 20), places of “Shopkeepers and bankers, lords of gold and of suburbs with forests of chimneys” (23).

Even after long contact with Europe and Senghor’s hope for cultural exchange, his poetic Africa resists the infiltrations of Western urbanity and modernity. In “Return of the Prodigal Son,” he celebrates the decay of modern influence:

I am glad to see the shops around the high dwelling empty

[...] Let bankruptcy thrive!

I am glad the white wings have deserted this arm of the sea.

In the submarine bush, let crocodiles hunt; let sea-cows browse in peace. (23-4)

In contrast to the urban machine world of Europe, the poetic essence of Africa comes out in “Man and the Beast”:

It is the hour of primal terrors; they rise from the bowels of the ancestors. [...]

the beast is without form in the fecund mud, breeding mosquito and tsetse

Toads and trigonocephals, poisonous spiders, caymans with mouths of knives. (63)

Here the sense of Africa is as a primarily, *essentially* primordial place with “man and beast living side by side, as in the villages of Africa” (Mezu 57). The impression of Senghor’s Africa as resistant to European civilization is strong enough in Senghor’s prose and poetry regarding Africa that it prompts Okechukwu Mezu to speculate, “He was probably very happy to leave Dakar, African yet so foreign, so near to home yet so far away” (3). As part of his hope for a universal synthesis between Europe and Africa, between France and the colonies, then, Senghor develops a sense of the two as different and monolithic cultural blocks. And because he represents Africa as a culturally coherent place, Senghor as a representative African is able to poetically adopt the mantle of an insider, capable of invoking Africa’s essential character more or less directly in the poetry.<sup>3</sup>

Many critics have taken issue with the flat and essentialist representations of Africa and Africans they find in Senghor’s writing and *négritude* generally. Most of the attention understandably has been centered on issues of race and the limitations (if not outright erroneousness) of casting blacks as “a race” with any natural characteristics to speak of. Abiola Irele argues that, in his attempt at “a rehabilitation of Africa, a way of refurbishing the image of the black man,” Senghor problematically confuses “race and culture, especially in his early writings” (*Critical Perspectives* 14, 24), perhaps uncritically accepting and perpetuating colonialism’s own racial categories. Depending on how one sees Senghor’s use of that inverted

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<sup>3</sup> Much attention has been given to Senghor’s poetic style, which parallels his thoughts on Greater France as it works to merge French and West African artistic expression. One might argue, then, that his poetry is anything but a direct representation of Africa’s essence, given its translation into a uniquely colonial form. For our purposes here, however, I am interested in the way both Senghor and most critics assume that, whatever the effect of this cross-cultural manifestation, the poetry still attempts to represent something that exists outside the language itself; that the poetry either succeeds or does not succeed in revealing that African essence in a new form, rather than being itself a discursive act that participates in producing “Africa.”

racism, one finds varying opinions on whether it was “a revolutionary or reactionary nativism” (Wilder 203); however, most agree it was a historically limited strategy at best, and not the essential cultural ontology that Senghor claims.

The temptation might be to extend the same thinking to Senghor’s treatment of Africa: we might assume that any attempt to define or represent “Africa” as “a place” would fail along the same lines as projects to delineate Africans as “a race.” As geographers like Doreen Massey and David Harvey have asserted, no place can be taken as simply given or natural; like Greater France, every place is produced historically through the interactions of meaning, social practice and materiality. In addition, the boundaries, character, and power structures of any place are to some extent shaped by its interrelations with other places and external forces.

This holds especially true for Africa; indeed, as James Ferguson argues, “Africa” cannot be conceived as “a place” at all except as a socially and historically constructed category, defined and positioned in large part by imperial and capitalist discourse and practice (Ferguson 4). Yet Ferguson goes on to argue that Africa *is* “a place” precisely because of its common positioning by colonial and neocolonial forces; therefore, we must attend to Africa itself as a “place-in-the-world,” a construct imposed forcefully on the relations and conditions of the continent, a even as we acknowledge its vast internal variegation (4).

Furthermore, there is some ground to suggest construing the continent as a coherent place may have some benefit. The desires for pan-African solidarity find a parallel in the claims of geographers Mark Purcell and Christopher Brown. They suggest that there is nothing inherently good or bad about any scale of interaction; rather, a successful construction of place “can be local, regional, national or global. Its ‘people’ can similarly exist at all scales. A global ‘community’ is just as conceivable and desirable as a local one” (Brown and Purcell 283). We

could substitute “ethnic” for “local” and “African” for “global” in this statement and assuage any concerns that “Africa” is simply too unwieldy a conception to be realistic or useful. Quite the contrary, in fact: it is often necessary to connect peoples and places in a very large solidarity to confront equally large-scale forces like imperialism and global capitalism at work structuring Africa’s position in the world.

As a way to approach the problems of geographic universalism and particularism in literature, Heise recommends that we investigate “the imaginative strategies and devices that allow individuals and communities to form attachments” to places like Senghor’s “Africa,” as well as “what overarching cultural and ideological purposes such commitments have been made to serve” (Heise 5). Rather than deriding Senghor’s poetry for even attempting to represent “Africa” itself, then, we must investigate the way his poetry frames Africa as “a place,” and to what consequence, especially with regard to how he negotiates the universal and particular within the continent.

Any understanding of Senghor’s apprehension of place begins by examining the cosmology that underlies his view of people in the universe. Throughout his ruminations on *négritude* and his early poetry, Senghor develops a pervading sense of reciprocal human/nature interaction. According to Sylvia Bâ, Senghor’s poetry reflects a belief that “black African culture has remained close to nature, [and thus] has evolved a way of life intensely conscious of the rhythmic patterns of natural phenomena and forms, a way of life designed to function within this rhythmic framework” (Bâ 110). Senghor’s earliest and most personal collection of poetry, *Chants d’Ombre*, reflects his own childhood experience with a way of life lived intimately within the environments in and around Senegal. “For Koras and Balafong” depicts a world where “the shadow of the *dakhars* was as fresh as a lime” and “The herdsman’s flute piped to the slow

movements of the cattle.” Her recalls “altars by the side of the hard salt plain” and “fountain of Kam-Dyamé” and “Fountain-of-Elephants” around which

the drums sounded from the insistent *tanns*

Beating a rhythm for the line of dancers at the feast of the Dead.

The poem goes on to trace out the history of the Serer places like Elissa and Sine-Salum, where leaders

exchanged gifts of the banks of the Salum

Precious pelts bars of salt and of gold from Bouré, of gold from Boundou.

(*Selected Poems* 15)

“Return of the Prodigal Son” takes up similar depictions; as the speaker returns from Europe, he insists “My heart has stayed as pure as the East Wind in the month of March,” proven by his recollections of “the horses of the River, gifts of the Kings of Sine, master and millet masters of palm.” Other poems evoke “the swaying palm trees,” “the dryness of Cayor and Baol where the arms of the baobabs twist in anguish,” “A sudden gust of Simoon sands up my throat,” savannahs, seaflats, rivers, any number of other specific ecological markers.

Rather than what Mezu simply calls “contact with nature in its unadulterated form” (Mezu 2), however, these passages suggest an understanding that weaves together both human and nonhuman in the cultural and social life of Senghor’s childhood home. The intimacy the poet recalls, then, is not only a connection with nature, but with *place* as a whole—its history, culture, geography, ecology and lifeways. These poems are embedded in Senegal generally, and in the “seaflats” of Serer villages in particular. He carefully cultivates “a particular atmosphere, a certain exoticism created by the sonorous names of persons, places, flora and fauna” (Bâ 44); this atmosphere is the “kingdom of his childhood,” where he learned “about village lore, about

medicinal plants and herbs, about birds and animals, about stars and constellations from his maternal uncle Toko'Waly,” and where “he used to go to the sandy island of Fadiouth near his native village of Joal, to listen to Marione N'Diaye and her chants of joy and sorrow” (Mezu 1-2). So powerful are these personal images of emplacement in Senegal that Mezu concludes that even as his poetry becomes more politically and outwardly focused, “The geography and the traditional beliefs of the environment which produced the poet have not been forgotten” (95). Overall, these poems engender what Tuan calls an “experiential sense of place,” one derived “not only through the eyes and mind but also through the more passive and direct modes of experience” like taste, touch and smell (Tuan 152).

For all the detail in these poems, however, we should remember that they are in many ways self-avowedly nostalgic and romanticized. Senghor’s intent is not realism or anthropological description, and the imagery is often “far from photographic” (*Léopold Sédar Senghor* 39). Instead, the poet aims to “recapture [...] this idyllic situation where borders between reality and imagination are thin and undefined” (Mezu 2). But for Senghor, the imaginative experience with place is far from unreal; rather, it adds to the sensual engagement with place a representation of the spiritual, cosmic experience of that place as well. Together, the physical and cosmic experience of place conjured in the poetry acts as a celebratory rediscovery of the essence of the places of Senghor’s childhood that would inform his vision of *négritude*. By depicting his own experience, collections like *Chants d’Ombre* and *Éthiopiennes* “permit an open and unashamed identification with the continent” through “glorification of the African past and a nostalgia for the imaginary beauty and harmony of traditional African society” (*Critical Perspectives* 15). Irele claims his evocation of Senegal in general and Joal in particular “went far beyond a purely compensatory mechanism in that it was also a genuine rediscovery of Africa, a

rebirth of the African idea of the black self' (16).

However, we can glean from these last comments from Bâ a shift from the particularity of Senghor's experiences in Senegal to an engagement with "Africa" itself, as if these are coequal, interchangeable places of meaning and discovery. Indeed, Senghor himself slips easily and regularly between the specific and the general in his poetry and prose, representing each with the same sense of direct experience with place. In claiming an experiential sense of "Africa," however, Senghor goes far beyond the geographic bounds Tuan envisions for this sense of place, given its focus on physical embeddedness. At its furthest reaches, Tuan suggests the experiential sense of place being part of a "regional consciousness":

Regional consciousness begins as shared inchoate feelings. Shared feelings may develop spontaneously into, or can be deliberately made into, shared lore and a shared body of explicit knowledge. How does the change occur? In a large unit of space people may have common experiences of nature and work, feel the same cycles of heat and cold, see the same dusk, and smell the same air. A geographer, noticing the similarities of environment and livelihood, calls it a formal region.

(Tuan 159)

Senghor claims a similar regional consciousness for Africa as a whole, asserting that "In African society, [...] work on the land is the most noble, because this work makes man's harmony with the universe possible and it is performed to the rhythm of cosmic forces" (*Prose and Poetry* 48). By making such a claim, Senghor's perhaps dubious assertion of shared material experience throughout Africa's agrarian cultures is backed by an assumption of unified spiritual, cosmic experience as well. Therefore, Senghor is able to make the leap from Joal to Africa primarily through this cosmology, which sees both places and scales animated by the same spirit, "unified

by the basic principle of life forces” to be in tune with the “agrarian nature of primitive black African culture” (Bâ).

The poems, then, construct a sense of “Africa” through more specific portrayals by way of analogy and symbol. The specific details of any place or community Senghor invokes in a poem connect the realities of that place directly to that cosmology that expresses “the *unity* of the African universe. From God through man, down to the grain of sand, it is a seamless whole” (*Prose and Poetry* 43). For Bâ, the symbolic nature of the poetry is so strong that we ought not attend to the material or embedded character of the people, animals, and environments at all. She contends, “The analogical image is not an equation; the object or sign does not signify what it represents to the sense but rather what it suggests, what it creates in the mind of the perceiver.” The imagery even of Senghor’s most personal poetry constitutes “a visible sign of an invisible force” (Bâ 141), the concrete expression of basic life forces, “a commonly agreed upon set of meanings, a network of ideas lying beneath the world of visible things” (*Léopold Sédar Senghor* 39-40). By drawing on this network of ideas and symbols to describe any one place (Joal or the River Congo or Chaka’s court in South Africa), Senghor hopes to poetically enunciate the essence of Africa as supra-place.

Allowed by this cosmology and accomplished through symbolic analogy, Senghor’s poems slide easily from specific to general, from particular to universal within Africa. Alongside much more specific references to Serer environments and culture, he speaks often of “my Africa,” “my Congo,” “my black land,” and in poems like “Prayer to Masks” he takes on an expansive “African” persona to speak for “the men of the dance.” In fact, Senghor is sure enough of his ability to represent all of Africa from his own experience that he includes few concrete details about places outside his own West African region: “I will confess again that almost all the

beings and things evoked in them [my poems] come from my region: a few Serer villages lost in the tide-covered lands, the woods, creeks and the fields” (Mezu 55). To the extent that the essence of the Serer villages and the essence of Africa are one and the same, Senghor can speak of an African sense of place through Joal without mediation or abstraction—and vice versa. Critics, too, have picked up this more or less direct equation between particular and universal when speaking of these places. Take, for instance, this passage from Lilyan Kesteloot:

Senghor thus knew his country, his 'childhood kingdom,' as he called it, extremely well, and was impregnated with its culture [...] Senghor was rooted in this civilization which had survived the ancient Mali empire, assimilating both Islam and Christianity without losing any of its original traditions. His Africa was living, profuse. (Kesteloot 195)

Here Kesteloot clearly demonstrates the tendency, both in the poetry and in analysis of it, to treat all places in Africa as *essentially* the same, enabling a view of Africa itself as a singular place.

Of course, we must be careful to note that Senghor’s *négritude* by no means effaces difference totally. Mezu agrees that there are trends, “essential elements” running through black civilization, but shouldn’t be reductionist: “it would be futile to try to create a totalist or absolutist African cultural value” (Mezu 93), something he feels Senghor avoids. Bâ makes a similar argument, suggesting that “Senghor’s affirmation of the existence of the philosophy of life forces as basic to black African culture does not include the denial of the fact that different groups within that culture have evolved different expressions of the philosophy” (Bâ 169).

Senghor’s poetry sometimes includes snapshots of this diversity in different regions around the continent (“Kilimanjaro snow” in East Africa and “uranium mines” in the south), but rarely with the same detail as those poems embedded in his childhood place. Furthermore, what details do

arise in poems like “Congo” connect right back to that intimate sense of place from his childhood in easy equation: In speaking of the central African river, he writes

Clearings in your bosom islands of love, hills of amber and *gongo*

Seaflats of childhood of Joal, of Dyilor in September (*Selected Poems* 65)

The general lack of concrete detail in dealing with the rest of Africa’s places and peoples may suggest that, while other places and civilizations in Africa may express some level of difference, their importance lies in similarity. The River Congo, then, matters to Senghor not for its uniqueness within Africa, but because it represents Africa’s particularity in the larger world as “a black and African river.” Whatever difference exists between life on the River Congo and on the Niger River is transcended by a fundamental connection of rhythmic cosmology, a connection that allows Senghor to “[draw] his knowledge from instinctive union with the rhythm of the Congo River” (Mezu 53, 52). Certainly particularity exists on the continent, but in this poetry it is subsumed to “the features of the Africa which is eternal” (*Prose and Poetry* 54).

Through constructions and representations like these, we begin to see the way Senghor negotiates between the universal and particular in his sense of “Africa” as a whole. He sheds further light on his philosophy in this regard in making a distinction between civilizations and cultures, with civilizations being the concrete expression of a more fundamental and shared culture (*Prose and Poetry* 53). Bâ explains that for Senghor, “This distinction preserves the permanent quality of culture regardless of the vicissitudes to which the historical and political reality or civilization may be subjected” (Bâ 44). Senghor’s model for Africa as place, then, proposes a fundamental, unifying cohesiveness, a singular cosmic reality that finds expression of this essence through the particularities of specific places and cultures within the continent. Like *négritude* itself, the universal character is primary, with particularities seen as mere variation, the

concrete manifestation through which one experiences the fundamental whole.

Here again, our temptation might be to critique this understanding of place as a problem of scale: certainly, expanding and exaggerating Tuan's experiential sense of place to encompass a whole continent exposes Senghor's poetry to dubiousness about his ability to experience and represent all of Africa this way. But once more I would argue the error to be not one of size, but of kind: it would be just as questionable to assert this kind of direct, unmediated experience with *any* place, regardless of how small or intimately engaged with. The problem with the experiential sense of place is to assume there is a naturally given place, an essential "Africa" to experience at all. By representing the continent through a cosmology that presumes a natural association between "Africa" and "(black) Africans," Senghor shuts out the historical discourses at work shaping both the way he frames place and his experiences of it to begin with.

Such discourses are of course implied by Senghor's *négritude* project itself, as a desire to represent Africa(ns) as a whole is largely response to colonial discourses which tended to conflate the whole continent and its peoples in roundly negative terms. Yet as postcolonial critics have repeatedly pointed out, by accepting the categories of race and place as given and natural in his response, Senghor fails to expose the racial/cultural and geographical assumptions underlying imperialist constructions of Africa. Rather than proposing new ways to understand and represent African place as a whole, Senghor's poetry does little more than reproduce the problematic construction and position of Africa in global discourses and relations.

As Ferguson suggests, dealing with "Africa" along these lines may well be unavoidable; because imperialism first and most powerfully cast the continent as a singular place-in-the-world, any response must occupy that position even as it works to alter it. Working from a model of "postcolonial regional particularism," Byron Caminero-Santangelo suggests that Africa can

and must be understood as having a unique “regional alterity which cannot be subsumed by a more universal imperial or postcolonial condition” (unpublished 17). In certain circumstances, representing Africa as a specific and coherent region is necessary in order to “reflect on what connections, differences, issues, challenges, and opportunities for action” arise from Africa’s particular place in global discourses and relations (17).

In a charitable reading, Senghor’s poetry may be seen to be a step in that direction, framing Africa’s particular regional character in the broader Civilization of the Universal. Yet Senghor strays from the model Caminero-Santangelo proposes by assuming that regional particularism to stem from a fundamental, continental commonality, rather than something produced “as a result of uneven relationships and processes operating at a global scale” (17). So where regional particularism might strategically bracket differences within Africa while still acknowledging their presence in other scales and situations, Senghor’s representation of place is fundamentally uniform, eschewing the possibility of meaningful variation at all. By adopting the colonial categories of race and appropriating “discourses of sameness and uniformity imposed on colonized peoples” (Bentahar 4), Senghor seems to imbibe the colonial delineations of geography and place as well, along with its “suppression of global entanglement” in producing the experiences and conditions Senghor recalls in his poetry (Caminero-Santangelo 17). In this vision, difference in Africa and Europe stems from “a people” belonging to “a place” with clear racial, cultural and geographic lines drawn between “these two antagonistic worlds,” as he writes in “For Koras” (*Selected Poems* 13).

It is a particularly curious vision of the situation, however, given the “vibrant and vigorous” city life established in Africa by the time of Senghor’s writing, the result precisely of historical interchange between places. In response to attacks by *négritude* writers, E’skia

Mphahlele asserted in 1968 that “we the Africans have been creating an urban culture out of the very condition of insecurity, exile and agony. We have done this by integrating Africa and the West” (*Critical Perspectives* 31-2). In his own poem “A New York,” Senghor shares a similar vision of black and white cultural values merged in urban places:

Harlem Harlem! I have seen Harlem Harlem! A breeze green with corn  
springing from the pavements ploughed by the bare feet  
of dancers In  
Crests and waves of silk and breasts of spearheads, ballets of lilies and  
fabulous masks  
The mangoes of love roll from the low houses under the police horses’  
hooves. [...]  
I say to New York, let the black blood flow into your blood [...]  
See your rivers murmuring with musky caymans, manatees with eyes of  
Mirage. (*Selected Poems* 79)

Yet in his poetry about Africa, this synthesis seems literally not to *take place* on the continent. Senghor’s resistance to include “foreign” elements into the fabric of the African place reveals the way he constructs Africa at its base just as singularly as did the colonialism to which he was responding.

Effacing particularity and the historical dynamism of place relations in favor of holism in this way is limited at best, and carries dangers for dealing with issues beyond colonialism’s simplistic and dichotomous racism. Where our attention turns from Africa’s shared regional concerns at a global scale to smaller scale or internal questions, Senghor’s representation of place falters noticeably. Examples abound, but we can look to issues of environmentalism and

colonial/national boundarification as especially instructive.

Senghor's cosmology and sense of "Africa" offer some attractive notions for those grappling with Africa's environmental issues: for one, as Walter Skurnik explains, his cosmology and understanding of culture is "revolutionary in that it seeks to change existing relations between man and nature [...] in the light of standard of morality and justice" (qtd. in "Arabic Constituents" 71). As such, the cosmology provides a crucial alternative to European imperialism's materialist, techno-scientific approach to Africa's environments through resource extraction, development, and enclave conservation. Senghor's poetry ties humans and nature together inextricably, valuing the nonhuman and human-nature relationships beyond resource utility. Senghor repudiates the European suspicion of totemism, arguing, "What is really unnatural and inhuman is to isolate man from his environment and to domesticate animal or tree. This domestication in Europe reaches the point of destruction, disturbing the balance of nature" (*Prose and Poetry* 44). In contrast, his understanding of African place "transforms tropical exoticism into meaningful relationships between man and his environment. This is what Senghor means by defining culture as 'the result of the mutual effort in the integration of man with nature and nature with man'" (Bâ 45). The "mutual effort" he depicts provides an alternative sense of place that does indeed add an important and resistant voice to the global discussion on place-making.

Senghor's poetry also helpfully suggests that we can and perhaps ought to understand Africa's environments and their connectedness at a very large, continental scale. An environmentalism that takes Africa's ecological struggles in isolation misses both far-flung causes and the way even "arbitrary" bounding of places at large scales can impact smaller-scale conditions by bringing to bear common social, political, and economic practices across varied

landscapes. There is no reason Africa cannot or should not develop some sense of shared environmental concern across large swaths of the continent. By casting Africa's environments and human-nature relationships together, Senghor seems to suggest a helpful way to understand a shared "regional consciousness" among Africans that might engender just such concern.

At the same time, it would almost certainly be a stretch to accord all of Africa a shared sense of region in any specific material or ecological sense; all but the most ignorant would balk at the notion that the whole continent shares a "body of explicit knowledge," or that Africa understood as having anything but the most basic "similarities of environment and livelihood," as Tuan defines the geographic region. Senghor seems to suggest as much in his prose, when he talks about "homelands": that very much parallel Tuan's notion of "region":

The Homeland is the heritage handed down to us by our forefathers; land, blood, a language or at least a dialect, manners and customs, a folklore and an art, a culture, in fact, rooted in one particular area and given expression by one race. [... ] Homelands arise naturally and are expressions of a particular place and environment. (*Prose and Poetry* 68).

Yet Senghor's poetry relegates environmental and social specificity to the role of symbolism, important not for what it says about the conditions of any one place but what it says about the very broad trends of human-nature relations in "Africa" as a whole. His poetic Africa follows the model of the "Nation," which "is superior to the Homeland. It is a quintessence of the values of the Homeland, a sublimation of them formed by transcending them" (68-9). By this understanding, particular material and historical conditions and concerns are subsumed by a large-scale model that privileges the holism of a singular Africa rather than a relationally-defined place of strategic commonality.

Even were we to accept Senghor's claims to a coherent approach to nature and place from all black Africans regardless of their particular homeland, we are hard-pressed from his poetry to understand how that "African personality" might apply to the specific conditions within the continent. To the extent that it focuses on a "transcendent" pastoral sense of human-environment interaction, his *négritude* can do little to illuminate how the global processes shaping Africa as region might intersect with more specific local conditions in varied places and ecologies across the continent. Instead, we see the tendency toward abstraction re-created even in the criticism; for instance, Mezu adopts Senghor's sense of place in his analysis of "Congo," disregarding any particularity to the Congo River's ecology and culture to claim instead, "the scenery is African" (53), as if that is descriptive in the least. He goes on to talk about characteristically "African water-fronts" (53) and "man and beast living side by side, as in the villages of Africa" (57). All this suggests a very unhelpful abstraction in the way Senghor and most critics negotiate the universal/particular relationship, especially where it comes to an understanding of Africa's simultaneously varied and linked material, ecological conditions.

Senghor's place construction of "Africa" through entirely cultural means also obfuscates attempts to understand better the political geography of the continent. Admittedly, Senghor's aim through *négritude* (at least before independence) was cultural emancipation, not political separation. Wilder contends the *négritude* "promised a way into rather than out of the imperial nation-state" by working to resolve the universal/particular contradictions of French imperialist discourse (Wilder 204). Yet that meant Senghor's conception of a culturally coherent continent had no political parallel, and provided almost no means by which to analyze or challenge the European geographic construction of Africa. By proposing all African civilizations and homelands as simply small-scale manifestations of Africa's singular essential culture and

placeness, Senghor's poetry often undercuts the concrete particularity of people and environment that might be used to resist the arbitrary parsing and bounding of colonies and nation-states.

After independence, the lack of a politically incisive element to the *négritude* poetry leads in some ways to an uncritical acceptance of those arbitrary borders. Irele suggests that "The alliance of the imaginative and the political *négritude* relates the movement to African nationalism" (*Critical Perspectives* 17); certainly so for "Africa" itself, but we are hard pressed to find in Senghor's philosophy much to describe the means through which any *individual* African nation might assert that cultural nationalism and divide itself from its neighbors as a legitimately separate entity. Yet Senghor the politician accepts the inviolability of these nation-states, marking a perhaps ironic contradiction with Senghor the poet. He writes, "I do not see how we can establish a United States of Africa when we begin by *dis-uniting* the state on the continent and by refusing to respect their frontiers and their integrity" (*Prose and Poetry* 66). Where Senghor's poetry Africa as monolithic place, Senghor's politics caution against overzealous pursuits of African unity, given "instances of such practical concern as arbitrary delimitation of national boundaries and former colonial association" (Bâ 169). One may well argue that Senghor's poetry consciously attempts to overcome these concerns by cultivating a recognition of essential commonality among Africans despite the historical factors that have divided them. But so long as Senghor's model for that cohesion relies on repression of difference subsumed to more important and "natural" sameness, it remains incommensurate with the claims of nationality. Paradoxically, Senghor's discourses of natural identity and cultural cohesion also lend credence to those nations themselves, having been routinely adopted by African nations as a means of self-legitimation. Here, however, we run into similar problems regarding the effacement and repression of difference within the nation, differences invalidated by the very

definition of the nation itself as a coherent entity.

The disjuncture between the political and cultural geographies to which Senghor aspires is all the more poignant given the rupture between North and Sub-Saharan Africa. Janice Spleth notes that “Senghor was supremely conscious of the obstacles to a united Africa and asserted in his Cairo speech that the greatest of these was the gap existing between Arab-Berbers and Black Africans” (“Arabic Constituents” 70). Yet by routinely assuming “Africa” to be “Black Africa” and adopting *négritude* as the expression of the continent’s fundamental spirit, Senghor’s poetry perpetuates this division. Ziad Bentahar suggests that “the imperative of race briefly lost its priority in favor of an emphasis on the struggle for independence throughout Africa,” but “as political concerns changed, unaddressed racial issues and the enduring pairing of 'Africa' with 'blackness' ultimately contributed to the lasting perceptions of North Africa as separate from the rest of the continent” (Bentahar 4). In many ways, then, Senghor’s construction of “Africa” reinscribes many of the same contradictions he sought to resolve through African humanism. Like the French imperial nation-state he sought to reform, his understanding of Africa struggles “to create unity out of heterogeneity” (Wilder 31), often instead opting for a vision of Africa founded on homogeneity. While proclaiming a universal inclusiveness in his conception of the continent, the racial founding for that cohesion dispels the Maghreb, an otherwise historically, materially, and culturally integrated part of the continent.

Perhaps recognizing the limits to this place-conception of Africa, Senghor late in life wrote a poem in which Spleth sees a marked change in Senghor’s approach. “Elegy for the Queen of Sheba” takes up a figure Senghor had used before to celebrate Black Africa: he takes the Queen to be the embodiment of Africa, like the figure in “Black Woman.” She is “Ethiopian in the original, classical sense of the word,” black and beautiful (“Arabic Constituents” 68). Yet

the later elegy, written late in Senghor's life, the Queen takes on a more ambiguous, expansive identity as Senghor addresses the fact that she was almost certainly from southern Arabia. In retelling her story, Senghor still invokes her to represent Africa and blackness, but now understood as itself "a composite of both African and Semitic cultures" (68). Spleth goes on to explain, "The simple dichotomy that once contrasted a homogeneous Africa with a monolithic Western civilization was replaced with a more diversified concept of the continent. African culture was redefined to become itself an example of *metissage*, a cultural blending of the Black-African and Arab-Berber heritages" (69). The shift in understanding here is helpful not only in according "Africa" a historical dimension to its development as a place, but also in recognizing the particularities that come together to form the "universal" Africa in ways that do not efface those particularities to get there.

Spleth proposes that we see this as a happy *dénouement* to Senghor's conception of Africa, the development from *négritude* to *Africanité* as the poet responds to changing historical conditions and political demands. Her argument bears resemblance to one that persistently comes up as we attempt to evaluate Senghor's poetry, philosophy and politics: the standard line goes that, for all its faults, *négritude* was a historically necessary step in the struggle against imperialism and racism. If the question is whether or not such solidarity among all Africans (or all blacks in a pan-African sense) was necessary to resist an imperialism that treated them in uniformly degrading ways, there can be little doubt as to the need for such a movement. But the question I have been exploring here is not the *necessity* of large-scale African collectivity, but the *means* by which it is accomplished. In that regard, we can and should question the inevitability of the "Africa" Senghor expresses in his poetry.

To begin answering that question, we might draw from Bâ's distinction between *types* of

*négritude*. Aside from Senghor's "essential negritude" premised on fundamentally shared racial/cultural traits, she describes "historical negritude" as "the common heritage of all black men" (Bâ 158), stemming from their common experience with European racism and imperialism, which "placed in the same context their widely dissimilar experience" (*Critical Perspectives* 25). Historical *négritude*, then, is what we might term a strategic essentialism, a historically emergent grouping of particular peoples and places due to a shared subject position. It involves the expedient and contingent bracketing of difference in order to deal with specific problems under specific conditions. Yet for Senghor, there is little to suggest the omission of difference where his poetry constructs a sense of "Africa" is either merely strategic or contingent.

If we accept Spleth's interpretation of "Elegy for the Queen of Sheba," Senghor moved on from (or at least revised) his essentialist constructions of Africa(ns). We should be wary, however, to accept the idea that the homogenizing move of the earlier poetry was at any point necessary or inevitable as a way to understand Africa as a place, even in resistance to problems like racism or imperialism. All the more so because such large-scale issues demanding large-scale resistance are unlikely to stop confronting Africa. Rather than return to the abstractions of *négritude* or other universalisms each time, we might heed Brown and Purcell's assertion that "upscaling resistance does not, in fact, require a levelling [sic] of difference and an exclusive emphasis on commonality" (Purcell and Brown 283). Alternative ways to represent the African whole should focus on narratives and representations that provide "a more complex formal framework able to accommodate social and cultural multiplicity" (Heise 21) even as the focus shifts to a continental scale.

### Chapter 3

“A Universal Garden of Many-Coloured Flowers”:  
Place and Scale in the Works of Ngũgĩ wa Thiong’o

*“The battle lines may be murky, but they have not changed.”*  
—Ngũgĩ wa Thiong’o, *Wizard of the Crow*

In his latest novel *Wizard of the Crow*, Ngũgĩ wa Thiong’o engages the murky battle lines of neoliberal globalization and the equally murky questions it raises regarding relations between the local and the global. Yet as the epigraph suggests, these lines for Ngũgĩ have not changed. The local/global dynamic has always been implied by Ngũgĩ’s anti-imperialist themes, existing alongside and within other tensions that have long occupied critics of his work, including the relationship of the individual hero to the community, of ethnicity or culture to the nation, of Western education to Gĩkũyũ nationalism and Kenyan independence. At their heart, these tensions might all be seen to grapple with the difficulty of negotiating the particular and the universal, difference and unity. This difficulty is articulated in Ngũgĩ’s twin efforts to revitalize specific cultures while simultaneously appealing to broad-based class solidarities and shared resistance among the peoples of Kenya, Africa, and the whole Global South. The geographic tensions implied by these efforts parallel recent work in geography and debates about the nature of place, especially in the wake of poststructuralist challenges to notions of authenticity that had previously underpinned most discussions of place. Many geographers have wrestled with how to ground a sense of the particularities of a place without acceding to an essentialized or exclusionary sense of that place as closed, static, self-defining and homogeneous. At the same time, they grapple with questions about how to understand the relations between specific places at national, regional, and global scales in ways that do not abstract or elide local difference.

In his illuminating monograph on Ngũgĩ, Simon Gikandi hints at similar geographical elements in Ngũgĩ's own contradictions, suggesting that his shifting narrative strategies arise out of endeavors "to establish the forms in which the story of the struggle between the global narrative of capital and local stories of resistance can be told" (*Ngũgĩ* 10). As with the other ambiguities in Ngũgĩ's literature, however, the geographic imaginary of his narratives cannot simply be cast as a binary that privileges local resistance against large-scale domination. Ngũgĩ himself has expressed "unease about the tendency to see the universal and the local in absolute opposition to each other" (*Moving the Centre* 25). By applying some recent geographic theorizations that have redefined understandings of place and scale, I argue that Ngũgĩ's writing adopts a consistently "glocal" understanding as it grows from the intimate proto-nationalism of *The River Between* to the call for global black class solidarity in *Wizard of the Crow*, imbricating the local within the global and vice versa. Ngũgĩ negotiates local place with larger scales of concern by understanding place as necessarily produced in historical, spatial relationship with other places and external forces; and by understanding the global or spatial as something that necessarily manifests within the particular conditions of place. By moving away from conceiving the relation between space and place, global and local as a site of necessary contradiction, we can disentangle Ngũgĩ's engagement with issues of class and culture, unity and difference, oppression and resistance from dichotomous alignment with the global and the local, and thereby attend more precisely to how Ngũgĩ attempts (and perhaps fails) to negotiate these tensions.

Admittedly, place is a potentially complicated avenue through which to approach Ngũgĩ's work; a good case might be made for or against seeing his literature and philosophy engaging with a primary concern for place. On the one hand, Ngũgĩ has long insisted on cultural revival as a primary means for resisting imperialism; to the extent that Ngũgĩ defines culture as "the

process of a people wrestling with their natural and social environment” (*Moving the Centre* 27), one might easily infer a deep concern for the places in which cultures are embedded and from which they gain their identity. Much of his own fiction deals centrally with Gĩkũyũ cultural identity as it revolves around “sacred values associated with a particular soil,” such that the loss of this land, this “spatial location of identity” provides the driving forces for resistance (Lovesey 139). Put another way, place factors in Ngũgĩ’s literature through the way he “identifies with the dispossessed,” through the *displacement* and sense of loss that are “indispensible to the form and meaning of Ngũgĩ’s early novels” (*Ngũgĩ* 5).

On the other hand, Ngũgĩ has expressed caution about the potential divisiveness a focus on place might engender, especially in the context of postcolonial Kenya and Africa where place might be used to bolster hard-headed tribalism and a fractious ethnic politics. He displays a recognition that awakening empowerment along exclusionary claims to place “may raise ethnic consciousness, exacerbate interethnic conflict, and promote agitation for self-government by various ‘nationalities’” in ways that would weaken nation-states and undermine the larger Marxist solidarities he envisions (Yewah 52). Such potential divisions, Ngũgĩ argues, have consistently been pressed by imperialist and dictatorial forces “to divide, weaken and scatter resistance” (*Moving the Centre* 53). Indeed, Gikandi’s assertion that Ngũgĩ’s are “local stories” bears some caveat, given the way they often reject a sense of atomization and boundedness often associated with “the local.” In that context, we might see his work increasingly occupying the global space of class relations as a way to reject the barriers of place, ethnicity, and nationalism, transgressing boundaries to enfold an ever-widening (and for some, an ever more abstract) union of the marginalized and exploited. In anything, then, place factors in this presumed dichotomy as a way to signal the break in Ngũgĩ’s writing and thinking, with place anchoring the liberal

cultural nationalism of the early novels and space as the mode for the more global prose and literature of his Marxist turn (see Gikandi's review of the latest novel, "The Postcolonial Wizard").

Yet these two geographic visions, being grounded in place and transgressing place, are only in conflict so far as one assumes place and space, the local and the global to be absolute dichotomies. Where place is taken to be closed, self-originating, and unique, it must be dissolved by the flows and space of the global scale. Many geographers, however, tend to understand place in ways that circumvent or defuse this dualism. Doreen Massey articulates an understanding of place as an event, something built up out of spatial relations over time, making dynamism a constitutive part of places themselves: "What gives place its specificity," she argues "is not some long internalized history but the fact that it is constructed out of a particular constellation of social relations, meeting and weaving together at a particular locus" ("Global Sense of Place" 322). That constellation is necessarily linked outward with other places through spatial and temporal flows, a "permanence" crystallizing out of those interactions. David Harvey notes that these permanences "come to occupy a piece of space in an exclusive way (for a time) and thereby define a place—their place—for a time" (190). At the same time, ecocritic Lawrence Buell reminds us that there is no place that "is either a hermetic unit or utterly a product of forces outside it" (Buell 60); nor are places "stable, free-standing entities, but continually shaped and reshaped by forces from both inside and outside" (67). The historical "event" of place makes it a unique site of difference, but one that is not "natural" or closed; rather, David Harvey explains, places are "always contingent on the relational processes that create, sustain, and dissolve them. The coexistence of 'multiple spatialities' in places undermines any simple, unitary sense of place" (*Cosmopolitanism* 190).

From this perspective of understanding place, we might see all of Ngũgĩ's literature as place-based in one way or another. Where his concern is directly for local place and specific culture (as in *The River Between*), he understands them as dynamic and heterogeneous, produced in relation with larger outside forces and connected with often far-flung geographies of domination and resistance. And where his focus shifts to a more overt concern for the global space of capital accumulation (as in *Wizard of the Crow*), he understands and narrates more universal class dynamics as manifesting differentially in the local conditions and relations of place.

From his first novels, Ngũgĩ represents even the intimate, "isolated" place of the Gĩkũyũ ridges as a contested space of multiplicity and change. This is true even when he invokes a mythical and spiritual connection between the people and their land, though admittedly at times the appeal to myth seems aimed at grounding an ahistorical, natural, uniform association of people and place. In *The River Between*, Chege relates the central Gĩkũyũ myth, in which "Murungu brought the man [Gĩkũyũ] and the woman [Mumbi] here and again showed them the vastness of the land. He gave the country to them and their children and the children of the children, *tene na tene*, world without end [...] The children spread all over the country. Some came to the ridges to keep and guard the ancient rites" (21). Identified by the myth and sustained by keeping to "the ways of the land" (13), this people and place become mutually linked and mutually defining: "These were the people whose blood and bones spoke the language of the hills. The trees listened [...] Bird and beast heard and quietly listened" (4). At the beginning of the novel, Waiyaki is initiated into "the daily rhythm of life in the village," a connection with the land and its knowledge and practices that maintained "the same life" and the same identity day after day (16). As James Ogude argues, this close affiliation of people and place draws from a

nationalist sense of belonging, such that “an amplified familiarity with the landscape [...] and certain specified geographical markers can be read to signify ‘nationness’” (17) and, presumably, the uniform identity that goes along with it.

Yet even through his evocation of a naturally linked people and place, “Ngũgĩ rarely invokes a precolonial Gĩkũyũ world [...] as a site of stable culture and identity” (*Ngũgĩ* 14), but instead appeals to the myth as a way to build a sense of identity in response to current and historical conditions. Despite Ogude’s claim that *The River Between* utilizes ethnicity “to refract a sentimentalized construction of precolonial society as an organic whole” (17), Ngũgĩ seems at pains in the novel to demonstrate that a shared history of belonging to a place does not equate with being naturally homogeneous as a society. Fissures even in this small, “isolated” Gĩkũyũ tribe “began long ago” (2), as competing versions of the origin myth led to competition between Makuyu and Kameno, physically embodied by the way the ridges “faced each other, like two rivals ready to come to blows in a life and death struggle for the leadership of this isolated region” (1). This “ancient rivalry” is only widened, not created, by the arrival of British colonialism and missionaries (68); Kameno and Makuyu harden their division in the colonial context, with Makuyu as the home of the Christian converts and Kameno as the base for the “people of the tribe, who had always been against the Mission and its faith” (80), with each side fighting to establish or restore a sense of purity. But, as the narrative makes clear, no purity is to be had, and the desire to push for conformity itself signals a lack of “organic” cohesion.

The lack of natural uniformity offered by place or myth comes to full fruition in *A Grain of Wheat*, where the divergent interests, misunderstandings, and betrayals of the State of Emergency in Kenya have fractured the Thabai community. Though examples abound, the relationship of Gikonyo and Mumbi takes on special significance in the text’s narrative of irony

and the need for reconciliation. On returning from imprisonment in faraway detention camps, Gikonyo finds that his wife has had a child with another man. Both Gikonyo and Mumbi are so ravaged by the years of hardship and embittered by dashed hopes and each other's misunderstood reactions to the situation that they fail to attempt any empathy or meaningful reconciliation. Reinforced by the symbolism of their names (mirroring the mythical progenitors of the Gĩkũyũ), their strained relationship becomes symbolic of the community and nation as a whole, yearning to find a way to be together but lacking any natural cohesion (mythical, spiritual or otherwise) that can easily mend the lacerations of politics, mistrust, and violence that have shaped their place and their lives. Indeed, Ngũgĩ often returns to the theme of gender tensions to suggest the potential divisions, divergent interests, and power struggles that characterize homes, communities, and cultures like Thabai, Kamenno and Makuyu, or Eldares in *Wizard of the Crow*. When even the intimacy of the home is potentially fragmented in this way, Ngũgĩ seems to say, we can understand no place as inherently, fundamentally cohesive; instead, communities and nations that derive their identity from historically and politically transgressed places like these must be understood as *constructed*, brought together out of the inherent multiplicity of place and in response to its changing conditions.

Gikandi reinforces this claim by pointing out that the precolonial Gĩkũyũ were “a fluid, acephalous culture, organized around subclans (mbari) and distant memories of a common ancestry” (Ngũgĩ 15). Like the “isolated” tribe in *River Between*, these groups had little sense of identity or strong affiliation with those “beyond,” living “a life of their own, undisturbed by what happened outside” (3). As implied by Waiyaki's efforts, the sense of a larger Gĩkũyũ identity was actively cultivated for political purposes as a way to collectively address the challenges of colonial rule and oppression. Pressed by the radical ruptures of colonial intervention, Waiyaki

and others developed a new consciousness of “country” and the need for an expansive unity that had not existed before. Far from celebrating their former isolation, Waiyaki fears “the ridges would lose their former dignity and would be left a distance behind the country beyond” (*River* 114). Against such isolation, Ngũgĩ and Waiyaki envision the ridges “merged into one area of beautiful land,” part of “the immensity of the land” of the Gĩkũyũ, “this country stretching beyond and joining the sky” (19, 20). The text suggests, however, that this merging is not a simple conflation, where all the people recognize themselves as essentially the same, singularly defined by shared cultural myth and a precolonial homogeneity. Rather, Waiyaki yearns for “a people who could trust one another” (137), joined out of their divergent interests by political exigency and a consolidated effort to build schools in response to colonial pressures.

Waiyaki’s self-consciousness about the need to redefine place and people in new ways responds in part to the inherent multiplicity of the ridges, but also to a change in the external factors at work in shaping that place. By setting *The River Between* at a time when the isolation of the ridges is broken down by encroaching colonialism, Ngũgĩ chronicles the changes in the physical landscape and social relations brought on by interaction with outside forces and a more conscious linking with places “beyond.” Colonial transformation of place takes the form primarily of land alienation in *The River Between* and *A Grain of Wheat*, with the initial appropriation of Gĩkũyũ lands “forcing many people to move from places they had lived for many years, while others had to live on the same land, working for their new masters” (*River* 73). During the State of Emergency depicted in *A Grain of Wheat*, the reorganization and reterritorialization of the ridges intensifies, with whole villages being forcibly displaced and consolidated into more centralized and controllable towns. Thabai itself “had combined a number of ridges: Thabai, Kamandura, Kihingo, and parts of Weru,” becoming a village “hastily

collected together, while the whiteman's sword hung dangerously above people's necks to protect them from their brethren in the forest" (*Grain* 4). In an attempt to stifle the Mau Mau uprising by cutting off movement and village support for the rebels, the British imprisoned men in detention camps by the thousands and made those people who remained "prisoners in the village" (126), surrounded by a trench they were forced to dig themselves.

Against this backdrop of utterly transformed place due heavily to external influence, Ngũgĩ resists the temptation to shrink away from that world beyond, to retreat into a more authentic and natural place or identity. Rather, he engages the imperative prompted by colonialism to understand the way places like Thabai have necessarily been transformed by their links with other places, fostering attempts to appropriate those connections to anti-imperialist purposes. Just as *The River Between* comes to frame a sense of Gĩkũyũ country in which the two ridges belong, *A Grain of Wheat* narrates an expanded and culturally complex sense of "Kenya" as the necessary context through which to understand Thabai's state, past and future.

By its implication in the Mau Mau resistance through characters like Kihika, Thabai finds itself part of the discourse of nationalism running through the text. Kihika intimates to Wambuku a nationalist sentiment of shared loss and shared passion at the heart of the resistance:

"You have got land, Kihika. Mbungu's land is also yours. In any case, the land in the Rift Valley did not belong to our tribe?"

"My father's ten acres? That is not the important thing. Kenya belongs to black people [...] whether land was stolen from Gĩkũyũ, Ubabi or Nandi, it does not belong to the whiteman. And even if it did, shouldn't everybody have a share in the common shamba, our Kenya?" (*Grain* 85).

By the end of the war, others have taken up a similar investment in the nation. With Uhuru upon them, the people of Thabai strive to embrace their place in and connection with the new nation: “We of Thabai village must also dance our part,” Warui insists (18). Here Kenya exists as an aspiration, but it also figures as an imposition throughout the text. The forced construction of New Thabai and the closing of all African shops in the Rungei market, for instance, were part of “a collective punishment to the ridges” (102) despite uneven support for the rebellion by the Gĩkũyũ. In addition, the village itself is transformed by the experiences of men who have been in concentration camps “scattered all over Kenya, from the Manda Islands in the Indian Ocean to the Magata Islands in Lake Victoria,” including camps like Yala and Rira in “a remote part of Kenya, near the coast where no rain fell and nothing grew except sand” (115). Through a geography of detention camps and places both familiar and foreign, homely and unhomely, these men interact with others from all over Kenya, confirming with each other “their deep love of Kenya” and bearing home an expanded sense of nation, but also new hurts and a sense that “everything had changed” (61).

Nationalism and independence, then, fail to bring any clear resolution to the tensions and divisions within Thabai, and in many ways complicate them further through the village’s connections to the new nation which will continue to shape its realities. Indeed, *A Grain of Wheat* reflects Ngũgĩ’s encounter with Frantz Fanon and his “profoundly anti-nativist” sense of national culture and collective identity as produced in dynamic relationship between African and European elements (Caminero-Santangelo 148). Ngũgĩ’s engagement with Fanon’s ideas seems only to have intensified the resistance in *The River Between* to seeing place as a site of purity or isolation; *A Grain of Wheat* sheds much of the romanticism from the previous novel and places Thabai firmly within the moral dilemma of developing a sense of place, culture, and nation even

as that nation cannot be fully extricated from its relationship with Europe. In particular, Ngũgĩ hints at lingering colonial structures after independence that will continue to divide and hierarchize these communities and Kenya as a whole. Just before Uhuru, district officer John Thompson contemplates the fate of the Githima research station—and presumably all the colonial institutions and governance to be handed over to “a black government” (42)—predicting that the departure of the British will lead to a reversion from civilization: “test-tubes and beakers would be broken or lie un-washed on the cement, the hot-houses and seedbeds strewn with wild plants and the outer bush which had been so carefully hemmed, would gradually creep into a litter-filled compound” (38). Yet the rest of the novel allays his pessimism over the fate of colonial structures. In a poignant example, the MP for Thabai deceives Gikonyo and undercuts his attempt to buy land from a departing white farmer, which he intended to return to a more traditional collective land-use model through a co-op (55). Instead, the Nairobi-based parliamentarian continues the colonial practice begun by the train and land appropriation, “a thorough exploitation of the hinterland” by those in power and in the cities (12).

Written so soon after Kenya’s independence, *A Grain of Wheat* can only hint at the potential for failed decolonization and an inability to fully cut the ties with Europe that would bolster this sort of internal exploitation. As the realities of neocolonialism sink in, however, Ngũgĩ traces out the geographic relations and global forces of capital accumulation far beyond the borders of Kenya in order to understand their influence on the nation and its local communities. Especially in works like the play *I Will Marry When I Want* and his latest novel *Wizard of the Crow*, Ngũgĩ casts his gaze to the “global space” in which the domination of the local plays out. In *I Will Marry When I Want*, though Gĩcaamba’s main adversary is Kenyan businessman Kĩoi, he locates the real source of his troubles elsewhere: “Even if you find an

African behind the counter, / Smoking a pipe over a protruding belly, / Know that he is only an overseer, a well-fed watchdog, / Ensuring the smooth passage of people's wealth / To Europe and other foreign countries" (113). The problem of foreign intervention is intensified and more damningly detailed in *Wizard of the Crow*, where the problems of transnational corporate exploitation of resources and control of markets is compounded by the dictatorial Ruler's efforts to ingratiate himself with foreign interests. Whether during the Cold War when he "mowed down a million Aburĩrian Communists" to appease the West (234), or in a neoliberal mode of structural adjustment when the government insists the people "are ready to forgo clothes, houses, education, medicine, and even food in order to meet any and every condition" the Global Bank might impose on funds for the Marching to Heaven project (248), the book details the absurdity of the government's tyrannical efforts to appease and cajole Western-dominated institutions.

At the same time, the Global Bank shows little interest for genuine development or the plight of the Aburĩrian people, instead only worried about protests "that threaten stability and pose danger to the free flow of capital" (*Wizard* 242). Beyond the Ruler's own selfishness and corruption, then, *Wizard of the Crow* implicates global economics and political forces in the deplorable state of Aburĩria. Outside the Global Bank headquarters in New York, Kamĩĩ stands "mesmerized by the power encased in all that glass and concrete. All the laws and regulations governing the economic and monetary policies of the nations of the earth issued from this building" (503). By contextualizing Aburĩria's woes under the Ruler's dictatorship in the global narrative of capitalist imperialism, Ngũgĩ echoes Laura Chrisman in locating some blame for problems in Africa and elsewhere in "extrinsic forces" that have "helped to create a crisis of political authority for these independent states" and that "seek to block the realization of liberatory, socialist nationalism" (Chrisman 196).

Despite the evident change in discourse here and Ngũgĩ's more intense focus on class dynamics as the principle determinant of physical and social realities, I would argue that the shift to a more global scale of narrative is in many ways a natural outgrowth of Ngũgĩ's encounter with Fanon: where Ngũgĩ represents the development of place, collective identity, and national culture in *The River Between* and *A Grain of Wheat* as an interrelation between internal and external forces, his later works mirror Fanon's tendency to frame those relationships within a neocolonial narrative that plays out at very large scales of connection. Protesting students in *Wizard of the Crow* demand "an education that would teach them about their own country *and its relation to the world*" (563, my emphasis), a desire perhaps not so different from Waiyaki's desire to unite disparate peoples through education, to establish schools that would link the ridges with "the country beyond" (110). Implied here, as in all of Ngũgĩ's representations of place, is that any attempt to understand one's own place, one's "own country" necessarily requires an acknowledgment of "its relation to the world," the links with other places and geopolitical forces that help to shape it.

That geographic imperative applies both to the place-making forces of domination and alternative geographies of resistance for Ngũgĩ. Concomitant with the increasingly large-scale mapping of imperialism in his literature, the place and scale of Ngũgĩ's imagined resistance also assumes global dimensions, escaping a simple characterization as "local stories of resistance" bent against a global imperium, especially where "local" is presumed to mean small-scale and bounded. Ngũgĩ's imagined challenge to exploitation transcends the relatively place-grounded plots of his texts to occupy the same global space as the forces of capitalism. He cultivates an ever-widening sense of common cause and subjectivity, from "The union [...] of all African

people at the level of Pan Africanism” (*Writers in Politics* 89) to a Global South consciousness incorporating Africa, Asia, the Caribbean and South America.

This consciousness stems in part from World War II, where Kenyan soldiers “told stories of what they had seen in Burma, Egypt, Palestine and India; wasn’t Mahatma Gandhi, the saint, leading the Indian people against British rule?” (*Grain* 73). Kamĩĩ gives this connection historical depth in *Wizard of the Crow*, claiming that “the Indian Ocean was once a cultural highway with constant migrations and exchange” between Africa, India, and China (*Wizard* 83-4). Rather than adhering to Tajirika’s rejection of the Indian influence in Aburĩria, Kamĩĩ insists that “there is not much difference between the political character of the Indian and the African” (56), and that “there are many things we could learn from India and other Asian countries, just as they have much to learn from us. We in Aburĩria, more than others, should strengthen our ties with India” (55). Though Kamĩĩ’s interest in an affiliation between Africa and Asia is hardly political at that point in the novel, Nyawĩra and the Voice of the People thoroughly understand these connections as a history of shared domination, as well as past and future resistance.

Indeed, the very reason for tracing out these connections is the necessity to forge larger solidarities to confront “The imperial powers [that] are co-operating and sharing information and strategies” (*Writers in Politics* 121). One such strategy has been to exercise repressive tolerance for “place-bound proletarian/socialist revolutions” (*Spaces of Hope* 38) in ways that keep them place-bound and isolated. Echoing many of Ngũgĩ’s statements, Harvey suggests that imperialism and global capital have been successful at maneuvering to limit unified challenges by effacing a history of precolonial connections and “feeding off ancient cultural distinctions, gender relations, ethnic predilections, and religious beliefs” in order to fragment and insulate protest (*Justice, Nature* 40). In response to this globally coordinated repression, Chrisman

argues, “Unification [...] is a necessary condition for accomplishing the political goal of collective autonomy” (189). She goes on to insist, “The only way a systematically disempowered people can become an empowered people is through a unified and systematic struggle” (190).

The peasants in *I Will Marry When I Want* echo her assertion:

*The trumpet of the poor has been blown.*

*Let's unite and organize*

*Organization is our club*

*Organization is our sword*

*Organization is our gun*

*Organization is our shield*

*Organization is the way*

*Organization is our strength*

*Organization is our light*

*Organization is our wealth. (116)*

Though sung by characters dealing with very specific local problems, the call here is not limited to the people of Limuru, or Kenya, or even Africa, but for “all the oppressed and exploited peoples” in the world to unite so they might “smash and bury the enemy forever” (*Writers in Politics* 121).

The Marxist underpinnings of this global vision have garnered much attention from critics and are often met with the same critique levied at classical Marxism itself: namely, that such narratives get swept up in a universalizing, totalizing teleology that leads to abstraction and oversimplification. Oliver Lovesey claims that later works indicate Ngũgĩ's desire “in classical Marxist terms, [for] the progressive dissolution of the nation, with its colonial and neocolonial

legacies, regarding the very idea of the state as oppressive” (Lovesey 156). The dissipation of the nation would ostensibly be paired with the erasure of any divisions or differentiations between oppressed peoples, forming a more or less monolithic mass of workers and peasants identified predominantly by their class subjectivity. We might see support for such claims when Ngũgĩ praises “the only alliance that matters in Africa’s historic struggle for its dignity: the alliance of workers and peasants” (*Moving* 58), or when the characters of *I Will Marry When I Want* shed more specific identity to align themselves with “all the slaves,” “all the peasants,” “all the poor” in responding to “the trumpet of the masses” (*Marry* 115). In this reading, Ngũgĩ’s emphasis on a shared class position trumps and disintegrates any other subjectivity, coalescing into a formless global homogeneity in a dualistic, mechanistic struggle between center and periphery, oppressor and oppressed. For Ogude, Ngũgĩ has become “trapped in a binary polarity” that “undermines the notion of typicality” by the “suppression of specificity and local conflicts” (67, 42).

Endemic in this interpretation, I fear, is the assumption that engaging the global always entails the “suppression of specificity,” that to find commonality in large-scale geographies of domination and resistance necessarily means supplanting the “local conflicts” that Ogude privileges in Ngũgĩ’s earlier, more geographically circumscribed novels. Yet as I have tried to show, Ngũgĩ’s literature understands “local conflict” precisely as the product of exchange between internal multiplicity and external relations at various scales. As such, a growth in the scale of concern need not elide small-scale particularities, but is rather one way to more fully explicate the “typicality” and “local conflict” that crystallizes out of these scalar interactions. As Arif Dirlik has argued, we benefit from thinking of capitalism and imperialism as “glocal” phenomena, involving transactions and flows at very large scales but necessarily engaging with the particularities of place. In turn, resistance to glocal modes of domination also takes shape as a

dialectically local and global phenomenon (Dirlik 29). Harvey extends this sentiment by insisting, “the slogan ‘working men of all countries unite’ may still stand [...] as the only way to appropriately respond to the global strategies of capital accumulation,” but that “the manner of arriving at and conceptualizing that response deserves critical scrutiny” (*Spaces of Hope* 23). Against accusations of discarded specificity, Harvey proffers a model for solidarity based on the principle of “militant particularism,” the notion that “the only permissible universalism is infinite respect for the particularity founded on historically (and geographically) shared ways of life” (*Justice, Nature* 35). In other words, the drive for collective resistance must recognize that “class struggle unfolds differentially across a highly variegated terrain” of specific, place-based histories and conditions (31); unity must be built *out of* and not *over* these differences.

Of course, the ability to achieve a global scope without effacing local place depends on how one conceives of scale. Perhaps implicit in critiques against Marx and Ngũgĩ is the assumption that each scale (the local, national, regional, and global) is a separate entity with its own characteristics; to move up in scale, then, means to superimpose larger and more abstract “levels” to which more local specificities are subsumed. We might also conceive of scale, however, as the extent to which places are linked with each other. To engage with a larger scale means to trace out more points of connection in large, often non-contiguous networks, what Ash Amin calls “nodes in relational settings” (quoted in Murdoch 21). In this way, dealing with larger scales does not mean leaving off or flattening out concern for particular places, but expanding that concern to include larger networks of linked places and spatial relations. Indeed, Buell suggests that “the difference between pious obeisance to lococentrism and a more critically aware place-connectedness is a sense of inhabiting different places simultaneously” through nested places and our own movements (real and imaginary) through linked places (Buell 66). He

quotes Val Plumwood in support of this notion, where she insists, “the goal of place-conscious and place-sensitive culture need not dictate a place-bound, stationary lifestyle of monogamous relationship to just one place” (*Future of Environmental Criticism* 69).

Whatever the problems of privileging class over other subjectivities or imperialism and capitalism over other sociopolitical narratives, I would argue Ngũgĩ’s literature avoids subsuming “local conflict” to a totalizing global teleology as Ogude suggests, precisely by adopting the sort of particularist universalism Harvey outlines, charted out by linking more and more places to his concern for particular places like Kenya. “Those who want to fight for the people in the nation and in the world,” Nyawĩra claims, must recognize the links of discrimination and struggle “in the home, the family, the nation, and the world” (*Wizard* 428).

This representation of resistance remains grounded in place while growing in scale by privileging a model of *unity* over *purity*. Emanating from the depiction of Makuyu and Kameno as contested spaces, Waiyaki laments that “he had forgotten to preach reconciliation” as part of their efforts at empowerment (*River* 112). “How could he organize people into a political organization when they were so torn with strife and disunity?” he wonders. “Now he knew what he would do if he ever got another chance: education for unity. Unity for political freedom” (164). Unlike the kiamas or Joshua’s Christian zealotry, the unity Waiyaki envisions is not premised on notions of purity but syncretism, bringing together the divergent interests of the ridges and even incorporating what elements of white religion and education that could be “reconciled to the traditions of the people” (162).

It is worth noting that at this stage in his writing, Ngũgĩ retains an ambivalence about the relations between colonizer and colonized in his attempts to define an emerging Kenyan culture that negotiates the helpful and antagonistic elements of European influence (Caminero-Santagelo

148). As Ngũgĩ begins to adopt “utter hostility toward anything deemed Western” and casts the global drama as oppressor versus oppressed, then, Ogude claims Ngũgĩ’s representation of the postcolonial situation loses its complexity and becomes mechanistic and flat (Ogude 13). I would argue, however, that his understanding of “the oppressed” at least retains a sense of complexity and dynamism—the solidarity of this group cannot be presumed but must be constructed through an extension of the unity Waiyaki proposes, unity which itself presupposes the existence and persistence of differences.

To focus on shared class subjectivity is not to inevitably assimilate them to a uniform identity. Chrisman notes, “it would be problematic to conclude that subalterns, leaders, women, and men are necessarily fixed in their identities, needs, and interests” (189); instead, subjectivity can be transformed through political exigency and agency, made to express “the positive value of ‘unification’ over ‘difference’” (189). At the same time, “unification is not an attempt to deny the legitimacy of difference” (189), but acts as a line of connection, “the means by which to transcend the boundaries of their imagined community to connect with other masses or marginalized groups in the world dealing with common problems” (Yewah 51). We can see this conception of unity without purity fitting with Fanon’s formulations in “On National Culture.” Fanon defines culture not as something natural or unchanging, but as “the conscious, organized struggle undertaken by a colonized people in order to restore national sovereignty” (Fanon 178). As such, living cultures are necessarily rooted in the particular conditions and histories of people and place and are thus unique to those situations. The Pan African and global solidarities Ngũgĩ enunciates can therefore not be based solely or primarily on the specificities of any one place or culture: “There is no common destiny between the cultures of Guinea and Senegal,” Fanon explains, “but there is a common destiny between the nations of Guinea and Senegal dominated

by the same French colonialism” (169). The motive and means for this joint geography is history and politics, not natural affiliation; still, it is enough to implicate all Africans in “a responsibility toward ‘Negro-African’ culture” (179). In contrast with essentializing notions like *négritude*, this black cultural consciousness “does not rest upon a metaphysical principle but mindfulness of a simple rule which stipulates that any independent nation in an Africa where colonialism still lingers is a nation surrounded, vulnerable, and in permanent danger” (180).

In parsing through how Fanon conceives of a growing and non-essentializing “African” culture, we would do well to heed his reminder that any culture, like place, is heterogeneous, “the outcome of tensions internal and external to society as a whole and its multiple layers” (Fanon 177). In other words, this larger African culture aggregates national cultures, themselves the product of multivalent social processes, all linked together by political exigency. Rather than effacing local specificities, it is precisely the particularities of people, place, and history producing culture that continue to ground even continental (or in Ngũgĩ’s case, Global South) scales of connection. This is perhaps what Fanon meant in saying, “It is at the heart of national consciousness that international consciousness establishes itself and thrives” (180). Here Fanon echoes Waiyaki’s plea for unity not founded on notions of fundamental sameness, an understanding Ngũgĩ carries forward even as he adapts and develops his conceptions of nationalism and global solidarity.

This reading perhaps contrasts with what some critics have identified as Ngũgĩ’s implication within a modernist nationalism in these early novels. Ogude argues that early on, Ngũgĩ was caught up in a modernist “nation-centered nationalism” that focused on “European-defined boundaries and institutions” (6), a nationalism that purported a “bounded identity” (6) through what Edward Said identifies as “an assertion of belonging in and to a place, a people, a

heritage” (qtd. in Ogude, 5). Nicholas Dirks recites a common criticism of nationalism defined in this way: “Claims about nationality necessitated notions of culture that marked groups off from one another in essential ways, uniting language, race, geography, and history in a single concept” (qtd. in *Ngũgĩ* 21). I hope to have demonstrated the way even Ngũgĩ’s most romantic novel, *The River Between*, might resist a too-simple inclusion within this definition of nationalism, but there can be no doubt that his later works represent a much more flexible understanding of the nation, drawing in large measure from the model of non-essentialized unity outlined above. The sense of collectivity displayed in Ngũgĩ’s literature might be part of what Lovesey calls Ngũgĩ’s “hybrid nationalism” that shifts between scales, incorporating but not conflating “sub-national ethnic nationalities, regionalism, Pan Africanism, and ‘Third World’ solidarity” (Lovesey 156). As Ngũgĩ engages each of these scales of concern, he does so in similar ways, eschewing an understanding that would see one as having fundamental characteristics that would flatten out or obscure the others. Rather, at every level Ngũgĩ spins out a narrative of place marked by internal divisions (of gender, of culture, of class) and a corresponding need for an expanded unity and reconciliation. Ogude recognizes as much regarding the early novels, noting a theme of “restoration of the community to itself [as] a precondition for the process that culminates in the building of a nation” (126). That restoration is not founded on “an organic return to the source, but a realistic acceptance of multiple histories” that shape Thabai in particular (134).

For Ngũgĩ, this foundational sense of place as always already multiple allows Thabai to metonymically stand for both itself and the nation, or Kenya to stand for all colonized or oppressed peoples and places. He repeats the same dynamic of expanded geographic unity through linked difference and shared political/historical contingency again and again, with the mechanism and conception of unification not radically changed as the scale grows. In *Wizard of*

*the Crow*, Kamĩtĩ reflects this understanding of unity through diversity as he journeys outside his body to survey all of Aburĩria:

[H]e had a bird’s-eye view of the northern, southern, eastern, western, and central regions of Aburĩria. The landscape ranged from the coastal plains to the region of the great lakes; to the arid bushlands in the east; to the central highlands and northern mountains. People differed as much in the languages they spoke as in the clothes they wore and how they eked out a living. Some fished, others herded cattle and goats, and others worked on the land, but everywhere, particularly in towns, the contours of life were the same as those of Eldares. Everywhere people were hungry, thirsty, and in rags [...] So I am not alone, he heard himself say [...] (38-9).

Here Kamĩtĩ begins to develop a sense of Aburĩria as a whole and his own place in it, but one that suggests a ground-up, particularist universalism that bears out “the importance of local knowledge or of starting from the particular to the general” (*Moving* 25). Guided by Nyawĩra’s insistence on even greater unification and his own predilection for finding truth in various cultures and traditions, Kamĩtĩ also travels “to all the crossroads, all the marketplaces and temple sites, all the dwelling places of black people the world over [...] from the pyramids of Egypt to the plains of the Serengeti and Great Zimbabwe; Benin to Bahia and on through the Caribbean to the skyscrapers of New York, alighting everywhere to glean wisdom” in order to “find out the sources of their power” (*Wizard* 494). As a testament to his expanding sense of collectivity, Kamĩtĩ carves “a Pan-African pantheon of the sacred” (268) that becomes symbolic for the Movement for the Voice of the People as they trace out “the sources of black power” (757) and seek to establish unity “across race and ethnic lines” (760). As the scale of geographic

entanglement expands throughout Ngũgĩ's works, this "global conversation of the deities" (760) acts as an implicit continuity, eschewing monotheism for a linked plurality of traditions. From the "isolated ridges" of *River Between* to the "global urban landscape" of *Wizard of the Crow* ("Postcolonial Wizard" 166), each piece strives to trace out a larger geography of connection while remaining embedded in the concerns, relations, and cultures of specific places. As an illustration of his ultimate vision, Ngũgĩ proffers the image of a "common global culture" that, like Fanon's "Negro-African" culture, is "expressed in the particularities of our different languages and cultures very much like a universal garden of many-coloured flowers" (*Moving* 24).

Perhaps few of Ngũgĩ's works demonstrate this glocality better than *I Will Marry When I Want*, a play written and produced in direct and extensive collaboration with peasants and workers at the Kamĩĩĩthũ Community Education and Cultural Centre in Limuru. Their efforts (and the fact that the play employs their language and songs) firmly ground the play in the culture, history and experience of Limuru, a direct engagement with particularity that makes it a "challenge to imperial cultural domination [...] in location, audience, language, values, and even style of production, i.e. the communal participation" (*Writers in Politics* 47). Though it spoke to global issues and worked to establish itself "as national and sought affirmations with the black proletariat of the diaspora and the rest of the African continent" (Joseph 59), it was eminently and unabstractedly a community voice, articulating their own understanding of those issues and their global connections by making use of their own cultural agency. This, perhaps, was the impulse for Ngũgĩ's venture into drama: its capacity to allow discussion of global, perhaps "mechanistic" or "dualistic" concepts while complicating them and localizing them by being quite concretely, specifically emplaced. As it was performed by the community theatre, it was

the very model of the cultural and linguistic renewal Ngũgĩ argues as the basis for anti-imperialism. Yet in its translated and distributed English form, it carries that message across to the far-flung masses of Kenya, East Africa, even the whole Global South, helping to form unity without demanding any measure of purity, cultural or otherwise. In fact, Ngũgĩ's experience with this play marks a significant transition in his thinking about militant particularism and the means by which to speak to global forces through local languages and cultures.

The shifting and concurrent scales imagined especially in *I Will Marry When I Want* and *Wizard of the Crow* suggest Ngũgĩ's flexibility in locating sites of domination and resistance geographically as he works to make the local speak to the national and the global and vice versa. It would be mistaken, then, to see Ngũgĩ's literary trajectory as coming to uncritically embrace a teleological globalism, as the forces of both oppression and revolution operate at and between all these scales. Even (and perhaps especially) in his most "global" text, *Wizard of the Crow*, Ngũgĩ remains ambivalent about the possibilities for the nation or for globalism as vehicles of liberating or dominating social and political power. For most of the novel, the nation-state figures as the instrument of the Ruler's dictatorship; he usurps its sovereignty by claiming no distinction between himself and the country (*Wizard* 136) and using the police, the army, and the government to serve his own selfish ends at the expense of the people. He also adopts the discourse of nationalism and Pan Africanism to insulate himself from foreign intervention or calls for democratic reform. As an independent nation, he claims, "we cannot allow ourselves to take orders from the West all the time [...] I want to remind you that we are in Africa, and we, too, have our *African forms of governance*. The democracy that is suitable for America and Europe is not necessarily suitable for Africa" (583). Instead of "Western" democracy, he imposes a nativist ideology, equating nationalism with the "march backward to the roots of an

authentic unchanging past” (622) and claiming that “the real threat to Aburĩria’s future lay in people’s abandoning their traditions” like polygamy, wife beating, and “unquestioning obedience” (621-2). In such instances, nationalism and the nation-state act as a refuge for the Ruler’s tyranny, which needs to be defended in part from external political pressures. The world media in particular is a “pest” for the Ruler (611), checking his open abuses of the population and spurring “questions about the missing minister” Machokali, whom the Ruler has had killed (612).

At the same time, the “new global order” of media transparency and democratization carries its own threats to the people of Aburĩria. As the US envoy from the Global Bank explains, “the history of capitalism can be summed up in one phrase: *in search of freedom*. Freedom to expand, and now it has a chance at the entire globe for its theatre. It needs a democratic space to move as its own logic demands” (*Wizard* 580). The pressure for Aburĩria to reform, then, stems not from concern for the people themselves, but for “a free and stable world where our money can move across borders without barriers erected by the misguided nationalism of the outmoded nation-state” (580). The dissolution and privatization of the nation-state equates to a form of “corporonialism” (760), in which the resources of the nation are “freed” for exploitation by transnational corporations and “the neoimperial class imports en masse the cheapest [goods] from abroad and undermines the efforts from within” (760). Against the machinations of neoliberal globalism, the nation reemerges as an instrument of the Movement for the Voice of the People, a claim to “political and economic sovereignty over a finite landmass” that allows them to counter the exploitative claims of global capital (Chrisman 187). The Movement’s main goal is “to imagine a different future *for Aburĩria* after people united take power from these ogres” (*Wizard* 758, my emphasis). Unlike the Ruler’s egomaniacal and

nativist nationalism, however, this “New Aburñria” is premised on “a coalition of interests all united by one desire to recover their voice in running the affairs of the land” (676). Here Ngũgĩ seems engaged in an effort to “reinvent the nation-state radically to serve the needs of its own people” (Chrisman 184), one that can wield its sovereignty “to protect laws for social justice” (*Wizard* 759) based on the specific interests and conditions of the nation.

By refusing to simply privilege or disregard either the nation or the global as inherently prone to the purposes of domination or resistance, Ngũgĩ holds out the possibility for a more nuanced understanding of the multivalent relations between these scales. *Wizard of the Crow* provides in many ways a narrative embodiment of Dirlik’s assertion, “The question then is not the confrontation of the global and the local, but of different configurations of ‘glocality’” which might serve different interests” (Dirlik 29). Representing the varying configurations of oppressive glocality has in some form or other been a constant theme throughout Ngũgĩ’s career, and as have calls for unity across cultures, ethnicities, races, places, and scales as the only appropriately glocal response.

By reframing our analysis around the glocality inherent in Ngũgĩ’s writing, we can begin to parse through some of the other tensions (geographical and otherwise) that have tended to be structured alongside and within assumptions of a local-global opposition. For instance, there has been a temptation in much of the criticism on Ngũgĩ (and African or postcolonial literature generally) to equate the local, rural, and place-based resistance, and to set them against the global, urban, and space-based domination.<sup>4</sup> There is some support for such a perspective in Ngũgĩ’s early novels, where land figures as “the basis of being and becoming” (“Postcolonial Wizard” 168), a source of livelihood and identity that serves “as a metaphor for life [...] Land is

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<sup>4</sup> Depending on one’s theoretical perspective, of course, the assignment of resistance and domination within this dualism might be reversed (see the Introduction to this dissertation and the discussion on Westphal’s post-structuralist geocriticism and its privileging of “smooth space” and transgression).

both a metaphor for struggle and the physical space for contest” (Ogude 28). In *A Grain of Wheat*, when Gĩkũyũ lands are coopted by colonialism, they turn to the forest as a democratic space for resistance, where dance sessions “turned into meetings where plans for the day of reckoning were drawn [...] flinging an open challenge to those beyond Thabai, to the whiteman in Nairobi and any other places where Gĩkũyũ ancestors used to dwell” (*Grain* 87). This romanticization and privileging of nature and the rural is set in stark contrast with urban spaces, with Nairobi in particular representing (neo)colonial encroachment and exploitation. Nairobi, Gikonyo muses, “was never an African city”; instead, “The Indians and Europeans controlled the commercial and the social life of the city” and “there was not a single African shop in the whole of the central and business area” (54). The superficial trappings of Uhuru (renaming streets, removing colonial monuments, and so on) do little to alter Nairobi’s role as a conduit for global intervention in and exploitation of Kenya. The urban-rural dynamic in *A Grain of Wheat*, then, seems generally to follow a center-periphery structure that is both divisive and hierarchal, opposing the city and the shamba even as the nation seeks to unite in its independence.

In his review of *Wizard of the Crow*, however, Gikandi suggests a change in how Ngũgĩ approaches the relationship of urban and rural. The novel, he contends, narrates “the death of the romance of home” (“Postcolonial Wizard” 168) and instead occupies a “global urban landscape” (166) in which the narrative is “nomadic,” able to access the intimacy of places like Thabai “only through memory and nostalgia” (167). Yet rather than exacerbating the gulf implied by *A Grain of Wheat*, Ngũgĩ depicts a more connected relationship between city and countryside in *Wizard of the Crow*. Indeed, much of the de-romanticizing of the rural comes through this connection and the growing implication of villages and wilderness within the national and global dynamics that also plague the capital Eldares. When Kamĩĩ returns to his boyhood village, instead of

finding an expected “rural peace,” he finds a place ravaged by HIV/AIDS: “It is no longer an urban thing,” he laments (*Wizard* 296). Similarly, the one-time refuge of the forest has now come under threat from “the Aburñrian state and big American, European, and Japanese companies, in alliance with the local African, Indian, and European rich” whose “unregulated clearing of forests [had] affected the rhythm of the rains, and a semidesert was beginning to creep from the prairie to the hills” (201). The situation challenges Kamĩtĩ’s assumptions of isolation and hopes that the bush can remain an untainted sanctuary. “He had once contrasted rural tranquility and urban anxiety. Things were more complicated now” (312).

Not all that complication is problematic in the novel, however. For Kamĩtĩ and Nyawĩra, the land and wilderness still provide a sense of wholeness and wellbeing, with the “healing properties” of nature marking a productive alternative to the exploitative capitalist values of the leaders in Eldares and the Global Bank (*Wizard* 481). And the forest continues to act as a safe haven for them in their struggles with those “ogres and scorpions” (208, 215). Yet whereas Kamĩtĩ yearns to “Abandon human community for the wilderness” (208), Nyawĩra insists that the knowledge and healing practices they learn from their engagements with nature be applied also to the needs in Eldares and Aburñria as a whole. So they set up The House of Modern Witchcraft and Sorcery on the outskirts of Santalucia, symbolically placed between the city and the wilderness. There they perform divination based on “the philosophy that illnesses of the mind, soul, and body were bred by social life” (275). As an antidote to the problems of social life, they provide “seven suggestions of healthy living,” including the assertion that “Life is a common stream from which plant, animal, and humans draw” (275). This notion of “clean living” also becomes a central tenet of the Movement: with the forest as “a school to which they often came to hear what it had to tell them,” they learn to work “with nature, not against it,” healing the land

as part of their efforts to heal the nation (758). In effect, the refuge of the forest is recreated in and around the informal settlement of Santalucia, and the politics and resistance of the city are carried into the forest. The result is not only shared burdens between city, village, and bush, but also shared resistance: for example, “some *matutus* brought in food from the rural folk” to help sustain the People’s Assembly protesting in the capital; with that support, “the assembly continued to grow in strength, confidence, and courage” (639). This interpenetrability of urban and rural parallels Ngũgĩ’s glocal logic, and in fact also challenges the assumptions that would tend to lock the rural within the sphere of the local, opposed to the more global spatiality of the city.

All of this is not to suggest, however, that understanding Ngũgĩ’s geographic imaginary of glocality resolves all the tensions or answers all the challenges critics have broached with his literature. Even if Ngũgĩ’s Ur-narrative is not the opposition of local to global, for instance, he does often suppose a geographic alignment of Global North versus Global South as the primary structure of domination and resistance. In most of Ngũgĩ’s texts, the US and Europe (and to a lesser extent Japan) figure as monolithic sites of imperialist and capitalist domination. They do not manifest as places in the way Kenya and Africa do, shut out from the setting of the narratives and represented by stereotypically ignorant and ethnocentric men like John Thompson in *A Grain of Wheat* or the faceless envoys of the Global Bank in *Wizard of the Crow*. Perhaps, as Ogude suggests, Ngũgĩ is stuck in a colonial geography, “always suspended on the deterministic structure of the First World and the Third World” (67), perhaps supported by Ngũgĩ’s coining of the term “corporonialism” to describe the situation in *Wizard of the Crow*. Or perhaps the general delineation of North and South reflects Ngũgĩ’s continued attempts to negotiate the role of race

and the history of colonialism in his Marxist narrative of class struggle. Either way, “The battle lines may be murky,” Nyawĩra exclaims, “but they have not changed” (*Wizard* 756).

However one understands Ngũgĩ’s tendency to dichotomize the world along these lines, this potential oversimplification should not be attributed to a necessary outcome of his attempts to frame his narrative in a global context, as Ogude has implied. As I have argued here, Ngũgĩ demonstrates a capacity to avoid problematic generalization in his complex understanding of the Global South as a variegated ground where domination and resistance are refracted through local cultures and conditions. Such a dynamic understanding of place and scale could ostensibly be extended to the spaces of the Global North as well, and Ngũgĩ has shown signs of beginning to do just that in his more recent writings.

Ngũgĩ briefly articulates a recognition of alterity within the imperial territories especially in *Moving the Centre*, where his anti-imperial solidarity purportedly incorporates “democratic forces for change” operating within the West, including “working class struggles; women’s movements; Black people’s movements; the peace movement” (111). And he includes a few instances of positive connection between Africa and the West in *Wizard of the Crow*, which for the first time narrates some of the action in the US. In Washington, Aburĩrian ministers encounter a demonstration by “Friends of Democracy and Human Rights in Aburĩria,” including a former Aburĩrian professor who, like Ngũgĩ, had been imprisoned and exiled, and was now “strutting about in a foreign land, betraying his country” by agitating for US diplomatic pressure on the Ruler (*Wizard* 483-4). Finally, Kamĩĩ includes “the skyscrapers of New York” in his rhapsody on the sources of black power (494), a gesture toward shared struggle with the diaspora in the US. Though far from comprehensive, these few instances of connection between the

resistance forces of North and South are significant for what they suggest about possible developments in Ngũgĩ's attempts to negotiate sites of domination and resistance.

Still, Ngũgĩ is unlikely to entirely resolve the tensions involved in mapping out the geographies of imperialism, precisely because whichever places he engages will always be products of complex and shifting glocal forces, as his own literature suggests. Glocality, Ngũgĩ suggests, is not a resolution unto itself, but a fact of places linked together in an increasingly globalized world. Only by dislodging critical interpretation from a dichotomous structure of local versus global can we more precisely deal with the dynamics and tensions of culture, class, identity, domination and resistance that drive Ngũgĩ's work. Adopting a perspective attuned to the glocality that runs through his writing clarifies but does not simplify critical attempts to elucidate the successes and limitations of his literary activism.

## Chapter 4

### Cosmopolitan Somalia: Place and Identity in Farah's *Maps* and *Links*

“We’re scattered across the world, but the memory of our family house unites us whenever we talk.”  
—Nuruddin Farah, “The Family House”

When Nuruddin Farah wrote “The Family House” for the 2008 edition of *Transition*, he had in mind a Somalia very different from that of his early fiction, the Somalia of Siyad Barre and errant patriarchal nationalism. In that early fiction, Farah challenged notions of both “Somali” and “Somalia,” along with the myths of linguistic, cultural, ethnic and even biological unity purported by the Barre regime as the basis for the “natural” identity of Somali(a). According to many critics, then, a novel like *Maps* (1986) is a thoroughly deconstructive project, undercutting any stable subjectivities and the very notion of Somalia itself.

More than twenty years later, however, that nationalism had long since cracked into civil war, disintegrating into a failed state, fractious clan politics and conflict, and a worldwide diaspora. More recent novels like *Secrets* (1998) and *Links* (2004) turn attention away from nationalism to the divisiveness of clan ideology, the “political construction whose aim was to provide the blood community with an imagined identity” (“Family House” 10) yet which “seldom knitted society into a seamless whole” (*Links* 34). In dealing with clans as artificial subjectivities paraded as natural identities, Farah’s later novels still engage in some measure of deconstruction. Yet increasingly, these works also seem concerned with reestablishing a sense of collective identity for Somalis as a heterogeneous society nevertheless knitted together, linked (as the novel title would suggest) but without naturalizing assertions of uniformity. Despite his criticism of Somali nationalism under Barre, despite the fragmented state of the country, despite his own exile and travels, Farah insists, “I have remained loyal to the idea of Somalia” (“Nuruddin Farah” 57).

In that context, the focus on postmodernism and deconstruction that has dominated criticism of Farah's work seems limited in its capacity to illuminate the direction of novels like *Links* or to understand the way earlier works like *Maps* also eschew unfettered deconstruction of any sense of Somali collectivity or particularity. Instead, we might take our cue from the epigraph, which suggests connection through (the memory of) place and place-based relations—in this case, the Farah family house in Mogadishu. Through an analysis of the role of place in *Maps* and *Links*, we can see Farah developing a cosmopolitan sense of Somali identity, one grounded in the specificity of place and enabling a sense of collectivity, while simultaneously remaining multiple and dynamic.

With the publication of the collection *Emerging Perspectives on Nuruddin Farah* in 1998, it became clear the emerging consensus was (and remains) centered around Farah's postmodernist challenge to myths of stable and homogeneous Somali identity. Though reticent to "claim Farah as a thoroughgoing postmodernist or to try to limit him to any one school of writing" (Wright 98), the anthology's editor Derek Wright nonetheless highlights the "quasi-postmodernist tendencies at play in Farah's work" (99) in a piece entitled "Mapping Farah's Fiction: the Postmodern Landscapes." Other works in the collection include Charles Sugnet's "Farah's *Maps*: Deterritorialization and the Postmodern," Felix Mnthali's "Autocracy and the Limits of Identity," Gillaume Cingal's "Self and Identity in the *Blood in the Sun* Trilogy," and a number of other essays suggesting an emphasis on the deconstructive and the hybrid. Three years later, Francis Ngaboh-Smart wrote that Farah "obviously belongs" to the "emerging, postmodernist, African literary tradition" that uses "imploded narratives, metaphors of splintered bodies, linguistic heteroglossia, 'the juxtaposition of parallel worlds,' and other formal strategies to underscore Africa's diverse cultural experiences" (Ngaboh-Smart 86-7).

The target of Farah's "imploded narratives" and exploded identities was clearly Somali nationalism, particularly under the Barre regime. In that respect, this standard line of criticism becomes especially clear through readings of *Maps*. The novel, according to most critics, can be seen as an allegorical narrative, in which the hero Askar frustratedly attempts to define himself through the Somali nation, and vice versa. Orphaned at birth and raised by an Oromo woman (Misra) in the Ethiopian-controlled but heavily Somali-populated region of the Ogaden, Askar has no "natural" sense of being Somali. His search for himself, then, is "cast within the country's epic quest for its soul" ("The Politics and Poetics of National Formation" 457) as it tries to reunite the Ogaden as part of Greater Somalia that was split by colonial powers. In his retelling, Askar self-consciously takes on the mantle of the "mythic offspring of Somali nationalist aspirations and the mother-Republic" (Wright 119), his own sense of wholeness tied to the geographic myth of a reunited Somalia. As the Western Somali Liberation Front begins to agitate rebellion against Ethiopia, then, Askar twins that cause with his own sense of coming of age and coming into his identity:

The orgies of self-questioning, which were his wont, gave way to a state in which he identified himself with the community at large. And he partook of the ecstasy of madness that struck the town of Kallafo [...] he was totally detached from his mother-figure Misra, and weaned. In the process of looking for a substitute, he found another—Somalia, his mother country. (*Maps* 100)

Askar's preoccupation with maps, then, metaphorizes his desire to delimit clear borders for both Somalia and himself, borders that would better correspond to the "pure" body of "mother Somalia" and a national subjectivity that more seamlessly fits that nation than his ambivalent state in Kallafo. He is inculcated in this idealism about Somali people and place by

his tutor Cusmaan, by the WSLF, and even to a certain extent by his intellectual uncle Hilaal, who added cultural and linguistic elements to the biological/ethnic and geographic myths of Somali nationhood. Hilaal asserts that the Somali are “a homogeneous people; they are homogeneous culturally speaking and speak the same language wherever they may be found” (*Maps* 174). It is that linguistic and cultural uniformity that unites Somalis everywhere, “no matter how many borders divide them, no matter what flag flies in the skies above them or what the bureaucratic language of the country is” (*Maps* 174), though Askar seems desperate to encase that cultural reality within clear national borders that would solidify his individual and national identity. Perhaps trying to reassure himself, Askar takes Hilaal’s thinking to heart, positing, “I wonder if the pastoralist nature of the Somali sees an inborn link between the child and its cosmology by having it learn the words ‘sky’ and ‘earth’?” (*Maps* 177), seemingly oblivious to the irony of making such claims about the “nature” of “the Somali” while living with cosmopolitan relatives in the Somali capital far from any “pastoralist” roots.

The intent of Hilaal’s claims seems to have been to assure Askar of his own Somaliness even as an orphan from the Ogaden. Yet the narrowness and totalizing nature of the assertion make Askar question himself even more, especially insofar as “mother tongue is important, very important” (*Maps* 175). Of course, this raises questions about Somalis whose mother tongue may not be “pure” Somali, as in the case of Cusmaan’s tutor, “a Somali from somewhere in East Africa” (*Maps* 169). Though identified as Somali, he was “apparently a ‘Misgenderer’: a term indicating where the genders are confounded” (169). As such, Askar associates him with foreigners: “When this man lapsed into Somali, he reminded me of the Ethiopian soldiers whom I heard speaking Somali at the marketplace, confounding their sexes” (169). In Askar’s own

case, he would have learned Somali primarily from Misra, complicating the notion of his own “mother tongue” and its impact on his Somaliness.

Perhaps nervous about his compromised position in Hilaal’s broad statements about the homogeneity of Somali character, Askar challenges his uncle’s assertion, asking about “differences which have been made to exist between the Somali in the Somali Republic and the Somali in either Kenya or in the Ethiopian-administered Ogaden.” Hilaal replies that “because they lack what makes the self strong and whole, [they] are *unpersons*” (*Maps* 175). On the one hand, then, Hilaal’s construction of Somali identity is inclusive, even to the point of accepting Misra as legally Somali “If her Somali is as good as yours” (174); yet on the other hand, it threatens to disallow any difference in that construction, leaving Askar still questioning ““Is Misra a Somali?’ ‘Am I a refugee?’ ‘Am I an unperson?’ ‘Is or will Misra be an unperson—if she comes to Mogadiscio?’” (175).

The various, contradictory answers Askar receives and develops in response to these questions suggest the way “the nation does not naturally proffer identities” (“Politics and Poetics” 457). All his attempts to clarify his own status (and crucially, that of Misra as a part of himself) in some pure Somalia are frustrated by the “absence of a stable system of meanings in the Somali cultural body” (459), be it ethnic, biological or even linguistic, as the presence of “misgenderers” suggests. Nationalism (symbolized by Askar’s maps) is at best an “artificial imposition of identity” (Wright 120), one that tends to homogenize people “who have in fact become irredeemably mongrelized” while in the same move “it artificially sets apart other groups who, in reality, are much more closely bonded” (Wright 121). Even as Askar zealously draws maps of Greater Somalia that include the Ogaden (and thus himself), Simon Gikandi argues, “he cannot countenance his separation from the woman whom he has called mother just

because she was born in another country” (“Politics and Poetics” 464). Not only does inclusion into “Somalia” repressively efface the multiple cultural determinations of Askar’s subjectivity as “a young boy from the Ogaden” (*Maps* 152), it demands the violent exclusion of “outsiders” like Misra—the mother figure with whom he was so close he seemed “to have remained a mere extension of [her] body for years” (78). Indeed, her murder on suspicion of helping the Ethiopians recapture Kallafo signals clearly the determination that she is *not* Somali. It is the fulfillment of Misra’s own prophesy at the time of Askar’s nascent nationalist awakening: “One day [...] you will identify yourself with your people and identify me out of your community. Who knows, you might even kill me to make your people’s dream become a tangible reality [...] In the name of your people. Kill” (*Maps* 99).

Ambivalence about Askar’s involvement in Misra’s murder aside, it is clear through the fractured narrative that Askar cannot ultimately convince himself of the legitimacy of Somali nationalism. Curiously, Askar is tutored here again by Hilaal, who makes him question the “truth” he finds in his maps: “Do you carve out of your soul the invented truth of the maps you draw? Or does the daily truth match, for you, the reality you draw and the maps others draw?” (*Maps* 227). Askar tries to justify a “substantial difference” between his maps reclaiming the Ogaden for Somalia and colonial recarving of Africa or “a map a German cartographer had drawn as his country invaded and conquered more and more of Europe” (228), the Somali claims being “truthful” and “just.” Hilaal counters that “There is truth in maps. The Ogaden, as Somali, is truth. To the Ethiopian map-maker, the Ogaden, as Somali, is untruth” (229). Exchanges and contradictions like this one throughout the narrative force Askar to recognize that “his own politico-linguistic map of Greater Somalia is, in reality, as much a fiction of cultural geography as the colonial maps were figments of political geography” (121). By having Askar come to

accept maps as “a moveable object, Farah challenges that postcolonial cartographic project that expresses unbounded admiration for a territory as one’s own free from chaos” (Ngaboh-Smart 96).

Critics point to the way Farah reinforces this deconstruction of Somali nationalist uniformity through a postmodernist narrative and representation of “puzzling indeterminacy” (Wright 100). The narrative itself is split between three narrators, often taken to be versions of Askar himself, voices that question and undercut each other and fail to cohere as a “self” through narration. These narrators help accomplish a “collapsing of ontological boundaries by multiple, superimposed orders of reality” (Wright 99). As a “liminal creature,” Askar himself straddles “sexual, national and ontological boundaries [...] in such a way as to dissolve the distinctions between the things they divide” (100-101). He, Misra, and the Ogaden come to represent the “complex and multiform components of Somali society” as they “combine the different human and cultural realities of the Ogaden, a border territory of mixed ethnic peoples” (Ruggiero 560, 561). Through them, Farah depicts “cultural dislocation” and a “divided and ambivalent society” (Ngaboh-Smart 87), multiplied and blurred to create “a semantic overdetermination so as to pulverize the atavistic desire for boundedness that has always mobilized Somali or African nationalism” (97).

The common thread through such interpretations is a clear sense of the artificial (and in many ways arbitrary) nature of nationalism and identity. They see Farah confronting that artificiality with a deconstructive narrative of breakdown and destabilization—disrupting any clear divisions and corrupting any “natural” uniformities as a way to make space for the “diversity” and “fluidity” that in fact belie the “nature of the Somali national character” (Ngaboh-Smart 92). The idea that an exclusively deconstructive narrative or interpretation can

speak to that difference itself, however, presents a tricky proposition. Nationalism is itself a form of difference; once decried and dissolved for its “artificiality,” what remains to stop a postmodernist deconstruction of the other identities of that “diversity” meant to replace it? One could just as well point to *any* subjectivity (collective or individual) as artificial, lacking stability and coherence; thus any identity could be subject to further deconstruction, further hybridization to account for the “in-between.” Taken to its *telos*, trying to account for difference with deconstructive postmodern logic may well do away with any difference at all, as every clear distinction is blurred, every “artificial” trait dissolved into a free-floating universal hybridity.

Of course, critiques of postmodernism of this sort are perhaps stale and, in this case, no doubt a little overblown. Though critics like Ngaboh-Smart see *Maps* as part of the “larger blurring of boundaries in a postmodernist discourse,” he also cautions that it does so in a way “that must be differentiated from the inordinately deconstructive variant of the West” (Ngaboh-Smart 100). Even as he blurs the boundaries of nationalist subjectivity, Farah shows little interest in utterly destabilizing all sense of identity; and in later works like *Secrets* and *Links* he calls for a renewed sense of Somali collectivity as an antidote to aggressive clan fragmentation. Yet it is precisely here that a postmodernist approach to understanding Farah’s work proves limited: focused as it is on a “commitment to anti-essentialism, difference and particularity,” postmodernism drives inevitably toward smaller, more “local” subjectivities, casting wary glances at any larger collectivity (Brown and Purcell 283). As Arif Dirlik has argued, postmodern anti-essentialism acts as “an efficient way [...] to defuse the claims to alternative possibilities” for collective identity or resistance that are especially imperative in the wake of the collapse of the Somali nation-state (Dirlik 40).

The problem criticism on Farah has encountered, then, is how exactly to describe the ways in which he challenges problematic subjectivities like nationalism and clan affiliation without exploding all boundaries, blurring all distinctions, or disallowing all collective identity. Even Ngaboh-Smart's admonition comes at the end of his piece, leaving us to our own devices to see what beyond *deconstruction* Farah might be doing to *reconstruct* a narrative of connection for people like Askar and Misra.

Here I propose an analysis of *place* in Farah's work to be one of those devices. Alongside a breakdown of a nationalist or clan-based narrative of identity and belonging, Farah develops a cosmopolitan sense of place, one in which identities and relations are not "natural" or exclusive but are nonetheless grounded in the particularity of place. Such an analysis puts an emphasis on the way Farah represents multiplicity and dynamism occurring in relation to a specific place, taking particular shape in and *as* that place—and in that way avoiding an "inordinately deconstructive" reshaping of Somali(a).

Given the preponderance of nationalist critique Farah's work, *place* may seem a strange point of analysis, especially in its implications with nationalist discourses of belonging and "natural" identities. Ngaboh-Smart calls out this association directly, noting the role of place in *Maps* as part of Askar's nationalist aspirations. He claims Askar's dreams of gardens are "his configurations of 'place,' his articulation of a 'symbolic system,' Somalia, into which he wants to assert himself" (Ngaboh-Smart 89). As the scare quotes would suggest, Ngaboh-Smart sees place in the novel as an idealism, a sense of boundedness, stability and homogeneity that buttress "his dream of a well-organized Somali nation as well as the identity that they Somali nation is likely to confer on its citizens" (90). Place here serves a mostly ideological function, an attempt to define belonging, to make still what is fluid, distinct what is blurred, singular what is multiple.

As an ideological artifice, what is needed (along with deconstruction of identity) is a deconstruction of place in favor of a sense of “space” or “heterotopia” or “zone” in which the fluid diversity of Somali(a) can be expressed.

Space has indeed been privileged over place by many post-structurally-influenced critics as a way to deal with the movement, migration, exile, and hybridity they see characterizing the postcolonial world. Space and flow have a similar appeal for geographic issues as discursive deconstruction for matters of identity: namely, disrupting foundational claims to territory, exposing borders as “nakedly the results of competitive historical zoning” or “freaks of colonial whimsy” (Wright 96). The indeterminacy and dynamism of space are seen as a productive challenge to both the arbitrary boundarification of Africa and romanticized narratives that would lock Africa’s ethnicities in geographic and historical amber.

Yet we would do well to remember that colonialism itself was at least as much a project of *space* creation as it was *place* imposition through borders/nations. In taking from Henri Lefebvre’s seminal work *The Production of Space*, Lawrence Buell notes that much of modern history involves the “worldwide ‘production’ of ‘abstract space’” as the purpose, means, and result of colonialism and capitalism (*Future of Environmental Criticism* 64). David Harvey expands on this idea, describing the way in which “the world’s spaces were deterritorialized, stripped of their preceding significations, then reterritorialized to the convenience of colonial and imperial administration” (*Condition of Postmodernity* 264). Somali nationalism played at the same spatialization in *Maps*, as Askar learns to be dismissive of the “‘inexistent’ border” (*Maps* 132) between the Somali Republic and the Ogaden, “a border that has never been well spoken of among Somalis, for such borders deny the Somali people who live on either side of it, yes, such borders deny these people their very existence as a nation” (126). This de- and reterritorialization

allows Askar to enframe a sense of Somali place as he believes it should be; yet in the process, he strips the Ogaden of its “specific identity” in order to incorporate it into the larger body under the “generic” signifier “Western Somalia” (227).

Derek Wright picks up on this correlation in the space/place dynamics of colonialism and nationalism: he claims Farah “is troubled by the imperial powers’ zonal expropriation of Africa’s political, ethnic and cultural space in both the colonial and independence periods; and, moreover, by the continuation and reinforcement of these territorializing habits by postcolonial African regimes” (Wright 101). At least some of that concern, however, stems from the way in which these moves were enabled by the fact that “Africa has occurred in the European imagination a conceptual rather than geographic space” (97), a dismissal of extant particularity and socio-geographic organization that rendered “their ethnic and geographic spaces subordinate to the free play of colonial signifiers” (96). That might give us pause, then, at the notion of countering nationalism with further abstraction, the overzealous blurring of all boundaries or distinctions in favor of the free play of postcolonial or postmodern signifiers. Doing so risks effacing the very particularity of place and people that serves as the basis for decrying and resisting this sort of colonial geography at all.

Still, in much of the criticism on Farah the focus is so much on his deterritorializing of the Somali nation that we are left only with blurred borders and dissolved distinctions. But place indeed matters in Farah’s fiction. Despite his efforts to complicate and multiply notions of Somali(a), one would hardly countenance an understanding of Farah’s fiction as so indeterminate as to not be in some important way *about Somalia*, however provisional or contested our understanding of that place may be. Without appropriate recognition of the role of place in Farah’s novels, we might miss the particularity that “gives definition, force, persuasion,

*embodiment*” to his concerns (*Writing for an Endangered World* 55). As Buell suggests, “the more a site feels like a place, the more fervently it is so cherished, the greater the potential concern at its violation” (*Endangered World* 56). Like the Farah family house, Mogadishu, Kallafo, and Somalia itself remain cherished places that ground Farah’s concern. Just as we should not confuse Farah’s challenge to nationalist identity with an “inordinately deconstructive” dismissal of all collectivity, then, we ought not equate his challenge of the Somali nation with a “postmodernist abstraction of places” (Dirlik 22). Rather, the question is what sort of collectivity and what understanding of place Farah develops as an alternative to Barre’s patriarchal nation.

Any analysis of Farah’s representation of place must start with the recognition that place itself need not be the idealized garden of Askar’s dreams. As Doreen Massey has argued, “An (idealized) notion of an era when places were (supposedly) inhabited by coherent and homogeneous communities” leads to an understanding of place and place defense as reactionary, inward-looking, and repressive (“Global Sense of Place” 315). Yet as the parentheses suggest, this cannot be the only way to understand place, and is itself no doubt colored by an academe that privileges movement and hybridity as a resistance to nationalist regimes like Barre’s that make use of this place sense to shut down disruptive diversity.<sup>5</sup> Massey agrees that such a representation of place misses the dynamism and heterogeneity that necessarily characterize all social relations, but she does not see this as reason to do away with a concern for place. “How,” she asks, “in the face of all this movement and intermixing [in a modern globalized world], can we retain any sense of a local place and its particularity?” (315).

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<sup>5</sup> David Harvey expands on this idea, noting that “place-based theories of nationalism, national socialism, and fascism have frequently been the epicenter for the most vicious assaults upon cosmopolitanism as well as liberalism. Possibly for this reason, liberals and cosmopolitans tend to ignore the problematics of place altogether or to write about it with undue caution” (*Cosmopolitanism* 167).

Massey's answer is to make that dynamism a constitutive part of places themselves: "What gives place its specificity," she argues "is not some long internalized history but the fact that it is constructed out of a particular constellation of social relations, meeting and weaving together at a particular locus" ("Global Sense of Place" 322). That constellation is necessarily linked outward with other places through spatial and temporal flows, what Harvey calls a "permanence" crystallizing out of those flows (*Cosmopolitanism* 191). Buell develops a similar understanding in his assertion that there is no place that "is either a hermetic unit or utterly a product of forces outside it" (*Writing for an Endangered World* 60); nor are places "stable, free-standing entities, but continually shaped and reshaped by forces from both inside and outside [...] Places have histories" (67). This historical development and porosity make for places that are multiple and porous, not easily conflated with some ideal, insular "community."

This formulation of place makes it appealing for the deconstructive elements of Farah's work; but what of the need to check that abstracting, boundary-blurring move? Dirlik warns, "Porosity of boundaries is not the same as abolition of boundaries," and that if we are "overzealous [...] in dislocating place from fixed location," we risk coming to an understanding in which "there is nothing special about place after all" (Dirlik 22). He adds a measure of "groundedness" to Massey's constellation of social relations, reminding us that there are "limitations set on the production of place by its immediate environment" (22). Indeed, place as a concept necessarily combines the social and the natural in ways that are inextricable and irreducible (Dirlik 18, Sack 108). The palimpsest of social relations of a place are "mediated ecologically by the physical environments that they also mediate" (*Endangered World* 60). Because place is "defined by physical markers as well as social consensus" (*Environmental Criticism* 63), it is something specific to which we can ascribe meaning, distinctiveness and

value; so “we speak of place-attachment rather than of space-attachment” (63). Harvey sums up the dynamic yet distinctive nature of places this way:

[Places are] “entities” that achieve relative stability for a time in their bounding and in their internal ordering of processes. [...] These permanences come to occupy a piece of space in an exclusive way (for a time) and thereby define a place—their place—for a time. The process of place formation (including that of bounding and internal ordering) is, therefore, a process of carving out “permanences” from a flow of processes that simultaneously create a distinctive kind of spatio-temporality [...] But permanences—no matter how solid they may seem—are not eternal [...] Places are, in short, always contingent on the relational processes that create, sustain, and dissolve them. The coexistence of “multiple spatialities” in places undermines any simple, unitary sense of place. Nonetheless, at the end of the day, the emphasis has to be upon the bounded entity or “permanence,” the distinctive shape, form, and internal ordering a particular place acquires. (*Cosmopolitanism* 190).

This formulation of place as constructed but not arbitrary, multiple yet with a particularity that cannot be abstracted, serves as the ground for Farah’s reconstruction of distinctive, collective Somali identity that runs parallel to his *deconstruction* of exclusive nationalist identity and place-sense. Indeed, the specific sense of place and place-based relations in *Maps* stands as a crucial obstacle to the sweeping claims of Somali nationalism. It is in many ways an obvious point, but bears stating: Kallafo is not Mogadishu. By extension, the Ogaden is not simply a part of Somalia (or Ethiopia). For all its border-crossing and blurred subjectivities,

*Maps* develops a strong sense of Kallafo and Mogadishu as places with immutable differences that challenge Somali claims to “natural” cohesion.<sup>6</sup>

Kallafo, both in the novel and in the reality of Farah’s own youth there, is in many ways rural and traditional. Farah describes growing up there tending to a family farm “in a fertile triangle about a three-hour walk from Kallafo, a town astraddle the River Shabelle” (“Family House” 6). He describes the family compound there as “alive with activity all day long and all year round,” with relatives, herdsmen, and teachers mingling among children and herds (7). Askar narrates a very similar situation in his Kallafo, his Uncle Qorrax’s compound a “‘festivity of goings-on’ [...] where there were many people, relatives and others, who called and were entertained and where one felt one was a member of a community” (*Maps* 18-19). For both Farah and Askar, it was a life in many ways “alien” to later life in Mogadishu (“Family House” 8). Far from the metropolis of Somalia’s capital, the town is a place where Askar learns the “pastoralist nature of the Somali” through cosmology:

[...] it was the earth which received the rains, the sky from whose loins sprang water and therefore life; that the earth was the womb upon whose open fields men and women grew food for themselves and for their animals. And men raised huts and women bore children and the cows grazed on the nearby pastures, the goats likewise. (*Maps* 143)

Such nomadic traditions, of course, formed part of the mythic Somali identity, but are not simply idyllic nostalgia here; rather, they constitute a major element of everyday life in Kallafo.

Askar, by all accounts, is well entrenched in the life of that place, at least as a young boy. As a child, he cultivates a visceral attachment to it, eating mouthfuls of earth from underneath

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<sup>6</sup> The place sense of *Maps* here will focus on Kallafo and the Ogaden primarily; Farah’s dealing with Mogadishu in *Maps* will be addressed along with *Links* later in the chapter.

the tree planted when he was born. On leaving Kallafo for Mogadishu after the outbreak of war, he muses that “for the first time in your life, you travelled away from where you were conceived and born and where your parents and your umbilical cord and your first teeth were buried” (*Maps* 126). To the extent that *Maps* is a “great novel of the body,” we can see the way that Askar’s “body is itself mapped by [the] culture” of the Ogaden in his bodily, emplaced experience with that place (Sugnet 534). Of course, as Ngaboh-Smart argues, there is a symbolic element to this attachment, particularly with the tree acting as a “visual allegory of his genealogy” (Ngaboh-Smart 90), his understanding of it part of his desire to connect with a mythic Somali identity. But Askar’s symbolic understanding of these things represents a retrospective effort to incorporate them into his nationalist narrative; there remains an underlying embeddedness in that place itself that is not easily dismissed as “symbolic” and that resists his intentions to abstract it to nationalist purposes.

Indeed, the pastoral idyll of the cosmology and Askar’s idealizations is further disrupted by the diversity and dynamism that characterize the Ogaden. Because of the agricultural productivity of the “fertile triangle” and the river, Kallafo draws a diversity of people from all over the region, from all over the “country made up of patchworks” that is Ethiopia (*Maps* 99). In his own recollections of the relations developed in Kallafo, Farah describes a general attitude of being “accommodative of others who were different from ourselves” (“Celebrating Differences” 17). That mix of cultures produces a sort of frontier quality to the social relations and Askar’s own subjectivity, especially as it is shaped by Misra. It was she who taught him the Somali cosmology “and occasionally some Amharic when night fell” (*Maps* 34). She tells him Oromo myths alongside Somali ones, including her own semi-mythic journey to the Ogaden from the Highlands up north. Despite their lack of “natural” affiliation, Askar and Misra develop

a place-based intimacy so keen that Askar describes Misra as “the cosmos and hers was the body of ideas upon which your growing mind nourished” (11).

Neither Misra nor Askar “belong” to Kallafo in any national or ethnic sense—she an Oromo in a Somali-dominated area, he a Somali orphan in the Ethiopian nation. Yet Misra has become so entrenched that “she no longer spoke or understood the language of the area of Ethiopia in which she was born” (*Maps* 99); and Askar, despite the designation of his legal documents in Mogadishu, remains “a young boy from the Ogaden” (152), unable to simply reshape himself into some “pure” Somali identity even when living in the heart of the Republic. In that place, it makes little sense to see themselves as substantially different from one another, yet that connection stems from the specific social and environmental dynamics of the Ogaden, a link that cannot easily be dismissed as either “natural” or “arbitrary.” In that way, their relationship is both allowed by and reflective of (even constitutive of) a sense of the Ogaden as a place “not so much parented as foster-parented” (Wright 119).

This, it would seem, is the sense of place and place-based collectivity Farah wants to privilege, one that disrupts representations of national essentialism but without a free-floating hybridity; one that challenges national borders without doing away with any sense of boundedness or particularity. Any analysis of place in Farah’s work, however, must maintain an understanding that this sense of place is no more “real” than any other. Indeed, a poignant way to read *Maps* sees the narrative as a conflict over the sense of place and the sort of relationships implied by a given place construction. The Ogaden war itself can be seen as an effort of this sort, to realign places like Kallafo from an officially Ethiopian territory and unofficially frontier place of mixture to a purely Somali place, one that challenges relationships like Misra and Askar’s. After the start of the conflict, Askar begins “thinking of the inherent contradictions—that she

wasn't his mother, and the country wasn't hers; that she was teaching him *his* people's lore and wisdom" (*Maps* 134). Such "contradictions" and his/hers divisions had not existed before; they reflect a dramatically changed conception of place in which Misra is now an outsider.

Many critics have addressed the place representation in Farah's work as an "imaginative" attempt to reconstrue Somalia along the lines of diversity. Sugnet claims Farah is "in some kind of inescapable relation to the Somalia that doesn't exist, to the Somalias he imagines into being" (537), a claim Farah has corroborated in his own reflections: "I felt joined more to my writing than to any country with a specific territoriality [...] I chose to dwell in a world of make-believe, in which Somalia was reduced to a country in my imagination" ("A Country in Exile" 713). Wright applies Michel Foucault's conception of *heterotopia* to Farah's imagined places; or rather, his fiction itself becomes a "paradoxical, 'heterotopian' space in which are superimposed [...] disparate and incompatible orders—the factual and the fantastic, the 'real' and the imaginary, this and other worlds" (Wright 95). This imaginative, contradictory quality is what allows Farah's fictive places to "overlap, and overstep, conventional national and geographic as well as moral and ontological boundaries" (95).

To understand the workings of place in Farah's novels this way is helpful to the extent that it reminds us always that we are dealing with place *sense*, place *representation* or *construction*. To assume Farah's novels can (or even attempt to) capture the "reality" of place through faithful mimesis of the geography or social relations without any mediation would be to ignore the very challenges he levels against nationalist ideologies that purport to do the same. And seeing *Maps* and other narratives dealing with a largely imagined Somalia does not necessarily undercut the argument that a strong sense of place anchors Farah's deconstruction of nationalism and grounds an alternative sense of collectivity. Buell argues that people in general

and exiles in particular regularly develop “connectedness with fictive or virtual places” (*Endangered World* 71) through (collective) memory and imagination. At the same time, Buell notes, “Some of the places that move us deeply even though we have seen them only in the mind’s eye are actual places, without the benefit of which (whatever the inaccuracy of our images) our sense of world citizenship might suffer” (73). Indeed, the very sense of concern and the urgency to imagine alternatives that drive Farah’s fiction stem from the fact that Somalia and Somalis are not simply his own invention, but represent actual people and places in need.

It is this connection with an actual geography, actual environments and places like Kallafo and Mogadishu that grounds his imaginative reshaping of Somalia and keeps it from being a narrative “free play of signifiers.” It also, to my mind, limits the benefit of understanding Farah’s sense of place as heterotopia, especially as it develops through later fiction like *Links*. Foucault said of heterotopias, “Places of this kind are outside of all places,” (“Of Other Spaces” par. 12) with elements “so very different from one another that it is impossible to find a place of residence for them, to define a *common locus* beneath them all” (*The Order of Things* xviii). Taking off from this description, Wright compares Farah’s fictive Mogadishu with “a postcolonial variant of those zoned postwar European cities that feature in American postmodern fiction (Pynchon, Hawkes, Vonnegut), in which the locales traversed are so diverse and disparate that they seem to belong (and often do) to different worlds” (Wright 101).

The sense of Mogadishu as an (unreal) space of incompatible congruency is in many ways apt for early representation of Mogadishu like *A Naked Needle*, though I have attempted to suggest the way *Maps* tempers the dislocated aspect of heterotopia with a sense of environmental, platial particularity. Garth Myers sees this as a trend in all Farah’s writing about the Somali capital, arguing that “the geographic dimensions of his stories are [...] easily accessible, and

representations of the city and its environs especially so, down to the intricate details of streets, homes, and gardens” (Myers 153). In *Links* especially these dimensions begin to take precedence over any sense of the fantastic or paradoxical, making the comparison with the “nowhere city” of postmodern fiction less productive.

One reason for the shift in *Links* to a less postmodernist place sense may well be the association of such an imaginative sensibility with exile and diaspora. In an interview on the 2004 novel, Farah recalls his return to Somalia after a long exile, and comments on its affect on the novel:

Years ago, if I wasn't sure of the street names, I concentrated on an area of the city rather than a particular street. Now, because I know the names of the streets, there are other interferences, and so there are fewer abstractions in my writing.

(“Nuruddin Farah” 58)

The specificity of his experience with the actual place he intended to depict put restraints on his imagination of the place as he attempted more fidelity to its “reality.”

If that experience in a particular environment provides the mechanism for his more grounded writing of Mogadishu as place, however, it leaves us yet to explain the motivation for doing so. The changed conditions of Mogadishu itself from *Maps* to *Links* no doubt supply some of the answer. After the collapse of the Somali state and years of clan warfare, a deconstructive and overtly fictive framing of the city no longer serves to demystify the homogenizing claims of nationalism, but more likely would buttress the fragmentation of clan ideology and the oversimplified international representations of Somalia. Ironically, without the strong claims to uniqueness proffered by the Somali state, Somalia in many ways became subject to discursive framing by other forces. Myers notes the way abstractions and stereotypes particularly in the US

media have made Mogadishu out to be “a *space* outside the norms of social order” (138, my emphasis). Jeebleh, the novel’s main character returned from a long exile in the United States, seems to have only a caricatured sense of Mogadishu after his years away. His initial impressions on his return are of a “cloak-and-dagger, man-eat-man” wasteland engulfed in violence, “a city ruled to ruin by gunrunners” (*Links* 3, 6). He instantly recognizes the “desolation he had read or heard about” primarily in “the American press” (15, 7). His judgment is blunt and immediate enough to garner a reproach from his handler, Af-Laawe, who rebuffs him with the challenge, “What do Americans know about things here?” (7), clearly implicating the presumably Somali Jeebleh with the ignorant foreigners.

Farah’s novel is directed at challenging such representations, which are shown to have only exacerbated the situation in Somalia. The space-making imagery of Somalia as a place of “pirates and terrorists” was used “to justify both the initial US military occupation as a civilizing mission and the eventual withdrawal” (Myers 139, 138). The “fictivizing” of Mogadishu in ways that flattened out a sense of place and people mirrors colonial spatializing narratives, repeated in the debacle of the US intervention: “Like the European colonialists before them, the Americans in Somalia could not systematically see the humanity in the people whose land they occupied” (Myers 156). Seamus echoes the sentiment in his recollections of the Black Hawk Down incident in the novel, saying of the Americans, “they saw everything in black and white, had no understanding of and no respect for other cultures” (*Links* 260).

In such a context, Farah finds an urgency to represent the complexities of Mogadishu, but without the “heterotopian” aspects of previous postmodern representations that tend toward a sense of “place transformed into space” in ways that may unintentionally obscure “the city of lived experience” (*Endangered World* 57-58). Instead, Farah’s strategy in *Links* is to make

Mogadishu “the principal character” of the novel (“Nuruddin Farah” 58) in a way that “provides a complex means for Westerners to understand Mogadishu as its people have lived through Somalia’s slow implosion” (Myers 139). To do so, he cultivates a sense in *Links* of Mogadishu as clearly a place, delving into the concrete particularity of the city and its social relations in a reconstructive effort after the *deconstructions* of *Maps*. Like the family home he sought out in his actual return to Mogadishu, Farah’s narrative eschews imagination and memory for a more embodied reconnection with the place to see what might be done to restore it.

Also like the family home, however, the Mogadishu Farah and Jeebleh find is in need of much restoration. The homes in Farah’s neighborhood “looked like no houses at all”; after years of war and neglect, the area had become “a zone of total grief” (“The Family House” 14). Farah finds his own home unrecognizable, just as Jeebleh is confronted with a city far different from the one of his youth. At one point, he is forced to navigate the city with a “mass of squiggles passing for a map” a friend had drawn attempting to represent the ruined city. Even so, Jeebleh has trouble in the now-unfamiliar landscape: “With no prominent landmarks to guide him, and no street names either, he was unable to determine whether some of the asterisks represented two- or three-story buildings reduced to rubble or crossroads” (*Links* 194). The radically transformed city embodies what Farah has called the “geography of the collective collapse” (qtd. in Myers 152), a place marked by degradation, displacement, and division, all carefully chronicled in the novel.

After so many years of conflict, one would hardly be surprised to find the place of that conflict having taken on its scars. Everywhere Jeebleh travels throughout the city, he finds similar scenes of destruction and decay in the physical environment. Though examples abound, one passage might suffice to illustrate the general degradation of the city:

He wondered where they were, in a basement of some sort, close to a building that had been an annex to a government ministry. He was disheartened by the water he saw leaking everywhere. Scarcely had he decided that the building was not at all inhabited when he heard the distant voices of children and smelled onions being fried. [...] down another half dozen devastated steps before they were out of the building. Then up a stairway a-scatter with geckos, past a half-demolished wall crawling with cockroaches, past a bricked-up door, past a window with half a glass pane, and then through cavernous rooms with no doors. Jeebleh was depressed to bear witness to so much destruction, and to the fact that what the plunderers didn't have the will to destroy simply fell into destruction on its own. (*Links* 79)

The violence underlying such devastation had subsided somewhat by the time of Jeebleh's fictional and Farah's personal travel to the city; still, the place itself embodies the ominous reminders of past and potential bloodshed in the "bullets [that] scarred nearly every wall" (70) and the remains of the infamous Blackhawk, "pieces of metal, once part of a war machine—elegant, noisily powerful and threatening when up in the air, but unimaginably ugly when fallen and dismantled" (271).

Even the natural environment comes to manifest the deprivations of Mogadishu, literally and figuratively. Alongside the fractured and decaying buildings, Jeebleh finds a garden "unwatered and ravaged by neglect [...] a comfortless witness to the nation's despair, which was there for all to see" (*Links* 210). Domestic animals too wander untended, "sick-looking goats" and cows that cough "like someone with a chest ailment," feeding on pebbles, shoes, and plastic bags, famished and emaciated dogs following Jeebleh hoping for scraps (133, 196). More telling

of the endemic violence, however, is the constant presence of “crows, marabouts, and other carrion birds” (18). They best embody the way death has come to inhabit the place, such that it is no longer “abnormal to see scavengers of carrion at a four-star hotel, looking as though they are well placed to choose what they eat and where they go. They look better fed than humans” (66). Indeed, they are so connected with and representative of the violence of Mogadishu that Jeebleh wonders if they “had learned to show up as soon as they heard shots, knowing there would be corpses” (18). Af-Laawe confirms his suspicions, telling him they “are no longer afraid if you try to shoo them away [...] the crows and the vultures were so used to being on the ground foraging, they were like tourist pigeons in a Florentine plaza” (65). Even the setting sun comes to remind Jeebleh of conflict, “the sky [...] soaked in the blood of sacrifice” (37).

This physically embodied degradation from the violence in Mogadishu is coupled with a keen sense of displacement and re- or disorganization. The outflux of people from the city to international diaspora, along with the devastation of particular areas of the city like “Bermuda” has led Mogadishu to become a city of “house-sitters” and squatters. Add to this the “million and a half” refugees from around Somalia that have fled to the city during spikes in violence in places like “the Death Triangle” (*Links* 135); they too live in abandoned homes, but more often “in the buildings that belonged to the state” (135), a manifest reminder of the absence of the state and the reshaping of the city. At the same time, those in power like Caloosha have used the situation to misappropriate mansions and villas for themselves (104), with a lingering ambiguity about whether the original owners had moved of their own volition or been forcibly removed by the militias and cronies of the Strongmen.<sup>7</sup> The result of all the refugees, squatting, and

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<sup>7</sup> The example of Caloosha against that of the refugees of militia fighting is a good illustration of Massey’s hesitation about unrestrained enthusiasm for migration, mobility, transgression, and other such postmodern/post-structural/postcolonial buzzwords. She notes that the “power geometry” behind such mobility makes the experience vary greatly in its benefits to the mobilized. For those (like the refugees) who are a *product* of the time-space

degradation, at least to Jeebleh's mind, is a city lacking the "orderly" character of his youth (35), replaced by a growing sense of "informality in the social interactions and built environments" (Myers 140).

Yet the post-conflict Mogadishu is certainly not without any sense of organization; indeed, much of the displacement and reterritorialization of the city is the direct result of the way it was divided between north and south by the Mahdi and Aidid factions. The division reflects the absolute, exclusionary "us/them" ideology of the clans which did away with "the nationalist rhetoric of the sixties and seventies" (*Links* 114) and instituted a fragmented society in which vigilantes "recruited from the nomadic hamlets north of Balcad town" would fight for clan-based militias "vowing to kill all the prominent politicians from the opposite clan family" (113). The ideology includes a very clear sense of place and ownership/belonging, in which one can claim, "We're ready to kill, we're ready to die until our ancestral territories are back in our hands" (27). The geography of the city, then, takes on the worst kind of place-sense, in which place-attachment and belonging have become "pathological," abetting "possessiveness, ethnocentrism, xenophobia" (*Endangered World* 76).

The city itself becomes the physical expression of this ideology, with the north and south controlled by opposing warlords backed by contentious clan-based militias and a "no-man's-land" or "so-called green line" between (76). On his own return to Mogadishu, Farah notes that "only one route" links the north and south of the city, even after the warlords were removed from power ("The Family House" 13). Jeebleh as well experiences the palpable division, tinged with an element of danger in crossing over the boundary between the factions. At one point, he and his driver take a circuitous route back south after having gone more directly north because

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manipulations of transgression, rather than *producers* of it (like Caloosha), this sort of mobility is hardly a panacea for problematic subjectivities or discourses (Massey 317-8).

“taking a different route from the one they used earlier will minimize the chance of driving into an ambush” (*Links* 70-1).

Under such a divisive sense of place, people supposedly belonging to certain clans are expected to reside on “their” side of the city (11), an informal policy policed by checkpoints and the militias. When Jeebleh arrives in the city, he asks the driver taking him to his hotel “Where are we?”; the driver responds, “We are in the north of the city, where our clanspeople have relocated to, having fled because of StrongmanSouth’s scorched-earth policy” (34). Later, by choosing to move in with his friend Bile in the south of the city, Jeebleh understands that “I left *their* side of the green line and relocated in the section of the city where the other clan family is concentrated. It’s as if I’ve written myself out of *their* lives” (219).

Like the nationalism and border-drawing in *Maps*, the imposed clan identities and division of the city in *Links* serve to combine those (like Jeebleh and Caloosha) who would choose to be distant and to sever those (like Jeebleh and Bile) who have an intimacy beyond that offered by the constructions of patriarchal bloodline. The change in understanding of social relations and place becomes a physical barrier in the geography of Mogadishu, which in turn further disrupts the social interactions of the city. Certainly the official social regulations and institutional operations of the place have suffered, exemplified by two men defecating openly in the street, behavior that in a functioning city “would have earned a reprimand or an immediate fine if someone from the municipality had seen them” (196). But there is no municipality to deal with such offenses, let alone provide any civil service. Bile tells Jeebleh, “the civil servants won’t do their jobs properly, the teachers won’t teach, the police, the army [...] nothing, and I mean no institution, will function as it should” (229-30).

Worse yet, even unofficial community ties and social order begin to break down from the degradation and division. Again, Bile instructs Jeebleh about how Mogadishu has changed: “This is a divided city, and you’ll discover [...] you seldom run into people [...] We remain confined within the part of the city where we live, and try as much as we can to avoid contact with others” (*Links* 85). Indeed, rather than simply reflecting the social dysfunctions of displacement and division, the degraded physical conditions reciprocally exacerbate the social breakdown: “People living in such vile conditions were bound to lose touch with their own humanity, [Jeebleh] thought; you couldn’t expect an iota of human kindness from a community coexisting daily with so much putrefaction” (201). Such indifference becomes apparent when he sees a crowd gathered around a man who has suffered a seizure, doing nothing to help him. When Jeebleh steps in to intervene, they are immediately suspicious of him as a “stranger in our midst,” chiding him, “We do not bother with people we do not know!” (198-9). Presumably clan affiliations would substitute for the general civil society, but these are just as susceptible to fracture under the conditions of violence and the ideology of division in the place, subject to fragmentation along the lines of “subclans” and an “ingrained mistrust” that would make them “friends and cousins one instant, sworn foes the next” (34). Even close-knit family units suffer from the displacements and social breakdown: in the disarray of Barre’s downfall and the militia takeover of the city, Bile finds his sister giving birth without a doctor. Breaking taboo, he delivers his sister’s baby, and given the chaotic reterritorialization of the city, moves in with Shanta and her husband Faahiye. Both circumstances put unbearable strain on their marriage, ending in a separation that further exemplifies the disintegration of the social order of that place.

I have quoted extensively and in copious detail here to suggest, as I think the novel does, the material fact of the conflict in Somalia and Mogadishu that plays so prominently in the

narrative. Farah remains very aware of the role discourse, ideology, and the construction of problematic identities have played in creating, sustaining, and exacerbating the violence in Somalia after the civil war. And as with *Maps*, he deconstructs the clan subjectivity that replaced nationalism, challenging the derisive and divisive understandings of place and belonging it engenders. But in a step away from postmodern abstraction and heterotopian boundary-blurring, *Links* couches this challenge even more firmly in the particularity of Mogadishu as a place. The violence and hardship of the past decade are seen to have concrete physical and social consequences that stem from and reproduce the discourses of clan fragmentation. Throughout his representation of the city, Farah expresses “obvious empathy [...] for those in the misery of the actual space of Mogadishu” (Myers 156). Any resistance or alternative has to be understood as equally embedded in the specificity of that environment and those relations. Rather than eschewing altogether the claims to unique collectivity and place put forth by the clans, *Links* transforms the sense of Mogadishu’s particularity along the lines of cosmopolitan diversity, simultaneously grounded in the city and linked to the world.

Though much discussion on Farah’s work sees it dealing with (or at least in the context of) Somalia generally, most of the novels center on Mogadishu specifically. Both *Maps* and *Links* represent Mogadishu as a unique place, not separate from Somalia so much as particular within it. In his recollections about moving to Mogadishu from the Ogaden, Farah remembers the city feeling “alien,” a place that had cultivated “its own cosmopolitan charm” from its existence “as a city-state from the tenth-century on” (“The Family House” 8). For Askar as well, the city had an alien and disorienting feel:

Clearly, this was a world you hadn’t imagined—a world of grown-ups, of siestas, of bathrooms with showers, sinks, and running water; a world within which Hilaal

created another world, out of which he refused to surface; a world in which you had lost your sense of direction, for you didn't know your north from your south and couldn't tell where you were in relation to the sea or in relation to where you came from. (*Maps* 143)

Mogadishu represented a place very different from Kallafo, a place more modern and urbane, a place where Askar has a watch “that circulates with my blood, one that stops if I don't wear it somewhere on my person,” a radio that “is on all day and night, entertaining us with the latest songs,” a place where body and cosmology have been replaced by “anatomy” and astronomy (19). The difference for Askar might be summed up in the difference between Misra and Salaado: the former with an “odour of her sweat” that was “natural” and the latter “a cosmopolitan woman, [who] smelt of perfumes and her clothes smelt of mothballs, her nails of varnish, her shoes of polish” (19). For Jeebleh too, the Mogadishu of his youth was “a city with integrity and a life of its own, a lovely metropolis with beaches, cafés, restaurants, late-night movies” (*Links* 35).

By no means does the uniqueness of Mogadishu signal either its isolation or homogeneity, however. Quite the opposite, in fact. Reflecting an understanding of places as concrete and relational, Farah depicts the city as deriving its particularity precisely from its connections with the rest of Somalia and the world, from a multitude of influences that have overlapped and coalesced as a specific “permanence” along the Somali coast. Like the Ogaden, Farah understands Mogadishu as a place transgressed and dynamic, but even more so because of its position by the sea. The sea is a constituent part of the city's character: “No river rises in Mogadiscio, the sea does. It begins here, the sea. It feels as if it does” (*Maps* 167). It links the city outward to the world, but has also brought the world to it. Both novels devote paragraphs to

the litany of those who “crossed it to conquer, to subjugate, to colonize” (167): “The Arabs, and after them the Persians, and after the Persians the Portuguese, and after the Portuguese the French, the British, and the Italians, and later the Russians, and most recently the Americans” (*Links* 124). As the title provocatively implies, *Links* explores the global machinations that contributed to the Somali civil war and collapse, from Cold War wrangling between the US and the Soviet Union (108) to the free-flow of arms and supplies from around the world (77) to the growing influence “fro the heartland of Islamic fundamentalism, from societies such as Pakistan and Afghanistan” in the absence of a stable government (45).

The history of all these interactions is “illuminated like a manuscript” in the city’s built environment (*Maps* 167), physically signaled by the sign at Jeebleh’s hotel “handwritten in Somali, Arabic, English, and Italian” (*Links* 37), a testament to past and current relations in that place. Farah, Askar and Jeebleh are all keenly aware of the conquest and violence involved in the city’s history (*Links* 14-5), yet all praise the Mogadishu that resulted (prior to the collapse) for its “cosmopolitan charm” (“The Family House” 8), the “bustling and clan-diverse cosmopolitan center of Somalia” (Myers 146). In one of many parallels between Farah’s personal narrative in the essay and Askar’s ruminations in *Maps*, we read Farah saying “I loved the labyrinthine networks of the city’s alleyways; I loved the *mélange* of its cultures” (8); and Askar admitting, “I love its centre which sports a multiracial, multicultural heritage” (*Maps* 166). Jeebleh recalls his youth when the diversity of the city was not subject to divisiveness or efforts at communal conformity; rather, “the people [...] were at peace with themselves, comfortable in themselves, happy with who they were” (*Links* 14).

Of course “the people” here are no more ethnically or culturally uniform here than they were in *Maps*, despite the narrowed focus on only Mogadishu, and Farah continues in *Links* to

resist the “natural” associations of people and place through clans just as he did the nation in *Maps*. By showing Mogadishu to be a historically dynamic, constructed, and multiply-inflected city, Farah constantly challenges any simplistic equation of “a people” with “a place.” Both Askar and Jeebleh should supposedly find some seamless integration in the city by nationalist or clan-based rules for belonging; but both struggle to identify their place in Mogadishu or Somalia by those standards. Askar, along with the rest of the “flood of refugees” that swelled the capital after the Ogaden War, faces serious questions about his status in the Republic (*Maps* 168); and continuous migration from rural areas stressed the “welcoming” city with “growing inequalities, and increasing deprivation” that sharpened the sense of difference and helped lead to “clan polarization” (Myers 146). His presence, along with even more marginal cases like Misra and the “misgenderers,” fed a growing paranoia regarding “outsiders” that began to fracture the very claims to unity that brought Askar and others to the city.

Jeebleh seems to have had a more integrative experience with Mogadishu in his youth, having grown up in the city and identifying with its cosmopolitan character. Jeebleh had always resisted the clan narrative that existed alongside the pluralism of the city, from the time his mother divorced his “lowlife” father and “impressed into his memory his uniqueness, repeatedly telling him that he could do anything he put his mind to” (*Links* 93). Even as an adult, then, “he felt no clan-based loyalty himself—in fact, the whole idea revolted and angered him” (11). In returning to a fragmented and divided city of clans and warlords, Jeebleh feels both unable and unwilling to identify with the new patrilineal order. He displays this disdain regularly throughout the narrative as he defies the social and geographical order of the clan-divided city. Twice he is dismissive of clan elders entreating him for money to beef up their militia in order to “take our rightful place among the subclans” (128), and he refuses to stay with Caloosha in the north (his

nominal clan relation), choosing instead to stay in the south with his friend Bile. Indeed, because of the danger he posed himself by his brusque rebuff of the clan order, “he felt safer outside his clansmen’s territory” (150).

Given the contentious nature of his past and present relationships with clan relations like the cruel and corrupt Caloosha, his rebuke of clan-based society is hardly surprising. Still, at least part of that revulsion may have been exacerbated by his time in America, where clan subjectivities seem particularly alien. A major with one of the militias in Mogadishu calls him out with such an accusation, suggesting that he sees himself as a “modern man” who “thinks our reliance on blood kinship is backward and primitive. He is saying that he has money, that his family is safe and in America, that he belongs to the twenty-first century, while we belong to the thirteenth” (30). In short, America has made him “forget who you are” (30). In truth, that seems an exaggeration, as Jeebleh’s feelings about his own relationship with America and Somalia are much more ambiguous; still, his diasporic subjectivity has irrevocably complicated his identifications with Mogadishu and removed any sense of “natural” belonging.

Superficially, his time away has marked him as a sort of outsider in the city, easily recognizable, for instance, when he goes to the beach “wearing a sarong that had had brought from New York—a present from his wife—a Yankees T-shirt, and under the sarong, a pair of swimming trunks” (*Links* 122-3). More substantively, he has developed a life and relationships in New York that have made him “engaged with America” in inextricable ways (42). His now split position makes him stumble trying to address his affiliations with his two homes:

Dajaal interrupted his thoughts. “Are you happy in America?”

“America is home to me, but I doubt that I would use the word ‘happy’ to describe my state of mind there,” Jeebleh said tentatively. “I’m comfortable in

America. I love my wife and daughters. I love them *in* New York, where we live.

I can't help comparing your question with one that I asked myself when I got here: Do I love Somalia? I found it difficult to answer."

"Do you?"

"Of course I love Somalia." (266)

At another time, however, he admits that "he did not love Somalia the way he used to love it many years before, because it had changed" (42). No doubt it had, though he certainly had changed as well. He can no longer easily identify as either Somali or American, especially given the conflicted relationship between these two places: "When I think about America from the perspective of a Somali, and reflect on what's occurred following the U.S. intervention, then I feel I'm in a bind" (267). In part because of this now contested and in many ways alienating subject position, Jeebleh often feels himself "on unfamiliar ground" in the city of his youth (140), disoriented and uncertain of his own motives and associations.

It is in that context that Jeebleh returns to Mogadishu in an effort to reconnect with the place, to "assess the extent of my culpability as a Somali" (32); or, more precisely, as both a Somali and an American. He realizes he cannot sever or ignore the links that remain for those places and for him as someone in relation to both places. In many ways, the novel can be read as Jeebleh's exploration of the American intervention as a shaping factor in the present conditions of the city (Myers 139, *Links* 262-3). Offering just one opinion in one of the novel's lengthy contemplations on the subject, Bile claims that "the Americans, by their actions, made a hero out of StrongmanSouth, and this prolonged the civil war. After all, it was after their hasty departure that he nominated himself president" (263). Myers agrees, contending that "before and after this direct engagement, the USA was and has continued to be indirectly fundamental to Mogadishu's

conflicts” (Myers 148). For his part, Jeebleh worries that after “centuries of attrition,” the US encounter has pushed the city past the brink: “The city became awash with guns, and the presence of the gun-crazy Americans escalated the conflict to greater heights. Would Mogadiscio ever know peace? Would the city’s inhabitants enjoy this commodity ever again?” (*Links* 15). Jeebleh seems to be mulling here the prospect of a permanently shattered sense of collectivity in the city, a disintegration of the social fabric from violence and a clan ideology itself subject to further division and fracture. Nevertheless, Jeebleh works to reintegrate himself with the city, tracing his own links of responsibility and connection with the place and people. “The Mogadishu Jeebleh refused to claim as home,” Myers writes, “becomes his once again through his recognition of his own culpability in the disastrous American misadventure in the city” (155).

By confronting the collapse and reconnecting with the city, Jeebleh begins to see Mogadishu as a place “never without its fractures, grief, absurdity, or misery, but also never without hope” (Myers 145). That hope in large measure stems from the fact that, though “shaped by tension,” Somalia is “nevertheless a *place* where people have loves and lives and relations with their families” (“Nuruddin Farah” 57, emphasis added). Alongside the degradation, displacement, and division, *Links* represents Mogadishu as fundamentally “lived space” (Myers 156) out of which Jeebleh and other Somalis can work to rebuild and reframe a sense of collective identity and relationship. Farah represents that rebuilt sense of community along cosmopolitan lines.

By cosmopolitan, I mean a sense in which people and relations are simultaneously grounded in place and connected outward with the world at large, the way one’s own worldview is made “richer and more fulfilling” when seen as linked with “other worlds that will be brought to bear on that world” (“Nuruddin Farah” 59). All of Farah’s novels are cosmopolitan in this

sense, involving as they do characters from many different countries and “knowing nods to literature and the arts from the rest of Africa and, indeed, from around the world” (Myers 145). By emphasizing this global connectivity, Farah is “deterritorializing Somalia as a nationalist project, and reterritorializing it as a place that belongs with the world,” with Mogadishu in particular a place that links “global connections and local intimacies” (145-6). What is crucial in *Links*, however, is that these “global connections” not exist passively as a sort of free-floating multiculturalism; instead, they converge within those “local intimacies” and form the very basis of the alternative sense of place and collectivity Farah poses as an alternative to nationalist and clan-based belonging.

Jeebleh had established such cosmopolitan relations early in his life, principally with Bile and Seamus. Bile and Jeebleh were not related “by blood or marriage,” but their mothers found a necessary cooperation and companionship in each other; so “they were raised in the same household, and had laid the foundation of their closeness in what they called ‘a land all our own’” (*Links* 82). Later, while graduate students in Rome, they expanded that relationship to include their Irish roommate Seamus, again living together physically and constructing “the country of their friendship” (180). Like Misra and Askar in *Maps*, they formed out of their shared place-based relationships an intimacy that had little to do with any “natural” affiliation. Echoing Farah’s sentiment about the “family house,” these platonic experiences bound them together despite their dispersal throughout the world during the crisis in Somalia. Subsequently, it is in moving back in with Bile that Jeebleh begins to rediscover his links with Mogadishu, as the three men find themselves drawn together again in that place (Myers 155; *Links* 180).

This model in many ways provides answers to the questions about collective identity posed in *Maps*; against the exclusionary ideology of clan geography, *Links* proposes an

expansive and inclusive sense of connection that makes few people “outsiders” if they have a meaningful connection with the place. In discussing a book by Shirin Ramzanali Fazel, “a Somali of Persian origin,” Shanta admits “I hadn’t given much thought, I confess, to the suffering of many Somalis of Tanzanian, Mozambican, or Yemeni descent. The civil war has brought much of that deep hurt to the surface. I hope that one day we’ll all get back together as one big Somali family and talk things through” (226). Clearly, her understanding of “Somali family” here is not defined by the biological metrics of Barre’s regime: when asked directly “Is Shirin Fazel Persian? Or is she one of us, Somali?” Shanta displays little of the existential angst so characteristic of Askar. She replies simply, “She is a deeply hurt Somali, like you and me” (226).

The sense of collective concern Shanta suggests here is representative of Farah’s cosmopolitan ethos: one not defined by language or ethnicity or biology, but by shared concern—in this case, the connection of shared hurt and suffering in the lived space of Mogadishu. Seamus bespeaks a similar sentiment of being linked through the material interactions of suffering. As an Irishman, he finds a deep connection with Mogadishu through a shared sense of strife. He tells Jeebleh, “The violence that’s war, combined with the violence that’s famine, run in my blood and in the veins of my memory, and so I understand where you’re coming from, and where you find yourself” (217). After traveling to Mogadishu to work for the UN, he realized he had “misplaced something of myself here [...] Instead of retrieving it and leaving immediately, I’ve stayed. It’s possible that some of us cannot help losing ourselves in the sorrows of other people’s stories” (216). The novel makes these place-based relationships deeper than simply shared misery, however; Farah suggests the more crucial links are those of responsibility, concern, and “a deep love of justice” (217) that necessitate working together to end such suffering. Jeebleh expresses an expansive ethic of concern several times in the narrative,

stepping in to intervene on behalf of an abused dog (129-131), the epileptic man ignored by the crowd (198-9), and a young, hungry thief (280). He identifies with their pain, chiding those who would exclude them: “When you hurt the dog, I hurt” (130) and “he’s a human being just like you and me!” (199). Farah succinctly embodies this sense of inclusive multiplicity through the Refuge, set up by Bile and Seamus to attend to the displaced and marginalized of the conflicts in Somalia.

The Refuge is in many ways an “ideally conceived” small-scale model for the cosmopolitan, place-based social interaction and identification Farah envisions in *Links*. Located in the middle of Mogadishu between the warring factions, the Refuge draws people from all over Somalia regardless of their bloodline or accent. The building itself was previously “Villa San Giovanni” owned by a Sicilian, and then a Catholic dorm for abandoned children. By reflecting the multivalent history of the city and being supported in part from international charitable donations, the built environment and social interactions of the Refuge defy any attempts to define its place or relations in closed, “natural” terms (*Links* 155, 188). At the same time, it engages these varied people in the collaborative tasks of attending to each other needs in a sort of small village, linking them together through the lived life of that place (Myers 156). Primary in the process of constructing that sense of collectivity is “the traditional method of eating together daily from the same *mayida* [...] in the belief that we create a camaraderie and we’ll all trust one another” (157). The result is a sense of “peace” sustained by the fact that “we’re all connected to this place!” (155, 157). In this way, Farah reconstructs a sense of collectivity that challenges the exclusions of clan and nationalism, but remains grounded and particular in its relationship to place.

With the Refuge as a metonym for the Somali people and nation as a whole, we can see the way Farah simultaneously deconstructs the “Somalia” that has existed for the last few decades while still remaining loyal to the prospect of a “Somalia” that might be. Taken together, *Maps* and *Links* demonstrate Farah’s complex and adaptive understanding of the nation as a notion not reducible to cartography or biology, but in some ways a material reality not to be eradicated altogether in the challenge to essentialism either. Rather, the vision here is of a nation rebuilt along cosmopolitan lines of particular yet inclusive identity anchored and linked together through place.

## Chapter 5

### Half Slum, Half Paradise: Abani's Global Cities

*"[...] he stared at the city, half slum, half paradise. How could a place be so ugly and so violent, yet so beautiful at the same time?"*

—Chris Abani, *GraceLand*

Early on in the novel *GraceLand*, the protagonist Elvis Oke ruminates on the seeming paradox of Lagos, with its staggering inequalities breeding both luxury and deprivation, opportunity and repression in such close proximity that he cannot comprehend their entanglement. Through Elvis's experience as an urban newcomer, and to a large extent throughout his literary corpus, Chris Abani explores the enigma of the urban landscape, especially in its interactions with the vagaries of globalization. His narratives inhabit the knotty intersection and interplay of city and scale that shape Africa's metropolises and the world cities where Africans find themselves, detailing the profoundly ambiguous causes, conditions, and consequences of global urbanity. His main characters struggle—and generally fail—to ground themselves in fluid, disruptive, and often unjust cityscapes; yet at the same time, Abani portrays (especially marginalized) urban spaces as places of vitality and value, engendering possibilities for alterity that exist alongside of—and perhaps arise out of—the hardships of city life. Refracted through cities as diverse yet connected as London, Los Angeles, and Lagos, Abani's ambivalent representation of global urbanity complicates notions of mobility, hybridity, and victimization that are often attached to discussions about cities, eschewing simplistic evaluations about the progressive or oppressive nature of these phenomena. Instead, Abani's narratives challenge readers to grapple with the multidimensional, multiscale forces at work producing the world's beautiful and ugly, violent and vital cities.

Abani places the urban setting at the very heart of most of his narratives, developing in detail each city's dynamic and multivalent character as the concrete expression of and medium for the converging relations and overlapping populations that build up each city's complex cosmopolitanism over time. In the novella *Becoming Abigail*, he draws attention to London's long history as a place both colonized and colonizing, demonstrated by "tired crumbling walls built by Caesar" (ch. 12) and "Cleopatra's needle [...] an Egyptian souvenir" with two "sphinxes [facing] the wrong way, gazing inward contemplatively [...] rather than outward, protectively" (ch. 2), standing as perhaps awkward reminders of the city's imperial past. In *The Virgin of Flames*, Abani recalls the Spanish influence of Los Angeles with a description of the old Mission, "once the center of civilized Los Angeles" (154), which gave way to increasingly eclectic influences like "migrant Jews from the East" who built "two-, sometimes three-story brick buildings that leaned on rusty metal fire escapes that would have been more at home in New York" (153). As such passages suggest, Abani is keenly aware of the way urban particularities crystallize out of often far-flung movements and relations of people, ideas, and material, consciously or unconsciously taking on a global character of one sort or another. So we see Lagos, "like any world city," home to few of its original inhabitants ("Lagos" 3), mirroring Los Angeles, where "there are no visible native Angelenos" (*Virgin* 207). Instead, the global character of city's population is reflected in its plantlife: "palm trees from the Canary Islands, eucalyptus from Australia, bougainvillea from Brazil, birds of paradise from South Africa. Nearly everything now native to Los Angeles came from somewhere else" (177). By drawing attention to the overdetermined development of cities like these, Abani's fiction engenders a clear sense of globalization and urbanization as entwined, mutually enabling processes. World

cities like Los Angeles and Lagos are seen as simultaneously situated within and a conduit for complex cultural, economic, and political relations across many scales.

Given this positionality, the city is where the local and global meet most predominantly and meaningfully in Abani's portrayal, their convergence manifesting uniquely in each place. For instance, similar to London's "souvenirs," Las Vegas has "the pyramid of the Luxor and reclining in front, the light catching the gold paint of its headdress, was the Sphinx" ("Las Vegas" 89). But unlike London, such global features stem not from a history of imperialism, but from a conscious effort by the "Jewish-Irish-Sicilian mob syndicate" to "mimic the movie romanticism of North Africa" and other pop culture trends (90). Such peculiarly mediated expressions of global influence, however, are linked in Abani's literature by a sense of commonality for all cities subject to similar forces of mobility and transnational exchange. It is surely no accident, for instance, that Abani uses nearly identical phrasing when describing both Los Angeles and Lagos: in his essay "Lagos: A Pilgrimage in Notations," he writes, "In the distance, a line of skyscrapers rise like the uneven heart of prayer" (1); and in *The Virgin of Flames*, we read of Los Angeles, "in the distance, a cluster of high-rises, like the spires of old Cathedrals, trace a jagged line against the sky, ever the uneven heart of prayer" (3). Here Abani discursively links cities otherwise quite distant from one another, inscribing both within the common experience of urbanity worldwide.

The shared dynamics of globalization and urbanization that shape Abani's cities also dominate the experiences of the characters who populate them. In all of Abani's narratives, characters come to cities from elsewhere, often across national borders. In *GraceLand*, Elvis and his father Sunday come to Lagos from a small town looking for work, and by the end of the novel Elvis is set to leave Nigeria for the United States. The title character in *Becoming Abigail*

is sent from Nigeria to London because her father believes “Your life will be better [...] London will give you a higher standard of education and living” (ch. 8). In “Las Vegas: The Last African City,” Sunil migrates to Las Vegas “fresh from Cape Town where he had worked for the Truth and Reconciliation Commission” (90). And Black, the protagonist of *The Virgin of Flames*, is the son of a Nigerian father and a Salvadoran mother who makes his way to Los Angeles after years of wandering across America. We might notice that while all these characters have strong ties with Africa (only Black is not directly from there), they all end up outside the continent, dispersed to the global cities of Britain and the US (not unlike Abani himself). The result is a diasporic engagement with Africa that resists seeing its people and places in isolation, confined to the continent. Rather, Abani seems often at pains to demonstrate Africa’s connections with global forces that manifest within and link together places like Lagos and London. These links and migrations suggest the way Africa’s urbanity is relationally constituted through its exchanges with the rest of the world, just as people and materials from Africa contribute to the globalization of other places.

The mutual articulation of the global within the urban and vice versa consistently featured in Abani’s fiction makes his cityscapes tempting to analyze through a framework of postmodernism or postcolonial hybridity and indeterminacy. Certainly the postmodernism of Los Angeles has been the subject of any number of studies that need not be rehashed here; suffice it to say that *The Virgin of Flames* in many ways adopts this familiar characterization of the city. With its “confusion of Art Deco, Hacienda, Lloyd-Wright and ugly 60s modernist architecture” and its *mélange* of cultures, Los Angeles is “a segregated city” with “several cities within it” that nonetheless “still managed to work as a single canvas of color and voices” (*Virgin* 73, 86, 177). Through this coalescing variety, the city reveals “the trick of its becoming; a city constantly

digesting its past and recycling itself into something new” (153), something that can only be defined by its indefiniteness.

Perhaps more interesting, however, is whether or not Abani attributes this sort of postmodernist subjectivity to all global cities; whether, say, his depiction of Lagos shares this capacity for cosmopolitan mixity and flow as part of the common urban experience. For Chielozona Eze, the answer is clearly, yes: indeed, this globalized hybridity acts as the salient feature of the city in *GraceLand*. He contends that the “multidimensional cultural hybridity” of the city (106) offers a space “Where people lose their primary attachment to blood in its closed, ethnic sense” (108) and instead adopt “a more open-minded or global approach to reality” (99) that disrupts “hitherto stable and monolithic identities” (101) in favor of more flexible postcolonial ones. Assuming a natural and necessary equivalence between urbanization, globalization, and a postmodern cosmopolitan ethic, Eze writes of *GraceLand*’s Lagos: “This is, indeed, the state of things: the postmodern, global and the transcultural condition in which ideas, people, and commodities move to and fro” (105), embodying the “idea of freedom, of the struggle to transcend boundaries” (103).

According to Eze, that struggle to be free of cultural or ethnic boundaries is what characterizes Elvis’s experience and growth in the novel as he engages the mobility and hybridity afforded him by Lagos as a world city. Freed from Afikpo, “one of the Igbo towns,” Elvis “lands in Lagos, where he instantly links up with the larger world” (102), including a Yoruba step-family and exposure to Western books, commodities, ideas, and tourists. Because his mother and one of his teachers had taught him to appreciate other cultures through American rock music and Western dance, Eze argues, Elvis’s emergence into the global sphere of Lagos “is no problem for him” (107). In fact, it is Lagos’s multiculturalist ethos that allows him to

explore the complications of his own identity through “a wholesome widening of the horizon to embrace the different faces of Africa” (110). Obi Nwakanma takes the productive interplay of mobility, hybridity, and freedom even further, claiming that by having Elvis leave Nigeria at the end of the novel, Abani questions “the value of nation and national belonging” (13), instead privileging the “highly mobile, literate, increasingly transnational [...] Igbo traveling identity” that resists the homogenizing strictures of nationalism in favor of “migration, exile, displacement, marginalization” expressed in “the urban centers of postmodern culture” (13). In such readings, cities—as uniquely global and transgressive spaces—allow Abani’s characters to doff restrictive subjectivities and relations (presumably centered in places like Afikpo) and more productively syncretize their heritage with other cultures from around the world in a transcultural, postmodern indeterminacy that allows the free expression of self.

Setting aside for a moment the many reasons to be extremely dubious about such a rosy picture of Elvis’s encounter with globalization and urbanization in Lagos (which I will explore later), Abani’s whole body of literature does to some extent bear out his wariness regarding rigid ethnic and cultural division of the sort supposedly countered by the postmodern city. His narratives consistently (if not always directly) suggest the possibility of cities to forge or enable more flexible subjectivities, set against more traditional and divisive identities. In *GraceLand*, older characters like Sunday and the revolutionary leader the King of the Beggars represent problematic attachment to strict Igbo ethnicity, ostensibly gleaned from their originary position outside the city, attachment that proves inimical to the needs and interests of Elvis and the people of Lagos and Nigeria generally. Frustrated by his loss of status in the new military government, Sunday clings violently to masculinist Igbo beliefs and practices, lashing out at Elvis for wearing makeup and wanting to be a dancer. Worse, he protects his brother from accusations of rape

(both of Elvis and his cousin Efua), and he has his misfit nephew killed “because he was a threat to all we had [...] he was killed for honor” (187). For his part, the King does not espouse the same hyper-masculinity when appealing to “the beauty of the indigenous culture,” but his rhetoric of protest is itself “essentialist, maybe even prejudiced, because the culture he spoke of was that of the Igbo, one of nearly three hundred indigenous peoples in this populous country” (155). Elvis is unconvinced by such thinking, noting that it “didn’t account for the inherent complications he knew were native to this culture, or the American [culture the King was deriding]. As naïve as Elvis was, he knew there was no going back to the ‘good old days,’ and wondered why the King didn’t speak about how to cope with these new and confusing times” (155). By equating resistance to “the evils of capitalism” with a simple and total “return to the traditional values and ways of being” defined in narrowly rural and ethnocentric terms (155), the King’s ideology excludes the great variety and diverse positionalities of the urban community and conditions he claims to represent.

It should be noted that Abani does not simply relegate Igbo culture to the “hitherto monolithic identities” Eze speaks of; rather, he counters the King and Sunday’s rigid understanding of Igbo ethnicity in the depictions of the kola nut ceremony that precede each chapter. In one of the final excerpts regarding the ceremony, he writes,

For the Igbo, tradition is fluid, growing [...] changing with every occurrence. So, too, the kola ritual has changed. Christian prayers have been added, and Jesus has replaced Obasi as the central deity. But its fluid aspects resist the empiricism that is the Western way [...] The Igbo are not reducible to a system of codes, and of meaning. (291)

Still, this understanding of Igbo cultural flexibility perhaps lends credence to Nwakanma's assertion that Abani privileges the global, cosmopolitan, urban setting as a place where that dynamism might come to fuller fruition.

In that regard, Abani represents Los Angeles as a place especially amenable to complex identities and cultural crossover. It is the city where a Mexican transsexual named Sweet Girl comes to escape her family that "betrayed me [...] because I was different. They disagreed with my life choices, said I was unnatural and threw me out" (*Virgin* 270). Like so many others, Sweet Girl comes to Los Angeles to rebel, to find herself in a city where "there is no common mythology [...] There is just you and what you see and imagine this place and your life in it to be, moment by moment" (206). In Los Angeles, she finds acceptance and camaraderie with people like Iggy, "a lapsed white Jew from East LA" who has become "a fakir-psychic" with metal rings in her back from which she "suspended her body in midair from meat hooks in order to induce a trance" (30). Iggy owns a café called the Ugly Store, cluttered with "shelves heavy with broken toys, voodoo dolls, fetishes from Java, Africa, New Zealand, Australia and Papua New Guinea" (30), as well as "an eight-foot-tall evil-looking statue of Anubis, the Egyptian god of the dead" (29) and "a stuffed moa, an ugly ostrich-like bird from New Zealand that was now extinct" (28). The Ugly Store occupies a central place in *The Virgin of Flames*, a metonym for the eclectic embrace of the city and a refuge for cultural and sexual in-betweens like Black and Sweet Girl.

Emplaced in the Ugly Store and East LA generally, Black resists his Rwandan friend Bomboy's assertion that "Your father was African, and so therefore, you are African" (195). Instead, he attempts to chart out and negotiate a more complicated and elusive identity as a "shape-shifter [...] taking on different ethnic and national affiliations as though they were

seasonal changes in wardrobe” (36). The relative “freedom” of the city and its cosmopolitan ethos empower Black to act out a complex sexuality in his relationship with Sweet Girl and to express himself artistically through public murals painted surreptitiously on the concrete channel of the Los Angeles River. Overall, the “expansiveness” of the city gives him “the feeling that he could become the person he always wanted to be” (53), a person that does not conform with the ethnic classification of Bomboy, the gender demands of his father, or the Catholic strictures of his mother, even as he tries to find ways to incorporate all three. It is perhaps worth noting that Abani himself, writing in London and Los Angeles, finds similar expressive empowerment within these global urban spaces. In exile from Nigeria, he gains “courage and freedom” to delve into issues especially of gender and sexuality otherwise circumscribed within an Igbo or Nigerian context (Ojaide 46).

From these examples, one can understand and perhaps expand on Eze’s characterization of Abani’s urban aesthetic as one that privileges the city and the global as liberatory and connective. Yet to cast the encounter with transculturality as singularly wholesome and freeing seems an overly narrow account of how Abani represents the experience of urbanity, especially regarding the multiform metrics of power and control that inflect each character’s position within the processes of globalization and urbanization. In particular, the causes and conditions of becoming inculcated into the processes of migration that bring people to these global cities in the first place are far from benign. Paralleling Abani’s own political exile from Nigeria, many of these characters lack autonomy over the dynamics of “mobility” that shuttle them to and from these cities and around the world. Nearly all the movement in his fiction involves some measure of forced or coerced displacement to and from these cities. Elvis and his father are pushed from Afrikpo after Sunday loses a corrupted election, leaving him jobless and in debt and leaving

Elvis bewildered: “How did they come to this?” he asks himself. “Just two years ago they lived in a small town and his father had a good job and was on the cusp of winning an election. Now they lived in a slum in Lagos” (*GraceLand* 6). Similarly, Black and his mother are pushed to East LA “After his father didn’t come back from Vietnam. After they lost the small house in Pasadena when the bank foreclosed on it” (*Virgin* 50). Sunil leaves South Africa because of its racial tensions, casting himself as a “displaced person”; though he now “thought of Las Vegas as home,” being able to “anchor to different places [...] was always hard work” (“Las Vegas” 90). Finally, though Abigail’s father consents to send her to London under the auspices of a better life, he has been deceived by a relative who wants her as part of the sex slave trade.

These examples make clear Abani’s understanding that while mobility is a key component of both globalization and urbanization (and whatever benefits may arise from them), movement itself is highly subject to “social differentiation” as a process that “both reflects and reinforces power” (“Global Sense of Place” 318). Depending on one’s position vis-à-vis the “power geometries” of global flows, mobility may be something people choose or something done *to* them (317), making simple evaluations of its progressive power unsatisfactory. As Tim Cresswell points out, theorists and writers have “alternately coded mobility as dysfunctional, as inauthentic and rootless and, more recently, as liberating, antifoundational and transgressive” (161). Yet Abani’s portrayal of movement in these works does not couch to this sort of dichotomous treatment, instead insisting on ambiguous and varied expressions of the conditions and consequences of movement within and across his texts. So we find, for instance, Elvis being hounded by a dictatorial regime in *GraceLand*, forced to uproot himself once more and flee to America at story’s end. At the same time, it is an escape to what Elvis believes is a land of opportunity, enabled by his friend Redemption’s fake passport, a situation made all the more

ambivalent by the last line of the novel: on hearing his name announced while waiting to board his plane, Elvis declares, “Yes, this is Redemption” (321).

Because the mobility in these texts lacks the clear autonomy and liberatory effect presumed by Eze and Nwakanma, the urban experience in Abani’s fiction often involves more struggle and a sense of dislocation in the shifting, disruptive spaces of the global city than they give voice to. The condition of many of these characters is akin to how Doreen Massey describes refugees, whose “experience of movement, and indeed of a confusing plurality of cultures, is very different” from those with the power to control their own or others’ migration (“Global Sense of Place” 317-8). Black, Elvis, and others cannot simply revel in the globalized multiculturalism of Lagos and Los Angeles; rather, they often display an anxiety and desire to connect with familial and cultural heritage from which they are cut off in the city. Elvis obsessively carries his dead mother’s bible and journal, excerpts of which begin each chapter of *GraceLand*, including Igbo recipes, botanical knowledge, and snippets of the kola nut ritual. Black is “obsessed with origins” (*Virgin* 123), the cultural sources of his identity he can largely only read about after his father’s death in Vietnam (205). Indeed, his father’s death leaves him to his own devices to try to understand and come to terms with the revelation that he was dressed and treated as a girl until he was seven because “our family has a curse, an evil spirit that kills all male offspring before they are six” (163). And Abigail burns names and memories onto her skin in an attempt to inscribe and solidify an identity and a past that are otherwise tenuous and unstable after her mother’s death and her displacement to London. In each case, the feeling of disconnection from larger collective identity is exacerbated by their position in a city in which they do not always feel at home. Elvis had been “miserable and unable to fit into school” in Lagos, “where his small-town thinking and accent marked him” (*GraceLand* 8). Abigail, too,

feels conspicuous in London, where people “would forgive you anything except a foreign accent” (*Abigail*, ch. 14). And Black is desperate “to get out of this town” (206) where “you have no people, without people you have no lineage, without a lineage you have no ancestors, without ancestors you have no dead and without the dead you can never know anything about life” (255).

Collectively, Black and Elvis’s gender experimentation and Abigail’s bodily mutilation seem to stem from identity crises involving both trauma from their heritage and the trauma of being disconnected and dislocated from it. They find themselves uprooted in the urban space, in some ways freed from repressive or abusive subjectivities and relations, but also struggling in places where “any idea of a solid past, as an anchor, is soon lost” (*Virgin* 206). In an apt image for the way these characters struggle to ground themselves in the “confusing plurality of cultures” in these world cities, we see Abigail astride the Prime Meridian in Greenwich:

She stood on the line that cut the earth into two time zones, feet inches apart, marveling at how true to life it all was. That once could be only a step away from another world, another time, and yet caught firmly in one or the other, or in her case, trapped forever between two. (ch. 8)

In such instances, being in the cosmopolitan transculturality of the city is of little help in their search for stable collective identity and connection. That all these main characters end up either fleeing or committing suicide seems evidence enough to challenge any simplistically positive view of their experiences in global cities, which clearly engender at least some measure of problematic displacement in their lives.

Beyond the experiences of these individual characters, we might see whole communities suffering a collective psychic trauma of dislocation and hardship in the urban space. Particularly in Maroko, the slum in Lagos where Elvis lives, the cosmopolitan convergence of cultures Eze

describes runs abreast of Abani's depiction of a troubled community where people view each other with suspicion and trepidation, facing shared trials and deprivations with equal parts apathy and violence. In two instances in the novel, the ordinary people of Maroko turn on "thieves" (whether proven or no) with vindictive ferocity: "In Lagos, vigilante justice was common, and the popular mode of execution was the necklace of fire—a tire around the neck doused with petrol and set on fire" (30). The second time, when the dying man flees, spreading flames throughout the ghetto, Redemption blithely dismisses Elvis's concern, simply saying, "Not our problem" (228). Most people here seem to waiver between lust for and indifference toward this sort of violence and death, counting it as simply a daily part of their experience in the city. When speaking about the many road fatalities that happen each day in Lagos, an old man provides Elvis and readers a poignant metaphor for the potential communal disruption of urban life:

[...] the spirits of the road danced around the buses, trying to pluck plump offerings, retribution for the sacrilege of the road, which apparently, when built, had severed them from their roots, leaving them trapped in an urban chaos that was frightening and confusing. (9)

This experience of rootlessness and communal breakdown challenges our understanding of the "ethical dimension" of urban dwelling as Eze defines it through a "desire to connect with the Other" (108). We may well understand that as Elvis's desire, yet the conditions of city life in Lagos throw up considerable impediments to such efforts at connection, hindering a stable sense of collective identity and belonging.

According to Eze, however, these "moments of alienation" are in fact "moments of transcendence" (108) in which characters ostensibly make the (perhaps difficult) transition from attachment to given "blood" identities to the more cosmopolitan hybridity discussed earlier. Yet

here too, the supposedly free and freeing engagement with transculturality is subject to differential power structures within globalization, especially as manifested in Lagos. Indeed, the pervasiveness of Western culture in the city seems as much an imposition as a free exchange, the product of cultural imperialism that yokes Elvis to Western interests and global markets in an often unequal relationship. Somewhat benignly at first, American movies and music play constantly in the background of Elvis's life, the detached forms of Western commodity culture that inspire him and other young Nigerians to be like John Wayne and Elvis Presley. With growing force, however, the text reveals the uneven and detrimental aspects of this cultural exchange. Sitting in his dilapidated room, a peeling BMW poster on the wall, Elvis becomes entrenched in naïve fantasies about Western greatness defined primarily through shallow commercialism. Cut off from any productive engagement with his own culture by an abusive father, dead mother, and the squalid conditions of Maroko, Elvis begins to shun his own identity for the apparent glitz of America.

As a young boy, he takes lessons in Western dance, which Eze takes to be part of his education in multicultural appreciation. Yet Abani's description of these lessons reeks of cultural shame and denial as the dancers struggle painfully to conform with Western standards. The dancers are "mostly mid-level civil servants preparing for their promotions and the anticipated social evenings that came along with them" by trying to learn the waltz (85). As they struggle with the foreign dance, the teacher berates them: "What are you, Mr. Ibe, an orangutan? Is dis how you will disgrace me at some high-society ball?" (86). Finally, the teacher ties the dancers to wooden crosses to "provide support and straighten their backs, providing the stiffer upper-body comportment required in formal dance" (86). Through this highly symbolic "crucifixion," they become "beautiful black dancers, stapled to wooden crosses" (87), giving Elvis the idea to

“lash double splints down the side of both legs” to help him better imitate “the Presley hip snap” (86). As a teenager, Elvis dresses as his hero and dances for tourists; risking accusations of being a transvestite (and subsequently being beaten by his father and strangers), he paints himself white to look more like “the real Elvis” (78). His makeup job is unsatisfying, however, so he begins to pine, “What if he had been born white, or even just American?” (78). He convinces himself that America “appreciated dancers” (24) and that “in America I can be very famous doing what I do” (168). The cumulative effect of these engagements with transnational cultural exchange, then, is not simply to imbibe multicultural appreciation or to forge some more productive and satisfying hybrid subjectivity, but also to be unable to translate his heritage and desires into the highly commercialized and Western-dominated space of Lagos. Instead he develops a wrenching anxiety to escape his life and find prosperity through American commodity culture, an anxiety and cultural pressure Abani has called “global whiteness.”

Lagos itself seems to suffer similar anxieties of “global whiteness,” as the “global” aspects of the Nigerian city largely eschew Western/indigenous hybrids and are rather expressed almost exclusively through copying Western material culture (*GraceLand* 8). In his essay on the city, Abani calls Lagos a “cosmopolitan whore” (“Lagos” 5) whose global influences are shown through “Blackberrys” and “online banking,” “BMW’s, Lexus’s” and “Computer Mega City” (4, 7). He describes the city’s Hotel Intercontinental as “something out of the Jetsons” that “would be more at home in Las Vegas,” inside which “you could be in any city in the world” (7). The tenor of such depictions suggests that global cultural exchange might be reduced largely to shallow commercialism—it is no surprise that the most “cosmopolitan” and globally-influenced parts of Lagos are also the wealthiest, as the benefits of globalization and transnational exchange are concentrated and segregated within the city. This sort of “hybridity,” then, marks Lagos as “a

site of entrenched social, political, and economic divisions” (Harrison 96), boundaries that both stem from and reproduce the city’s uneven engagement with the global relations of material culture.

*GraceLand* picks up similar themes of economically variegated “transculturality” within the urban space. On arriving in Lagos, Elvis finds that “one-third of the city seemed transplanted from the rich suburbs of the west. There were beautiful brownstones set in well-landscaped yards, sprawling Spanish-style haciendas in brilliant white and ocher, elegant Frank Lloyd Wright-styled buildings and cars that were new and foreign” (7-8). This is the bustling, postmodern, transcultural, affluent Lagos other Nigerians imagine, the copy of European and American cities in all their success and modernity. It is an image perpetuated within Nigeria because “People who didn’t live in Lagos only saw postcards of skyscrapers, sweeping flyovers, beaches and hotels,” and those who visited their hometowns from the city put on airs of wealth, “the women in flashy clothes, makeup and handbags that matched their shoes” and “the men, sharp dressers” who “threw money around” (7). Yet, as Elvis discovers, most of these people are not in fact rich, and upon returning to the city, they “go back to their ghetto lives” (7). Indeed, just outside the affluent confines of Lagos’s wealthy quarters, the underside of the global-urban dynamic sprawls out in informal settlements like Maroko.

In this part of the city, Elvis experiences starkly different conditions from those of the cosmopolitan center: much of the shantytown is suspended over a swamp, built on stilts over “green swampy water” teeming with sewage and disease (*GraceLand* 14). Plank roads wind through a sludge of dirt, excrement, offal, and waste “whipped into a muddy brown froth” (6). At best, Elvis wakes to “the smell of garbage from refuse dumps, unflushed toilets and stale bodies” (4); at worst, to rats swimming in his oft-flooded room (32). Children play on piles of burning

trash and in puddles of fetid water; people hawk knock-off prescriptions on crowded buses, sell dangerous amounts of their own blood, or simply beg to get by. This, too, is Lagos; this, too, Abani seems to suggest, is the nature of the urban, the “common companion of every city’s luminescence—darkness” (“Las Vegas” 90). By setting his narratives primarily in places like Maroko, Abani portrays the way globalization and urbanization seem to breed opulence alongside deprivation, inequality alongside access, seriously complicating the sense of liberation and progressive cultural exchange Eze and Nwakanma attribute to these phenomena.

To a certain extent, Abani recapitulates the theme of economically segregated cities throughout his writing, suggesting the pervasiveness of inequality and division within the urban condition itself, spanning and connecting places as different as the US and Nigeria. In *The Virgin of Flames*, the narrative traverses Los Angeles, pointing out the poverty and divisions present in places like South Central LA, where Black frequents a strip club that “wasn’t seedy as much as it was run-down” and where “the clientele was for the most part black” (24-5). Or there are “the dangers of downtown” (16) with its homeless population and junkies making it “a favorite location for gritty downtown shots” in movies (56). In “Las Vegas: The Last African City,” Sunil muses that “Vegas really is an African city” (90). He goes on:

What other imagination would build such a grandiose tomb to itself? And just like every major city across Africa, from Cairo to his hometown in Johannesburg, the palatial exteriors of the city architecture barely screened the seething poverty, the homelessness, and the despair that spread in townships and shantytowns as far as the eye could see. But just as there, here in Vegas, the glamour beguiled and blinded all but those truly intent on seeing and in this way, the tinsel of it mocked the obsessive hope of those who flocked there. (90)

Through such observations, Abani makes clear overtures to flagrant disparity as a common condition in cities, connecting the African urban condition outward to cities of the Global North in ways that are often ignored or pushed aside.

Still, the diagnosis of Las Vegas as displaying telltale symptoms of Africanness seems particularly suggestive of the way the more or less common urban paradox is differently inflected globally. Indeed, Abani implies that African cities are especially farcical in whitewashing poverty with conspicuous wealth and shallow opulence. The implication seems to be that, while it may crop up in places like Vegas or Los Angeles, this condition is endemic to Africa as a whole, with Lagos just one manifestation of a uniquely troubled region of the world. For instance, despite Sunil's characterization of Vegas, sprawling slums the size and condition of Maroko are unlikely to spring up so close to city centers in the US, and those ghettos that do ring the wealthier sectors of Western cities will almost certainly not meet the same fate as Maroko, both in the novel and in reality: forced eviction and demolition to make way for a "millionaire's village" ("Lagos" 3). That kind of oppressive crackdown, along with the utterly deplorable circumstances of the slum, is unique to Africa in Abani's repertoire. The wildfires and ash that threaten East LA in *The Virgin of Flames* certainly lend the novel an ominous tone, climaxing in frenzied looting at novel's end. But this threat operates mostly on a symbolic level in the novel, and there is little to compare with the violence, abject poverty, and state aggression depicted in *GraceLand*. Overall, the subtle mood of slow desperation in *The Virgin of Flames* stands in stark contrast with the acute crises and spectacular destruction of Maroko.

In contrast with his other works, *GraceLand*'s representation of Lagos, Maroko, and African urbanity generally takes on a sensationalist and urgent character. Though putatively rooted in the factual conditions and history of Maroko, Abani's portrayal of the individual and

communal travails of that place seems perhaps unrealistically unrelenting and brutal. In the span of just one year, Elvis experiences all manner of inhumanity and grotesqueness: in addition to the rape, honor killing, and “necklace of fire” mentioned earlier, Elvis finds himself mixed up in human organ trafficking (complete with kidnapped children for “spare parts” (242)), imprisoned and tortured, displaced from his destroyed home, and propositioned by a child prostitute. In the other texts as well, Africa(ns) figure as a violent Other. While still in Nigeria, Abigail notices “Something lying in the middle island of the freeway” that “looked to her like the body of a baby, perhaps tossed from the window of a speeding car by a teenage mother unable to cope. It wasn’t an unusual thought in this country where the dead littered the streets of big towns and cities like so much garbage” (*Abigail*, ch. 9). *The Virgin of Flames* betrays a similar sense of African brutality through the Rwandan character Bomboy, whose only explicit connection with the continent in the narrative is memories of being forced to kill Tutsis as a child soldier.

Tanure Ojaide argues that Abani’s fiction suffers “a lack of realistic reflection on the place, people, worldview, and sensibility of Africa,” and that “setting a novel in Africa becomes a convenient tool rather than a true reflection” in works like *GraceLand* (45). Ojaide explains Abani’s mischaracterization of Africa as a consequence of his exile: forced to draw on “vague memories” filtered through a “psychic disconnection from the continent” (44). His position in American and Britain means producing a narrative of Nigeria “to be read by only or mainly Westerners,” adopting “the language of his foreign readers” and, presumably, some of their misconceptions as well (45). If we agree with Ojaide’s assessment, we might see Abani’s discourse on Africa flirting with what James Ferguson calls “‘Africa’ talk,” which frames the region as a whole “in urgent and troubled tones” with rhetoric “full of anguished energy and (often vague) moral concern” (2). This discourse focuses on “The crisis in Africa [...] described

through a series of lacks and absences, failings and problems, plagues and catastrophes” (2). Abani perhaps risks participating in lingering colonial discourses on Africa as “the dark continent,” an ideology that potentially skews any understanding of the sort of circumstances and conditions described in *GraceLand*.

Ferguson also points out, however, that “‘Africa’ talk” occurs both within and outside Africa, dispelling the notion of more “authentic” representations stemming from appropriate or sufficient contact with some “real” Africa. In fact, problematic as this discourse may be, Ferguson insists it is not false or inauthentic. As he explains, the “Africa” of this rhetoric is “a category that (like all categories) is historically and socially constructed (indeed, in some sense arbitrary), but also a category that is ‘real,’ that is imposed with force” (5) with very concrete consequences for Africa’s relations with the rest of the world. Though *GraceLand* may focus a bit much on (or even exaggerate) the corruption, violence, and poverty in Nigeria, the novel avoids the tendency of “‘Africa’ talk” to blame Africa for its own problems through a discourse of “disconnections and disavowals” on the part of the Global North (17). Instead, the novel imbricates these troubles within “the fundamental *relationality* [...] of the position in the world that is ‘Africa’” (17). If Africa and its cities are uniquely troubled places, Abani and Ferguson argue, it is because Africa is a uniquely marginalized “place-in-the-world” (Ferguson 5); in this way, Abani’s representation of Lagos ties the crises and systematic inequalities Elvis experiences to a global structure of power and exploitation.

Of course, Africa can trace its current place-in-the-world to colonialism and its lingering effects, which shaped the peculiar ways the region was brought into the modern processes of globalization and urbanization in the first place. To further their economic and administrative interests, imperial powers tended to reterritorialize colonies around cities, capitals, and ports,

especially for the purposes of raw material export. The development of cities like Lagos represents a “commercial notion” left over after independence (Fanon 187), disproportionately drawing people and resources from the rest of the country and funneling them to Western markets (Imoagene 60). Even after independence, in a new era of neoliberalism and development policies, the global economic structure “has left little or no place for Africa outside of its old colonial role as a provider of raw materials” (Ferguson 8), a role prone to creating inequality and corruption within a nation. Adding to and clashing with Eze’s vision of globalization as a process helping people like Elvis “link up with the larger world” *culturally*, Ferguson argues it is more divisive than connective *economically*: through Nigeria’s petroeconomy, Lagos “is indeed ‘globally connected,’ but such ‘global’ links connect in a selective, discontinuous, and point-to-point fashion” that “leaves most Africans with only a tenuous and indirect connection to ‘the global economy’” (Ferguson 14). Abani echoes this notion of disconnection in an evocative metaphor for the city: “If Lagos is a body, and the oil pipelines crisscrossing it are veins, then the inhabitants are vampires” (“Lagos” 4). Cut off from access to the national oil (and oil profits) flowing through their own city, poor Lagosians tap the lines and steal oil, for which the “body” treats them like a “virus” or “parasites,” violently killed off by the thousands each year (4).

It is this dynamic that primarily accounts for the huge disparities in Lagos, as export dollars are concentrated in the hands of a very few to the exclusion of the national and urban poor. Elvis remembers reading an editorial boasting the Nigeria had one of the highest percentages of millionaires in the world, but that neglected to mention that “their wealth had been made over the years with the help of crooked politicians, criminal soldiers, bent contractors, and greedy oil-company executives,” an economic exploitation that also led to Nigeria having “a higher percentage of poor people than nearly any other country in the world” (*GraceLand* 8).

This sort of corruption and neocolonialism allows Nigeria's government and urban elites to hoard the nation's wealth for themselves, "in no way [allowing the people] to enjoy any of the dues that are paid to it by the big foreign companies" (Fanon 165). In trying to help Elvis better understand the mechanisms of injustice behind Lagos and Nigeria's dichotomous conditions, the King of the Beggars tells him, "Someone does not become a beggar; we are made beggars" (31), in part by the globalization that pairs highly selective development and connection with "widespread disconnection and exclusion" (Ferguson 14).

That is not to say that the people of Maroko are entirely cut off from the exchanges of globalization in the urban sphere—for better or worse, even the most degraded and deprived areas of the city are awash in the trappings of American culture as people throughout Nigeria are made consumers of Western products. Further complicating the assumption that Elvis's exposure to American movies and music only benefits him by bestowing a sort of cosmopolitan open-mindedness, we see the way these products exacerbate the marginalized economic position of many Lagosians within the structures of globalization. For instance, the movies Elvis enjoys as a child are shown free, "courtesy of an American tobacco company, which passed out packets of free cigarettes to everybody in the audience, irrespective of age" (*GraceLand* 146). Elvis proceeds to smoke throughout the novel, spending what little money he has on American cigarettes. Or we might consider the (lack of) food pervasive in the narrative. The recipes from his mother's journal that preface each chapter remind readers constantly of indigenous foods and Igbo traditions and knowledge regarding the place and environment; yet these foods and practices are nowhere to be found in Elvis's "transcultural" experience in Lagos. Instead, Elvis fills his belly with "tasteless" food, Coke, Bazooka gum, and so on. His lack of access to Nigerian food mirrors the situation in the country generally, according to Bolanle Awe, where

Nigeria (along with many other African nations) was encouraged to grow cash crops for export in lieu of food and “to become a consumer nation importing chocolate and beverages,” even to the point of needing to import staples like “rice and sugar, which were obtainable at prices cheaper than that of traditional crops produced locally” (Awe 9, 11).

Even when Elvis “finds some solace in transnational exchange,” then, the unequal structures of that exchange trap him in “a global economic system that perpetuates his marginalization” (Harrison 97). Through processes of disruption and substitution in global markets, the poor of Nigeria are made beggars *for* the products and relations they are disadvantaged *by* in the first place. Rather than depicting simply a productive and equal-footed interaction between world cultures, Abani uses commodities throughout *GraceLand* as evidence of the uneven and exploitative potential in globalization, especially as it pertains to Africa, where the exchange is as often empty and disillusioning as it is gratifying and world-expanding. Thus we see Elvis at one point in the novel desperately “seeking words of wisdom” from Bazooka gum wrappers, only to find meaningless, culturally irrelevant platitudes like “A stitch in time saves nine” (240), signifying an utter lack of substance or benefit for him from Western commodity culture. By the end of the novel, readers (though apparently not Elvis) are fully disabused of faith in global exchange to redeem the poor with Marlboros or rock and roll.

It is within this understanding of globalization as a process proliferating inequalities along with cultural mixing that we can more complexly grasp Abani’s representation of urbanization as a process itself made unequal through its transnational relations. Pushed from rural areas to urban centers by an export economy focused on plantation cash cropping and an oil boom, thousands yearly join what Fanon calls “the incoherent rush towards the cities” (157). The wealth of the urban elites and the bustle of commerce gives Lagos the appearance of opportunity,

and people clamor to join “the gold rush of trying to make it into what looks to them like the regulated modern sector” (Imoagene 57). Most, like Elvis, “hadn’t known about the poverty and violence of Lagos” until they arrive (*GraceLand* 7); and like Sunday, they find no quality work in the city. Indeed, O. Imoagene argues, unemployment is a problem endemic to export oriented economies and cities (57). Finding no jobs, the economically displaced become remarginalized by the same sort of spatial segregation privileging cities over rural development; they find themselves pushed out of the formal urban center and made refugees of a sort in the informal periphery. Settlements like Maroko spring up to absorb the influx, hastily constructed on undesirable land, lacking services, drainage, and sewage. The global economy and state policies work in tandem “to produce informality” of this kind (Myers 73), an uneven urbanization that concentrates wealth in some areas while it simultaneously “denies people jobs in their home areas and denies them homes in the areas they have gone to get jobs” (Neuwirth 12). Echoing the King’s sentiment that people are “made beggars,” Garth Myers insists that the presence of informal settlements like Maroko does not reflect the intentions of its inhabitants to circumvent formal rules, spaces, and economies; instead, “the system threw them down and out to a place where that is their only choice” (Myers 82).

Through his education by the King, Elvis comes to understand the selective, uneven, exploitative, and often corrupt character of the global economy in Nigeria as the answer to the riddle of Lagos’s schizophrenic geography of opulence and degradation. Not only do people suffer from the wrongdoing of “dose army bastards” running the state, the King tells him, but also from “dose tiefs in the IMF, de World Bank, and de U.S.” (280). He goes on to explain:

Let me tell you how de World Bank helps us. Say dey offer us a ten-million-dollar loan for creating potable and clean water supply to rural areas. If we accept, dis is

how dey do us. First dey tell us dat we have to use de expertise of their consultants, so dey remove two million for salaries and expenses. Den dey tell us dat de consultants need equipment to work, like computer, jeeps or bulldozers, and for hotel and so on, so dey take another two million. Den dey say we cannot build new boreholes but must service existing one, so dey take another two million to buy parts. All dis money, six million of it, never leave de U.S. Den dey use two million for de project, but is not enough, so dey abandon it, and den army bosses take de remaining two million. Now we, you and I and all dese poor people, owe de World Bank ten million dollars for nothing. (280)

The King sees here a Nigerian populace victimized by development practices and the precursors to structural adjustment policies which were “meant to bring African states and economies into line with a standard global model,” but that effectively created “an Africa that is actually more different than ever from the imagined global standard” (Ferguson 13). That evaluation would seem to apply equally well to the variegated and often underdeveloped condition of Africa’s cities in Abani’s representation.

The exploitative discourse of development helps explain not only the inequalities within Lagos, but also the differences between Abani’s portrayal of urbanization and marginalization in Lagos and Los Angeles, whose “place-in-the-world” is very different and not subject to the same practices of structural adjustment and informality. As Sarah Harrison points out, the destruction of Maroko ostensibly falls under the auspices of “development,” with the intention that an unsavory and unproductive place will be improved, made more useful and valuable in the city’s efforts at progress. But as with most everything else in *GraceLand*, the costs and consequences of “improvement” are differentially distributed, primarily benefitting the already wealthy. We

get a hint that the interests of the state and urban elites are behind the demolition when Redemption points out to Elvis the closeness of the wealthy to Maroko: “though dey hate us,” he says, “de rich still have to look at us” (*GraceLand* 137). This uncomfortable proximity provides plenty of motivation to be rid of the slum, as the state employs a battery of discursive attacks on Maroko in order to legitimate its destruction. The city declares “Operation Clean de Nation,” framed as an “attack on de centers of poverty and crime” and an attempt to remove “a pus-ridden eyesore on de face of de nation’s capital” (247). This discourse follows a pattern of developmental approaches to informal settlements throughout the Global South, Robert Neuwirth argues, as they are discursively constructed as home for “criminals, dirty people, thieves, muggers, prostitutes, gang leaders, disreputables, abusers” (15). Following Nigeria’s own history of shunning rehabilitation in favor of “outright demolition, after forced eviction and forced population relocation” (Agbola 271), Maroko is bulldozed and its inhabitants dispersed to other slums, creating space for a “beachside millionaire’s paradise” (*GraceLand* 248).

As Sunday astutely observes, this discursive campaign and development effort does little to “address de unemployment and de real cause of poverty and crime” (248), instead further excluding the people of Maroko from any benefits attending the reterritorialization of wealth. Moreover, they are worse off, having lost what housing, jobs, resources, and communal support they had managed to develop there as they are forcibly displaced to another marginalized area—another sort of disruptive urban “mobility” that is “about the worst thing you can do to a people—next to killing them”(Agbola 273). In short, the political and economic dynamics of globalization and urbanization continue to categorize people like Elvis as “trashy people” stuck in a “trashy place” in a self-justifying cycle of division and deprivation. The portrayal of global urbanity in *GraceLand*, then, may well include the “struggle to transcend boundaries” (Eze 103),

but equally or more forcibly portrays the resilience of “the physical and figurative boundaries of the state authorities and the urban elite” (Harrison 108), boundaries in part created by that very same global urbanity and violently protected against the taint of poverty. In “Lagos,” Abani reflects on the condition of the “millionaire’s village that was once Maroko,” writing: “I think it is the ghost of that lost place haunting the rich to distraction so that even their twelve-foot high walls, barbed razor wire or broken glass crowning them, or the searchlights, or the armed guards, cannot make their peace with the moans of a woman crying for a child crushed by the wheels of bulldozers” (3).

Given the pervasiveness of power, corruption, violence and inequality within such a depiction of African urbanity, it is perhaps not surprising that the King calls for a return to “traditional values and ways of being” that produce “a tight-knit community, where the good of the group was placed before the individual stake” (*GraceLand* 155). Yet his vision employs a problematic binary, abdicating the urban to the “perverse morality” of capitalism “based on commercial value rather than a humanistic one” (155), privileging instead a traditional rural life outside the structures and strictures of the global. Implicit in his appeal is an erasure of the possibility for urban dwelling, ironically lending credence to the discourse of Maroko’s destruction as a place not suitable for living.

Yet the King’s disavowal of city life, even in a city so violent and unjust as Lagos, is not in concert with Abani’s complex representation of the urban, in Africa and elsewhere. Even as conditions in places like Maroko and the ghettos of East LA significantly complicate an optimistic portrait of urban cosmopolitanism, Abani’s narratives also work to establish these marginalized spaces as places of value. With over one billion people living in such places throughout the world, Neuwirth asserts, the challenge “is not to eradicate these communities,”

but to “stop treating them like slums—that is, as horrific, scary, and criminal—and start treating them as neighborhoods that can be improved” by and for the people who already live there (249). The tragedy of Maroko’s destruction is precisely that, for all its challenges and deprivations, it was *not* a “pus-ridden eyesore” but a home, a place people identified with and one they could not and did not always want to leave (Aina 401, Berner 113). In many ways, Abani’s representation of Maroko and East LA fits with Myers’ description of “an alternative, fluid, ambient—informal—city [...] that is getting by on its own, if perhaps barely so” (79). Through the word play “(i)n(f)ormal,” Myers argues that this sort of community constitutes a potentially productive norm in Africa, a sentiment Abani seem to echo in his essay on Lagos: “In the shadow of highrises, behind the international money of Broad Street, *the real Lagos* spreads out like a mat of rusting rooftops” (“Lagos” 2, my emphasis). He insists that, in his Western exile, “I miss Lagos” (1), even and perhaps especially areas like Maroko, where “I found the Lagos inside me” (2). As for Los Angeles, much of *The Virgin of Flames* reads like a love song to the city, with long rhapsodies on the (perhaps overlooked and tortured) beauty of its poorer quarters. Black reflects that

Los Angeles for him wasn’t Beverly Hills, or the movies, or Rodeo Drive [...] It was the angle of light caught on the trickle of the Los Angeles River as it curved under one of the beautiful old crumbling bridges of East LA. The way the painting of an angel wearing sandals and jeans, its once-white wings stained by exhaust soot and tag signs, smoking a cigarette on a support of the 10 East Freeway on Hoover, curved into flight if you took the corner of the on-ramp at speed. In the cacophony of colors and shapes in the huge piñata stores on Olympic, near Central; and the man pulling the purple wooden life-size donkey

mounted on wheels down Cesar Chavez [...] It was in the solo of an unemployed saxophonist in Sunny's Café down at Leimert Park playing for tips. (98-9)

Black finds evidence that even in its neglected, dilapidated, dangerous state, "somebody once loved this place, paid attention, and in that moment, even here, there was hope" (143). In the last lines of the novel, the narrator takes on the first person while giving a "benediction" to the story of Black and of the city, claiming that in spite of the oppressive aspects of the city, "with piety's conviction we make a home here" (296). While not a resounding endorsement of all things urban, the text does suggest at least the potential for dwelling in even the more troubled parts of the city, however difficult and tenuous that dwelling might be.

Through his narratives of struggle, inequality, growth, beauty, life, creativity, and abuse in Maroko and East LA, Abani suggests "other scripts for citiness" that have the potential to turn "harsh reality into survivability" (Myers 80). These are, for Abani, "places of real joy, of concrete despair and of inventiveness that people who live away from the urban will never fully understand" ("Lagos" 1). Without discounting the forces of global exploitation and uneven urbanization that position these characters in dire circumstances, Abani's narratives resist a simplistic understanding of slums as urban detritus populated by the mere victims of transnational economics. Somewhere between autonomous cosmopolitans and powerless pawns, Abani's characters act out "small, creative urban practices that are, if you will, applied attempts by the abject poor to lay claim to 'equal rights of membership' in [...] global urbanity" (Myers 82). The range of these practices is as varied and ethically ambiguous as the cities themselves: As he attempts to navigate the dangerous and impoverishing conditions of Lagos, Redemption is willing to work for the corrupt and ruthless Colonel, who operates out of Maroko's informal spaces to sell drugs and human organs, to capture and kill political dissidents, and so on.

Redemption's priority is his own survival, and he encourages Elvis to adopt a similarly callous and self-serving acceptance of the fact that "Dis world operate different way for different people" (*GraceLand* 242) and to take advantage of the illegal and profitable opportunities in Maroko. Black's friend Bomboy takes a similar approach, establishing an "illegal but highly profitable abattoir" in the "abandoned docks on the River" in East LA (*Virgin* 59), where he employs the butchery skills he learned in the Rwandan genocide. By contrast, the King embodies a communal ethic based on the axiom that "People are important" (*GraceLand* 134). He strives to give Elvis "an alternative to de world dat Redemption is showing you" (131), one that refuses to capitulate to the forces of exploitation and pushes for economic and political reform through his performing troupe and public protest. In a similar way, Iggy uses her work in the Ugly Store to be helpful to others, employing Ray Ray, a drug-addicted dwarf, and giving refuge, as well as living and art space to Black.

These characters hint at the complex ways by which people work to perpetuate, eliminate, or simply survive the often harsh conditions of urban marginalization. Yet their mixed results—and the inability of Black and Elvis to survive in their respective cities—leaves readers ultimately dubious about the success of claims to equal membership within global urbanity, at least if left to pursue and enforce those claims on their own. Efforts to transform the conditions of places like Maroko are circumscribed by their relation to large-scale forces and structures and a general inability to "confront and transform the processes that gave rise to the problem in the first place" (*Justice, Nature, and the Geography of Difference* 401). *GraceLand* repeatedly calls into question the "revolutionary capital" of these masses (Fanon 150) when left alone to deal with the "paralyzing imbrication of local, national, and international discourses of development" paired with corruption and violent state authority (Harrison 97). For example, during a protest

rally in Freedom Square in Lagos, an opposition speaker urges a sort of neoliberal, democratized reform spearheaded by the people:

[...] the people's perspective shapes the nation, so that the country becomes the thing people want to see. Every time we complain that we don't want to be ruled by military dictatorship; but every time there is a coup, we come out in the streets to sing and dance and celebrate the replacement of one despot for another one.

How long can we continue to pretend we are not responsible for this? (*GraceLand* 155)

The speaker's idealism is perhaps laudable, but overly quixotic, as demonstrated by the swift and vicious putdown of the protest after Maroko's destruction. Brute military force and complex, resilient forces of transnational capitalism and politics conspire to perpetuate Nigeria's troubled place-in-the-world, hindering "the people" from making much headway in reforming their own city and nation.

In the end, Maroko is plowed under, Sunday and the King are killed in protest, and Elvis is arrested, tortured, and displaced to yet another ghetto. Elvis has become well educated in the causes and consequences of injustice seemingly inherent in the structures of globalization and urbanization in Africa, but finds no solutions to such large-scale and complex problems.

*GraceLand* suggestively describes Elvis's impotence and confusion as he surveys the poor and displaced around him at novel's end: "Elvis traced patterns in the cracked and parched earth beneath his feet. There is a message in it all somewhere, he mused, a point to the chaos. But no matter how hard he tried, the meaning always seemed to be out there somewhere beyond his reach, mocking him" (307). Caught in crisscrossing networks of power and exploitation that crystallize in Lagos, Elvis becomes an "observer of injustice" with little capacity to do anything

about it (Harrison 97). Instead, he flees to America, where he still naively believes he can make it as a dancer in the more prosperous and free cities of the West.

Of course, Abani's narratives set in the US take the shine off of those bright dreams. Though circumstances in Los Angeles are not shown to be so dire in *The Virgin of Flames*, a similar sense of limited power in the face of large forces of injustice still crops up at times in the novel. The troubled imperial history of the city and region are embodied by "the Mexican woman who owned the bench in front of the Dorothy Chandler Pavilion," who "knew that this land was hers and her mother's before her" but could only occupy the bench and crochet, "a way to grind down the white man's clock, stitching and unstitching a scarf she would never wind around all the land" that was taken (146). Aspirations like Elvis's are perhaps symbolized by "the young Sierra Leonean" who came "To forget the blood" and who struggles with job after job waiting "for the new life that was promised here to begin" (146). Like the Mexican woman, his control over his own fate seems scant; all he can do is "underline his dreams in a torn Jackie Collins novel" (146). The people of East LA find little help with poverty and harsh conditions from institutions and state authorities that either ignore or harass them, from the police and ambulances that rarely go to that part of town to the "guard outside the INS building on Los Angeles Street [hassling] fellow Chicano immigrants waiting in line" (146). Instead, they turn to the Virgin of Guadalupe, not just as an important symbol in Catholicism, "but because she was a brown virgin who appeared to a brown saint, Juan Diego. She was also a symbol of justice, of a political spirituality" (40), connected in the novel and in the city with the likes of Cesar Chavez.

As with the protests in *GraceLand*, however, *The Virgin of Flames* seems to cast doubt on the efficacy of this political religion to handle the widespread concerns of the Angelinos.

Black muses:

he couldn't quite imagine what the Virgin would do in East LA [...] every time he tried to visualize her, he saw one of the plaster statues from his Catholic childhood in a church that wore a blue robe marked by poverty and bullet holes from drive-bys. There were fingers and even part of her nose missing where the plaster had been chipped from age and careless handling, leaving the rusting chicken wire frame exposed. (132)

Like the statue, hope in the Virgin becomes tattered and exposed through the course of the novel as people pin their hopes on a false manifestation of the Virgin. Fooled by a brief image of Black on the roof of the Ugly Store wearing a wedding dress and a blonde wig, people throng to the store, setting up shrines and holding vigils, waiting for more divine intervention in their lives that will not be forthcoming. At the climax of the story, a carnival atmosphere breaks out in the streets around the store as people revel in falling “snow”—but it is really ash from the wildfires bearing down on the city. As false hopes and anticipation of relief are dashed, the atmosphere turns “from celebration to frenzy,” complete with violence, looting, and onlooking but idle police helicopters (272). Instead of a redemptive appearance by the Virgin, the crowd is treated to the sight of Black's accidental self-immolation atop the Ugly Store, a “Virgin of flames” that symbolically reinforces the troubled conditions of the ghetto. In the end, there is nothing transformative for the people or the city from all the Virgin sightings, just as the visions and annunciations of Gabriel (who appears to Black throughout the novel) fail to sanctify or provide salvation for Black.

Ultimately, however, the lack of redemptive transformation in the novels, either from the people or the state or globalized mobility or urbanized hybridity, should not lead to an evaluation of Abani's cityscapes as utterly hopeless and bereft of value, any more than the possibility for

cosmopolitan growth should lead to a singularly optimistic take on his representation. In Abani's own words, cities are necessarily "psychic spaces of existential melancholy and desire" that cannot be separated or mitigated ("Lagos" 1). The "religion of cities" (*Virgin 2*) entails equal measures of joyful, luminous, and sorrowful mysteries. "Ambivalence is the heart of this town," Iggy insists. "Not *in spite of*, but *because of*" (206). Ambivalence, it would seem, is at the heart of all global urbanity in Abani's fiction, not in spite of but because of the multiform forces and varied expressions of mobility, hybridity, victimization, and alterity that shape and take shape within the cities of his writing. To borrow from Eze, this is, indeed, the state of things: the postmodern, global and the transcultural condition in which ideas, people, and commodities move (unevenly and often unjustly) to and fro; in which cultural and economic boundaries are crossed, defended, and reproduced; in which power is contested and amplified; in which citiness is lived out in common, linked experience and highly varied manifestation.

## Conclusion

The preceding chapters build up an argument for reading African literature through complex concepts of place, space, and scale, in large part as a corrective against the simplistic and dichotomous ways geographic notions have typically been broached in the criticism of these texts. In challenging the tendency to see local and global, national and transnational, place and space as binary oppositions, these chapters share a recurrent theme regarding the various ways places and scales can be connected yet remain grounded and particular. A substantial amount of this argument rests on the insistence that the material development and connection of African places exist alongside and interact irreducibly with the discursive elements of geographic relations more prevalently interrogated in the literature and criticism. It is on this last point that I hope to expand the substance and reach of this work to more directly engage the burgeoning field of postcolonial ecocriticism.

There is an acknowledged distrust between the disciplines of ecocriticism and postcolonialism given their sometimes divergent concerns. Ecocritics are perhaps concerned that postcolonial scholars ultimately do no care about the environment (at least not outside its implication within social issues), just as postcolonial critics suspect that ecocritics have little concern for the people in places like Africa. Efforts have been undertaken on many fronts to bridge this gap, primarily by articulating their shared interests and concerns; on the part of postcolonial ecocriticism, this takes the form of illuminating a shared history of colonial transformation and exploitation. I have proposed a more thorough engagement with geography in general and place in particular as a productive ground on which to further this negotiation and convergence. As a concept that is necessarily both discursive and material, place draws together

the human and nonhuman in ways that allow us to examine their mutually transformative interactions over time.

In order to more fully flesh out the possibilities for using the model of place I develop in this project as a productive intersection between ecocriticism and postcolonialism, it will be necessary to draw ecology and the nonhuman more directly into the material aspects of place and the representation of place in African literature I have explored here. That could certainly involve bringing in authors and texts who address aspects of ecology more overtly in their work, and working to show how those environmental concerns operate in conjunction with social, political, and economic relations within the geographic frameworks of place and scale outlined in the chapters. But it also means a more concerted effort to elucidate the (perhaps implied) ecological elements of texts that ostensibly have little to do with the nonhuman.

In this latter effort, I am intrigued by developments in what has come to be called “material ecocriticism,” which seeks to draw attention to the fact that humans as place-making actors operate “within material processes that include multitudes of other ‘actors,’ the majority of which are not human or, for that matter, conscious” (Phillips and Sullivan 446). Such a recognition forces us to acknowledge the ways the nonhuman exercises agency in the development of places, helping to shape the ways place crystallizes out of the flows and relations between human structures and between human and nonhuman. Echoing in many ways the model of place outlined in this dissertation, material ecocriticism sees humans “participating in a broad spectrum of relationships with other forms of agentic matter on many scales” (Phillips and Sullivan 446). In other words, human bodies (just as places) are embedded within complex networks of interaction that have profound impact on their development and the possibilities for meaning and relations that stem from that embeddedness. This form of ecocriticism, which pays

overdue heed to dirt, waste and disease, can very productively be incorporated into the discussions of this project, especially with respect to locating the ecological within the urban spaces of Africa and African literature. And where material ecocriticism might help to fill out the ecological aspects of place, I hope to make the geocriticism outlined here applicable to material ecocriticism in thinking through the “many scales” of this material agency, especially as they intersect with notions of nationalism, globalization, and the like. In short, though I have privileged the terms “geocriticism” and “place” throughout this dissertation, I see their distinction from “ecocriticism” and “environment” as porous, and my intentions for this work are to make them even more so.

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