HISTORY, HORROR, REALITY: THE IDEA OF THE MARVELOUS IN POSTCOLONIAL FICTION

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ABSTRACT

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This dissertation examined the use of anti-realist aesthetics in the representation of history in postcolonial fiction produced in Latin America, the Caribbean, South India and Africa. More specifically, it focused on how postcolonial writers engage the issue of history, outside of the dominant realist literary expression.

This work explored the issue of history, with particular focus on the writings of Alejo Carpentier, Sony Labou Tansi, Salman Rushdie and Ben Okri. These writers' works were situated within the framework of the marvelous real, which regarded history as a phenomenon that was in itself, supernatural. Therefore, the histriographical discourse foregrounded in the selected texts was sensitive to the nightmare of history on the one hand and the vagaries of the production of historical knowledge on the other.

The dissertation found out that the marvelous dimension of the postcolonial novel derived from the horrific characteristic of historical events. Rather than generating the marvelous by evoking the supernatural as external to history, postcolonial fiction produced the marvelous by narrativizing imperialism as an experience of horror, which constituted an alteration, and amplification, of the scale of reality. This magical aesthetic provided the writers the opportunity to continue in the tradition of political commitment, which was no longer possible in the realist convention.

This study observed that the violence of history during the colonial era and in post-independence period in Sub-Saharan Africa, the Caribbean and Latin America manifested

as horror of infinite proportions, which was represented through the notion of the marvelous. This thematization of horror, as a unique characteristic of history, was an effort on the part of these writers to capture the contradictions of social and historical experience. The dissertation concluded that by centralizing horror as a distinctive source of the marvelous, by highlighting the limitations of the process of producing historical knowledge, and by undermining mimetic representation, these writers attempt to re-imagine new social systems and create new political vision devoid of the contemporary regime of violence.

To Ajayi, Olusola, Tomi, Ajike, Lola,

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Introduction

Tomas Gutierrez Alea's *The Last Supper* (1976) is a film inspired partly by the Haitian Revolution and partly by a church event in Cuban history of slave labor: a plantation owner selected twelve of his slaves in a reenactment of the biblical "Last Supper." In the film, "the count" arrives from a neighboring village and meets an assembly of his slaves who work his sugar mill. Present at the occasion is the runaway slave, Sebastian, who has been captured and dragged to the assembly by a horse. Other slaves are made to witness his punishment: the sadistic overseer cuts off one of his ears, and although the count winces at this barbaric act, he fails to intervene in the gruesome torture. The violence which is meted out to Sebastian inspires the Count to explore other strategies through which to control and repress the slaves. At the gathering, he orders his overseer, Don Manuel, to select twelve of the slaves for a biblical ritual. But when Don Manuel is unable to make up his mind about the twelfth, the count instructs him to include the wounded Sebastian.

The count's determination to follow a biblical precedent is unmistakable when later on he washes the twelve slaves' feet just as Jesus Christ did with his twelve disciples. But his expression of contempt at this self-imposed duty creates a caricature of the sacred act. This ritual is followed by a generous dinner, and the slaves, full of food and wine and contented with this position at the table, take advantage of the moment to complain to the count about Don Manuel's brutality. The slaves' attitude to Don Manuel triggers the Count's paternal harangue about the natural order of races, a hierarchy in which the slaves are supposed to serve their masters as a fulfillment of a divine destiny. In addition,

he informs the slaves that they should observe religious rites which the slaves interpret to mean a suspension a suspension of their labor on the following day, that is, Good Friday.

The Count leaves the mill at dawn, before the work at the sugar mill usually starts, for his administrative post in a neighboring village. As usual, Don Manuel rushes through the slaves' quarters, waking them up for the day's work at the sugar mill. The slaves, however, argue with him that the Count had exempted them from work on Good Friday. Unable to convince Don Manuel of the Count's decision, the situation escalates in chaos and before long, the sugar mill goes up in flames. In the midst of this confusion, Don Manuel is captured and Sebastian asks other captors to allow him to decide Don Manuel's fate, then deals Don Manuel the fatal blow and disappears with all other slaves into a nearby forest.

The priest, who is stationed at the sugar mill, rushes to inform the Count of the riot on his property, at which point his Episcopal personality of the previous night disappears. The Count then assumes the violent and brutish temperament of a conquistador and heads straight for the mill. He restores order at the mill by ordering the execution of the twelve slaves who had dined with him the previous night and their heads are pierced with stakes which line Don Manuel's grave. At this point there is a close up shot of one of the stakes without a head and the scene dovetails to Sebastian running through the bush with a machete in his hand. In a quasi marvelous realist manner, Sebastian's lycanthropic powers can be discerned as the images alternate between a waterfall, and a group of galloping wild horses and birds, all of which not only evoke his possible special powers, but also celebrate Sebastian's hard-earned freedom from servitude.

Set in the eighteenth Century during the Haitian Revolution and the Enlightenment, *The Last Supper* expresses a number of postcolonial artistic and critical concerns. The first is the attempt to capture an historical moment in which slaves were assumed to be subservient people incapable of resistance; rather than passive victims, they are presented in this film as agents of freedom. The second has to do with the competing discourses in the movie. The Count gives the initial narrative at the dinner table as he tries to condition the slaves' consciousness to accept their circumstance as God's punishment for black people whose bondage is a benevolent act of redemption. However, Sebastian is skeptical of the Count's discourse and delivers a counter-narrative grounded in Yoruba mythology. In response to the Count's discourse of submission, Sebastian tells the story of how Olofin (another name for God in Yoruba religious beliefs) created Truth and Lie, two arch enemies engaged in a duel in which each beheaded the other. In the confusion of their fight, each mistakenly took the head of the other and Sebastian ends the story by saying that Lie is now going about with the head of Truth while Truth is wandering about with the Head of Lie. The implication of Sebastian's tale is not lost on the audience: the Count, with his discourse of submission and racial determinism, is analogous to Lie that parades itself as Truth.

Furthermore, in this story Sebastian deconstructs the Count's rhetoric of white supremacy through which he plans to perpetuate the slaves' thralldom by normalizing slavery. It is not clear whether or not the slaves fully comprehend Sebastian's counter-narrative, but the violence that erupts the following day suggests that the Count's effort is in vain. But the more crucial significance of the violence lies in its ambivalent relationship to the narratives. That is, for Sebastian, his discursive challenge to the Count

and the liberating violence of the following day are inseparable. At the end of the film, it is apparent that Sebastian's mastery of the word and sword leads him to self-determination.

The Last Supper is not a quintessential marvelous realist film, but its religious tone, Sebastian's mythical tale, and the marvelous ending suggest a strong similarity to the thematic concerns of marvelous realist fiction. The film intersects with marvelous realist literature precisely because it renarrativizing the history of slavery and colonization. The opening sequence of *The Last Supper* testifies to the violence that dominates the frame. For example, Don Manuel's terrifying rage as he thrashes through the slaves' quarters in search of the runaway Sebastian, and the gruesome murder of the other eleven slaves who had dined with the count the previous night show that one of the fundamental issues thematized in *The Last Supper* is the dehumanizing effects of late eighteenth Century industrial economy. In the marvelous realist and magical realist texts from 1940s through this age of globalization, writers have consistently grappled with the same horrific history as evident in *The Last Supper*. Miguel Angel Asturias' *Men of Maize* (1949), Gabriel Garcia Marquez's *The Autumn of the Patriarch* (1975), Salman Rushdie's *Midnight's Children* (1980), Isabel Allende's *The House of the Spirits* (1982), Ben Okri's *Songs of Enchantment* (1993) and Mia Couto's *The Last Flight of the Flamingo* (2004) have all thematized the horror of imperialism and colonialism, choosing strategic historical moments from the conquest, through independence, to the present moment. The cultural, political and economic contexts in which these texts are set may be different, but their preoccupation with the horror of history indicates that they explore more or less the same subject.

Here lies the significance of *The Last Supper*: Sebastian tells a story that deconstructs the Count's colonial discourse by arguing that the rhetoric of benevolent slavery is false. He also demonstrates a command of his master's language and culture and unravels the vicious agenda of European economic expansion. Sebastian's choice of story, situated within Yoruba mythological and oral archive, is crucial for its ideological purpose. Incidentally, the story belongs to a culture and tradition from which he has been uprooted and displaced but which he nevertheless evokes in opposition to the Count's. The strategy works by exposing the ideology of slavery through whereby *The Last Supper* shows that imagined or essentialized cultural constructs can be empowering especially in breaking down the mobious strip of history. Recent postcolonial criticism tends to regard "monadic" cultural representations as oppositional to liminal identities but as *The Last Supper* has shown, liminality and "essentialism" need not operate on parallel lines. *The Last Supper* then foregrounds critical issues of resistance and blurs the boundary between liminality and essentialism.

Critical Reception of Postcolonial Marvelous Realist and Magical Realist Fiction

Ogunsanwo, in "Intertextuality and Post-Colonial Literature in Ben Okri's *The Famished Road*," argues that Okri's primary concern in *The Famished Road* is to challenge the European literary canon. He contends that "[f]rom Okri's viewpoint . . . the modernist tenet of the universalizing values of 'serious art' ignores cultural differences" (41). Ogunsanwo's point becomes clearer when he says that one remarkable achievement of Ben Okri's *The Famished Road* is the clearing of a new cultural and literary space within the European canon and history (45). The grim reality of Nigerian history that Okri captures in his novel has been silenced because for Ogunsanwo, it functions mainly

as a structure to the novel (47). It is the intolerable condition of Nigerian reality which partly explains Okri's leaning towards the marvelous, and in order to appreciate his use of this mode, it is indispensable to situate *The Famished Road* and other texts of similar aesthetic orientation like *Songs of Enchantment* and *Astonishing the Gods* within their particularly disturbing historical contexts.

Hawley makes a similar argument in "Ben Okri's Spirit-Child: *Abiku* Migration and Postmodernity" as he says, "[i]n *The Famished Road* and *Songs of Enchantment*, Okri is not intent upon replacing one ruling system by another, but . . . wishes instead to recognize and celebrate a distinctive way of encountering and describing reality: he has an aesthetic, rather than overtly political or psychological, aim" (33). Just like Ogunsanwo, Hawley fails to account for the historical concern of the texts, especially as evinced in *Songs of Enchantment*, a text that expresses the horror of Nigerian polity. Hawley seems to privilege the aesthetic quality of the texts while the political, social and historical imperatives remain largely ignored. In contrast to Hawley's argument, the excessive violence of the political parties during the 1960s and early 1980s and the sheer terror perpetrated by the political class testify to the horrific reality that *Songs of Enchantment* tries to capture through its marvelous mode.

The above critical tendency to ignore historical dimensions of texts is not limited to Ben Okri's works. For example, Bassi in "Salman Rushdie's Special Effects" acknowledges *Midnight's Children*'s concern with history; that is, Rushdie's *Midnight's Children* challenges the colonial rhetoric, particularly in relation to historiography (53). He argues that Rushdie "counters colonial historiography" by rejecting the chronological order imposed by Western imperial order (53), but the actual bloodbath that characterizes

post-independence India, so central to *Midnight's Children*, is not given much attention. One wonders why critics neglect the characters' apprehension of the massacre and the trauma of war that arises from the India/Pakistan conflict. *Midnight's Children*'s subversion of European empirical and linear historiography cannot be denied, but the horror of post-independence India also, at strategic moments, structures the supernatural dimension of the novel.

In "Liberals, Conservatives, and Bananas: Colombian Politics in the Fictions of Gabriel Garcia Márquez," Janes argues that the imagination in Garcia Márquez's fiction is not intrinsically political or social (125). She, nevertheless, acknowledges the author's ability to integrate the political history of Colombia and the resources of the imagination. According to Janes, the height of the author's expertise can be located in *One Hundred Years of Solitude* and *The Autumn of the Patriarch* in which Garcia Marquez is able to blend the supernatural and post-independence Colombian history (125). While Janes's claims may be valid, she fails to recognize how the marvelous real functions as the medium through which Colombia's traumatic colonial and neocolonial history is narrativized in both *One Hundred Years of Solitude* and *The Autumn of the Patriarch.*

Of particular importance is Syl Cheney-Coker's *The Last Harmattan of Alusine Dunbar*, a novel which, like Tomas Gutierrez Alea's *The Last Supper*, tries to articulate some of the silences in history that have to do with the cataclysmic consequences of the trans-Atlantic economy. In *Last Harmattan*, a group of freed slaves returns to the West African village of Kasila and found their own settlement, which they call Malagueta. After an unfortunate incident in which some inhabitants of Kasila fall victim to the potatoes planted by Jeanette Cromantine, a war breaks out and the survivors of

Malagueta must hide in the forest before they are visited by another set of aspiring settlers. Together they build the new Malagueta which prospers so much that it attracts colonial interests. After many years of attacks and counter-attacks, Malagueta falls into the hands of the colonialists who institute martial law and force some of the inhabitants into servile labor, the kind from which the people had escaped long before coming to West Africa. Later on, the military regime gives way to a bourgeois clique that is interested only in profiteering; and in the process of dominating political and economic spheres of power, the new regime destroys Malagueta's historical monuments. The marvelous dimension of the novel is partly built around the unusual power of Fatmatta the bird-woman. She is a ravishing beauty who renders impotent any man who forces her into a sexual act. In her death, she deploys her power to revolutionary purposes by rescuing those who are wounded during battles.

In responding to *Last Harmattan*, Bertinetti argues that the text "blurs chronological time, in which one event succeeds another, thus placing them [events] in a temporal dimension that is epic, not historical" (200). Cheney-Coker's novel certainly subverts a linear form of narration and sometimes gravitates towards the epic, but it is surprising that Bertinetti fails to notice how the occasional epic style of the novel enhances the terrifying history that the author centralizes in this narrative. Bertinetti seems so concerned about the novel's disruption of the realist mode that the history that is so pivotal to it goes unacknowledged.

Meanwhile, Cooper's critique of *Last Harmattan* locates the text within the postcolonial paradigm just as Ogunsanwo and Hawley have done in the case of Ben Okri's *The Famished Road* and *Songs of Enchantment*. Her book, *Magical Realism in*

West African Fiction: Seeing with a Third Eye is worth examining in greater detail. Brenda Cooper contends that in *Last Harmattan*, the freed slave's idea of returning to some moments or places of origin is met with contradictions which reinforce the novel's skepticism about the idea of "returning." Cooper emphasizes the problems of the originary with two main arguments: that the notion of "return" is an attempt to preserve an assumed pristine origin and tradition and that it can only lead to crisis. Cooper, therefore, highlights the war that arises between the people of Kasila and the settlers by stresses the following: "But when their children succumbed to death soon after eating the sweet potatoes which the foreign woman had planted, they deduced with an age-old logic, contrary to reason, that the seed of the settlers' misfortune had been planted in their world, which not even the totemic power of their gods could halt" (100). The war between the indigenous people and the settlers, for Cooper, and rightly so, is a marker of the text's postcoloniality because it refuses to valorize or romanticize West Africa as an idyllic space of return.

For Cooper, the history of Malagueta testifies to the impossibility of returning to an originary moment or space and, as stated earlier, it derives its postcolonial impetus from resisting the notion of a pristine past or space. However, the history of Malagueta should be examined within the larger context of the novel; the fact that Cooper bases her argument almost entirely on the early part of the novel makes critical inquiry into the rest of the novel pertinent. Malagueta should be seen within the historical context of its colonization. The destructive outcome of the colonial encounter partly accounts for the marvelous aura of the text whereby the war of attrition between the inhabitants of Malagueta and the colonial forces transform the town's peaceful and stable signs to one

of terror and also explains why Fatmatta the bird-woman has to intervene from time to time, either to comfort the grieving or assist in the bloody encounters.

After the successful story of Malagueta has been heard overseas it becomes the target of colonial interests and tyranny. The impending doom of Malagueta is foregrounded in the following passage:

> Captain Hammerstone, at the head of sixty men, sailed for Malagueta to establish a British garrison. He had obtained a commission from the Colonial Office which had been pleased to find such an enthusiastic man willing to go out to a place when others had baulked at the idea. His instructions were to build a fort, protect the new traders who would follow on his heels to build warehouses and shops, guarantee peace and stability, and to put down any rebellion or uprising by the founders of the town, though he was warned against antagonising the citizens. . . . He went out with a conscience that was clear, and with the impetuous notion that his new life had already been sanctioned by Divine Providence. Being a man utterly convinced of his own worth, he sailed, determined to impose his rule. (156)

Phrases and clauses like "British garrison," "a fort," "put down any rebellion," "Divine Providence" and "determined to impose his rule" confirm Captain Hammerstone's imperial project justified not only by the force of military power, but also by the discourse evoking divine authority. After a series of battles, Hammerstone's army subdues the Malaguetans. Although the settlers lose to the imperial army, they are determined to liberate Malagueta from the invaders. When the narrator says of Hammerstone, "[n]ow his lovemaking was a methodical formula, like the mapping of a territory which required interest but very little love" (302), Hammerstone's reign of terror

that follows the subjugation of Thomas Bookerman's forces becomes unequivocal. The marvelous mode of the text captures the disruptive consequence of the colonial intrusion and no character other than Thomas Bookerman could express this invasion in historical terms. He says to Captain Hammerstone,

> You done come like a tief 'mongst us, and you gon tell us how you gon steal our land, how you gon build factories, and take our women and chillum for your bed and workshop. Ain't never known any king be good to black people. We all come here cause de king done lie to us; tell us to fight for him and he gon give us land, gon give us respect and we gon be safe. And we done believe him, but he gives us land ain't fit for man or animal. People dying there 'cause ain't no thin you kin do wid dat land: marshes, swamps, thorns, thistles and it's cold. So we come here and make dis place real nice, and we got a little happiness, and our women ain't afraid no more people gon be taking their chillum. Now you want to live here, but why you don't stay where you come from? Because we ain't gon be letting you do nothing to us now we free. We is our own men now, dem chains no longer round our necks and we ain't gon let you, you hear, Mr King? (159)

In his speech, Bookerman refers to particularly traumatic historical moments which include slavery, servitude on American plantations, the American war of Independence, betrayal by the British royalty and of course, the new imperialism brought by Captain Hammerstone. *Last Harmattan* shows that as a postcolonial text, it is concerned with subverting a romanticized view about Africa as well as revisiting the traumatic encounter between Malagueta and the colonial forces.

It is because of the centrality of colonial conflicts that one needs to go beyond

Cooper's claim about the illusion of return. The main historical concern of the text which is devoted to the clash between the people of Malagueta and the mercantile colonial forces of the British Hammerstone, is conspicuously missing from Cooper's argument. As seen above, some of the postcolonial critics cited have emphasized more or less the same argument: the primacy of hybrid and liminal cultural forms, a paradigm through which these texts confront and subvert colonial narratives that insist on stable notions of reference. In doing so, the texts' engagement with history is partly lost in the rhetoric of hybridity and liminality. In order to grapple with traumatic renderings of historical encounters during and after colonization, it is crucial that we contextualize these texts within the framework of the marvelous real precisely because the marvelous emerged as a consequence of the brutal meeting of the agents of European expansion and the "other."

The marvelous dimension of above-cited novels lies in the irrationality of a grim and traumatizing history because the horror of colonization defies logical knowledge and is therefore, marvelous (Achille Mbembe 7-8). Some postcolonial either fail to adequately recognize and emphasize the historical interests of these novels (Ogunsanwo and Hawley), valorize the subversion of European historiography (Bassi) or reduce the texts to an integration of history and the imagination (Janes). It cannot be overemphasized that postcolonial criticism dealing with texts that profusely deploy the imaginative should articulate both interstitiality and liminality on the one hand, and the texts' grim historical reality on the other. The central argument here is that these texts are narratives of horror and this horror is inextricably bound with history. However, the fact that the novels engage a traumatic history does not imply that the focus on interstitiality and liminality is secondary or ancillary to the overall purpose of postcolonial fiction. In fact, these two

modes of criticism must be kept in view at all times because the process of production of history enhances and undermines access to historical knowledge. These novels emphasize and foreground the intolerable reality of colonialism and neocolonialism not only to awaken our memory of the past, but also to complement and mediate the now prevalent discourse of hybridity. Stressing the relation between history, horror and the marvelous illuminates a triangulated relationship that is integral to evaluating these narratives.

History, Horror, Reality and the Marvelous

The emergence of the marvelous real is overdetermined by myriad factors which range from the desire for regional identity, the attempt to break from European realist and modernist aesthetic practices, the celebration of an autochthonous epistemological viewpoint to the subversion of European historiography. Equally important, and most often ignored, is the narrativization of the intolerable and horrific history during and after colonialism. History, in this case, does not imply linear or unproblematic accounts of the depredatory effects of colonialism. That is, the texts examined here do not claim to have narrated colonial history "as it really happened," but draw attention to themselves as constructs of the past and suggest new perspectives for understanding and interrogating the predatory consequences of the "discovery." The domination of non-Europeans by the British, French, Dutch, Portuguese and Spanish empires did not end with the independence of the colonies. Rather, "decolonization historically went hand in hand with neo-colonialism" and the "end of an old-fashioned imperialism . . . meant the end of one kind of domination but evidently also the invention and construction of a new kind" (Jameson 184). Consequently, the globalizing world hardly suggests the end of overt or implicit domination; it only shows that the imbrications of local and foreign agents of

power have created a vicious cycle of pain. The texts studied here constitute an effort to demonstrate how European historiography is "implicated in the long history of European colonialism" by thematizing the continued devastating effects of internal and external imperial agendas (Young xii).

Horror therefore refers to the violence, concomitant with the colonial project, directed at the bodies and landscape in the occupied territories. This notion of horror also includes the post-independence atrocities of indigenous regimes which have been represented in such novels as *Songs of Enchantment*, *Shame* and *The Autumn of the Patriarch*. It refers to the cycle of bloodbath and irrational levels of violence that resists logical comprehension and has characterized the history of imperialism before and after the official granting of independence to the colonies. The former colonies have continued to experience a history that has "always [made] animality and bestiality its essential components, plunging human beings into a never-ending *process of brutalization*" (Mbembe 14). The novels depict the gruesome existential experience in the aftermath of colonialism and create a terrifying social and historical reality.

The concept of horror being used here is a manifestation of the brutality that characterizes colonialism and its aftermath. It is different from the horror depicted in the Gothic fiction where evil, fear and terror, are a representation of psychic space. The effect of the horror in the Gothic novel is the creation of the awareness that evil is not external to humans but lies within their psychological domain (MacAndrew 5). Ghosts, monsters and the lurking assassin "frighten because they are already the figments of our dreaming imagination" (8). Unlike in marvelous and magical realist literatures where horror is the ineffable temperament of colonial history, Gothic fiction produces pleasure

because "[i]f an idea of danger is involved, the result will be a terror that is pleasing because the [reader] knows he is himself safe" (40).

Although Kristeva analyzes the historical repression of women through patriarchal structures, she seems more concerned with the exclusion of women from the symbolic order and how such exclusion is transformed to empowerment through the destabilization of the symbolic order by that which stands outside of it. For Kristeva, horror is produced by the abject, which is "a terror that dissembles, a hatred that smiles, . . . a friend who stabs you" (4). However, the horror being described in marvelous and magical realist literatures concerns the representation of the "other" "in the harshness of its destiny" (Mbembe 18), from the Middle Passage, slavocracy, colonialism, neocolonialism, to the contemporary contradictions of our globalizing world. The marvelous real, is then an attempt to come to terms with the vicissitudes of history, whose terror defies rational explications.

Emergence of the Marvelous Real

In Latin America, writers had experimented with French Romanticism and various modernist literary expressions like Dadaism and Surrealism, but later revolted against these literary modes at the onset of the 1940s (Irish 127). This revolt can partly be explained by of the influence of Roh's publication of *Post Expressionism, Magic Realism: Problems of the Newest European Painting* (*Nach-Expressionismus, Magischer Realismus: Probleme der neusten Europäischen Malerei*) in 1925. However, Roh's concept applies to European painting and suggests an encounter with an object strictly in the realist sense. His notion of magical realism is a rejection of the Expressionist painting which is why Roh argues that "this fantastic dreamscape has completely vanished and . . .

our real world re-emerges before our eyes. . . . The religious and transcendental themes have largely disappeared in recent painting. In contrast, we are offered a new style that is thoroughly of this world, that celebrates the mundane" (17).

By 1927 when Roh's book was been translated to Spanish and published by *Revista de Occidente*, European writers in Buenos Aires started referring to their works as magical realism (Irene Guenther 61). In 1935, Jorge Luis Borges' collection, *A Universal History of Infamy [Historia universal de la infamia]* appeared in Buenos Aires and it was this same year that Flores believes magical realism emerged in Latin America (133). It was not until 1949 that the term, "the marvelous real," emerged in the prologue to Alejo Carpentier's *The Kingdom of this World* titled, "On the Marvelous Real in America" (75-88). The marvelous real derives its power partly from autochthonous ritualistic and religious practices whose logic does not totally conform to a rational/positivist model. Also, the marvelous reflects Caribbean and Latin American writers' desire to break away from the European canon which has served as their literary model since the beginning of the 20th century. It constitutes an aspect of the writers' efforts to find an "authentic" Latin American voice in literary expression. For instance, Haiti occupies a pivotal place in the formulation of the marvelous real for being the space where Afro-Caribbean religious practices flourishes despite the violence of the French colonial enterprise. The racial and cultural plurality of Haiti also threatens the racial and cultural purity maintained by the imperialists. Therefore, "the undeniable spell of the lands of Haiti," the "magical warnings along the red roads of the Central Meseta," the "drums of the Petro and the Rada," the "presence of the Indian and the black man," and "its fecund racial

mixing" all emphasize how the religious beliefs and racial mixing form the basis for the marvelous real (Carpentier, "Marvelous Real" 84-88).

Perhaps Carpentier's most enduring influence to postcolonial criticism is his exploration of the relationship between marvelous real and history. In Carpentier's *The Kingdom of this World* therefore, Haiti is not only a site that represents the survival of Afro-Caribbean religious beliefs, or racial and cultural plurality, but is also a place that carries the burden of the most atrocious events of modernity. So, the marvelous real grapples with history and attempts to account for the inexplicable horror of modernity, as seen in the following statement: "[n]ow then, I speak of the marvelous real when I refer to certain things that have occurred in America" (Carpentier, "The Baroque" 102). One of the events being referred to here is the "discovery" of the American continent, particularly, the manner in which the "discoverers" wiped out entire civilizations and collective memory. For instance, "when Hernan Cortes said to his monarch: 'As I do not know what to call these things, I cannot express them' " (Carpentier, *Baroque* 107), he was expressing his wonder at the magnificent city of Mexico. However, by asserting that "I cannot express them," he also denies the history of the continent by extirpating its memory both literally and figuratively (104). The notion of the marvelous therefore, lies in the unleashing of imperial savagery on the continent and the violence with which it was resisted:

> The marvelous real is found at every stage in the lives of men who inscribed dates in the history of the continent and who left the names that we still carry: from those who searched for the fountain of eternal youth and the golden city of Manoa to

> certain early rebels or modern heroes of mythological fame from our wars of independence [...]. (Carpentier, "Marvelous Real" 87)

The history of imperialism, then, becomes a source of the marvelous real because the conquest of the New World and establishment of colonies seem to confound our sense of reality and geography: that is, imperial powers subdued cities which had already built an advanced civilization and were much bigger than major cities in colonizing nations during the period of European economic expansion. The Conquest was characterized by the most unthinkable horror especially because of unnecessary use of violence against the people of the Caribbean and Latin America. Carpentier contends:

> How could America be anything other than marvelously real, if we recognize certain very interesting factors that must be taken into account? The conquest of Mexico occurs in 1521, when Francois I ruled France. Do you know how big the urban area of Paris was under Francois I? Thirteen square kilometers. . . . When Bernal Diaz del Castillo laid eyes . . . on . . . the city of Tenochtitlan, the capital of Mexico, the empire of Montezuma, it had an urban area of one hundred square kilometers - at a time when Paris had only thirteen. ("Baroque" 104)

These geographical disparities and the horror of the conquest are crucial to formulating notions of the marvelous real because of the strangeness of these events. History becomes marvelous in itself precisely because of our inability to capture and express its horror in realistic and logical terms. The task of the writer is then to attempt to recover this history and rescue it from the ruins of colonialism. The marvelous real is not only about capturing the strange, intolerable and shocking history of the colonized peoples, it

is also a means of recovering the memory of peoples and histories partially lost in the ruins of the colonial encounter. For example,

> As far as the marvelous real is concerned, we have only to reach out our hands to grasp it. Our contemporary history presents us with strange occurrences every day. . . . Today, we know the names of these things, the forms of these things, the texture of these things; we know where our internal and external enemies are. We have forged a language appropriate to the expression of our realities, and the events that await us will find that we, the novelists of Latin America, are the witnesses, historians, and interpreters of our great Latin American reality. ("Baroque" 107-108)

Novels like Miguel Angel Asturias' *Men of Maize*, Carlos Fuentes' *Where the Air is Clear*, and Juan Rulfo's *Pedro Paramo* employ indigenous beliefs that were threatened during the colonial period. They also attempt to recapture the memory of epochs that had fallen victim to the brutal force of the conquering European nations. The theme can also be located in the works of other Latin American writers like Gabriel Garcia Marquez and Jose Donoso, and in the writings of African writers such as Sony Labou Tansi, Mia Couto, Ben Okri and others. Although the marvelous, from Carpentier's point of view, is a uniquely Latin American experience, there is an emergence of contemporary African writers who have appropriated the marvelous to confront horrific historical situations, though within different contexts. Neocolonialism, dictatorship and perpetuation of pain can partly explain why various writers have been experimenting with the marvelous real beyond the geographical and cultural context of the Caribbean and Latin America.

Marvelous or Magical

Although there are fundamental and irreducible differences between the marvelous real and magical realism, many critics tend to conflate the two concepts in their textual analysis. Scarano contends that the term, "magical realism," despite its inability to embrace all texts based on the imagination, is still very attractive and will therefore survive better than other terms like the marvelous, real imaginario, realismo, artístico or realismo fantastico (10). Bertinetti also argues, in a footnote, that "the concept of magical realism originated and to a substantial degree developed in Latin America, with one of its chief starting-points being the formulation in 1949 of the concepts of the *real maravilloso* by the Cuban Alejo Carpentier" (197). Another critic, Robinson, writes of "Carpentier's formulation of magical realism," thereby implying that the marvelous real and magical realism are the same (79). Yet Fishburn also claims that *The Kingdom of this World* is a work of magical realism (167). Although Shroeder did not effectively distinguish between the marvelous real and magical realism, she acknowledges that the term magical realism became more confusing when it was applied to the works of Alejo Carpentier (Shroeder 2). In his discussion of magical realism, Slemon refers to the marvelous real as belonging in a different context; and just like Shroeder, Slemon does not fully distinguish between the two terms but acknowledges that the two terms are not interchangeable (407).

Magical realism is the amalgamation of reality and the supernatural in such a way that "the marvelous seems to grow organically within the ordinary, blurring the distinction between them" (Faris, *Ordinary Enchantments* 1). In other words, there is no hierarchy between the supernatural and realistic elements in a text because the story is narrated in a matter-of-fact manner which portrays both the "telluric" and the "supernatural" events as

"real." The narrator of magical realism expresses no surprises because to him or her, both the real and the supernatural are accepted as realistic. Although "the educated reader considers the rational and the irrational as conflicting world views, he does not react to the supernatural in the text as if it were antinomious with respect to our conventional view of reality, since it is integrated within the norms of perception of the narrator and characters in the fictitious world" (Chanady, *Magical Realism and the Fantastic* 23). However, the marvelous real derives from the Latin American encounter with the historicity of its landscape (Carpentier, "Marvelous Real" 87). The landscape is believed to be imbued with both historical and supernatural characteristics founded in horror (Delbaere-Garant, "Psychic Realism" 252-253). The horror of history is so intense that it becomes more or less a spiritual experience which shocks and astonishes the characters and the reader as in Gabriel García Márquez's *One Hundred Years of Solitude*.

This shock and astonishment produced by the narrative of history differentiates the marvelous from magical realism, where the supernatural events are presented as ordinary events. For example, Rushdie's *Midnight's Children* (1980) is the backdrop of bloodbath that attended the independence of India and the separation of Pakistan from India. Whereas the horror of history is being represented in this novel, it does not make any claims about the supernatural as such. Wherever the supernatural is invoked, it almost always serves as a narrative technique, but the novel's eclectic style often integrates other narrative forms such as the fantastic, uncanny and the marvelous.

Both the marvelous real and magical realism are partly characterized by "ontological duality," which implies that they both express two opposing epistemologies and perspectives of apprehending reality (Angulo 6). That is, they both present a world in

which some events occur that are considered "real" because they conform to our doctrines of the real while other events happen that are described as "supernatural" because they usually involve characters and actions that are assumed to be unfamiliar to us. These two perspectives in magical realism and the marvelous are "conflicting, but [are] autonomously coherent . . . perspectives, one based on [a] rational view of reality and the other on the acceptance of the supernatural as part of everyday reality" (Chanady, *Magical Realism and the Fantastic* 21-22). Magical realism, then, adopts both views of reality, and the supernatural does not disconcert the narrator. However, the supernatural in the marvelous real is fundamentally different from that of magical realism because it is partly derived from a religious experience, and the "experience of the marvelous is unexpected and unusual" (Hart, "Magical Realism" 43). In addition, the marvelous real self-consciously alerts us to the experience of the past which is astonishing and supernatural in itself (Carpentier, "Baroque" 105). This is a quality of the marvelous real that is not an integral part of magical realism and it is for this reason that the direct engagement of the marvelous real with the absurdity of history sets it apart from magical realism.

Aside from differences in terminologies, Durix, John Beverley and Aldama have raised certain questions about the marvelous real. For example, Durix argues that the marvelous real projects the European gaze on the "other." Consequently, the marvelous real is no more than a Eurocentric fetishization of the "other" because it is premised on the uniqueness of Latin American and Caribbean landscapes and cultural sensibilities (105). In addition, Durix contends that the marvelous expresses the "feeling of wonder experienced by the conquistadors"; more importantly, it "is not very far from conceptions

of the Noble Savage" (105). Similarly, Aldama asserts that the marvelous real has been greatly influenced by the European anthropological assumptions about Latin America, particularly, as articulated in Levy-Bruhl's *How the Natives Think* (10). In Aldama's view, anthropology "suggested that 'primitive' thought and perceptions are pervaded by mysticism and that 'primitive mentality' is not governed exclusively by laws of logic and is therefore mainly prelogical and analogous to the mentality of a child" (10). The implication for the marvelous real, Aldama states, is that "[t]he link between *lo real maravilloso* and Levy-Bruhl's influential book is readily apparent: it had a clear though unintended role in fixing and justifying the political propaganda of colonialist and neocolonialists everywhere" (10).

The link between the marvelous and the baroque is the subject of John Beverley's criticism of the marvelous. Beverley argues that the cultural and racial mixture that is central to the concept of the marvelous does not reflect the violence, racism and segregation that characterized the history of colonialism and slavery in the Caribbean and Latin America (62). Also, Wilson declares that "Carpentier appropriated . . . ["le merveilleux"] from Breton's vocabulary," and "could discount the surrealist marvellous because he linked urban with reason, and tropical nature with the unpredictable" (70).

There is a sense in which the marvelous can be considered anthropological; the incorporation of folk narrative styles and the evocation of "traditional" belief systems can invite such criticisms advanced by Durix and Aldama. Liam Connell makes a similar argument in a different context when he says that the anthropological element of magical realism implies that realism is based on superstition and myth and therefore opposed to European writings assumed to be informed by logic and rationality (95-96). But

interestingly enough, both fantasy literature and Gothic fiction developed from the late eighteenth century into the nineteenth century also creates worlds which are radically opposed to, and intended to challenge the hegemony of logic and reason. Both fantasy literature and the Gothic present "explicit antinomy between the laws of reason and supernatural beliefs" in an age . . . when rational explanation and empirical observation had relegated archaic paradigms to an inferior status" (Chanady, "Territorialization of the Imaginary" 132). They therefore deconstruct "rationalist discourse affirming hegemonic paradigms of the Enlightenment" . . . "by the description of apparently supernatural events and constant reference to the fear of the protagonist in the face of the inexplicable" (132). If Durix and Aldama have based their criticism of the marvelous on its supposed opposition to logic and rationality, such a manifestation is not unique to the marvelous but shared by both fantasy and Gothic literatures. It is apparent that both Durix and Aldama have ironically reinforced the same Eurocentric perceptions of non-European peoples and cultures without acknowledging the same trend in European literary practice.

Furthermore, they have only isolated an interpretation of the marvelous, the effect of which leaves us with a half-truth about the significance of the marvelous. The marvelous real, though partly relying on the supernatural in the construction of reality, is by no means circumscribed or undermined by religious and ritualistic significations; it also relies on the horror of history to produce its supernaturalized reality. It is true that some religious and ritualistic elements can be interpreted as ethnographic, but to reduce the narrative mode to ethnographic content is to overlook the primacy of history. More importantly, these ethnographic elements can become a means through which resistance is articulated as seen in Patrick Chamoiseau's *Texaco* and Kojo Laing's *Women of the*

Aeroplanes where history, myth and existential experience struggle and overlap with each other. Ultimately, Aldama and Durix fail to acknowledge the political and liberatory significance of the marvelous real. Their criticism of the marvelous as ethnographic derives from "uniqueness" of the Caribbean and Latin America rather than a careful analysis of quintessentially marvelous real texts (Mellen, *Magical Realism* 119).

In addition, Beverley's claim that the marvelous fails to reflect the violence, racism and segregation that characterized racial and cultural mixing is not entirely valid. For instance, *The Kingdom of this World* is particularly sensitive to the violence of French colonialism in general, and specifically, the horror of racial mixing which is shown as forbidden, and punishable with terrifying cruelty. Rather than obscuring history, the marvelous confronts the silences and horrors (Carpentier, "The Baroque" 107-108). Despite the above criticisms, marvelous real, with its interrogative approach to the past, offers a perspective on history vital to postcolonial criticism. In other words, the centralizing the traumatic encounters between Europe and non-Europeans will revitalize postcolonial criticism which previously has been shaped by emphasis on cultural hybridity.

Critical Approach/Methodology

The critical approach/methodology in this work will follow the postcolonial critiques developed by Spivak, Bongie, Gilroy, Young, JanMohammed Neil Lazarus and others. Since the texts examined are more or less grounded in the marvelous, there is particular emphasis on how they portray the "other" in the "harshness of its destiny" (Mbembe 17). Of course, Bhabha, Appiah and Hall have privileged the politics of interstitiality which means they not only celebrate cultural plurality, but also valorize porosity of borders; it is

obvious that they have been influenced by the postmodernist idea of "death of the subject" which implies that subjectivity and identity are never constituted prior to the moment of enunciation. Their criticism constitutes a counterpoint to colonial narratives that privileged homogenized and imagined identities. However, the danger in pursuing Bhabha et al's argument is that there hardly exists any space, location or position to interrogate the traumatic past that postcolonial fiction has foregrounded. The following excerpt will throw light on the issue:

> Doesn't it seem funny that at the very point when women and people of color are ready to sit down at the bargaining table with the white boys, that the table disappears? That is, suddenly there are no grounds for claims to truth and knowledge anymore and here we are, standing in the conference room making all sorts of claims to knowledge and truth but suddenly without a table upon which to put our papers and coffee cups, let alone to bang our fists. (Amory, qtd. in Shohat and Stam 345)

Therefore, the fluid and cosmopolitan politics advocated by Bhabha, Appiah and Hall has the tendency of becoming another kind of cultural imperialism (Kortenaar 11). It is for this reason that Gayatri Spivak's *A Critique of Postcolonial Reason* will be pertinent to this work because it not only acknowledges the primacy of hybridity, interstitiality and the porosity of national boundaries, but also demonstrates that certain unified subjectivities like "self," "people" and a totalizing concept like "nation," are still useful in understanding and challenging historicity. Categories like "nation" and "people" are crucial to this work because "[h]owever transnationalized or globalized today's world might be, the boundaries of a civil society still mark out the individual state and are still

nationally defined" (*Critique* 399).

While the postcolonial method, like postmodernism, rejects fixed and unitary notions of identities, the notion of "totality" and "fixity" help re-conceptualize the politics of resistance outside the postmodern "orthodoxies." In addition to Spivak's *Critique*, Bongie's *Islands and Exiles* provides the paradigm to re-inscribe "fixity" and "essentialism" into the analysis of the above-cited texts because "[a] reliance upon, and a reversion to, fixed and ultimately fictional (ethnic, racial, national, and so on) identities is inescapable, notwithstanding our ever greater immersion in and sensitivity to a creolized and creolizing world" (*Islands* 10). The confrontation with past and present injustice that is germane to postcolonial narratives suggests that categories like the "nation-state," "ethnicity," and "people" are strategic points of references. In effect, "monadic" and "unified" representations of individual and collective subjectivities are deployed, a task for which Bongie's *Islands* becomes invaluable because of its potential for repositioning such "stable" references in current postcolonial debates. More importantly, no matter how globalized the world has become, not matter how cosmopolitan the world of these novels is, the historical context of their production is one in which the relationship of the former colonized peoples and the former colonizers is still structured by binary opposition (JanMohammed 82). JanMohammed says further that "the dominant pattern of relations that controls the text within the colonial context is determined by economic and political imperatives and changes, such as the development of slavery, power- and interest-relations in all colonial societies is the manichean opposition between the putative superiority of the European and the supposed inferiority of the native" (82). In the globalizing world of today, discourses of binary oppositions have diminished

significantly and the former colonial powers are more or less absent from the affairs of the erstwhile colonies. However, because the West as a colonial force has given way to the multinational corporations, the devastating effects of their policies on the political and economic lives of former colonies are not easily discerned. Since the corporations now have multinational membership, they operate with more audacity while their lack of specific national identity undermines expectations of accountability at a time when nation-states in the developing worlds no longer exercise dominant economic and cultural roles, unlike in the 1960s, 1970s and early 1980s. Colonial governments no longer control the affairs of the developing nations directly, but the multinational businesses have dominated the markets, thereby creating similar, if not the same negative consequences of colonialism. It is for this reason that JanMohammed will be essential to theorizing the transformation of the colonial order.

The writers whose works have been selected for analysis are the first generation writers (Alejo Carpentier from Cuba and Gabriel García Márquez from Colombia) and second generation writers, Sony Labou Tansi (Congo), Salman Rushdie (Britain/India) and Ben Okri (Britain/Nigeria). These Latin American, Caribbean, African and Indian authors have been chosen for the manifestation of the marvelous real in their writings on the one hand, and their tendency to depict the cruelty of the colonial past and the violence and pain of the post-independence period, up to this age of globalization on the other. Their significance lies more in their historical narratives more than in their geographical locations although the different social and historical contexts will be appreciated. Their choice is not entirely based on geographical criteria.

In chapter one, the main issue is the centrality of history to the idea of the marvelous real, particularly, the fundamental connection between historical narratives and memory. This argument is situated within Carpentier's *The Kingdom of this World.* This is a novel in which the writer is preoccupied with the question of history as memory and myth which underlines the significance of accounting for events of the past while being conscious of the fact that history is produced discursively. The idea of history as narratives that subvert amnesia in this text becomes of the utmost importance especially when contextualized within the logic of Glissant's *Caribbean Discourse* in which he suggests that the experience of colonialism obliterates collective memory (62). Also, Young's poststructuralist paradigm in *White Mythologies* and Glissant's text will provide the forum to develop the argument that, structured by meticulous sensitivity to the subversion of amnesia precipitated by the processes of the production of historical knowledge, *Kingdom* attempts to recover, narrativize, appropriate and reconstruct the place of the "other" in the challenge to historicity.

In chapter two, the argument is that second generation novels, specifically, Sony Labou Tansi's *Seven Solitudes of Lorsa Lopez,* function within the marvelous realist notion of horror, and that the history that the texts account for is shaped by the horrific character of its passing. The horror that this novel exemplifies is different from the conventional category of horror in the 18th century Romance and Gothic fiction in which horror is an externalization or narrativization of the human psyche (MacAndrew 5-7). Although it is possible to locate certain aspects of the Gothic horror in *Seven Solitudes,* such as the grotesque and terror, emphasis will be placed on the text's dramatization of how horror is shaped by violence of history. In contrast, Achille Mbembe's *On the*

Postcolony functions to demonstrate that *Seven Solitudes* describes a different kind of horror that is distinctive to the encounter between Europe and the New World, which has also patterned the representation of post-independent social realities (Mbembe 17).

Chapter three argues that the idea of horror discussed in the previous chapter is an experience too gruesome to recall by memory. Therefore, the horror of the past events captured by Salman Rushdie's *Midnight's Children* problematizes literary representation because the experience they try to depict defies the logic of memory or rational representation. This novel, to varying degrees, operates within the paradigm of the marvelous real because it narrativizes history so that the extremely troubling dimensions of history produce an unexpected, shocking and supernatural representation of reality. That is, the horror that characterizes this narrative has fundamentally altered the illusion of reality as typically seen in realism, and the naturalization of the supernatural as given in "magical realism"; it also signifies the limitations of the representational potential of the marvelous. Jean-Francois Lyotard's notion of the "unrepresentable" in *The Postmodern Condition* reinforces the shock and astonishment that *Midnight's Children* evokes, which resist conventional modes of representation; Kristeva's *Revolution in Poetic Language* will help engage the idea that, although *Midnight's Children* testifies to the impossibility of a coherent narrative of horror, it is imperative to acknowledge that one cannot entirely avoid totalizing historical experience.

Chapter four examines the role of the marvelous real in reviving the politics of *engagement* which plays a diminished role within realist narrative mode. More importantly, Ben Okri's *Astonishing the Gods*, together with Spivak's *Critique*, Bongie's *Islands and Exiles* and Deleuze and Guattari's *A Thousand Plateaus* make it possible to

deconstruct colonial narratives of cultural and racial essentialism. They also follow the marvelous real's politics of oppositionality enhanced by the recognition of how imagined identities like racial and national categories can become instrumental to challenging the conditions of anomie that structure historical realities of the non-European during colonialism, post-independence, and this global age. In other words, the politics of *engagement* and oppositionality inherent in the marvelous real energizes postcolonial criticism.

Chapter One: The Marvelous and the Imperative of History

How does postcolonial fiction engage the history of colonialism? First, it will be erroneous to assume that there is one unproblematic category of postcolonial fiction. Postcolonial narratives are shaped by a lot of factors which differ in terms of historical specificity and aesthetic choices. For instance, while some Caribbean and Latin American writers had expressed their social and historical conditions through literary realism and modernism, others focused on the marvelous. This assertion poses the question, why the marvelous? The main reason for privileging the marvelous lies in history's irrationality; that is, like Auschwitz, the cataclysmic consequence of colonization cannot be fully grasped through empirical method or rational logic. This is why the marvelous realist writers depart from literary realism because to adopt realism is to place reality within an ordered system and within a rationally comprehensible order of knowledge. In addition, the irrationality of colonization also has to do with the magnitude of colonial atrocities especially those committed by nations that claimed, while these atrocities were being perpetrated, that they had superior civilizations. These contradictions are by no means reducible to logical reasoning which is why many postcolonial writers tend to gravitate towards the marvelous.

One of the important texts that explores the operation of the marvelous is Alejo Carpentier's *The Kingdom of this World* (1949). *Kingdom* offers a revisionist perspective on History by reconstructing the events of Haitian Revolution in such a way that less known actors in that revolution now become its heroes. In essence, *Kingdom* participates in exposing the silences of history. *Kingdom* is also a quintessential work of resistance literature designed specifically to challenge imperialism and its manifestations in

colonialism, racism and sexual predation. This text also attests to Said's claim in *Culture and Imperialism* that partly because of imperialism, cultures have always been hybrid (xxv). *Kingdom* shows how voodoo and Catholicism overlap and how the idea of "mestizaje" has come to be constitutive of the Caribbean and Latin American identity. *Kingdom*'s marvelous perspective on history reinforces our understanding of the persistence of colonization, which is why revolutionary zeal is central to its story. It is necessary to sound a note of caution at this juncture because, while the idea of emancipation may be central to the Enlightenment project, *Kingdom* shows an ambivalent attitude toward it. In other words, the Enlightenment translates to slavery, colonization and racism, but the text embraces its emancipatory ideal. Despite embracing revolutionary optimism, it is clear that *Kingdom* does not attempt to "normalize" history or present history as a series of orderly events where such order is non-existent.

The idea that colonial history is so overwhelming for rational contemplation has some affinity with the idea of the sublime. It is necessary to point out right away that one cannot equate the marvelous and the sublime and one cannot interchange the terms. However, the notion of the magnitude of experience which is incomprehensible to the senses establishes some subtle relations between the marvelous and the sublime. In other words, even though the terms "marvelous" and "sublime" have different connotations and originate from different critical contexts, the fact that they both try to represent experiences whose magnitude exceeds the power of the senses already signifies a similarity in their operation. Therefore, the sublime is crucial to our understanding of history in the sense that, as Immanuel Kant argues, "nothing that can be an object of the senses is to be called sublime" (106). This implies that history cannot be expressed

through empirical knowledge precisely because the magnitude of the events concerned exceeds the power of the senses. It is for this reason that we have to understand the sublime in terms of an event that is beyond the grasp of the senses. Kant says further, "[h]ence the magnitude of a natural object to which the imagination fruitlessly applies its entire ability to comprehend must lead the concept of nature to supersensible substrate, . . . a substrate that is large beyond any standard of sense and hence makes us judge as *sublime* . . . the mental attunement in which we find ourselves when we estimate the object" (112). In the above quote, one can deduce the connection between the sublime and the marvelous: the expression, "inability to comprehend" and "large beyond any standard of sense" reinforce the notion of magnitude of history and the impossibility of a rational understanding of history. That is, history is marvelous precisely because it shares a certain quality of the sublime; and it is sublime because its atrocities and cataclysm cannot be apprehended through empirical knowledge. White's idea of the sublime in *The Content of the Form*, though different from Kant's because it is directly related to historiography, emphasizes the incomprehensibility of history. White may not be talking about aesthetics like Kant but they both operate on the premise that certain experiences are beyond human perceptual capacity. Therefore, any attempt to present history as understandable and unproblematic is complicit with ideologies of dominant groups. White says:

> Historical facts are politically domesticated precisely insofar as they are effectively removed from displaying any aspect of the sublime. . . . By this I mean . . . the following: in so far as historical events and processes become understandable, as conservatives maintain, as radicals believe them to be, they can never serve as a

> basis for a visionary politics more concerned to endow social life with meaning than with beauty. In my view, the theorists of the sublime had correctly divined that whatever dignity and freedom of human beings could lay claim to could come only by way of what Freud called a "reaction-formation" to an appreciation of history's meaninglessness. (70-72)

In this sense, the sublime operates on at least two levels. The first is that it attributes incomprehensibility to history, and rightly so, because the catastrophes of history cannot be reconciled with rationality even though the perpetrators could justify their heinous acts. The second is that the sublime also encourages political resistance that aims at achieving freedom for those who have been victims of history. In order to revisit the contradiction of history, it is important to acknowledge its sublime nature without which a vision of a different future will be difficult to imagine. In fact, White asks whether the recovery of the sublime cannot engender a historiography "charged with avenging the people?" and he answers by stating, "This seems plausible to me" (81). Also, the sublime acts as a reactivation of memory in the sense that by refusing to paint a pleasant picture of history, the sublime brings to memory the atrocities of the past which, as Glissant argues in *Caribbean Discourse*, obliterates collective memory (62). In the situation in *Kingdom* where Carpentier's historiographical project intersects with the sublime, history emerges in opposition to the order, comprehensibility and transparency of knowledge. White says:

> It seems to me that the kind of politics that is based on a vision of a perfected society can compel devotion to it only by the virtue of the contrast it offers to a past that is understood . . . as a "spectacle" of "confusion," "uncertainty," and

> "moral anarchy." . . . But modern ideologies seem to me to differ crucially from eschatological religious myths in that they impute a meaning to history that renders its manifest confusion comprehensible to reason, understanding, or aesthetic sensibility. To the extent that they succeed in doing so, these ideologies deprive history of the kind of meaninglessness that alone can goad living human beings to make their lives different for themselves and their children, which is to say, to endow their lives with meaning for which they alone are fully responsible. (*Content* 72)

It is pertinent to indicate that the very incomprehensibility, meaninglessness and the illogicality of the colonial enterprise in *Kingdom*, which have been rendered through the marvelous mainly because the marvelous is not merely a "supplement," but the manifest character of Haitian history. As will be shown in *Kingdom*, history is presented as an experience in the sublime. In addition, by exploring the Haitian Revolution, the novel seems to say that emancipation must be seen as marvelous because of the contradiction of freedom. The novel shows how despotism follows the revolution, a statement that testifies to the marvelous and paradoxical character of revolution paradox. This bitter reality must always be remembered in order to envision a different historical trajectory. The main reason for proposing a different historical trajectory has to do with historicity itself; Carpentier's historiography in *Kingdom* exposes the myth of singularity of history, thereby initiating alternative histories an example of which is the successful slave revolt. Glissant says:

> One of the most disturbing consequences of colonization could well be this notion of a single History, and therefore of power, which has been imposed on others by

> the West. The struggles for power and the wild assertion of power in South America in the nineteenth century and in Africa today (after decolonization) are the result of this. We begin to realize that . . . the profound transformation of mentalities in this regard creates the possibility of changing the world order. (93)

In Saint Domingue, when the blacks subvert the French slavocracy, they also challenge the dominant notion of history so that both the bloodbath that the reader confronts and Makandal's narratives contribute to a new historiography: a notion of history from the bottom as against the idea of history from the top, whose object is power and domination. It should not be surprising that Carpentier remythologizes Makandal who already exists within popular imagination among blacks as the liberator; to deploy Makandal implies embracing the instability, incomprehensibility and surplus of history. It also implies the whole culture of the marvelous, which undermines the transparency, stability of reference and the dialectic, on which the Western historiography relies. Glissant rightly notes that "on the eve of the victorious confrontation of Bonaparte's armies in 1802, the Haitians celebrated the exploits of the Maroon Mackandal, as they were idealized in their imagination . . ." (71). The myth about Makandal works in this context to create a new historical direction that figures the peoples who are victims of Western colonization and historical discourse. The fact that Makandal's "history" becomes central to *Kingdom* indicates that subverting West's tyrannical idea of history is paramount to the novel. The tyrannical and colonizing impulse of Western form of History occupies a central place in Young's *White Mythologies* on the ground that Western historical discourse already has a colonial character that excludes other peoples while paradoxically subjugating them. Young says:

> the mode of knowledge as a politics of arrogation pivots at a theoretical level on the dialectic of the same and the other. Such knowledge is always centred in a self even though it is outward looking, searching for power and control of what is other to it. . . . History, with a capital H, similarly cannot tolerate otherness or leave it outside its economy of inclusion. The appropriation of the other as a form of knowledge within a totalizing system can thus be set alongside the history (if not the project) of European imperialism, and the constitution of the other as "other" alongside racism and sexism. The reaction against this structure has produced forms of politics that do not fit into traditional political categories. (35)

Both Glissant and Young agree on the totalizing power of Western history; they also agree on West's exclusion of the "other" from its own definition of history. For instance, Glissant concludes that in fashioning alternative historiographical models, one should be skeptical of the notion of history as "simply a sequence of events, to which . . . there will always be an *outcome*" (Glissant 70). Since "History . . . written with a capital *H* . . . is a totality that excludes other histories that do not fit into that of the West" (75), there must be a surplus of meaning, which implies that this singularity must be broken to allow multiple and varied signification. It is in accordance to breaking the totality of History with the capital H that Glissant suggests that "we should let the weight of lived experience 'slip in' " precisely because "[i]n it lie histories and the voice of peoples" (75). In reference to *Kingdom*, by centralizing the black slaves, Carpentier calls into question the dominance of Western historical approach; that is, history as an event, as lived experience and as discourse, must all struggle to shape the nature of postcolonial historiography without any one of the models attaining a position of privilege. The

multiplicity of historiographical modes also allows expression for the incomprehensible aspect of history. Glissant suggests that in response to colonization, "authors . . . give . . . excessive emphasis to the unspeakable" (78). In other words, in opposition to a teleological pattern of historical discourse, *Kingdom* represents an attempt to repudiate Western teleological, mappable and knowable pattern of history by exploring aspects of history that are irreconcilable to the logic of the senses.

A problem arises from destabilizing the purported singularity of History with the capital H: within the context of *Kingdom*, the blacks' alternative history operates as a counter-point to Western historical model, but this alternative history is inextricably bound to the history of the French Revolution, so that while foregrounding a counter-history, one ineluctably reproduces the dominant history. The tales and myth about Makandal cannot exist by themselves, they must be situated within French colonial history in Saint Domingue. The colonial history ceases to enjoy the privilege of singularity, but because the history of liberation in *Kingdom* prefigures the history of colonialism, one must necessarily reproduce the other.

The rest of this discussion will be divided into three parts: the first will give a background to Carpentier's fiction, particularly *Kingdom*, which had shaped the formulation and the praxis of the marvelous real. The second part will explore the nuances of memory, its alignment to history, its irreducible difference from history and how historiography participates in the reconstitution of memory. The third section will be devoted to the specific ways in which *Kingdom* reconstitutes memory of the Haitian Revolution through the immediate context of Haiti and through remythologizing African history.

Background to Carpentier's Fiction

In the prologue to his 1949 novel, *The Kingdom of this World*, Alejo Carpentier asks a rhetorical question: "After all, what is the entire history of America if not a chronicle of the marvelous real? ("On the Marvelous Real 88). Because of the geographical scope of America, this is an ambitious statement, the validity of which may be controversial. Despite the attempt to unify America in his discourse this assertion raises another issue: the notion of history as marvelous. In that same prologue, Carpentier argues that the magnitude of colonial expedition, the conquest of the Americas and resistance to colonial order which culminated in the first ever successful slave revolution in Saint Domingue between 1791 and 1804, all signify the marvelous character of European mercantilist domination of the new world. *Kingdom*, with a focus on the Haitian Revolution, explores the marvelous reality that Carpentier claims, is the distinctive character of America.

Carpentier's works are so varied that they cannot be forced into coherent literary or political ideologies. Other novels like *Music in Cuba* (1946), *Reason of State* (1974), *The Harp and the Shadow* (1979), *The Lost Steps* (1956) and others mark the shifting moments in Carpentier's literary concerns. But *Explosion in a Cathedral* (1962), though published thirteen years after *Kingdom*, pursues themes similar to the latter. However, two major differences between *Kingdom* and *Explosion* are their geographical scope and attitude to reality. In other words, while *Kingdom* is specifically set in Haiti, *Explosion*'s stories extend beyond Haiti to Guadeloupe and other Spanish, English and Dutch colonial possessions in the Caribbean. Also, *Explosion* does not exhibit the marvelous reality of *Kingdom* although there are a few moments that can be classified as marvelous in the

former. Despite their differences the two novels are preoccupied with the Haitian Revolution and how it altered the history of European colonialism in the Caribbean.

Kingdom was written more than a century after Haitian Revolution, but for most of the 19th century, the astonishment caused by the Haitian Revolution tragically led to Haiti's being ostracized by many countries in the Western hemisphere; historians also avoided the subject of Haitian Revolution partly because the idea of an independent black nation was considered unthinkable (Debois 2). One of the immediate consequences of that ostracism was economic hardship for Haitians which is why when Carpentier visited Haiti in the early 1940s he observed that the aftermath of the revolution was nothing but marvelous specifically because of the economic hardship and cultural plurality.

The independence of Haiti also meant a loss to the French Empire in the Caribbean and Cuba's assumption of the production and supply of sugar. The expansion of the sugar industry between 1898 and 1927 meant a greater demand for manpower, and in an attempt to cope with this demand black laborers had to be imported from Jamaica and Haiti (Echevarria 44-45). This sugar boom made Cuba and Dominican Republic the dominant sugar suppliers in the Caribbean, but ironically, the blacks were economically alienated. Partly as a result of their social and economic alienation and partly as a result of newly arrived slaves from Africa, blacks in Cuba maintained several cultural practices. These practices separated them from the rest of the population through a division largely along racial lines (43). Therefore, the religious practices that Carpentier witnessed in Haiti in 1943, along with Afro-Cubanism which meant embracing African cultures, the impoverishment of the independent nation, its ostracism and the use of Haitian laborers in Cuba marginalized by classism and racism, inevitably found their way into *Kingdom.*

Kingdom self-consciously evokes the memory of Haitian Revolution precisely because freedom for the slaves and independence of Saint Domingue were events which were considered unthinkable. The novel focuses specifically on the black slaves and how their role in the revolution caused one of the most surprising events in the history of colonialism. Since Carpentier conceives the idea of the marvelous as a uniquely Caribbean and Latin American experience, *Kingdom* to some extent fits into "modern" Latin American writing in which writers were more concerned with eliminating European influences in their works. As Irish notes in "Magical Realism: A Search for Caribbean and Latin American Roots," Latin American writers have experimented with French Romanticism and various modernist literary expressions like Dadaism and Surrealism in the early part of 20th century, but later revolted against these literary modes with the emergence of inadequately theorized "magical realism" (127). Apart from the literary experimentation among Latin American writers of mid-twentieth century, *Kingdom* also coincided with the period when empire had started to decline. A year before its publication, India attained its independence from Great Britain; following World War II, the ground was also prepared for decolonization in Indochina and Africa. In essence, *Kingdom* highlights the memory of Haitian Revolution within the contexts of post-revolution disillusionment in Haiti, the marginalization of black laborers in Cuba and the decolonization in Africa.

Kingdom attempts to fill some of the silences and absences in history particularly because European historiography up till the middle of the 20th century had ignored the role of the colonies in colonial history (Slemon 411-2). More importantly, the paradox of independence has perpetuated literatures of resistance in many post-colonial societies

because independence hardly meant the end of domination. Post-independent Haiti in Carpentier's novel is a good example in which the oppressive force is no longer France, but King Henri Christophe, who subjects Haitians to a life of servitude in order to protect Haiti from French invasion. *Kingdom* helps to evaluate changing patterns of domination in many post-colonial societies especially in contemporary contexts where the physical presence of a colonial power has been either marginal or negligible.

The memory of the Haitian Revolution in Carpentier's novel evokes the marvelous dimension of the revolution and also provides a paradigm for rethinking domination and resistance, especially in this global age when porous borders and shrinking global space can mask patterns of domination. Also, unlike in the nineteenth century when Haiti was abandoned by the West politically and economically, there have been more historical studies of the revolution, although these are quite marginal when compared to the French Revolution with which it was intertwined. But more important is the novel's potential for understanding the intricacies of domination especially in a world in which formal colonization has ended, thereby making it difficult to identify its traces.

The Kingdom of this World and Memory of Haitian Revolution

The fact that *Kingdom* was published in 1949, a time when empires had started to decline and had partially lost their legitimacy raises more questions than answers. Around the time of its publication the move towards decolonization had started in the colonies and more specifically, there had begun constitutional reforms in the then Gold Coast and Nigeria to gradually eliminate colonial influence in governance. With the ratification of *The Atlantic Charter* of August 14 1941, it was almost unequivocal that empires were on a trajectory that would result in their demise. However, it is not very clear that

Carpentier's novel was a direct response to declining empire or was a statement in support of decolonization of colonized territories; what is interesting about this novel is the strategic moment of its publication and the historical event that forms the basis of its narrative, the Haitian Revolution. On the one hand, *Kingdom* valorizes the slaves' victory over the French army and government in Saint Domingue, a timely celebration of the waning of imperial power. On the other hand, *Kingdom* self-consciously makes one remember the battles, politics and the very history that culminated in the Haitian Revolution. One important aspect of the Haitian Revolution, particularly in the context of *Kingdom*, is its incomprehensibility and astonishing character, which give this historical event its marvelous temperament. In order to appreciate the significance of the Haitian Revolution to Carpentier's novel it is crucial for us to examine some of the pronouncements of those involved. At this point, an excerpt from General Leclerc's letter to his in-law, Napoleon Bonaparte will suffice:

> The black generals are well aware at this moment that I am going to destroy their influence entirely in this country; but they dare not raise the standard of rebellion: (1) because they detest each other and know very well that I would destroy them, the one with the aid of the other; (2) because the blacks are not brave and this war has scared them; (3) because they are afraid to measure themselves against the man who destroyed their leaders. Under these circumstances I am marching steadily and rapidly towards my goal. The South and West are almost disarmed. In the north the disarming will begin in eight days.
>
> The police is being organised, and as soon as the disarmament is over and the police in position, I shall strike the last blows. If I succeed, as is probable, then San

Domingo will be readily restored to the Republic. (Quoted in C. L. R. James 336-37)

In the above excerpt, Leclerc presented his action plan to Bonaparte in such a methodical manner that one would not hesitate to commend the "pragmatism" with which he executed the war. Also, Leclerc was not only sure of his war plans, he was confident of his knowledge of black generals as well as the black population of Saint Domingue. The subtle reference to his "superiority," of which the blacks supposedly were afraid, made him certain of winning the war. This notion of his "understanding" of the blacks is most evident in his use of "because" in the excerpt, which signifies his over-confidence. Leclerc's empirical, positivist rhetoric is important: it shows that as the representative of the French government he has authority over the discourse of the war. Leclerc reduced the blacks to knowable and known subjects and in so doing he claimed victory over them even before the execution of the war. Leclerc portrayed himself as having mastered the blacks' own knowledge when he used the expressions "black generals are well aware," and "know very well."

Ironically, Leclerc could not have been more mistaken in his "knowledge" of the black people of Haiti, a point that emphasizes not knowledge, but his ignorance of the war and its astonishing outcome. More important is the magnitude of the war which must either have been downplayed by Leclerc, or of which he must have been oblivious. The fact that these same blacks decimated the French army shows he had underestimated not only the strength of black soldiers, but also the magnitude of the war he was fighting. Equally important, the landscape seems to assume extraordinary power and participated in the destruction of the French army that later succumbed to treacherous terrain and

disease. When he later says, "If I succeed . . . then San Domingo will be readily restored to the Republic," Leclerc was hinting at his secret mission in Saint Domingue, which is to restore slavery; but the blacks were also ready to procure and defend their freedom with their lives.

There is no doubt that "[h]istory is the main topic in Carpentier's fiction" and the history that Carpentier engages in *Kingdom* is the history of the Caribbean and more importantly, it is the history of "beginnings" and "foundations" (Echevarria 25). *Kingdom* recounts the history of a people who refused to be re-enslaved and it retells the history of an empire whose administrators questioned the slaves' humanity and right to their freedom. The same French Empire after World War II was not ready to relinquish Indochina or Algeria despite the fact that Vietnam had declared its own independence following the defeat of Japan.

Yet, what gives *Kingdom* its marvelous dimension is partly the supposed uniqueness of the Caribbean and Latin American cultural space and the animistic endowment of the Latin American landscape. Therefore, while critics have stressed anthropological materials in *Kingdom*, they have overlooked how history could be marvelous (Aldama 7). The marvelous nature of history is rooted partly in the notion that freedom for the slaves or independence of Haiti was never considered possible options within the scheme of French imperialism. Equally marvelous is the idea that imperialism perpetuates itself despite independence after the revolution, which implies that the pattern of history presented in *Kingdom* is a cyclic one. In other words, French imperialism is followed by King Henri Christophe's autocracy, followed by the reign of the mulattos in which slavery was being reconstituted.

It cannot be emphasized enough that Carpentier's novel tries to refashion memory through the evocation of the "foundational" moment of Haiti, especially because history itself is a form of amnesia. The idea that the historian has the power to select what "makes" history, the fact that historical accounts are narratives of events, and the notion that historiographical concerns in recent times have tended towards the processes through which historical knowledge is produced, all point to the processes of inclusion, exclusion and silences which are inseparable from the production of historical knowledge in the first place. *Kingdom* as a historiographical text, rejects teleological notions of history but more importantly, it explores history for the possibility of validating popular memories of the revolution.

Stephanie Black's documentary film, *Life and Debt*, testifies to the persistence of imperialism through a study of how another Caribbean country, Jamaica, has become a tourist country which attracts visitors from the more prosperous countries in the world. It also highlights the irony in the boom of tourist industry by exploring how Jamaica has become the site of exploitation through the proliferation of sweatshops, a condition in which the workers are no better than slaves. The historiographical attitude to history in *Kingdom* more or less resuscitates memory as a counter-historicist and counter hegemonic strategy to the unending cycle of imperialism. For example, Ti Noël, a slave to M. Lenormand de Mezy is a companion to Makandal, the slave who loses his arm while working a machine. The fundamental issue about Ti Noël's reference to Makandal is that the latter is a storyteller whose stories evoke the memory of Africa:

> He spoke of the great migrations of tribes, of age-long wars, of epic battles in which the animals had been allies of men. He knew the story of Adonhueso, of the

> King of Angola, of King Da, the incarnation of the Serpent, which is the eternal beginning, never ending, who took his pleasure mystically with a queen who was the Rainbow, patroness of the Waters and of all Bringing Forth. But, above all, it was with the tale of Kankan Muza that he achieved the gift of tongues, the fierce Muza, founder of the invincible empire of the Mandingues, whose horses went adorned with silver coins and embroidered housings, their neighs louder than the clang of iron, bearing the thunder of two drumheads that hung from their necks. (*Kingdom* 13)

Aside from Carpentier's idyllic or quasi-romantic recollection, Makandal instills in other slaves specific knowledge of Africa, a cultural, political and social space from which they had been displaced. Memory is therefore an irreducibly political phenomenon, serving specific interests, and in the case of *Kingdom*, it becomes a means of subverting the colonial discourse within the drudgery of the slave system.

The idyllic character of this memory of Africa may actually have served Makandal a specific purpose, one of which is guiding the slaves through a process of unlearning the ideology of French domination. Through this seemingly romantic "remembering" of Africa, Makandal constructs a counter-narrative to the myth about slavery. For instance, C. L. R. James says in his influential book about the Haitian Revolution, *The Black Jacobins*, that "[t]here are and will always be some who . . . try to prove that slavery was not so bad after all, that its evils and its cruelty were the exaggerations of propagandists and not the habitual lot of slaves" (13). But Makandal's loss of his arm and Ti Noël's recapture by Henri Christophe's taskmasters are evidence that contradict the idealization of French slavery. According to James, French officials like Malouet and Vaublanc spoke

of the "privileges of slavery" through which slaves could "enjoy 'the pleasures of love,' his master [having] no interest in preventing the indulgence of his tastes" (14). Such narratives are by now commonplace but are critical to Makandal's recollection of Africa, especially the choice of the story to be given to other slaves. It is not just the content of these stories, which is significant, it is the method through which Makandal tries to legitimate his own story of Africa. So, when the narrator tells us, "[t]he ground was covered with signs: . . . several black chickens swung head down along a greasy branch. Finally, where the signs ended, a particularly evil tree stood, its trunk bristling with black thorns, surrounded by offerings. Among its roots were thrust twisted, gnarled branches as crutches for Legba, the Lord of the Roads," it is apparent that Makandal's stories and Ti Noël's rendition of them are self-consciously situated within ritual (109). The reference to ritual reinforces the primacy of memory to Makandal's revolutionary mission because he confers on the narratives the sacredness of myth.

Makandal's anecdotes draw their inspiration from African ancient history, a point that alerts the reader of *Kingdom* to the reality that Makandal's stories emerge from oral archives and resuscitated as "memories" of Africa. In other words, "[h]istoriography . . . 'represents . . . a truly new kind of recollection' " (Ricoeur 400). Moreover, one must not overlook the fact that Makandal's storytelling follows more or less in the tradition of the griot, in which history is constructed from memory. But what one sees in *Kingdom* is that Makandal's reconstruction of history is made possible by adopting a style that closely resembles that of the griot in which history is reconstructed mainly from memory. The power of the griot's historical reconstruction derives from his or her narratological strategies which according to Hale in *Scribe, Griot, and Novelist: Narrative Interpreters*

of the Songhay Empire, can range from direct address to "repetition, metonymy, comparisons, metaphors, ideophones . . . and etiological tales" (62). The griot also employs "variations in narrative voice" as a way of "[diminishing] the distance among the audience, the narrator, and the story," in order to emphasize important aspects of the story. However, there is a problem in reading Makandal as a griot or to interpret his storytelling as a griot's narrative; this is because in *Kingdom*, one does not have direct access to his "performances" except through the third person narrator's account. In addition, these stories are short pieces that the narrator inserts into the narrative and this structuring prevents a sustained evaluation of Makandal as a griot. However, he reconstructs the reign of Mansa Moussa, focusing on his achievements while attempting to achieve immediacy by bridging the gap between the past and the present, and between the audience and the story just like the griot.

In order to appreciate the relation between history and memory and consequently the novel's historiographical approach, one has to foreground the layering of the narratives. That is, on one level is African ancient history rendered by Makandal and related to the reader as memory. On the second level is Ti Noël's perspective which constitutes a narrative within narrative; and because the first narrative has to do with African ancient kingdoms, the novel presents history within history. The third level is the story told by the third person and when these three levels are aligned, they form a unique form of metahistory. Although this metahistory may not reflect the self-referentiality that has come to characterize of Salman Rushdie's *Midnight's Children* and *Shame*, *Kingdom*'s layering of African historical narratives and myth, intertwined with the Haitian Revolution, indicates a self-conscious application of history and memory. The excerpt

from the above quote will help explain this unique deployment of history and memory: "[b]ut, above all, it was with the tale of Kankan Muza that he achieved the gift of tongues, the fierce Muza, founder of the invincible empire of the Mandingues, whose horses went adorned with silver coins and embroidered housings, their neighs louder than the clang of iron, bearing the thunder of two drumheads that hung from their necks" (13). Again, the narrator emphasizes Makandal's skill as a storyteller who evokes history through memory, more or less in the tradition of the griot in which, according to Hale, griots focus on military achievements of rulers more than their failures. The particular reference to the ancient Mali Empire, within the context of the Haitian Revolution and Makandal's revolutionary vision, is Makandal's attempt to reorient the slave's consciousness by putting his narrative force into reenacting Mansa Moussa's military valor. Probably because Mansa Moussa's exploits are replete with marvelous accounts—magical stallions, miraculous climatic changes, being able to disappear and reappear—Makandal's Mansa Moussa is a supernatural being with incredible strength and fecundity.

Makandal, apart from being a revolutionary, is a politician *par excellence* because he is aware of slavery's repressive regime and its impact on their psyche. Therefore, he constructs a grand narrative about Africa that to some extent essentializes Africa and its history. The fact that his oratorical genius manifests when he tells the tale of the nascent Mali Empire demonstrates, not only demonstrates his mastery of that history, but also his desire to impress the slaves with the same marvelous history. The "fierce Muza, founder of the invincible empire of the Mandingues" indicates that he attempts to convince the slaves that they possess a supernatural heritage that they could deploy in order to break the cycle of the new world colonial economy. Certainly, one can question why Makandal

should construct such a grandiose image of Africa for the slaves, but the effect of slavery on the slave's psyche might have called for a counter-grand narrative to challenge the grand narrative of slavery and colonialism. For instance, C. L. R. James says about the slave's treatment that "[n]o . . . white was a servant, no white man did any work he could get a Negro to do for him. . . . This was the type for whom race prejudice was more important than even the possession of slaves, of which they held a few. The distinction between a white man and a man of colour was for them fundamental. In defence of it they would bring down the whole of their world" (33-34). This is a reality that Carpentier encountered when he was in France and which partly explains his disenchantment with the French Communist Party which he believes was implicated in the French colonial agenda. It is therefore not surprising that he resorts to a character like Makandal who exhibits a deep understanding of the imperial program. The "magical" grandiose nature of the narrative resonates with ontological plurality usually associated with epic narratives which the griots are known to chant and perform. But the fact that griots perform epic narratives does not imply that all griots are comfortable chanting in the epic form because as Hale observes, there is a "difference between master and apprentice griots" (58). There is no doubt then, that in reconstructing the memory of Africa for the slaves, Makandal's interest is undisguised. The history of Kankan Muza—Afro-Cuban version of Mansa Moussa—serves to educate the slaves about their heritage, an idea that would likely sharpen their antagonism towards their thralldom. Of course many of the slaves might be Mandingues, there were slaves from other groups in West Africa; therefore, the kind of consciousness that Makandal is propagating is that of an "African heritage" geared towards serving the political needs of all the slaves and must not be

assumed to be an African consciousness already present in their memories. Perhaps the most powerful effect that Kankan Muza assumes in Makandal's narratives is the "fantastic" performance through which the hero is "brought to life" as a way of activating submerged memories. These slaves, who never shared Mansa Moussa's political, cultural and social heritage, can now partake of the sense of wonder that reminds one of the hero's supernatural exploits epic as performed by the griots.

Nowhere has Makandal ventured to alter the slaves' mentality more than in his comparison of European and African political systems. The image he presents is that of Manichean opposites; that is, in terms of governance, Africa and Europe are essentially opposites and his preference for the African political system is unequivocal. Again, Makandal is presented to us as a character well versed in international politics and culture and therefore able to demonstrate his authority on the history of Europe and Africa. Ti Noel recalls Makandal's tales as follows:

> In Africa the king was warrior, hunter, judge, and priest [...] with a mighty strain of heroes. In France, in Spain, the king sent his generals to fight in his stead; he was incompetent to decide legal problems, he allowed himself to be scolded by any trumpery friar. And when it came to a question of virility, the best he could do was engender some puling prince who could not bring down a deer without the help of stalkers, and who, with unconscious irony, bore the name as harmless and silly a fish as the dolphin. Whereas Back There there were princes as hard as anvils, and princes who were leopards, and princes who knew the language of the forest, and princes who ruled the four points of the compass, lords of the clouds, of the seed, of bronze, of fire. (14-15)

This epic image of Africa is deliberately invoked in opposition to the European political system and it is obvious that Makandal, and probably Carpentier, favors the African epic narrative style on the one hand and its political system on the other, while the European monarchy is mocked as weak and lacking in authority. There is no doubt that the slaves would have to grapple with their glorious past which Makandal has now caused them to "remember" while trapped within the French slave system. In order for his revolt to be successful, or at least to carry the slaves along, the slaves' past must be reexperienced as memory in a process through which history is gleaned from official and oral archives. Memory in this case is a "struggle against forgetting" and Makandal's mastery of African ancient history becomes instrumental in reconstructing the slaves' past (Ricoeur 413). It is not surprising that Ti Noël and other slaves idolize Makandal, whose power of storytelling gives them a narrative of their past, bringing back "heroes" with supernatural abilities. For example, Kankan Muza is an historical and mythical figure; more importantly, he is a ghost conjured by Makandal's words, becoming one of the most important characters of *Kingdom* interacting with the living. Meanwhile, the griot's power of performance sometimes gives official significance to the narrative; Johnson et al argue in support of the strength of the griot's historical narrative when they observe that for many African listeners "the version of the past recounted by a griot constitutes the accepted representation of events" (xx). In comparison to Hale's position, the scribes who document historical accounts, unlike the griots who rely on memory, are most always suspicious of the validity of the griot's version. The griot's version is subject to the dialectic of memory, but the scribes sometimes resort to the griots for information, which means that the official history depends on the griot's memory. But in the context

of *Kingdom*, whether or not Makandal is telling the truth does not matter much; what is important is that he adopts the narrative style of the griots in order to achieve immediate political gods.

The more important implication of memory at this point is its relation to historiography in *Kingdom* precisely because in *Kingdom*, Carpentier's view of history is both that of an event that has been concluded in the past, and an event whose ghost continues to haunt historians. It is on the basis of history as a haunting experience that Carpentier constructs a cyclic perception of history that can be discerned in successive regimes following the Haitian Revolution. Carpentier's historiographical choice therefore makes sense in its awareness of history as a process that must be reexperienced and relearned. An immediate problem arises from reexperiencing and relearning history, which is the need to fight against the forces of amnesia, the forces of forgetting, within the process of the production of historical knowledge. This need to remember explains why the question of memory is central to any historiographical analysis of *Kingdom*. But one must address the question of the complex relation between memory and history.

While the "art of memory" dates back to antiquity, the emergence of modern history goes only as far as the nineteenth century, when history tended towards social sciences. But despite the fact that history as a social science emerged more or less recently, it has not been able to completely break away from the notion of memory. Whatever the similarity or distinction between memory and history, it is fundamental to acknowledge that neither is politically innocent. That is, both are always constructed and are subject to manipulation. Le Goff argues in *History and Memory* that during the classical era, manuscripts of important political events were designed as extensions of human memory

so that their primary function is to help humans remember, that is, help fight against the threat of forgetting (73). He observes that while one cannot claim that all details recorded in manuscripts is subject to manipulation, the manuscripts were greatly influenced by desire for power, which meant that to control the manuscripts was to determine who would be remembered, or what might have been remembered. This practice, according to Le Goff, is in fact historical, that is, it can be traced from antiquity to Renaissance, whether in classical thought or Christian religious practices. Le Goff says of the Christianity in the Middle Ages:

> In addition to forgetfulness, there was also the possibility that the names of the unworthy might be struck out of memory-books. . . . Concerning an excommunicated person, the synod of Reisbach declared in 798 that "after his death let nothing be written in his memory," and the second synod of Elna in 1027 issued an earlier edict concerning other condemned people: "and let their names not be read at the sacred alter along with those of the faithful dead." (73)

The above highlights that the idea of memory goes beyond the capacity for an individual or a group to remember past events because right from the antiquity, memory has been associated with writing as a means to preserve the past. The quote also confirms that memory is not innocent and that it is heavily selective in its details. A corollary of this point is that those who are in power often use their control over the manuscripts and documents to determine who and what is remembered and who and what might be forgotten. All point to a crucial development: writing has become significant in the exercise of memory and whoever controlled the manuscripts controlled memory, at least

to some extent. Le Goff emphasizes the relation between memory and the written document in the Middle Ages when he says:

> in this period when the written word is developing alongside the oral and when there is, at least among clerks or *literati*, an equilibrium between oral memory and written memory, recourse to writing as a support for memory intensifies. Lords bring together in charter books the documents they need to produce to defend their rights. Concerning the land, these charter-books constitute the *feudal memory*. . . . The introduction to the charter granted in 1174 by Guy, Count of Nevers, to the inhabitants of Tonnerre, declares that "The use of letters was discovered and invented for the preservation of memory of things. What we wish to retain and learn by heart, we cause to be written down, so that that we cannot keep perpetually in our weak and fragile memories may be preserved in writing and by means of letters that last forever." (74-75)

The main idea that can be deduced from the operation of memory through the written word is the interest to preserve the past. However, we have also seen that the manuscripts had been deployed for inclusion and exclusion of those not considered worthy of being remembered. Memory, in this sense, is more complicated than an unproblematic retrieval of events either from the human faculty or from manuscripts. The fact that memory as the written document was invented primarily to "meet the needs of an emerging literacy" suggests that whatever constitutes memory in written form would be contested especially because of conflicting class interests (Hutton 12). However, this is not to claim that there is always class conflict wherever the elite may be involved. But because the written document is not merely a glossary of events or catalogue of day to day happenings,

conflict of interests would certainly emerge over the content of the manuscripts. This is why the "mastery of memory and forgetfulness" is one major preoccupation of "classes, groups, societies" (Le Goff 54). To buttress this position, Yates's major study of "the art of memory" in the classical period and its manifestation in the Renaissance has shown that the art was shaped by mnemonics. That is, the practice of mnemonics during the classical times depended on the techniques in oral culture through which knowledge could be organized and its use during the Renaissance reflected a sixteenth century culture whose historical relevance had been either ignored or silenced (251).

Having briefly noted the practice of memory and its constructivity in antiquity and classical period, one must grasp the relatedness of memory and history. To explore further the connection, or lack of it, between history and memory, Halbwachs's ruminations on the subject might yield some useful insights. Halbwachs's position regarding the memory-history debate centers on discontinuity between history and memory. He in fact says categorically, "[h]ow could history ever be memory . . . since there is a break in continuity between the society reading the history and the group in the past who acted in or witnessed the event?" (79) For Halbwachs, there is an irreconcilable opposition at work, "the ultimate opposition between memory and history" (79). Memory for Halbwachs concerns those events which occur time after time and which tend to establish a connection between the past and the present. In essence, the distinction between the present and the past is blurred so that the past is construed to be active in the present, and the present becomes nothing but the past that is relived. This interpretation of memory is problematic for Halbwachs primarily because his perception of history is that of events which happen only once and can never be repeated. Unlike history that

involves supposedly singular and unrepeatable events, memory is invented and focuses on people and events, whose significance is exaggerated. Also, memory is hardly dynamic in the sense that it holds on to its invention when living reality contradicts such premises (79). Whereas, history is a science whose record can be considered objective because it relies on evidence regarded as factual reports, memory lacks objectivity (Hutton 77). Again, Halbwachs associates memory with tradition and history with a break from tradition. Unfortunately, since Halbwachs sees memory mainly in terms of its alleged opposition to history, he fails to recognize the possible connections between them. As Hutton argues, Halbwachs "never looked at history as a kind of official memory, a representation of the past that happens to enjoy the sanction of scholarly authority" (77). Despite the fact that Halbwachs initially suggests the possible link between history and memory, he is unable to focus his investigation on the overlapping of the two concepts. Perhaps one of the most crucial contributions Halbwachs makes in the discourse of memory can be located in his criticism of Freud's theory on memory. Halbwachs argues that Freud's notion of individual memory and memory-images which are lodged deep in the unconscious is doubtful in the sense that those memory-images are "collective images of social discourse"; also, individual memories are "reconstructed by . . . virtue of their relationship to a framework of social memory" (78). It is this perception of memory, and his criticism of Freud that make Halbwachs contend that recollection "is always an act of reconstruction, and the way in which we recall an individual memory depends on the social context to which we appeal" (78-79). Individual and collective are constructed mostly from diverse, confused and contradictory sources and therefore are unreliable, in contrast to history whose method depends on factual objectivity. The

emergence of history as a social science establishes the dominion of history over memory, a view that Le Goff shares with Halbwachs:

> At the outset, I had to examine the relations between *history* and *memory*. Recent, naïve trends seem virtually to identify history with memory, and even to give preference in some sense to memory, on the ground that it is more authentic, "truer" than history, which is presumed to be artificial and, above all, manipulative of memory. It is true that history involves a rearrangement of the past which is subject to social, ideological and political structures in which historians live and work. It is also true that history has been and still is, in some places, subject to conscious manipulation on the part of the political regimes that oppose the truth. Nationalism and prejudices of all kinds have an impact on the way history is written, and the rapidly developing field of the history of history (a critical and highly evolved form of traditional historiography) is in part founded on the acknowledgement and study of these links between historical production and the context of its period as well as that of successive periods which modify its meaning. But the discipline of history, which has recognized these variations in historiography must nonetheless seek to be objective and to remain based on the belief in historical "truth." (xi)

For Le Goff and Halbwachs, there is danger in privileging memory, but this danger can be avoided through the meticulous efforts of the historian who would escape the pitfalls of memory. Le Goff argues:

> Memory is the raw material of history. Whether mental, oral, or written, it is the living source from which historians draw. Because its workings are usually

> unconscious, it is in reality more dangerously subject to manipulation by time and by societies given to reflection than the discipline of history itself. Moreover, the discipline of history nourishes memory in turn, and enters into the great dialectical process of memory and forgetting experienced by individuals and societies. The historian must be there to render an account of these memories and of what is forgotten, to transform them into something that can be conceived, make them knowable. To privilege memory excessively is to sink into the unconquerable flow of time. (xii)

Neither Le Goff nor Halbwachs could see the interesting link between memory and history and therefore could not appreciate the peculiar way in which historiography participates in the fulfillment of the demands of memory. It seems that their quest to establish and consolidate history as a science has motivated them to discount historiographical reconstruction of memory. Although Halbwachs and Le Goff could not pursue the link between memory and history, particularly the ways in which, according to Ricoeur, historiography is a unique form of recollection, their idea of memory as a problem of social power reinforces memory as a realm of conflicts and struggle for power and dominion. Any discussion of memory must reflect the tensions that beleaguer the process of recollection because remembering and recollection are never devoid of interests and desire for power.

The fact that the process of recollection is fraught with interests is significant; historiography plays an important part in determining what is remembered and it is for this reason that remembering is also a politically charged process that cannot be entirely separated from historiography. Memory and history are therefore interconnected and this

connection must be explored. The fact of their connection does not imply that memory can be substituted for history and vice versa; rather, historical knowledge interrogates the past, tries to understand it and also, it "remembers" the past. Unlike Le Goff and Halbwachs who argue that history is a triumph over memory and in whose works memory is associated mainly with oral cultures, our understanding of history must acknowledge the notion that history partakes of the process of remembering. In a sense, memory and history are not radically opposed to each other. If one examines Nora's statement that "Memory is constantly on our lips because it no longer exists," there is a sense in which the idea of memory is problematized (1: 1). That is, an event long concluded in the past is no longer available to our consciousness in space and time; its 'truth" is reconstructed and this fact is true for memory and historical knowledge. Although they may be opposed to each in several respects, they have something in common:

> Memory and history, far from being synonymous, are thus in many respects opposed. Memory is life, always embodied in living societies and as such in permanent evolution, subject to the dialectic of remembering and forgetting, unconscious of the distortions to which it is subject, vulnerable in various ways to appropriation and manipulation, and capable of lying dormant for long periods only to be suddenly reawakened. History, on the other hand, is the reconstruction, always problematic and incomplete, of what is no longer. Memory is always a phenomenon of the present; history is a representation of the past. Memory, being a phenomenon of emotion and magic, accommodates only those facts that suit it. It is vulnerable to transferences, screen memories, censorings, and projections of all

> kinds. History, being an intellectual, nonreligious activity, calls for analysis and critical discourse. Memory situates remembrance in a sacred context. History ferrets it out; it turns whatever it touches into prose. Memory wells up from groups that it welds together, . . . that there are as many memories as there are groups, that memory is by nature multiple yet specific; collective and plural yet individual. By contrast, history belongs to everyone and to no one and therefore has a universal vocation. Memory is rooted in the concrete: in space, gesture, image, and object. History dwells exclusively on temporal continuities, on changes in things and in the relation among things. Memory is an absolute, while history is always relative. (1: 3)

It is within this "dialectic of remembering and forgetting" that Carpentier's *Kingdom* must be situated. That Carpentier chooses the history of the Haitian Revolution implies he must have forgone other historical moments in the Caribbean history. But the centrality of this peculiar history indicates that Carpentier is conscious of the reality of remembering and forgetting, hence the choice of Haitian Revolution. His other novel, *Explosion in a Cathedral*, attempts to cover the whole history of the Caribbean from late 1700s to the early decades of the 1800s. In a way, the two novels deal with similar issues and while *Kingdom* is restricted to Saint Domingue and Cuba, *Explosion* covers some of British, Dutch and Spanish colonial territories. The centrality of the Haitian Revolution to *Kingdom* demonstrates Carpentier's desire to remind one of the event and to activate one's memory of the revolution and help resist the threat of amnesia. While Nora may be correct in his distinctions between memory and history, one cannot ignore the symbiotic relation between them, and it is this relation that distinguishes Nora from Halbwachs and

Le Goff, who see memory and history as radically opposed. But the important thing to note is that in the old Songhay Empire, as Thomas Hale has argued, the distinction between history and memory is not so clear-cut. The scribes were the ones who produced official records but it will be erroneous to assert that the scribes operated independent of the griots who relied mainly on their memory. Both the scribes and the griots were employed by royalty and aristocracy, and in fact, Hale suggests that "[w]hat links the two . . . is their service to the elite" (46). Even though the scribes would not openly admit it, Hale observes that more often than not, the scribes relied on the griots to produce an approximate version of historical events (54). Certainly, the griot's versions are subject to the vagaries of memory but no matter how unreliable or distorted they could be, the griots contributed to the production of history either by offering their services to the scribes or by performing their stories and histories. Also, because their versions sometimes validated the popular imagination, there is the tendency to conclude that the griot's versions challenge the official version; sometimes griots "do telescope history to reveal a view of the aristocracy that glosses over the major catastrophe in Songhay history" (54). This tendency would explain why Makandal favors the griot's version of Mansa Moussa's history, whose production blurred the borderline between history and memory. The question then concerns the place of memory in Carpentier's *The Kingdom of this World.*

"Historical Marvelous": *The Kingdom of this World*

History functions in two fundamental ways in *Kingdom*: first, history is akin to trauma which haunts its victims who are therefore unable to escape their past. Second, history in the novel operates like memory in that the past is evoked to fulfill a need in the present.

Pierre Nora has argued that memory is "always a phenomenon of the present" while history is the "reconstruction" of what is "no longer" (1: 3). The distinction between memory and history that Nora is trying to establish here does not imply that memory incorporates only "present" events while past events belong exclusively to history. The distinction must be understood in terms of uses of history through memory; that is, the past becomes immediate and is given the urgency of the present. In *Kingdom*, memory resurrects the past and gives it a sense of immediacy and more importantly, a supernatural quality in which the past "literally" lives in the present. The importance of this approach in *Kingdom* rests on the notion that the "past is still making itself felt in the present" and continues to impact the material conditions in the present. *Kingdom* is a quintessential instance of the perpetual living of the past in the present. The focus on the Haitian Revolution signifies a memorialization of history through which history is temporarily divested of its pastness and becomes a present phenomenon. Again, the method by which this feat is accomplished is the supernaturalization of the past through which Makandal's ghost helps liberate the slaves.

The Haitian Revolution and Makandal of *Kingdom* both simultaneously occupy historical and fictional spaces. That is, the historical event thematized in *Kingdom* serves specific fictional and ideological purposes, which demonstrate the untamed power of the past over the present. In the same way that the Haitian Revolution looms over the Haiti and Cuba of Carpentier's time, Makandal, now imbued with lycanthropic abilities, outlives his own historical time. In a sense, the similarity between historical Makandal and fictional Makandal is limited to the insurrection of 1857 in which, through the unification of plantation slaves in most of the Caribbean islands, livestock and

slaveowners were poisoned *en masse* (King 10). Makandal's role in the rest of the novel is clearly a fictional choice that aims at engendering the revolutionary vigor of this orator underscoring the sublime nature of his epoch. In fact, Makandal, though a strong leader of the maroons and a great organizer, was undermined by his "temerity" and was betrayed, captured and "burnt alive" (C. L. R. James 21). Beyond his rebellion, betrayal and execution, Makandal becomes the inspiration for the Haitian Revolution between 1791 and 1804, although by that time he had been dead for close to forty years. In *Kingdom*, his death translates to a renewed revolutionary energy that inspires the slaves to follow through with the rebellion. The narrator says of Makandal:

> the slaves of the Lenormand de Mézy plantation continued unshaken in their reference to Macandal. Ti Noël passed on the tales to his children, teaching them simple little songs he had made up in Macandal's honor while currying and brushing the horses. Besides, it was a good thing to keep green the memory of the One-Armed, for though far away on important duties, he would return to this land when he was least expected. (62-63)

Kingdom preserves Makandal's memory in two crucial ways: his follower, Ti Noël consciously educates his children about the "One-Armed" revolutionary. Ti Noël would later explain that Makandal, through lycanthropic powers, strengthens the blacks' belief in the possibility of freedom. Through preserving Makandal's memory, one leans of his abilities, rendered in supernatural discourse. In the above quote, the narrator collapses historical time so that Makandal's memory becomes fresh in the slaves' minds and he becomes directly relevant to the anti-slavery rebellion. This is a strategy that Slemon calls "foreshortening of history" ("Magical Realism," 411), which allows the writer to traverse

history from colonization to emancipation or independence within the same narrative. In *Kingdom* only twenty years passes between Makandal's execution and reorganization of the rebellion, whereas in actual historical time, it was *between* 1757 and 1791. Makandal's memory was not known to have directly influenced the revolution that started in 1791, but Ti Noël's suggestion that Makandal would return when least expected signals the writer's commitment to this folk hero and the determination to make him relevant to the overall success of the revolution. At several post-revolution meetings and voodoo rituals, the narrator constantly refers to Makandal's invisible presence or lycanthropic forms.

By centralizing Makandal in the revolutionary war, the narrative significantly alters historical fact precisely because Toussaint L'Overture, Dessalines and Henri Christophe were the generals who later led the revolution and they are conspicuously absent from this version of history in *Kingdom*, except L'Overture who is presented as an artist carving African masks. *Kingdom*, therefore, is a rewriting of history designed specifically to immortalize Makandal. It is not very clear why these active generals are denied their place in *Kingdom*, but one thing seems apparent, the novel is certainly not about rationalists who believed entirely in the European civilization that the French planters propagated in Saint Domingue. Another character who occupies the center stage with Makandal is Bouckman, who will be remembered for his role in the voodoo ritual that preceded the revolution. Voodoo is a practice in *Kingdom* that is germane to the operation and success of the revolution and it is partly through voodoo that Carpentier is able to demonstrate one of his irreducible marvelous characteristics of history. That is, Bouckman and Makandal, voodoo initiates, are two central characters who elevate the

revolution to spiritual dimension, which Carpentier calls "an amplification of the scale and categories of reality, perceived with particular intensity by virtue of an exaltation of the spirit that leads it to a kind of extreme state" ("On the Marvelous Real," 86). It is no wonder, therefore, that the generals did not believe in voodoo and, in fact, forbade its practice (King 10; James 309). Dessalines had on an occasion raided the maroons of Saint Domingue for practicing voodoo, but voodoo is ascribed a revolutionary purpose in *Kingdom* partly because it accentuates the supernatural dimension of the revolution.

By constructing the history of the revolution around Makandal, Bouckman and the army of slaves, *Kingdom* produces a representation of "history" rather than History. That is, the French colonization of Saint Domingue must be interpreted, not only as economic aggrandizement, but also as a landmark in French and modern History. However, the history that the slaves produce is a counterpoint to colonial History, which more often than not, obliterates the roles the slaves play in the encounter. For instance, Leclerc's impudence demonstrates colonial arrogance on the one hand and on the other, it shows that his commitment to actualize Napoleon's mission in Saint Domingue is intended to become a great historical achievement. In such a situation, Makandal, Ti Noel and Bouckman would not become historical figures in their own right, but passive victims of history; ironically, through their successful slave revolt, History (with the capital letter) becomes challenged. Glissant makes a similar observation in *Caribbean Discourse* by arguing that the history of the Caribbean is an encounter between History and histories which is why he says, "History [with the capital H] ends where the histories of those peoples once reputed to be without history come together. . . . History is a highly functional fantasy of the West, originating at precisely the time when it alone 'made' the

history of the World" (64). One should note that Makandal's insistence on the griot's version of ancient Malian history functions not only as a political strategy to conscientize the slaves into revolutionary action, but also as a counter-discourse to Western notion of History. As Glissant argues, the cataclysmic proportion of Caribbean colonial history precipitated not only the destruction of lives and property, but also the extirpation of collective consciousness. Therefore, Makandal's foregrounding of the monarchical grandeur of Mansa Moussa is an attempt to produce history (with the small "h") at a moment when the slaves have been displaced. History (with the capital letter) must be seen within *Kingdom* as a destructive force through which the West violated the New World. Glissant says:

> The French Caribbean is the site of a history characterized by ruptures and that began with a brutal dislocation, the slave trade. Our historical consciousness could not be deposited gradually and continuously like sediment . . . as happened with those peoples who have frequently produced a totalitarian philosophy of history, for instance European peoples, but came together in a context of shock, contraction, painful negation, and explosive forces. This dislocation of the continuum, and the inability of the collective consciousness to absorb it all, characterize what I call a nonhistory. (62)

The negative consequence of this process is what Glissant calls "the erasure of the collective memory" (62); it is for this reason that one must view Makandal's narrative as a gesture aimed at producing a counter-history and reconstituting the collective memory. One can conclude that Makandal's tales constitute a kind of "oral historiography," which is an attempt to reconstruct the past through memory using the narrative style most

associated with the epic, mostly performed by griots. Makandal's oral historiography challenges West's totalized form of history which Glissant maintains is a "History . . . written with a capital *H*" and must be seen as a "totality that excludes other histories that do not fit into that of the West" (75).

The key issue about Carpentier's historiography is that it produces a counter-culture precisely because, as voodoo initiates, Makandal and Bouckman amplify the narrative to a spiritual level at which the supernatural functions as a characteristic of history. That is, history itself becomes supernatural and in fact marvelous, especially if we consider Glissant's assertion that "History has its dimension of the unexplorable, at the edge of which we wander, our eyes wide open" (66). In no other place is the supernaturalization of history apparent than in Bouckman's speech on the night of initiation prior to the revolution. Having told the congress of blacks that "some very powerful gentleman had declared that the Negroes should be given their freedom, but . . . the rich landowners of the Cap . . . had refused to obey them," Bouckman declares war on the slaveowners in a language in which historical and the spiritual become intertwined (66). Bouckman says, "The white men's God orders the crime. Our gods demand vengeance from us. They will guide our arms and give us help. Destroy the image of the white man's God who thirsts for our tears; let us listen to the cry of freedom within ourselves" (*Kingdom* 67). The reference to God and gods seems to locate the impending conflict within the African pantheon in which the deities intervene in human warfare. The fact that he says, "let us listen to the cry of freedom within ourselves," evinces the intermingling of history and divinity, or more appropriately, the statement underlines the blacks' involvement in a process that spiritualizes history. Fredric Jameson in another context makes a similar

argument when he contends that the marvelous real in Carpentier is "not a realism to be transfigured by the 'supplement' of a magical perspective but a reality which is already in and of itself magical or fantastic. Whence the insistence of both Carpentier and García Márquez that in the social reality of Latin America, 'realism' is already necessarily 'magic realism' " ("Magic Realism" 311). In essence, Bouckman and Makandal's involvement in voodoo already places history in the realm of the supernatural by understanding the revolution in both human and spiritual terms. It is no coincidence that after Bouckman is killed, he is placed in the same historic place where Makandal's execution becomes a spiritual feat. The narrator says, "[t]he head of the Jamaican, Bouckman, green and open-mouthed, was already crawling with worms on the very spot where Makandal's flesh had become stinking ashes" (*Kingdom* 76). Interestingly, apart from Bouckman, there is no other dominant character other than the slaves themselves. This account of history resonates with what Glissant calls history from "below," especially when he cites the example of Caliban and Prospero from Shakespeare's *The Tempest* in order to substantiate the idea that the West produced its totalitarian form of history through literature. The slaves' revolt in *Kingdom* can be likened to history produced from below as against Western notion of history produced from above. Young, in his reaction to postmodernism in *White Mythologies*, rightly suggests, "the loss of 'History' [which] can no longer be a single story, even though Western history continues to conspire with its 'vast unfinished plot' of exploitation" (156). But despite the continuation of History's agenda of exploitation, it is clear that the singular and dominant History has been challenged by histories constructed from below.

Moreover, it is imperative to re-examine the roles that Makandal plays in the Haitian Revolution. In the version of the revolution in *Kingdom*, one crucial event that determines the course of the revolution is Makandal's execution. The narrator says:

> Macandal was now lashed to the post. The executioner had picked up an ember with the tongs. With a gesture rehearsed the evening before in front of a mirror, the Governor unsheathed his dress sword and gave the order for the sentence to be carried out. The fire began to rise toward the Mandingue, licking his legs. At that moment Macandal moved the stump of his arm, which they had been unable to tie up, in a threatening gesture which was none the less terrible for being partial, howling unknown spells and violently thrusting his torso forward. The bonds fell off and the body of the Negro rose in the air, flying overhead, until it plunged into the black waves of the sea of slaves. A single cry filled the square:
>
> "Macandal saved!" (*Kingdom* 51-52)

For the slaves who are aware of Makandal's reputation as a voodoo initiate with supernatural powers, this event confirms Makandal's powers and in fact, the skeptics among them would be convinced of his extraordinary abilities. In addition, the force with which he fights and breaks his bonds is extraordinary, and it undermines the French political legitimacy. The event that happens next makes Makandal's execution one of the most controversial episodes of the novel:

> Pandemonium followed. The guards fell with rifle butts on the howling blacks, who now seemed to overflow the streets, climbing toward the windows. And the noise and screaming and uproar were such that very few saw that Macandal, held by ten soldiers, had been thrust head first into the fire, and that a flame fed by his

> burning hair had drowned his last cry. When the slaves were restored to order, the fire was burning normally like any fire of good wood, and the breeze blowing from the sea was lifting the smoke toward the windows where more than one lady who had fainted had recovered consciousness. There was no longer anything more to see. That afternoon the slaves returned to their plantations laughing all the way. Macandal had kept his word, remaining in the Kingdom of This World. Once more the whites had been outwitted by the Mighty Powers of the Other Shore. And . . . M. Lenormand de Mezy in his nightcap commented with his devout wife on the Negroes' lack of feelings at the torture of one of their own – drawing there from a number of philosophical considerations on the inequality of the human races which he planned to develop in a speech larded with Latin quotations. (*Kingdom* 52-53)

These two passages taken together raise the problematic of epistemology. Bassi draws attention to how Makandal's execution inspires the slaves to develop revolutionary zeal (56-57). However, the key idea in these passages is the intertwining of two supposedly contradictory versions of Makandal's execution and how these contradictory accounts demonstrate that the execution has something in common with the sublime. The sublime as well, reinforces the notion of the marvelous. It does not however follow that the marvelous real can be equated with the sublime but the important thing is to observe the affinity between the operation of both the sublime and the marvelous. Kant argues concerning the sublime as follows: "[f]or what is sublime, in the proper meaning of the term, cannot be contained in any sensible form but contains only ideas of reason, which, though they cannot be exhibited adequately, are aroused and called to mind by this very

inadequacy . . ." (99). The crucial point in Kant's assessment of the sublime lies partly in the irreconcilable difference between rationality and empiricism. That is, the sublime cannot be grasped through reason and at the same time, the sublime overwhelms the senses.

In the passages above, the pseudo dramatic irony evinces the operation of the marvelous real but the scale of brutality before and after Makandal's execution is too much that it cannot be understood simply in empirical terms, which is why the idea of the sublime becomes relevant. The slaves see Makandal escape from the burning stake and because of the pandemonium, they are unable to witness Makandal's death. However, their ignorance of Makandal's death is not the locus of the sublime; the sublime and the marvelous real in that event inhere in their unflinching faith in Makandal's invincibility. In terms of the gruesome circumstance of the execution, it is the reader who will be disturbed by this horrific act of burning Makandal at stake; the senses are inadequate to explain this gruesome act. That is, the event is such that can only be described in infinite proportions. Kant explains that magnitude of destruction is essential to the understanding of the sublime when he argues that "it is rather in its chaos that nature most arouses our ideas of the sublime, or in its wildest and most ruleless disarray and devastation, provided it displays magnitude and might" (99-100). The key words to note here are "chaos," "wildest," "ruleless," "devastation" and "magnitude," and they suggest that the catastrophic event cannot be fully grasped by the senses. Rather, it is an event whose devastation must be described in superlative terms. Although Kant might be dealing with nature in this case, there is a remote affinity to the marvelous real in the sense that *Kingdom* is concerned with History, which was marked by unprecedented level of

devastation. It is for this reason that Carpentier in his prologue describes the history of the Caribbean as "a chronicle of the marvelous real" ("On the Marvelous Real" 88).

Zamora elaborates on this contradictory knowledge by arguing that "[i]n *The Kingdom of this World*, the clash between European and African worldviews invests objects (most especially Mackandal's body) with contradictory meanings that co-exist and operate equally within the text – a semantic duplicity largely foreign to literary realism" ("Swords and Silver Rings" 30). It is possible that the priority given to African myth and history in *Kingdom* might have influenced Zamora in centering her argument on the divide between African and European forms of knowledge; the episode also serves to underscore the magnitude of the events which follow Makandal's demise. The sublime and the marvelous real intersect on the ground of magnitude and surplus of ruin and devastation. Although it is pertinent to add that the killing of Makandal and the genocide committed on the slave population may share certain features of the sublime, this does not mean that colonialists do not rationalize their acts of brutality. But the crucial thing to note is that the sublime is experienced by other characters and readers who cannot make sense of the excessive destruction.

When M. Lenormand de Mezy advocates the imperial ideology concerning "inequality of the human races," the narrator sets up the arrogance with which colonial administration relates to the slaves of Saint Domingue (*Kingdom* 52-53). Because he is so racist, M. Lenormand de Mezy fails to see the reality of the dangers that would later accompany the revolution. When the revolution starts, the narrator confronts the reader with one of the prevalent stereotypes perpetrated by empire; that is, the blacks are represented as weak and incapable of conceiving of the notion of freedom. Trouillot

makes the same observation by describing La Barre's assertion that the revolution is a myth. Trouillot says:

> In 1790, just a few months before the beginning of the insurrection that shook Saint Domingue and brought about the revolutionary birth of independent Haiti, French colonialist La Barre reassured his metropolitan wife of the peaceful state of life in the tropics. He wrote: "There is no movement among our Negroes . . . They don't even think of it. They are very tranquil and obedient. A revolt among them is impossible . . . We have nothing to fear on the part of the Negroes . . . We sleep with our doors and windows wide open. Freedom for Negroes is a chimera." (*Silencing the Past* 72)

Yet after the revolution began, "the most important slave insurrection in recorded history had reduced to insignificance such abstract arguments about Negro obedience" (72). In this speech, La Barre tried to ignore the reality of the slave revolution as a way of forcing "reality within the scope of [...] beliefs," which is why Trouillot argues that his aim is to "repress the unthinkable and to bring it back within the realm of accepted discourse" (72). However, when it becomes clear that the insurrection cannot be ignored, although still believing that the slaves are incapable of achieving freedom, the colonialists decide to wipe out the slave population. The narrator tells us, "[t]he colony faced ruin. . . . M. Blancheland was in favor of complete, absolute extermination of the slaves, as well as the free Negroes and mulattoes. Anyone with African blood in his veins . . . should be put to death" (*Kingdom* 78). Their strategy, according to James, is to "[k]ill them off and get new ones who know nothing about liberty and equality" (360). This is one of the moments in the novel that testifies to the notion of the marvelous as constituted by

brutalities of colonial history, especially at a time when the French colonialists believed that colonizing the blacks was the justified by their "superior" civilization, supposedly founded on reason.

The manner of colonial rule and the ruthlessness of the regime precipitate the marvelous role ascribed to nature; that is, the "landscape is not a passive creature," which is why the stormy night after the revolution began is presented to as divine intervention on the side of the black fighters (253). Some animals are seen as "allies of men" and they are active agents of revolutionary energy rather than inert objects. In the battle against the French slavocracy, Ti-Nöel identifies several animals he believes are participants in the conflict and in support of freedom. For example, when the mulattoes attempt to capture him, Ti Noël, who by that time has acquired lycanthropic powers, turns himself to a stallion and escapes. The reader is able to experience the encounter between the French army and the slaves as marvelous because of the supernatural mode through which it is presented. However, the marvelous aspect of the novel is produced partly by, and lycanthropic power.

One of the memorable sublime moments in *Kingdom* is Ti Noël's description of Le Cap on his return from Cuba. Ti-Nöel returns to the Cap only to encounter a grim reality that supports the notion of history as marvelous. Henri Christophe, a former cook, and one of the generals of the revolutionary force has become the king of independent Haiti. Henri Christophe is so ruthless that it is hard to determine whether his regime is not as repressive as the ousted colonial regime:

> "Prisoners," thought Ti Noel to himself, as he observed that the custodians were Negroes, but that the workers were too, which ran counter to certain notions he had

picked up in Santiago de Cuba. . . . But the old man stood still in his tracks, awed by the most unexpected, most overwhelming sight of his long existence. (113)

The idea of the cyclic nature of history presents itself when Ti-Nöel discovers that the prisoners or slaves as well as the menacing soldiers are black people. The image he encounters is just unthinkable and his shock is unmistakable. The words such as "awed," "unexpected," and "overwhelming" fit perfectly into the register of the sublime and marvelous real. The perception of the sublime is enhanced primarily because it is not only the reader who encounters this shock; that a character expresses his astonishment at the sight of black slaves policed by black overseers reinforces the marvelous temperament of the scene. To emphasize his dismay, the narrator says, "But the old man stood still in his tracks, *awed by the most unexpected, most overwhelming sight of his long existence*" (113; emphasis added). For Ti-Nöel, it is the most disagreeable sight he has seen and this is a classic example of the marvelous real. This encounter in the unbelievable universe will emphasize Ti-Nöel's anxiety and shock and should be quoted at length:

> But what surprised Ti Noël was the discovery that this marvelous world, the like of which the French governors of the Cap had never known, was a world of Negroes. Because those handsome, firm-buttocked ladies circling in a dance around a fountain of Tritons were Negresses; those two white-hosed ministers descending the main stairway with leather dispatch cases under their arms were Negroes; Negro was the chef, with an ermine tail on his cap, who was receiving a deer borne on the shoulders of several villagers led by the master huntsman; those hussars curvetting about the riding ring were Negroes; that high steward, with a silver

> chain around his neck, watching, in the company of the royal falconer, the rehearsals of Negro actors in an outdoor theater, was a Negro; those footmen in white wigs, whose golden buttons were being inspected by a butler in green livery, were Negroes; and, finally, Negro, good and Negro, was that Immaculate Conception standing above the high altar of the chapel, smiling sweetly upon the Negro musicians who were practicing a *Salve.* Ti Noel realized that he was at Sans Souci, the favorite residence of King Henri Christophe, former cook of the rue des Espagnols, master of the Auberge de la Couronne, who now struck off money bearing his initials above the proud motto *God, my cause and my sword.* (114-15)

This passage captures the new imperial regime which replaces the French colonialists in almost all aspects of oppression. It is certain that they have maintained the hierarchies formed and guarded by their colonial regime and probably have intensified such hierarchies. As Ti-Noel observes, the soldiers who are enforcing the great servitude not only beat the slaves, but also kill them indiscriminately, and this is why Ti Noel states that even slavemasters are usually reluctant to kill their slaves since they are valued in monetary terms. *Kingdom* is a testament to history as a narrative that resists comprehension especially because Henri Christophe's regime undermines the blacks' hard-earned freedom.

Although Haiti's imperial regimes follow a chronological order, the narrative displays the meaninglessness and enigma of history as a consistent theme. Christophe's reign follows French colonialism, and is followed by that of the mulattoes. Thereby the narrative highlights the perplexing characteristics of history. By the end of the novel, we are reminded again of Makandal's influence, which persists in Ti Noël's lycanthropic

powers. In order to escape the mulattoes, Ti Noël disguises himself as a goose, but on arriving at a clan the geese reject him. On realizing that he is an intruder, he changes to human form and resigns himself to "The Kingdom of this World." That is, Ti Noël accepts the incomprehensibility of history and resolves to fight for future generation even though he is aware that he "will suffer and hope and toil for others who will not be happy either" (*Kingdom* 185). The last passages of the novel from which the above excerpt is quoted evince the reality of a world that is shaped by perpetually repressive regimes whose existence cannot be understood except as the marvelous. The role of the Latin American writer, Carpentier argues, is that of the historian, intent upon capturing the marvelous reality of history ("The Baroque" 107-08).

Wakefield suggests that Carpentier's baroque fiction is "an escape from history" because of the significance ascribed to nature (45). However, *Kingdom* is an exploration in history and simply because history in *Kingdom* is not presented within a "symbolic order" does not imply that the novel is an escape from history. This claim is true not only of *Kingdom*, but also true of *The Lost Steps* and *Explosion*. In David Mickics's reading of Carpentier's *The Lost Steps*, he contends that the "wilderness that the narrator discovers fails to offer the hoped-for canvas or blank page ready for Adamic telling. This nature recalls a history . . ." (384). *Explosion* examines similar issue of history, just as does *Kingdom*. The main difference between them is that *Kingdom* is set primarily in Haiti while *Explosion* captures most of the Caribbean islands, and the revolutionary war in Haiti takes a marginal position in the latter novel. However, the contradiction of freedom and slavery, and what Hayden White calls "moral anarchy," are common thematic concerns in both novels. The war against the goddess of Reason in *Kingdom* manifests in

Explosion in a Cathedral in the contradiction of the freedom expedition which is supposed to save Guadeloupe from the British but eventually reestablishes slavery. In both novels we encounter characters who are "overwhelmed by historical forces they neither created not control" (Zamora, "Magical Ruins" 63).

Chapter 2: The Road Leading Straight to Horror

In his article, "Postmodernism as Realism: Magic History in Recent West African Fiction," Wright studies some West African literary works and observes that some of the recent West African writers such as Kojo Laing, Syl Cheney-Coker and Ben Okri thematize horror in their fiction. A particular example is Biyi Bandele-Thomas's *The Man who Came in from the Back of Beyond* (1991). Wright has this to say about Bandele-Thomas's[1] novel:

> Corporate responsibility at state level is as missing as family solidarity at the domestic one. Corpses rot in gutters and uncollected refuse piles the streets. Laws that are no respectors of starving citizens are implemented by police who do not care what crimes the indigent resort to in order to pay their taxes. In one scene of surreal horror the skeletons of the anonymous poor . . . are dragged from makeshift congested graves by rabid dogs and trundled to the doors of nearby houses. In this world of brutish nightmare world anything is possible, nothing surprises. (189-90)

The same can be said of Ben Okri's *Songs of Enchantment* where the citizens in the ghetto are victims of state-organized violence and repression. But narratives of horror are not limited to West African writers; rather, horror is a condition of postcolonial literature which is why a critic like Gina Wisker can include Achebe's *Things Fall Apart* among postcolonial texts of horror precisely because this text details the tragic consequences of colonization. Whether *Things Fall Apart* fits the category of horror or not is not the central issue here; the main issue is how postcolonial texts capture colonial and post-independence social milieus as an experience steeped in excessive violence. It is in the

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[1] Biyi Bandele-Thomas is now known simply as Biyi Bandele.

sense of excessive and overwhelming condition of violence that horror is used primarily in the context of our argument about horror.

This attribute of horror inheres in state repression (although it is not limited to it) especially in official activity like public execution, through which the state makes horror a spectacle. Foucault examines this phenomenon in *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison*; in the first few pages of this book, Foucault relates and foregrounds a public execution which becomes an experience in horror precisely because pain, agony, the grotesque and excorporeality, all abound in a manner reminiscent of *Seven Solitudes of Lorsa Lopez* (1985). Citing archival records Foucault says, "On a March 1757 Damiens the regicide was condemned. . . . 'Finally, he was quartered,' . . . 'This last operation was very long, because the horses used were not accustomed to drawing; consequently, instead of four, six were needed; and when that did not suffice, they were forced, in order to cut off the wretch's thighs, to sever the sinews and hack at the joints ...' (3). This graphic display of violence which the state legitimated with official power takes the regicide through this slow and agonizing pain of death. But it also took the spectators through the same trauma because even though the spectators were not the condemned, they certainly shared the trauma vicariously. Foucault states further that "the executioner . . . took the steel pincers . . . and pulled first at the calf of the right leg, then at the thigh, and from there at the two fleshy parts of the right arm; then at the breasts" (4). The slow process of execution certainly fills one's consciousness with excess of agony and disgust because this execution was designed specifically to take the condemned through a process in which pain is limitless. When Foucault notes that "the same executioner dipped an iron spoon in the pot containing boiling potion, which he poured liberally over

each wound" (4), one cannot fail to notice the similarity to Sony Labou Tansi's *La vie et demie* where the protagonist has been shot and when commanded to drink some potion, the liquid comes out through all the holes in his body. The two incidents are not exactly the same but they are similar on the ground that they are state-initiated torture, making horror a spectacle. When one invokes horror, one of its instances involves the spectacle of pain as in the execution of Damiens the regicide, an experience that is beyond the limits of reason. In order to show that Damiens' execution produces surplus of agony it is pertinent to examine the part of the execution, of which Foucault says, "[w]hen the four limbs had been pulled away, the confessors came to speak with him; but his executioner told them that he was dead, though the truth was that I saw the man move, his lower jaw from side to side as if he were talking" (5). The executioner, one can see, is not exempted from the trauma that he inflicted on Damiens; he had to tell the confessor that the condemned man was already dead even though he knew that was not the truth. When recontextualized within Sony Labou Tansi's fiction, the "dead man" talking has a greater significance: it suggests that what the executioner experienced must be explained, not only by the process of slow death, but also by the irrationality of the execution, in which a perfectly mechanical incident developed an aspect of the extraordinary and of the supernatural. This aspect of the execution is not incidental precisely because the executioner's logical, rational and methodical habit and practice gave way to the irrationality, not only of the sentence, but also of surplus of pain. It is for this reason that in reading horror in postcolonial fiction, and specifically in Sony Labou Tansi's fiction, one should pay attention to the ways in which excorporeality can produce supernatural narrative. That is, horror produces the marvelous because, as seen from this example, the

excessiveness of violence sometimes produces a narrative which cannot be uttered within the symbolic order. Of course, Foucault is more concerned in *Discipline and Punish* with "the disappearance of torture as a public spectacle" (7), Damiens's execution that he foregrounds will help in demonstrating that horror inhabits the realm where surplus of meaning is produced and where language is inadequate to express its referent which is why the discourse of horror sometimes borders on the marvelous, the magical or the fantastic.

One writer whose works self-consciously grapple with the horrific condition of independent nation-states is Sony Labou Tansi. Among others Sony Labou Tansi has published *The Antipeople* (1983), *La vie et demie* (1979), *L'état honteaux* (1981), *Les yeux du volcan* (1988), and *Le commencement des douleurs* (1995). But the text on which this argument focalizes is *Seven Solitudes of Lorsa Lopez* (1985). Nearly all of Sony Labou Tansi's texts mentioned are explorations in violence and the grotesque, which is why Perraudin refers to them as literature of disenchantment. Perraudin says of these texts thus: "[a] last resort, a last gesture, the confrontation with pain and its graphic representation constitutes the ultimate act of a visceral resistance and denunciation, . . . it also echoes an entire generation of African francophone writers for whom the representation of violence, or rather violence in representation, becomes a political act of intervention *par excellence*" (81). One has to agree with Perraudin that the representation of violence, specifically in Sony Labou Tansi's texts (*Seven Solitudes* most especially), is a political act of intervention. Also, violence is not merely the monopoly of state apparatus. It can be deployed by dominated groups to mediate the repressive regime established by the state. It may be true that violence constitutes a means of intervention

on the political terrain, but one should be conscious of its attendant problems raised in *Seven Solitudes*. Certainly, *Seven Solitudes* is not intent on replacing a regime of horror with another; therefore, the violence it depicts must be understood as a condition of the African nation-states rather than an unproblematic political weapon. In *Seven Solitudes*, "Sony Labou Tansi describes a reality that is coexistent with the fictional experience, inseparable from the novel," which is why the novel should be seen not only as depicting unmediated horror, but also as a way of imagining a social space relieved of its regime of violence (145).

Published in 1985 and set in a post-independence mythical African town, the horror in *Seven Solitudes* brings together both colonial and post-independence horror. The rest of this discussion will be organized as follows: the next section will examine the category of horror and this part will acknowledge the theoretical and critical applicability of horror to postcolonial fiction, and will also recognize the problems associated with deploying horror in interpreting postcolonial fiction. The second segment will examine the intersection of space and horror and argue that space functions in *Seven Solitudes* as a symptom of a stifling social condition suitable for the discourse of horror. In addition to space as an indicator of horror, this section will argue that both domestic and public realms are doomed by violence. The last part of the chapter will be devoted to justifying the claim that the disappointment in postcolonial nation-states has significantly eroded the faith in the efficacy of these nation-states. But the key issue at stake is that postcolonial fiction does not only reflect this disappointment, it also represents how horror influences some postcolonial texts in embracing non-realist modes, particularly, the marvelous. This last portion will evince the manifestations of horror in the

indiscriminate brutality of political repression and death; this part will argue as well that horror is evident in the violence committed on the body of both men and women.

Navigating Horror

In order to read postcolonial fiction as narrative of horror, one has to engage the problem that is immediately apparent with the category of horror and its applicability to Sony Labou Tansi's *Seven Solitudes*. Apart from *Seven Solitudes*, *The Antipeople* (1988) is another novel that, to some extent, fits the discourse of horror because of its immersion in the trauma of war which partly accounts for the marvelous reality of the novel. Although the intersection of horror and the marvelous might be tangential to *Antipeople*, it explains the very structure of *Seven Solitudes*, hence the focus on *Seven Solitudes* as a narrative of horror. To determine what constitutes horror in *Seven Solitudes* is a difficult task because unlike novels like *Men of Maize* (1949), *Where the Air is Clear* (1958), *Explosion in a Cathedral* (1962), *Autumn of the Patriarch* (1975) and *The House of the Spirits* (1980), which are to some extent historical novels, *Seven Solitudes* cannot be deemed historical. The immediate explanation is that *Seven Solitudes* attempts to capture the violence of the social landscape which is incongruent with conventional notions of the historical novel: that is, utilizing aesthetic and temporal distance from the event or events on which the text is based (Wole Ogundele, "Devices of Evasion" 128).

Although *Seven Solitudes* might not conform to normative definitions of the historical novel, its focus on contemporary and post-independence violence cannot be ignored as horror narratives. The fact that contemporary social reality intertwines with colonial history makes this novel historical in its own right, a fact which reinforces its preoccupation with horror because it combines both colonial history and postcolonial

social moments. The notion of horror in *Seven Solitudes* is shaped by the "harshness" of social reality, tyranny, repression and brutal effects of power. The following quote from Mbembe's *On the Postcolony* will help situate the use of horror in *Seven Solitudes*: "[t]hus, it was through the slave trade and colonialism that Africans came face to face with the *opaque and murky domain of power,* a domain inhabited by obscure drives and that everywhere and always makes animality and bestiality its essential components, plunging human beings into a never-ending *process of brutalization*" (14). Foucault's *Discipline and Punish*, in the afore-mentioned execution, offers a view into state repression and its manifestation in public display of horror, which sometimes can parallel colonial violence and postcolonial repression. Foucault notes:

> After two or three attempts, the executioner Samson and he who had used the pincers each drew a knife from his pocket and cut the body at the thighs instead of severing the legs at the joints. The four horses gave a tug and carried off the two thighs after them, . . . the same was done to the arms, the shoulders, the arm-pits and the four limbs. (5)

Seven Solitudes epitomizes these quotes, especially with the meaningless and gory spectacle of death that characterize colonial and postindependence historical moments. The novel fits what Mickics in another context calls, "grim, implacable vision of history" (384). It is this grim and implacable vision of history that constitutes horror in *Seven Solitudes* and this vision is significant because the narrative draws the reader's attention to itself by locating the discourse in the marvelous realm. That is, it is the horror in Labou Tansi's novel that produces the marvelous real. In essence, the marvelous in *Seven Solitudes* does not function as an ornamental device; rather, the marvelous is itself the

horror of history and it is for this reason that we must refute Simpkin's attempt to homogenize all "magical realist" narratives as to create a supplement to reality on the one hand, and simply as an aesthetic device on the other. The horror, the marvelous in *Seven Solitudes*, is the very history that the text tries to confront, although one must be careful to avoid simplifying both the horror of history and the aesthetic component of the novel into the familiar form and content divide. The marvelous temper of *Seven Solitudes* cannot be divorced from its historical context and social landscape.

Meanwhile, another problem emerges here, which is the historical nature of horror narratives themselves. Horror narratives have emerged centuries before the publication of *Seven Solitudes*. Horror can be traced to Horace Walpole's *The Castle of Otranto* (1764). Other examples include Emily Brontë's *Wuthering Heights* (1847), Ann Radcliff's *The Mysteries of Udolpho* (1794) and Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein, or The Modern Prometheus* (1818). *Frankenstein* is a unique example of horror: while the other texts rely on the supernatural to produce horror, *Frankenstein* seems more or less like science fiction which Brown argues is Shelley's attempt to "[replace] empty theatrics of popular supernatural fiction" (*The Gothic Text* 6). But during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries horror texts were characterized by the presence of the supernatural whether in texts simply called horror narratives or the ones called Gothic horror. Wisker argues that horror is a branch of the Gothic and they both use the same formulae; however, horror, she contends, is more likely than Gothic to "dwell on the connections between violence and sexuality" (8).

The similarities and differences between horror fiction and Gothic fiction should not become a primary concern here as much as the relation of horror to postcolonial fiction in

general and *Seven Solitudes* in particular. One has to admit that there must be some similarities between the Gothic horror and the marvelous and the most important one is that both are a response to harsh social and historical conditions. Jones makes a similar argument in *Horror: A Thematic History in Fiction and Film* when he says:

> by the time it was published in 1818, *Northanger Abbey*, set around 1798, was already an *historical* novel, beneath whose surface was detectable the upheavals of that very turbulent decade, the 1790s, when England was at war with France . . . living under constant fear of French invasion, with rioting on the streets of London and other cities, and a full-blown political uprising in Ireland. [T]he Romantic Gothic novel of the 1790s is a direct product of this instability. (2)

The marvelous as well is predicated on the horror, violence and repressive regimes that had characterized colonialism and that continue after the official termination of colonialism. *Seven Solitudes* is a quintessential case of the manifestation of structures of colonial tyranny and violence in post-colonial nation-states. For instance, Wilson Harris's *Palace of the Peacock* (1960), populated by ghosts of past explorers and slave drivers, retraces the agony and violence of colonization on the Caribbean islands while Juan Carlos Onetti's *Let the Wind Speak* (1996) and Sony Labou Tansi's *Antipeople* and *Seven Solitudes* show how colonial regimes of violence have survived in post-colonial times.

Apart from being influenced by turbulent social and historical situations, horror and the marvelous sometimes exhibit a gloomy vision of history. However, this gloomy view of history is a self-conscious effort on the writers' part to disturb and disrupt the purported order and structure of history. One of the main reasons why the state (whether monarchy as in the execution of Damiens the regicide, or as in postcolonial nation-states)

organizes spectacle of horror is to coerce the people a regimen, a discipline. Foucault says, at the moment that the French state removes "horror" from the public space, it replaces it with another kind of horror, developing a subjugated body and a disciplined body. The body "was in the grip of very strict powers, which imposed on it constraints, prohibitions or obligations" (136), so that discipline "produces subjugated and practised bodies, 'docile' bodies" (138). One may not encounter "discipline" in the same way that Foucault has described it; the public show of violence on the body is an attempt to force Damiens into some discipline, which is why "Monsieur Le Breton, the clerk of the court, went up to the patient [Damiens] several times and asked him if he had anything to say [that is, confess]" (4). The violence that is done to the body becomes concomitant with the condemned man's conformity to certain state regulations and both must be seen as operating on the mechanics of horror. It does not, however, imply that the violence and "confession" are the same things. The important thing is that they complement each other in this display of horror. *Seven Solitudes* may not have foregrounded such exhibition of violence, that is, the slow and painful death to which Damiens was condemned, but the detailed description of some murders parallels the horror of the eighteenth century French monarchy. This grim representation of history, common to horror fiction, could be nihilistic and the writers are equally maligned for projecting a gruesome vision of history. Williams makes this same argument, claiming that nineteenth century French horror writers (that is, Charles Baudelaire, Jules de Goncourt, Gustave Flaubert, Guy de Maupassant and Alphonse Daudet) were too quick to denounce the Industrial Revolution and particularly, the French Revolution. His study is based on French writers, but his criticism is still pertinent to other literary contexts. In fact, his criticism of these French

writers resonates with allegation of pessimism leveled against Sony Labou Tansi and other francophone writers of the 1980s (Moudileno 21-22). Williams has this to say:

> Historians have advanced a variety of tenable explanations to account for the peculiar philosophical gloom of the nineteenth century. We know of the disenchantment after the apparent failure of the French Revolution; we can sense the moral dismay over the decline of legitimacy and the birth of utilitarianism as principles of authority; and we still can be moved by the descriptions of sordid life in the new factory towns. On the other hand, does any historian give us a world, before 1789, so celestial and sanitary that we would unhesitantly opt for it ahead of the nineteenth century? For that matter, did the French Revolution really "fail" to a degree that would justify the pessimism that followed? Did not the Industrial Revolution offer hope for the future, if perhaps too soon, and not merely horror? (x)

Williams goes on to argue that French horror writers depict the horror that followed the French Revolution because they were neurotic, and that "disease had blackened their outlook on life" (xi). That Williams assumes that French horror fiction can be explained mainly by the writers' medical conditions presupposes a logical connection between disease and horror fiction. The problem with Williams's line of argument is that in his bid to justify the Industrial Revolution and the French Revolution, the irrational violence that followed the French Revolution becomes silenced by the sanctimonious rhetoric of progress. He indirectly justifies the "reign of terror" as a sacrifice for progress. Whether the writers experienced severe medical issues or not, the horror that they represent in their works is historical and, therefore, was fictionalized history. Williams also neglects

to mention that thousands of blacks were condemned to servitude in Saint Domingue and would have probably argued that the horror of French slavocracy did not merit its depiction as horror in Alejo Carpentier's *Kingdom* (1949) or Patrick Chamoiseau's *Texaco* (1995). The chief issue here is that Williams, consciously or unconsciously, participates in silencing the French imperial history of horror.

This trend of interpretation is not limited to French horror writers but applies to postcolonial fiction as well. Diawara describes as "Afro-pessimists[,] writers such as [Williams Sassine], Henri Lopes, Amadou Kourouma, and Sony Labou Tansi" (46). That these writers' outlook appears gloomy may not be denied, but the fact remains that they represent history as an experience of horror. One way of approaching this issue is to observe and acknowledge that both Kourouma and Labou Tansi try to capture an extremely traumatic history and by representing this history as horror is to underscore the irrationality of genocide and tyranny. In addition, writers such as Kourouma and Labou Tansi are evidently not so optimistic about glorifying a future whose history is marked by repression and bloodbath. Their stance is not opposed to a conflict- and oppression-free future; in fact, their unique form of horror is an inverse way of imagining alternatives to the horror thematized in their works. Therefore, interpreting their works as gloomy may be a valid observation in its own right, but it does not reflect the complexity and nuances of horror. One must get past criticisms such as Williams' and Diawara's and focus instead on how the depiction of horror in Labou Tansi's novel, *Seven Solitudes*, includes, but transcends the evocation of terror, fear and revulsion.

So far, there is one fundamental trait that the Gothic horror of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries shares with horror of postcolonial fiction: a representation of

violence, repression and terror which characterizes specific historical situations. Just as there are points of convergence between the Gothic horror and postcolonial horror, there are also irreducible differences. For instance, Gothic horror explores the mind landscapes and in fact externalizes the mind so that the horror depicted is the fear lurching in the confines of an individual's mind. Although it may take its inspiration from history, the Gothic horror sometimes focuses on the workings of an individual's psyche. It is for this reason that Haggerty in *Gothic Fiction/Gothic Form* suggests that "[r]ather than directly addressing the philosophical question of how the mind transforms the external world into private experience . . . the Gothic novelists attempted to give imaginative worlds external and objective reality [and] were looking for ways of giving private experience external manifestation" (7).

One crucial difference between horror in the Gothic fiction and postcolonial novel is that the Gothic presupposes an orderly world in which the supernatural intrudes, which is why at the end of the story, the invading forces are always vanquished and order is restored. This perspective of horror differs considerably from postcolonial fiction where horror is represented as characteristic of, if not an intrinsic part of, history. Whether one is concerned with *The House of the Spirits* where cycles of violence are associated with changes in Chilean political history, *Kingdom of this World* where history is a series of never-ending regimes of horror, or *Seven Solitudes* where horror appears to have been a normalized condition of history, there is no closure in these postcolonial texts. Bloom argues in "Horror Fiction: In Search of a Definition" that "primeval nature of fear, deeply embedded in our 'subconscious mind' and our 'inner instincts' and stored in the 'residuum of powerful inherited associations' leave . . . us confronted with the 'terrible'

and 'cryptic' power of the 'extraterrestrial,' 'whereof we know nothing and wherein we have no part!' " (158) The "supernatural" event which is the source of horror is always presented as external to our own world, believed to function according to the laws of the sciences. So, horror is always an intrusion, a statement that is questionable in the works of postcolonial writers cited above, including Sony Labou Tansi. Bloom emphasizes this in his argument by stating that "[t]here is always the presence of the supernatural, demonic, violent and unpredictable, usually present without explanation or logic and glimpsed at the moment it *breaks into our world.* The demonic threatens the annihilation of human consciousness but, at the same time, assures us of continuity in the eternal . . ." (165; emphasis added). On the other hand, at the end of *Seven Solitudes* social hierarchies are still intact and those who hold oppressive and repressive powers are unchallenged even though there is a suggestion of change in the flood that brings the story to a close. The supernatural in horror fiction must be seen as "barbarism and savagery of unlawful invading forces . . . that threaten. . . civilized life" unlike in *Seven Solitudes* where the idea of "civilized life" is seriously questioned (Heiland, *Gothic and Gender* 4). Horror can also be pleasurable primarily because order is restored at the end of the story and the reader is aware of the "asymmetry" between the world of fiction and his/her own world (Wisker, *Horror Fiction* 4; Leffler, *Horror as Pleasure* 261-2). Certainly, *Seven Solitudes* can be read for pleasure and there is no apparent objection to the restoration of order; however, the chaos, horror and bloodbath are irreducible part of the history it captures, which is why at the end of the novel no order is restored and no civilization is particularly assured of its continuity.

Space and the Production of Horror

The story of *Seven Solitudes* is set in the mysterious village of Valancia, an isolated, impoverished and violent village. The conflict begins with the murder of Estina Benta, the wife of Lorsa Lopez. Estina Benta is suspected of having an affair with another man and because Lorsa Lopez could not withstand such an allegation, he murders his wife in the most gruesome way imaginable. The villages expect the police to come and investigate the crime but they only wait in vain until towards the end of the story when an outspoken woman, Estina Bronzario is also murdered without any clue about the identity of the culprit. Finally, there is a flood that destroys the mythical town of Nsanga-Norda, the seat of the government, which, despite being close to Valancia, is unconcerned about its affairs. A novel like *Seven Solitudes* gives voice to those groups who have been silenced not only by Western imperialism but also by the structures of power within Africa itself. It will be misleading to reduce this novel to a work of "art for art's sake" because both in the language and in the diegesis, this work is conscious of the structures of power that are operative within the African polity.

The horror of *Seven Solitudes* is contingent upon integration into, and exclusion of, the mythical town of Valancia and Nsanga Norda from the international community. From the beginning of the novel it is clear that Valancia is an isolated town, which, because it is set within an unfamiliar geographical space, becomes even more isolated. As it is set in an unfamiliar space, it is implied that there is no clear reference to a known African or non-African country, although the novel concerns the tribulations of African countries, particularly in the Congo region, after the disappointment of independence. *Seven Solitudes* achieves it marvelous temperament partly through this remote location of

Valancia and partly through the violence and horror that is symptomatic of life in the town. The undying tree, the singing trees and sighing mountains, mourning the relocation of the government capital from Valancia to Nsanga Norda, all point to a marvelous world. However, this marvelous world is also created through the town's isolation from the rest of the world. That is, although the novel does not make reference to a known African country (except South Africa), it nevertheless maintains its consciousness of, and distance from, Europe and the United States. The issue which is at stake here is how the novel launches its discourse of horror, and one important method deployed in *Seven Solitudes* is by creating a remote and claustrophobic space.

That *Seven Solitudes* creates a claustrophobic space is not necessarily apparent and should not be taken for granted. The characters are both socially connected and detached mainly because they lack the power to initiate political action whether within their homes or outside. In other words, the claustrophobia in *Seven Solitudes* works in two fundamental ways: the first is that the home space is apparently inaccessible to outsiders while those inside lack the agency to break the domestic claustrophobic setting or escape the terror within that home. The second is that the society represents a macrocosmic dimension of domestic space and the same lack of political agency haunts the characters whether they are within the home space or outside of it. A good example is Estina Benta who is unable to escape her husband's maniacal and homicidal rage and who would not be saved by the community no matter how loud she cried for help, thereby reinforcing the notion that violence dominates both the domestic and the public space.

But before exploring how Estina Benta's murder fits into the discourse of horror in *Seven Solitudes*, one should engage the circumstances that make that horror possible in

the first place; that is, the way in which Valancia represents an abode of horror. The first strategy used in this text is economic and political isolation, the implication of which is that Valancia is crippled economically and consequently has to suffer the trauma of such economic and political terrorism. It is not surprising that *Seven Solitudes* has to lean towards the marvelous real, especially because the trauma that follows this isolation is so extreme that literary realism would be inadequate to express it. To grasp this discourse of solitude through which the horror of this isolation is expressed one should examine how the narrator describes it:

> We hadn't sold our pineapples that year, because our President had insulted America at the Sixteenth Paris Conference on the price of raw materials. Out of revenge, the Americans refused to eat our pineapples, and the French had supported them by refusing to eat them out of modesty, the Belgians because they understood, the Russians out of timidity, the Germans out of simple bloody-mindedness, the South Africans by intuition, the Japanese out of honour. . . Anyway, for one reason or another, the whole world refused to eat our pineapples. (1)

Despite Valancia's economic separation from the rest of the world, it is clear that some sort of international relation existed prior to this isolation. This economic strangulation must be explained not only in terms of international policy, but also in the spatial constriction, an attribute that evinces Valancia's suitability for horror. In essence, this economic blockade works in two important ways. The first and the more obvious is the trade restriction; the second, which is the primary concern here, is how Valancia gradually becomes literally a "haunted house" where the dark evil consists in harshness

of existence rather than in some inscrutable supernatural forces as in the case of Gothic narratives. With the trade embargo in place, Valancia becomes a claustrophobic town in which the inhabitants are forever trapped and forced into the ineluctable tyranny of poverty, insecurity and fear. The notion of Valancia's claustrophobia is reinforced by the fact that none of the inhabitants ever leaves Valancia except for a few visitors who come and go. Here lies the power of horror in *Seven Solitudes*: the characters who come and go are government officials, whereas the original people of Valancia are restricted to its existential terror. The horror of Valancia's claustrophobia inheres in government official's exceptional power to traverse spaces and as *Seven Solitudes* demonstrates their presence in Valancia always coincides with malevolent events. The implication is that government officials, with their abilities to cross spaces in contrast to Valancia's people who are trapped within its walls, are invested with supernatural powers. Government officials' supernatural powers as set against the people's imprisonment within Valancia links *Seven Solitudes* to the discourse of the marvelous real in which the marvelous derives from disparity of power or rather the interplay of power and powerlessness. Even though the novel hardly makes explicit reference to governmental perfidy, corruption and the "failure" of the postcolonial state, it nevertheless captures similar trends in a most powerful manner: that of rendering the narrative within the marvelous mode. The idea of the supernatural powers commanded by government officials shows not only the extent of social disempowerment, it also accentuates the claustrophobic condition in which the people live, a condition through which horror thrives. The isolation and enclosure, which Foucault argues is a component of discipline, may not necessarily involve the graphic images of horror in *Seven Solitudes*. Foucault contends that "[d]iscipline sometimes

requires *enclosure*. . . . It is the protected place of disciplinary monotony. There was the great 'confinement' of vagabonds and paupers; there were other more discreet, but insidious and effective ones. There were the *colléges*, or secondary schools . . ." (141). While prisons and schools might not display the violence of 18th century French monarchy, the notion of confinement and isolation in *Seven Solitudes* exacerbates the violence and the people's helplessness and consequently, the inevitable feeling of horror within the confined space of Valancia.

Both Gothic horror and *Seven Solitudes* are linked by their deployment of claustrophobic spaces. Although one cannot equate the claustrophobic spaces of the Gothic horror to the one in *Seven Solitudes* and while *Seven Solitudes* is clearly not a Gothic text, the claustrophobic state that pervades Valancia is Gothic in form. In another context, Armitt compares magical realism and Gothic fiction and comes to this conclusion: "[i]n magical realism [...] is a fabulous panorama, whereas the Gothic landscape is inevitably claustrophobic. Part of the clashing worldviews in *The House of the Spirits* revolves around the tension between the allure of the agoraphobic, manifest in the many adventures into new territory, and a type of Gothic magnetism which continually drags characters back to a nodal grouping of oppressive houses" (308). While Isabel Allende's *The House of the Spirits* seems to combine both the form of the haunted house and oppressive social landscape, it conforms to, and resists, the Gothic at the same time. *Seven Solitudes* shares the same ambivalence to the Gothic in the sense that the haunted house is limited to Lorsa Lopez's house most of the time; however, the whole social landscape of Valancia is itself claustrophobic, a motif that is overwhelming in comparison to horror fiction, which is deliberately confined to the haunted house.

The horror of *Seven Solitudes* is such that the claustrophobic setting shows how imperialism persists in postcolonial nation-states; that is, the horror in *Seven Solitudes* can partly be explained by Valancia's subjugation by international imperialist forces through economic and political policy that turns Valancia into a claustrophobic state in which poverty and terror reign. Although dealing with a different issue, it is precisely because of the intersection of imperialism and horror that Wisker says, "[u]surping the laws of other lands, imperialists and colonialists stole mother tongues and silenced peoples, imported and enslaved, disenfranchised, destabilised, and disempowered them, taking over spaces and ways of living. Some insisted on imposing the post-Enlightenment bravado and self-assuredness of the . . . European conqueror as the best, the only way" (173-74). Wisker seems to be more concerned with the early stages of colonialism than its manifestation in postcolonial situations; but one thing is apparent from Wisker's comments (and in *Seven Solitudes*), "[t]he history of postcolonial peoples is one that reeks of the elements of horror" (174). More specifically in *Seven Solitudes*, imperialism manifests itself in terms of international trade "conspiracy" which undermines Valancia's place and viability within global commerce. The claustrophobic environment created by this conspiracy turns Valancia into a landscape of horror.

One should sound a note of caution here: imperialism alone does not account for the horror in *Seven Solitudes*; rather, local tyranny also contributes to Valancia's isolation and consequently, its regime of horror. The novel does not privilege local politics against international forces which is why the horror in the novel derives from combined forces of international imperial machinery and local autocratic systems, investing the landscape with invisible presences. The involvement of local regime in the horror of *Seven*

Solitudes is unequivocal right from the beginning of the text. Just after detailing economic emasculation of Valancia, the narrator tells us about local administration's involvement in exacerbating the horror:

> It was the same cry we'd heard at the same hour of the day years before, when the authorities had decided, for the seventh time, to move the capital from Valancia to Nsanga-Norda: "We can't stay here, this place belongs to the devil," they said. And so, for several long months, walls, bridges, municipal gardens, town squares, swimming pools, railway stations, all went on their travels, by air and by water, by rail and by road. Even the water from the artificial lake of the Village of Passions, the seven drawbridges, the thirty-nine mausoleums, the fifteen triumphal arches, the nine Towers of Babel . . . were all transported to the new capital. (2)

It cannot be overemphasized that relocating the capital is concomitant to disappearance of infrastructural facilities. The element of the improbable from the above quote is impossible to render through conventional realism; Sony Labou Tansi, leaning towards the marvelous, captures political perfidy. The absence of the law, inefficiency of the law, lack of basic amenities and indiscriminate and sure deaths, all can be partly explained by relocating the capital. Also, whenever the law appears in Valancia, it does so almost like an intruding evil force most characteristic of the Gothic novel. For instance, at the death of Estina Benta, the sloppiness of the officials and the police, the threats that they issue, their arrogance and indifference, and the assertion of an unfathomable level of power over the people of Valancia make the officials and the police appear more like aliens who are, or who perceive themselves as being invincible. The incredible power of the officials over the people deepens the deplorable and horrific existence led by the people of

Valancia and it also situates *Seven Solitudes* in the realm where the unfathomable is possible.

The passage not only demonstrates how local tyranny reinforces the claustrophobia created by international imperial forces, it also resonates with imperialism and colonialism. In the passage there is an intertextual relation to Gabriel García Márquez's postcolonial text about a tyrant in his twilight, *The Autumn of the Patriarch* (1975) where colonial forces "carry off [...] territorial waters" in an apt metaphor of dispossession (210). Where in García Márquez's text the imperial forces are constituted by Germany, Britain and the United States, in *Seven Solitudes* the forces of pillage reside in a ghostly government. The fact that the people of Valancia receive no positive response to the request to perform the funeral rites for Estina Benta indicates the government's indifference to the people's concerns. However, it is the marvelous dimension of this narrative that establishes its urgency and consequence; that is, the people could not bury the dead until they were left with the skeleton in the public square which creates both a chilling effect and a humorless satire. The reason why this episode is interesting is that the government is largely absent, but, when present is mainly as ghostly agents of horror, fear and dispossession, a point that links *Seven Solitudes*, though vaguely, to the imperial impulse of *The Autumn of the Patriarch*.

Landscapes of Horror

In *Seven Solitudes*, the body figures as the site of horror. That is, both female and male bodies function as the site of local and state violence so that the body operates in *Seven Solitudes* as the body politic. However, the body is imbued with multiple significations which means that its function transcends victimhood; the body is also the site of

resistance to local and state repression, violence, and more important, the body is the site where "otherworldliness" manifests. But it is pertinent to mention right away that resistance also has its problems. At this point one should focus on how the body is constituted as the body politic, but also how it serves as the site of violence. The female body particularly functions as the body of the nation which means that at the moments and scenes of violence, the body, according to Veit-Wild, is gendered (238).

It is the murder of Estina Benta that jolts one back into the consciousness that women are not merely the victims of the patriarchal order in Valancia. They are also the victims of state repression and it is Estina Benta's death that makes the connection possible. The representatives of the state do not themselves participate in the regular murder cases in Valancia; however, their silence over the cases establishes their collusion with local regimes. While one may not be able to categorically link the state apparatus at Nsanga-Norda to Valancia's masculinist order, the fact that both regimes condone oppression of women makes women doubly vulnerable in Valancia. It probably would be safe to contend that women in Valancia are victims of both regimes whether or not there exists an understanding that binds the two repressive administrations together. However, Estina Benta's body becomes the site where patriarchal violence is displayed so that her death "links power relations in political discourse to violence in gender discourse" (Veit-Wild 236). The novel seems intent on shocking the reader through the horrifying description of her murder by exaggerating the violence used in the act, a device that makes one question whether the horrific account is the central issue. For instance, Lorsa Lopez is presented as a sociopath from whom such a gruesome murder should not be a surprise; but one should not lose sight of the fact that Labou Tansi also hyperbolizes the murder episode so that

one cannot fail to notice that *Seven Solitudes* produces a surplus of signification. However, because Sony Labou Tansi exaggerates this murder scene, its horror is, to some extent, mitigated. That the horror might be mitigated shows not only that the male-female relationship is based on injustice and violence, but also that the woman is vulnerable to mysterious predatory powers. Lorsa Lopez states:

> Since the women of this town have started playing at being men, nothing's right any more. It's all the fault of the whites. They've mixed everything up: the roles of the puppet, the epileptic and the idiot. Their money has killed our soul. I'm going to pack you off to the devil for good.
>
> While she screamed for help, he went into the pigsty. He came back with a spade and struck her three true male blows, breaking the spade - so he gave her two more hefty blows with the handle. Then he went and fetched a pickaxe and began chopping her like wood. He split her body open and, ripping out her smoking guts, he tore at them with his big wild animal's teeth and drank her blood, to appease the anger knotting his soul. (11-12)

If it is true that the claustrophobic condition of Valancia is produced partly by modern imperial powers, the passage above also indicates that the patriarchal order is equally responsible. The sheer force with which Estina Benta is killed only emphasizes women's vulnerability within a city where the male oppressive regime seems normalized. At a glance, the violence of the act is unmistakable, and that Lorsa Lopez is a sociopath is unequivocal. The violence is so excessive that it breaks the bounds of the symbolic order. In addition to being outraged by Estina Benta's murder, the narrative invites the reader to mock the fact that Lorsa Lopez reduces the problem to the influence of the "whites." One

can see that he relishes patriarchal privilege so that it is immediately apparent that what he could not accept is the disruption of gender hierarchy. That is, Lorsa Lopez is reluctant to see women transcend the role of second class citizens and give expression to their personality.

In Lorsa Lopez's own speech, the reader witnesses a "horror" and at the same time is lured to mock Lorsa Lopez's buffoonery. On the one hand, Lorsa Lopez provides a weak alibi for killing his wife: colonialism. But what he has done here is to replace one horror with another, thereby deepening the intensity of the violence beyond the logic of language. From his speech it is clear that Estina Benta's murder is an extremely political act and Lorsa Lopez is the one who makes this link possible. The murder is supposed to be a pseudo-reaction to a belated colonialism, but it turns out to be a domestic and public aggression which signifies that the people of Valancia are both victims of colonialism and local autocracy. However, it is the women who are represented as ultimate victims. When the narrator tells us that he "struck her three male blows," one is instantly reminded that gender hierarchy in the story take a primal place. The crime is so cruel that Labou Tansi represents it to us in cannibalistic terms. Of course, the cannibalistic representation immediately resonates with stories about Idi Amin in Uganda, but it is not certain if Sony Labou Tansi is trying to make this connection. But the cruelty against women and Estina Benta in this case, rendered in cannibalistic terms, is so unthinkable that it threatens the limits of realist aesthetics. Although the law seems to be absent from Valancia, it condones Lorsa Lopez's crime. It is because of the law's culpability that Estina Bronzario asserts immediately following Estina Benta's death that "[t]he police haven't been [here] because it was only a woman who was killed" (19). The law, or the

government at Nsanga-Norda in this case, is not merely inefficient, it is an agent of horror precisely because it preys on the people in a manner reminiscent of supernatural evil.

Interestingly enough, the story takes a dramatic turn: the death of Estina Benta becomes the rallying point of women's resistance to patriarchal injustice. That Estina Benta is murdered is not the only issue that angers the women, but that the administration at Nsanga-Norda refuses the women's plea to bury her is unthinkable and unacceptable. Women's resistance constitutes another twist to the horror in *Seven Solitudes* so that it is not an altogether a pessimistic story as Manthia Diawara has argued; indeed, women are portrayed as revolutionaries. Nonetheless, while *Seven Solitudes* is not a conventional horror story, it still resonates with Gothic fiction like *Wuthering Heights* where the confinement of women within the domestic space is meant to highlight a repressive male-centered ideology. Although the castle or mansion can be limiting and disempowering in Gothic fiction, Heiland contends that Gothic fiction transgresses patriarchal structures of power. She argues further by stating that

> the stories of gothic novels are always stories of transgression. The transgressive acts at the heart of gothic fiction generally focus on corruption in, or resistance to, the patriarchal structures that shaped the country's political life and its family life, and gender roles within those structures come in for patriarchal scrutiny. Further, and importantly, these acts are often violent, and always frightening. (5)

The protest following Estina Benta's death also constitutes a transgressive act which is meant to challenge Valancia's patriarchal authority and the state power, at least through Lorsa Lopez's ruthless killing of his wife. Within this repressive space is agency and

resistance, just as in *Seven Solitudes*; however, there is a fundamental distinction between the Gothic and *Seven Solitudes*: Gothic fiction is usually set in a confined space like an old castle or abandoned mansion, but the setting of *Seven Solitudes* is the whole town of Valancia. The fact that the story of *Seven Solitudes* happens in a town is a testament that the novel conforms to, and resists classification as, horror, through its transformation of a whole social setting into a claustrophobic, violent and frightening space. As the story progresses, the remains of Estina Benta are left unattended and the police refuse to investigate the case.

The women of Valancia conceive of Estina Benta's tragedy as a tragedy of all women, and in order to resist this callous act, they act in unison by declaring sexual abstinence from men. This move is important because the women seem to categorize state violence and patriarchal terror as complementary. While it is certain that all citizens of Valancia are victims of state violence, state terror is intensified by ruthless killing of the women. When the women declare their abstinence from men, it is clear that they are taking on the patriarchal system, but their resolve is unmistakable when the narrator says,

> Fartamo Andrea set at sixteen moons the period during which they would not open their clothes to a man. Woe betide the fool who spurned the majority's decision! She'd either menstruate continuously or catch the Nsanga-Norda sickness. This women's talk made the men smile, but knowing that Estina Bronzario would always be Estina Bronzario, they accepted that they would have to steel themselves to endure this enforced abstinence. (*Seven Solitudes* 22)

By abstaining from men, the women impose a punitive measure, but the implication of this punishment far surpasses the penalty. The women avoid not only the mere sexual

encounter, but also the violence associated with it; this is why sexual violence must be seen as a parallel to the murder of Estina Benta and governmental abandonment of Valancia. But it is also a means of breaking the limits of conventional representation by producing excess of signification. To buttress this point, Veit-Wild also observes that "[m]en in Sony's fictionalized societies are characterized by a voracious appetite for food, sex and for material wealth" ("The Grotesque Body 235). This link between sexual conduct and state violence is corroborated in the following passage from Mbembe's *On the Postcolony*:

> To exercise authority is, above all, to tire out the bodies of those under it, to disempower them not so much to increase their productivity as to ensure maximum docility. To exercise authority is, furthermore, for the male ruler, to demonstrate publicly a certain delight in eating and drinking well, and, again in Labou Tansi's words, to pass most of his time in "pumping grease and rust into the backside of young girls." The male ruler's pride in possessing an active penis has to be dramatized, through sexual rights over subordinates. . . . The unconditional subordination of women to the principle of male pleasure remains one pillar upholding the reproduction of the phallocratic system. (110)

This women's revolt opposes both administrative complacency and terror on the one hand, and female persecution on the other. But the most important subject here is how sexual terror functions in Valancia; that is, the women decide to put an end to men's sexual predatory practices that double as political tyranny, which seems to have been normalized. Sexual abstinence is an attempt to take away the normalized sexual privilege of men and rejecting men's names is an effort to demythologize patriarchal authority, just

as Sony Labou Tansi veers away from realism.

However, the men become aware of the seriousness of the women's revolt when Estina Bronzario threatens Valancia's symbolic systems. The narrator says of Estina Bronzario, "[t]he other decision taken by Estina Bronzario's women was no less of a constraint for the men. In future, men would take their wives' names when they married in Valancia" (*Seven Solitudes* 23). First, it is apparent that Valancia is a patrilineal society. Second, the men seem more threatened by the prospect of renouncing their own names than abstinence from sex. It is hard to determine whether Sony Labou Tansi specifically is referencing Lacan's famous "Name of the Father";[2] in any event, it seems the women's aim is to uproot the whole symbolic system on which Valancia is built. If one follows this hypothesis briefly, it is certain that the women of Valancia operate outside of the symbolic order and they clearly have threatened that system, which is why their action can partly be explained by Kristeva's argument about abjection in *Powers of Horror.*

According to Kristeva, bodily fluids and matter that the body expels can be considered filth. But it is not the filth that is actually being expelled, but defilement, and this defilement is culturally constructed most typically in religious terms. She, therefore, argues that "[d]efilement is what is jettisoned from the '*symbolic system.*' It is what escapes that social rationality, that logical order on which a social aggregate is based, which then becomes differentiated from a temporary agglomeration of individuals and, in short, constitutes a *classification system* or a *structure*" (65). When applied to women and

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[2] Jacques Lacan argues that at the pre-oedipal stage, contrary to Sigmund Freud's position, the child is not afraid of the father but "the name of the father" which signifies the father's mastery over the symbolic order into which the child must enter his/her illusion of wholeness and unity has been shattered at the mirror stage.

also to *Seven Solitudes*, the exclusion of women from the symbolic order is contingent, not on any rational logic but on the logic with which the symbolic order operates that demands the exclusion of women. The men of Valancia have taken their "superiority" for granted, which implies that they could not question the alleged female "inferiority." Masculinist hegemony in Valancia cannot be mistaken when Elmano Zola says on behalf of men, "[t]hey can give us lice, all the lice on earth . . . They can give us the pox and all the mushrooms in the world, but not their names" (*Seven Solitudes* 23). Clearly, the battle is drawn right here because both the women and men are set to confront each other; but while it is the women who are originally threatened and persecuted, they have become a threat to the men, or more specifically, the symbolic order. In other words, abjection cannot be total in the sense that there is always the threat of defilement and this threat is a violent one that attacks the symbolic order, the same way that the women of Valancia have decided to renounce the "Name of the Father." No matter how many Estina Bentas are killed the men cannot escape from the threat that women constitute to the society's systems of signs. In a sense, abjection becomes the horror which terrorizes male hegemony. In *Seven Solitudes*, the women directly confront the men and it is clear that the battle between the genders is as physical as it is symbolic. Kristeva's notion of abjection depends on both violent and subtle means of warfare:

> In societies where it occurs, ritualization of defilement is accompanied by a strong concern for separating the sexes, and this means giving men rights over women. The latter, apparently put in the position of passive objects, are none the less felt to be wily powers, "baleful schemers" from whom rightful beneficiaries must protect themselves. It is as if, lacking a central authoritarian power that would settle the

> definitive supremacy of one sex-or lacking a legal establishment that would balance the prerogatives of both sexes-two powers attempted to share out society. One of them, the masculine, apparently victorious, confesses through its very relentlessness against the other, the feminine, that it is threatened by an asymmetrical, irrational, wily, uncontrollable power. (70)

Perhaps the way to understand how the women of Valancia contend with male authority is not to focus exclusively on the scenes of violence and horror, but also on the very marginalization of women from the symbolic order. This way, this marginalization can be interpreted as the cause that produces the "terror that dissembles, a hatred that smiles, a passion that uses the body for barter instead of inflaming it, a debtor who sells you up, a friend who stabs you. . . ." (4), and as the very "defilement" that menaces the symbolic systems.

In *Seven Solitudes* especially, men are not the only perpetrators of horror and ultimately the text does not make gender distinction in the use of violence. The text is obviously concerned about the precarious position of women in society, but fails to stereotype women as passive victims whose injustice is unmitigated. Rather than represent them as helpless sufferers of male excessive force, women confidently challenge the basis of male power, while participating in the reign of terror over Valancia. The following passage will throw some light on the issue:

> It's not altogether certain how Elmano Zola's pronouncement reached the ears of the women. The next morning, on opening the deep freeze to get out Fr Bona's daily half-kilo of liver, . . . still too bleary-eyed to make out anything clearly, [Madame Elmano Zola] was confronted by the most horrifying sight: three pieces

> of husband with a strip of vellum stuck between his teeth. On it, the following words were written with a cosmetic pencil and underlined with nail varnish, as we all saw later when we came to have a look, our faces streaming with hot tears: "Women are also men." (23)

First, the fact that the perpetrators are never captured or because there are no eye witness account of this hideous act which resonates immediately with the killing and chopping of Estina Benta's body, (and also resonates with the Texas chainsaw massacre), it is hard to conclude that the women are responsible for the crime. But the details provided by the narrator suggest: "cosmetic pencil," "nail varnish" and the legend attached to the dead that reads "women are also men." The frightening part of the violence that now seems set to engulf Valancia is that apart from proposing to reverse the symbolic order by making men to take the names of their wives upon marriage, the women seem only to exacerbate the regime of horror demonstrating that they are equal to men in violence. At this point in the novel, Sony Labou Tansi seems to experiment with surrealism by juxtaposing objects which usually do not belong together. Elmano Zola's chopped body existing side by side with beef liver is clearly a surrealist reference, which implies that the source of the marvelous in *Seven Solitudes* is multiple.

Seven Solitudes provides the context to celebrate women's resistance to male authority; but the novel also offers the opportunity to problematize women's position within the conflict. The fact that the legend reads, "women are also men" confirms that the women of Valancia are still operating within phallocentric logic with which men have oppressed the city. The text seems to reverse gender roles without extirpating the reign of terror. Perraudin argues that

> When we limit ourselves to . . . the literature of the 1970s and 1980s, also called the "literature of disenchantment," the resort to this type of motif of violence signifies the entry into a symbolic order of violence. Such a maneuver is evidence of a desire to position the subject in the postcolonial world, a desire that coincides with what Jonathan Ngaté refers to as politics of anger. . . . In this context, the acts of violence seem inevitably confined to a highly political and public sphere. The driving motivation behind these acts of torture, excorporations and rape seems to stem from a desire to weaken the ability of the other to assert himself or herself within a realm of power that is in the process of being contested. ("From a 'Large Morsel of Meat' ," 73)

Perraudin's observations, though applicable directly to Sony Labou Tansi's *La vie et demie*, is instructive to *Seven Solitudes*. Violence seems already normativized with the murder of Estina Benta, but it is reinforced by the murder of Elmano Zola. One can try to exonerate the women by arguing that they did not invent the violence, but have only deployed a means that is already operative in the society. It is also true that these acts of violence are meant to incapacitate everyone, especially the women, so that they can be unthreatening to men, but their adoption of violence simply confirms the power of violence over everyone, both male and female. In another context, Nicolas Martin-Granel argues that "femininity . . . allows one to escape from the male monstrosity" (*Le quatrième côté du triangle* 71), but in *Seven Solitudes*, the women's intervention in the regime of patriarchy challenges the status quo on the one hand, and legitimizes it on the other, since they themselves now appropriate the same method of violence. In *Seven Solitudes*, the violence is not restricted to the "political and public sphere" as Perraudin

has noted in the case of *La vie et demie*. Neither the public nor private realms can escape the dominance of violence in *Seven Solitudes*; however, women's effort is nevertheless important precisely for the fact that they have initiated a process of challenging the "season of anomie" that seems to characterize many West African, Central African and Southern African nation-states. This gesture may not be perfect, but it is still an important revolutionary moment through which the women "express a deep moral indignation in their denunciation of the shameful state into which humanity has sunk today" even though they cannot be exempted from this very condition (Clark, "Passionate Engagements" 39) . As the novel will show, there is no other record of such a gruesome murder by women, whereas there are more women and men killed by other men, anonymous persons, and the mysterious forces terrorizing Valancia.

Seven Solitudes epitomizes Achille Mbembe's idea of the postcolony where violence and arbitrariness of power reside in political institutions and individuals. This means that the repressive apparatus of power may be enforced by dominant political class but the dominated people like Lorsa Lopez, Estina Benta, Elmano Zola and Estina Bronzario, all are implicated in the brutal display of power and its horrific consequences. Also, women constitute the revolutionary force intent upon dismantling the dominant signs of the political class and patriarchal hierarchy. The interesting thing about their representation in *Seven Solitudes* is that the text fails to apotheosize the women just because they have challenged the dominant regime of power. Just as the women are implicated in the exercise of violence, so are the people of Valancia. Unlike in novels like Ousmane Sembene's *God's Bits of Wood* and Ngugi wa Thiong'o's *Petals of Blood* where the oppressed class is portrayed as agents of social change, that kind of revolutionary

optimism is absent in *Seven Solitudes*. In fact, Ngugi wa Thiong'o's *A Grain of Wheat* attempts something similar to *Seven Solitudes* by depicting the revolutionary class as treacherous and unreliable. But Sony Labou Tansi in *Seven Solitudes* shifts the focus from socialist realism of the 1960s and early 1970s to a literature shaped more or less by disenchantment because there is no section of the society that can be exempted from the brutal reality of power. Mbembe's description of the postcolony can help the excessive violence in *Seven Solitudes* which in this case has been termed, horror:

> The notion "postcolony" identifies specifically a given historical trajectory—that of societies recently emerging from the experience of colonization and the violence which the colonial relationship involves. To be sure, the postcolony is chaotically pluralistic. . . . The postcolony is characterized by a distinctive style of political improvisation, by a tendency to excess and lack of proportion. . . . But the postcolony is also made up of a series of corporate institutions and political machinery that, once in place, constitute a distinctive regime of violence. In this sense, the postcolony is a particularly revealing, and rather dramatic, stage on which are played out the wider problems of subjection and its corollary, discipline. (102-3)

To buttress his argument, Mbembe claims that corporate institutions in the postcolony do not possess the monopoly of instruments of violence and the existence of private militia testifies to the proliferation not only of instruments of violence, but also instances of violence. *Seven Solitudes* dramatizes this proliferation of instances of violence and as Mbembe contends, violence is not the prerogative of the dominant class. The normalization of violence by the repressive political apparatus inspires the appropriation

of violence by dominated class. It should not be surprising to that the women not only kill Elmano Zola, they claim responsibility for this horrific act in a manner reminiscent of terrorist operations and older colonial practices like that of King Leopold who maimed, beat and killed the inhabitants of the Congo region in his desperate attempt to appropriate natural resources. The idea that violence in postcolonial societies has "a tendency to excess and lack of proportion" can be located in *Seven Solitudes*'s hyperbolic language: excessive and graphic description of excorporeality on the one hand, and vulgar language typical of carnivalesque spirituality.

The position of "the people" is a little more complex in Sony Labou Tansi's novel: even though they do not physically engage in these acts of violence, they nevertheless support it with their complacency and apathy. The apathy and brutality of the law parallels the lukewarmness of the people whom the narrator presents as passive collaborators in the crimes against women. While Lorsa Lopez is killing his wife, despite her plea to be saved from her maniacal husband, the neighbors simply lament but do not lift a finger to save the poor woman. The text suggests that everyone in the society is complicit with this pattern of oppression and murder. During the murder of Estina Benta the narrator describes Lorsa Lopez's final act of cruelty, but the crucial issue is how the narrator portrays the dying woman and the immediate and remote neighbors who abandon her:

> He fetched all the tools from his pigsty: meat hooks, picks, forks, felling axes, machetes ... millstone. He finished off his crime with the pickaxe. One last blow, *which was heard throughout the town.* Until siesta time, the body lay in the town square, still calling out: "*Help me! He's killing me!*"

> Dismembered, disemboweled, completely covered in red clay, crawling with flies stuffing themselves on the blood and gore, her body garlanded with her guts, she lay there, moaning. *No one brought her the help she needed.* Her voice gradually faded away. "Help me! He's killing me!" From her bloodless vocal cords came a hard metallic, grating sound. Until two in the morning, "Help me!" (12; emphases added)

From this quote it is apparent that Lorsa Lopez's crime is not merely a private atrocity but a communal one. The notion of collective responsibility for Estina Benta's murder is signified by the location of the victim's remains at the town square. By placing her dying body in the center of the town, the narrator seems to make the town accessible to her death throes. Since she is ignored at the moment of dire need, the city's culpability in this crime is as heinous as the murder itself. The people's vicarious participation in the murder is reinforced by graphic displays of filth and disgust and especially what Kristeva calls "defilement," the basic components in the rhetoric of horror. When the narrator states, "[n]o one brought her the help she needed," it is clear that the people have the agency to intervene in the murder but decide to abstain from action. However, this argument can be reversed: the state of horror in Valancia is so overwhelming that everyone is incapacitated. In this case, the people's passivity merely expresses the extent to which the corporate institutions of power have dominated them to the point that rather than being participants in the crime, all are victims. It also signifies that Lorsa Lopez's murder of his wife and the women's cruel butchering of Elmano Zola are manifestations of violence previously sanctioned and maintained by the dominant group. While this argument may be operative in *Seven Solitudes*, it definitely is not the only possible

interpretation of these killings. Both the dominant and dominated groups are agents of the violence through which the novel achieves its discourse of horror. This sense of the horror is reinforced by the marvelous impulse of the passage; that is, a chopped human body, already disemboweled, continues to plead for help through its marvelous agony. By giving this body the capacity to yell after it had been mutilated, the cruelty of her death becomes accentuated because her agony is not lost on the reader. More important, the speaking dead fits the marvelous temper of the novel so that in death, Estina Benta paradoxically gives voice to the voiceless.

In order to show that the people are as liable as the administration in Nsanga-Norda, one should examine another episode from the text. This example concerns the occasion when law enforcement officials visit Valancia to determine whether Estina Benta's remains should be buried or not. The description of the government representative who visits Valancia because of the murder is frightening and ominous for what is to happen shortly:

> This was the first time we'd heard that voice in Valancia, the deep voice of Carlanzo Mana, issuing with some difficulty from a mouth buried in hair over six feet from the ground, from the centre of the face of a wild creature. It sounded like the voice of death. The hairs that devoured Carlanzo Mana's face were of abnormal size and length. His protruding forehead forced his dark glasses back into the enormous depression of his eyes. This man introduced himself to the crowd in these terms: "Carlanzo Mana from the Ministry of the Interior." (50)

The narrator's description of Carlanzo Mana borders on physical attributes of a monster. His monstrous hair, the deep depression in his face, his appearance resembling a wild

creature and his voice of death, already spell doom for the people of Valancia. His description corresponds to that of the "Dewild" (or Agbako) from D. O. Fagunwa and Wole Soyinka's *The Forest of a Thousand Daemons* (1968), a ghommid with terrifying personality. To worsen the case for Valancians, he holds executive authority that the people despise but cannot confront. For the minister of the Interior who is also the representative of the government at Nsanga-Norda to visit Valancia, it is clear to the people that the government is actually a monster preying on its own people. Despite Carlanzo Mana's intimidating and dreadful description, one of the people present at the town square, Salmano Ruenta openly despises corporate travesty that Carlanzo Mana displays. The narrator says:

> Carlanzo Giraffe, as the crowd were already calling him, took off his glasses. His eyes were strangely bloodshot. His mulatto's forehead took on the grey hue of a fresh corpse. The same colour spread to his neck, and a stream of blue snot began to run down from his left nostril. The man caught the snot with his tongue. This clumsy child's gesture made us all smile, but Salmano Ruenta exploded into a howl of manic laughter that made everyone freeze. (51)

If we again subscribe to Kristeva's notion of horror as filth that is expelled from the body, Carlanzo Mana is an epitome of such horror, as seen in the snot coming from his nostril. But the main attribute that qualifies him as Kristeva's candidate for horror is his association with a corpse. A corpse, according to Kristeva, is the ultimate form of abjection. Although *Seven Solitudes* may not be the quintessential horror novel, Carlanzo Mana's description conforms to Kristeva's formulation of the concept. Carlanzo Mana lives true to his portrayal and kills Salmano Ruenta:

> Tears were pouring down his face. His forehead was creased into two wide furrows. Carlanzo Mana leapt upon him and began to throttle the laughing man with his iron grip. We saw Salmano Ruenta struggling for air, just a little air for his lungs. But Carlanzo Mana squeezed ever tighter. The silent crowd began to cross themselves, then we heard a bone crack. The laughing man's tongue protruded further and further out of his mouth as he gasped for air. We heard another bone crack. Then a drop of fresh blood could be seen on his tongue, and the crowd crossed themselves with a sigh. "Oh, God! How terrible! He's killed him." (51)

Now if the murder of Estina Benta takes place in the night and one assumes that the people could not venture out because of the dangers of the night, the same cannot be said of the murder of Salmano Ruenta, which takes place right in broad daylight. Rather than intervene to save Salmano Ruenta's life, the people simply watch him die in the hands of the maniacal Carlanzo Mana. When they say, "Oh God! How terrible! He's killed him," they are not only lamenting Salmano Ruenta's demise, but also establishing their involvement in his death. According to Mbembe, this instance of "mortification of the flesh, the torment and torture and beatings that drive the native to loose great inhuman cries, the trembling that overtakes the native faced with soldiery, the shaking and raw expressions of horror and terror" (Mbembe, *On the Postcolony* 167), can help capture the ruthlessness with which Carlanzo Mana murders Salmano Ruenta. Sony Labou Tansi seems to question the people's reluctance to mitigate the horror of their own postcolony, Valancia. Therefore, the men who commit these atrocities on women, the manic government officials to whom the people are a mere quarry, the women who deploy the same violent methods of the patriarchal order and the men and women who simply watch

the commission of these atrocious crimes are all implicated in the regime of violence that now engulfs Valancia. This violence takes on a supernatural dimension when the dead develops the power of speech; Carlanzo Mana's ruthlessness also characterizes a nightmare while the people's apathy becomes so exaggerated that it becomes unreal.

In *Seven Solitudes*, the reign of terror overwhelms Valancia when Carlanzo Mana declares that he would kill Estina Bronzario. It thus appears that the women's participation in the rule of terror is short-lived. Two events can partly explain the women's subjection: one is Sarngata Nola's repression of women by reducing them to mere objects of male sexual desire. It should be acknowledged that Sarngata Nola operates differently from Lorsa Lopez and Carlanzo Mana, but the end result of his act is the repression of his many wives and by extension, the women of Valancia. The objectification and oppression of women are not limited to the violence unleashed on them by the political institution and patriarchal system, but also involve the roles they have been assigned in the social space by men. One of the first instances in which women are described is through Sarngata Nola, a performer whose several wives he forces into performing for men's sexual gratification. The narrator tells us:

> Sarngata Nola's women were beautiful beyond all imagining, and they danced the rumpus with consummate art. They were called the "daughters of the devil" because of the salaciousness and earthiness of their boneless hips, which spat fire and made men sigh with desire. And since, at the time, Estina Bronzario's sexual curfew was in full swing, the dancers gave the men the opportunity to shoot their load in secret without any hassle. (32)

One cannot deny women's objectification, but by foregrounding the sexual idiom, this

novel creates a sort of fantastic landscape where it becomes possible to transgress societal inhibitions particularly in the realm of language. It is for this reason that sexual references abound in the novel, although more importantly, the women's reaction and resistance to male authority also function within the fantastic register. For example, it is understandable that a woman can refuse sex within the domestic space, but by situating this act within public space the novel takes us onto a marvelous world of infinite possibilities. When Estina Bronzario confronts Sarngata Nola about his wives, subjected to a life of itinerant dancers, he replies to Estina Bronzario that his wives are free, though the ludicrousness of his response could be more appalling:

> Stop being such a bloody fool, Estina Bronzario. My wives are free. . . . You know Valtano. You know Nsanga-Norda. You know the Seven Solitudes in the rue de Nesa. I took them away from there, away from the disease, the hunger and the shame, because, I can't bear the sight of women fucking for cash. I showed them how to make their cunts a cathedral, a holy of holies, the summit of heaven and earth. For the vagina, Estina Bronzario, isn't a Coca-Cola can or minced meat: it's the road all people must take to freedom, honour and dignity. The vagina, Estina Bronzario, isn't a come-rag. . . . I freed them from all the "that's what women are for" filth. I gave them a heart, a soul, a purpose. Thanks to me, they know now that the penis isn't an instrument of terror, a see-saw, or a juice-shooter, but our third eye. If you want them to be free to pass on lice and disease, you'll have to wait until I'm dead. (38)

On first glance at the quote it would appear that Sarngata Nola is interested in women's freedom but his interest lies in exploiting them and his exploitation of them is no less

violent than mutilating their bodies. While it may be true that Sarngata Nola rescues his wives from a life of prostitution, it is also true that he has put them under a different thralldom in which, though free from prostitution, are inevitably condemned to serving his own economic whim. This is a new kind of slavery and a different form of oppression in which the absence of prostitution provides the illusion of freedom. The difference between the previous life of prostitution and the life of erotic dancing is not so clear because the patronage of his performance depends largely on the seductiveness and the erotic movements of these women. In the present regime, they are brought directly under the male gaze where their objectification as sex symbols is total. The women have only moved from one oppressive situation to another and the assertion that Sarngata Nola makes that his wives are free cannot be further from the truth. They are still objects of male desire and they are not freer than when they allegedly were prostitutes. Instead of freeing them, he has re-inscribed them within the patriarchal repressive system. But Sarngata Nola's representation cannot be explained exclusively in terms of oppression; the women's portrayal as social spectacle functions also in two fundamental ways. The first has to do with their "performance" of prostitution and their erotic dances which must be understood in terms of the carnival, through which social taboos of sexuality are mimicked and destabilized. In other words, the carnival-like performance of the women functions as transgression of social norms about sexuality especially if this interpretation is predicated on the women's act and not Sarngata Nola's discourse women's liberation. The second point, which is a corollary of the first, is that the open mention of sexuality signifies the destabilization of the symbolic order, which is why we cannot interpret the women's performance as a normalization of heterosexual imaginary. The narrator's

indiscriminate use of sexual references shatters the demand for social decorum and reinforces the women's subversion of sexual norms; the fact that Valancia is a marvelous setting already repudiates the official language, supplanted by the carnivalesque.

Not even Sarngata Nola can escape the brutal force of the dominant political group located in Nsanga-Norda despite the authority that he wields over his wives. Carlanzo Mana announces his determination to murder Sarngata Nola and Estina Bronzario. The entry of Carlanzo Mana into the crisis in Valancia signifies government's intervention in a situation marked by unending chaos. Unfortunately, the government's participation functions specifically to escalate the chaos and not to mitigate it. Therefore, women's original move to stem the tide of male violent rule over Valancia ends up being no more than a "storm in a tea cup." Carlanzo Mana becomes the major threat that beleaguers the town even though everyone, as seen above, is guilty of exacerbating the violent situation. The frightening part of this crisis is that the people's inability to resist Carlanzo Mana's threats gradually turns to accepting his power as inevitable; this implies that the tremendous cruel and brutal power he holds over Valancia is normalized. In relation to the threat to murder Estina Bronzario, the narrator says, "[a]t the time, the people of the Coast called Estina Bronzario 'the Lady of Bronze', or 'the Mucandi', that is, she who will be killed. We didn't know if they were going to kill her before or after Sarngata Nola, but no one in Valancia was in any doubt that Estina Bronzario would be killed. Perhaps one morning, under the loutish midday sun? Or one night? We had no idea. Lorsa Lopez had barked one evening that she would be killed down by the bayou" (67).

This passage accentuates the argument that while the inhabitants of Valancia are victims of state-ordered attacks, they are vicarious participants in this reign of terror.

They are aware of the impending terror on Valancia and are nonchalant about it; they simply acknowledge and accept its inevitability which, rather than inspiring a confrontation with Carlanzo Mana and his invisible killer squad, they end up normalizing this imminent doom looming over Valancia. We should acknowledge, however, that corporate violence and patriarchal force seem to complement each other. That Lorsa Lopez could predict the time and place of Estina Bronzario's death indicates either he is privy to the information or that the tendency to murder has become so instinctive that he easily predicts the condition of Estina Bronzario's murder. And just as he predicts, Estina Bronzario is murdered accordingly. The narrator observes, "we heard someone shouting and we all turned round to face the direction of Nsanga-Norda. We saw Fartamio Andra coming from the bayou. . . . She was shouting . . . 'Estina Bronzario's been killed! What a disaster!' As at the time of Estina Benta's murder, everyone crossed themselves as Fartamio Andra passed. 'God! What a disaster! They've killed her!' (98) By shouting "Estina Bronzario's been killed! What a disaster!' . . . They've killed her!" the people are mourning the loss of Estina Bronzario but more importantly, they are declaring their complicity in her death without knowing it. Their reaction is consistent with the general reactionary attitude towards organized and personalized form of violence. At the end of the novel, when no one knows exactly if Carlanzo Mana is actually the one responsible for Estina Bronzario's murder, political terror assumes its marvelous dimension mentioned earlier; that is, the ability to traverse space and being able to enter and exit Valancia while the inhabitants of Valancia are unable to escape the claustrophobia of their town. The anonymity of Estina Bronzario's murderer is a phenomenon that completes the marvelous capacity of the political power located in Nsanga-Norda. It is

probably because of this overwhelming supernatural power of the state that intervention in this nightmare (the storm and flood that eventually destroys Nsanga-Norda, promising the people of Valancia a new beginning and a possible end to their nightmare) is portrayed with the tropes of the marvelous.

Seven Solitudes is a text that has made it possible to capture the sense of horror that characterizes the post-independent Congos, and the tyrannical power of the political machinery located at Nsanga-Norda may also speak to Mobutu Sese Seko's Zaire. Whether the then Zaire or Congo Brazzaville are immediate referents of *Seven Solitudes* or not, the condition of horror resonates with many West African and Central African nation-states particularly in the 1980s when military dictatorship ravaged many African countries. More specifically, though Mobutu Sese Seko might have ruled the then Zaire, his repressive force and authoritarianism haunted the two Congos and other neighboring countries, which is why the claustrophobic condition of Valancia, the violent deaths of its inhabitants especially Estina Benta, Elmano Zola and Estina Bronzario, and the graphic description of these murders evince the suitability of horror to *Seven Solitudes*. However, examining the novel from the perspective of horror is not without fundamental problems that must be acknowledged. If the basis for horror consists in the graphic display of guts, blood, snot, and if it appeals to our sense of fear, disgust and terror, *Seven Solitudes* definitely is comparable to classic horror fiction as in 18th century and nineteenth century horror fiction, typical of the Gothic literature and fantasy literature of the nineteenth century. *Seven Solitudes* must be seen, according to Moudileno's emphasis on Sony Labou Tansi's fiction, as a text that is intertextual in nature because its formal properties embrace not just the Gothic horror, but also science fiction (32). Others include elements

of surrealism (as in human meat that is indistinguishable from animal flesh), magical realism (like the tree by the coast with the ability to grow back its foliage as soon as it is cut down), and the marvelous real (that manifests itself in the terror produced by disproportionate power relations between dominant and dominated groups), and so on. This last point features more conspicuously in the overall argument: that is, *Seven Solitudes* self-consciously dramatizes the horror of a post-colonial African nation-state by capturing the proliferation of violence not just by official agents of governmental power, but also by individuals and groups. Horror in this novel definitely has many manifestations which have already been mentioned and it is through them that the nightmare of post-independence has been captured.

However, because *Seven Solitudes* possesses some of the cardinal elements of Gothic literature, one have to ask if it also inherits its contradiction in terms of whether or not it destabilizes official discourses of power including dominant discourses of fiction. The fact that fantasy literature and Gothic fiction usually occupy the margins of Western social and political discourse tends to confine the disruption caused by intruding supernatural agents within isolated contexts, thereby legitimating and consolidating the values and hegemony of bourgeois culture. Faris in her discussion of the relation between magical realism and Gothic fiction suggests:

> Unlike Gothic fictional dwellings, magical realist houses do not isolate their magic but instead provide focal points for its dispersal. They are openings from which it spreads into the world around it and receivers through which it welcomes cosmic forces, which may either terrorize before ultimately refreshing it. . . . But most important for women's narratives, the domestic sphere in these magically real

houses is usually not closed in on itself in isolation but opened outward into communal and cosmic life, as proven by the ghosts from other times and places that wander through some of them. (182)

Faris contends further saying, "the fantastic has played a defensive role, validating the status quo, modifying 'hegemonic discourse in order to justify the survival of bourgeois society.' It did this by locating unreason in confined spaces where it represented the cultural metaphor of marginality. Some of magical realism perpetuates this trope, particularly, as in Gothic fiction, in the phenomenon of the haunted house . . ." (160). Bloom seems to corroborate this argument when he states that "the malevolent spirit or hellbound demon, . . . reassure[s] and affirm[s] values even as they terrorize us" (162). Despite the potential reactionary bent of horror, one must also acknowledge, as Donna Heiland contends, that horror transgresses dominant and oppressive discourses so that at best, horror is ambivalent towards established structures of power (4). Meanwhile, *Seven Solitudes* thematizes a peculiar form of horror through which it mimics, deconstructs and lampoons the arbitrary, yet excessive deployment of violence by dominant and unofficial units of power. *Seven Solitudes* may share the elements and contradictions of horror, but one thing is sure, it is not ambitious or overly optimistic about restoring of order and tranquility which is central and indispensable to Gothic fiction and fantasy literature. At the end of the novel Estina Bronzario is murdered while the fact that the people are unable to determine the perpetrator implies that all of them are in danger. Order, tranquility and reassurance, are far from Valancia; they are far from the postcolonial world of *Seven Solitudes*.

Chapter 3: Representing the Unrepresentable

> Several voices shouted at the same time:
>
> "Get down! Get down!"
>
> The people in front had already done so, swept down by the wave of bullets. The survivors, instead of getting down, tried to go back to the small square, and the panic became a dragon's tail as one compact wave ran against another which was moving in the opposite direction, toward the other dragon's tail in the street across the way, where the machine guns were also firing without cease. They were penned in, swirling about in a gigantic whirlwind that little by little was being reduced to its epicenter as the edges were systematically being cut off all around like an onion being peeled by the insatiable and methodical shears of the machine guns.
>
> Gabriel García Márquez, *One Hundred Years of Solitude* (329)

One of the significant moments in Gabriel García Márquez's *One Hundred Years of Solitude* is the historic strike conducted by the workers of the Banana Company. The strike takes place because the workers, particularly José Arcadio Segundo, decides to protest the company exploitative practices and their main demand is that they "they not be obliged to cut and load bananas on Sundays" (*Solitude* 319). Miraculously, José Arcadio Segundo is the sole survivor of this massacre; what follows is the battle over which version of the event will be accepted. This implies that José Arcadio Segundo's version of one of the most ruthless massacres in the history of Macondo struggles against the official version. For the despotic government of Macondo, the massacre did not take place. Yet, José Arcadio Segundo's experience of the massacre is gruesome and that the event occurred cannot be denied.

There are two problems that the survivor faces right away. The first is that he is automatically launched onto the plain field of the production of historical knowledge, which means he has to account for the event and cannot rely simply on the fact that the massacre takes place. In essence, he has to contend with the official version of the event as the government denies the event altogether. It is not surprising that the people of Macondo merely adopt the government's report on the occurrence, even when their family members are still missing or are dragged away from them. As the narrator recounts, "[t]he official version, repeated a thousand times and mangled out all over the country by every means of communication the government found at hand, was finally accepted" (333).

The second problem has to do with José Arcadio Segundo's rendition of the massacre; that is, no one can deny the massacre as a factual event, but it is impossible to narrativize it in order to reverse the amnesia that now plagues Macondo on the one hand, and on the other, to refute the government's claim that the massacre did not take place. To worsen the case for him, José Arcadio Segundo could not convince anyone that the event took place despite his efforts to discuss with as many people as possible. The main challenge he faces is to represent an event which is no longer representable; his inability to convince the people of Macondo that the massacre took place or his failure to reverse the official version of the tragedy is not entirely because of the government's propaganda machine or the people credulity. The issue that *One Hundred Years of Solitude* foregrounds in the massacre and its account is the problem that is inherent in language on the one hand and in memory on the other. In other words, in an attempt to "represent the unrepresentable," José Arcadio Segundo confronts two different, yet similar problems:

the first has to do with what Paul Ricoeur describes as "the aporia of the representation of an absent something that once happened" (135-36), while the second has to do with the deferment of signification which implies that since the event has been lost in time and space, it is beyond the reach of language to capture. In *One Hundred Years of Solitude*, marvelous events are not totally dependent on endless trail of blood, the capacity for humans to fly into the sky or humans growing a tail. The marvelous in this novel is contingent upon the horror of history and the process of producing historical knowledge, which, as has been seen from the above example, becomes problematic as soon as the event enters into the symbolic order. Whether it is a specific historical moment like the massacre or it has to do with the notion of reality, the role of language is to capture the occurrence, but at the same time, one should be aware that language also fails to capture the event.

This thematic concern in *One Hundred Years of Solitude* can also be found in Salman Rushdie's *Midnight's Children*, a novel in which the problem of representing the horror of reality, the horror of history and the originary beliefs through which the horrors are justified, is foregrounded. Central to *Midnight's Children* are two violent events: the State of Emergency that the then Indian Prime Minister, Indira Ghandi, declared in the 1970s and the bloodbath that characterized the nationalist war between India and Pakistan, arising from the partitioning shortly after independence in 1947. Although *Midnight's Children* cannot be reduced to the marvelous in the way that the marvelous functions as underlying structure of *One Hundred Years of Solitude*, their similarity in terms of depicting history and reality as horror, and their similarity in regard to the limitation of language and memory in representing the past, is striking. The problem of

representing the horror of the Emergency is immediately apparent when the protagonist of the novel, Saleem Sinai declares, "[s]omewhere in the many moves of the peripatetic slum, they had mislaid their powers of retention, so that now they had become incapable of judgment, having forgotten everything to which they could compare anything that happened. Even the Emergency was rapidly being consigned to the oblivion of the past" (*Midnight's Children* 512). Here, Saleem Sinai confronts an audience similar to the one in *One Hundred Years of Solitude*, which fails to believe that a tragic event has taken place. In Rushdie's novel, this population does not dispute the Emergency and the unthinkable violence that characterizes it; the challenge that Saleem struggles with is that this horrific event is already being overtaken by amnesia to the point that the Emergency is already becoming a myth. The Indian government's strategy is not unconnected to the propaganda machine that the Colombian government employs in *One Hundred Years of Solitude*. It is on account of this that Saleem tells states that "[t]oday, the papers are talking about the supposed rebirth of Mrs. Indira Ghandi; but when I returned to India, concealed in a wicker basket, 'The Madam' was basking in the fullness of her glory. Today, perhaps, we are already forgetting, sinking willingly into the insidious clouds of amnesia" (443). The idea that the people are already forgetting the atrocities that Indira Ghandi committed during the Emergency is shocking to Saleem; however, the fact that Saleem is worried that collective memory of the Emergency is disappearing does not imply that the novel records the event faithfully. Contrary to a faithful representation of these atrocities, *Midnight's Children* thematizes the problematic nature of reality; that is, the novel is an account of the war of partition and the horror of the Emergency, but it is

also a testament to the limitation of language and memory in representing cataclysmic events. In essence, *Midnight's Children* attempts to represent the unrepresentable.

Interestingly enough, this is not a problem new neither to literature or critical theory, nor specifically about the relationship of literature to reality. In the recent past, that is in the last century this problem became central to modernism. Modernism, in challenging the logic of modernity, that is, in its questioning of notions of order, meaning and progress, rejects the notion of art as a reflection of reality. It is for this reason that one of the major casualties of this modernist attack is the realist novel, specifically, its assumption that art can represent reality "as it is." The fact that the realist novel is contingent on representing reality does not imply that its relationship to reality is mimetic. Far from being mimetic, the relationship between the realist novel and reality is one predicated on a doctrine of the real that aspires to capture reality in a graphic sense. Modernist novels such as James Joyce's *Finnegan's Wake* (1939) and Virginia Woolf's *Mrs Dalloway* (1925) are a conscious attempt to challenge the notion of reflection of reality that was so central to realism, which is why meaning and "the subject" are fragmented in a way that resists realist pretension to wholeness and unity of space and time.

The same fragmentation of meaning, indeterminacy of signification, instability of space and time also constitute some of the cardinal characteristics of postmodernism. However, the main difference between modernism's disintegration of the subject and meaning and postmodernism's reflection of the same is that while modernism laments the disappearance of wholeness and unity, postmodernism celebrates fragmentation and plurality. Also, because modernism expresses a kind of anguish over the subject that no

longer possesses a center, it still sympathizes with the loss of that unified subject and aspires towards wholeness and unity even when such a dream is clearly unattainable. Postmodernism has an ultimately decentering impulse through which hierarchical structures of knowledge are destabilized. In *A Poetics of Postmodernism: History, Theory, Fiction*, Hutcheon asserts:

> Postmodern art . . . asserts and then deliberately undermines such principles as value, order, meaning, control and identity . . . that have been the basic premises of bourgeois liberalism. Those humanistic principles are still operative in our culture, but for many they are no longer seen as eternal and unchallengeable. The contradictions of both postmodern theory and practice are positioned within the system and yet work to allow its premises to be seen as fictions or as ideological structures. This does not necessarily destroy their "truth" value, but it does define the conditions of that "truth." Such a process reveals rather than conceals the tracks of signifying systems that constitute our world – that is, systems constructed by us in answer to our needs. (13)

There is no doubt that Rushdie's *Midnight's Children* is an attempt to draw attention to its signifying process in a way that fits Hutcheon's theory of postmodernism. It is no coincidence that Hutcheon categorizes *Midnight's Children* in a group of literature she calls "historiographic metafiction," by which she implies, "those well-known and popular novels which are both intensely self-reflexive and yet paradoxically also lay claim to historical events and personages" (5). But since these issues, that it, the fragmentation of meaning in modernism and postmodernism's deconstruction of grand narratives, are no longer new, one should examine the relevance of this discussion to Rushdie's *Midnight's*

Children. The key issue is the relation of the foregoing to postcolonial discourse; that is, the notions of fragmentation of meaning and the problem of representing reality, which are so germane to modernism and postmodernism must be foregrounded. This is not to say that there exists no link between postmodernism and postcolonialism, but one must not assume that this link is absolute so as to avoid overgeneralizing about the relationship of the two concepts; or, one may end up occluding the idiosyncratic perspectives of postcolonial discourse. However, to examine how the postcolonial critical enterprise challenges orthodoxy and "immutability" of meaning in relation to reality is not an unproblematic exercise, especially since some texts that are considered postmodern also pass for postcolonial. In this situation, any attempt to distinguish the postmodern from the postcolonial runs the risk of fetishizing their assumed differences; conversely, to establish their similarity is also to risk conflating them. For instance, García Márquez's *One Hundred of Solitude* and Rushdie's *Midnight's Children* are texts that are uniquely postmodern primarily because of their unrelenting self-reflexivity and anti-mimetic mode. They are also postcolonial in the sense that they undermine values of universality and absolutism, which are cornerstones of imperialism during the colonial period or despotism after the official termination of colonialism. The interesting thing is that these two texts, in different ways, are also postcolonial based on the features which make them postmodern. In other words, self-reflexivity, disintegration of meaning, the problem of representing reality, which are quintessential elements of postmodernism, function within postcolonial contexts to undermine not merely bourgeois values, but also manifestations of hierarchical structures and forms of authority within postcolonial literature and societies.

Again, Hutcheon distinguishes postmodernism from postcolonial discourse by arguing that "[w]hile it is true that post-colonial literature . . . is also inevitably implicated and . . . 'informed by the imperial vision,' . . . it still possesses a strong political motivation that is intrinsic to its oppositionality. However, as can be seen by its recuperation (and rejection) by both the Right and the Left, postmodernism is politically ambivalent: its critique coexists with an equally powerful complicity with the cultural domination within which it inescapably exists" ("Circling the Downspout of Empire" 130). Relying on Hutcheon, Tiffin, During and Slemon, Fletcher corroborates Hutcheon's assertion about postcolonial literature being more politically motivated than postmodern literature (*Reading Rushdie* 6). Admittedly, the political concern of postcolonial literature cannot be denied, but it will be misleading to conclude that it can be distinguished from postmodern literature solely because of its political commitment. The "truth" of the matter is that as Rushdie's *Midnight's Children* shows, the decentralizing impulse of the fiction, disintegration of meaning and the fragmentation of the subject, are not always so easy to separate from the political aim of the text because being skeptical of totalizations, they are already implicated in a political agenda. More important is the fact that because *Midnight's Children*, to some extent, tends towards the marvelous real, the problem of capturing reality within an imperial context and post-independence dictatorships is already foregrounded. The marvelous world of *Midnight's Children* is marked by an instability of the sign, which implies that the symbolic order, though not to be escaped, is constantly threatened precisely because of the fluidity of the marvelous universe, where "meaning" is always relative and subject to endless possibilities.

This skepticism toward immanent meaning and the representation of reality is an issue that dominates Rushdie's *Midnight's Children* and it manifests in Saleem's discourse on the nations, India and Pakistan; it manifests in Saleem's contemplation of himself as a subject and also surfaces whenever he discusses the status of his writing as history. All these are legitimate angles to examine the text, but the focus here will be, specifically, how *Midnight's Children* attempts to "represent the unrepresentable." Put differently, the task at hand will be to interrogate how Rushdie's text negotiates the problem of representing reality. But the question of reality in *Midnight's Children* is not simply a concatenation of quotidian activities; the issue that is at stake in this novel has to do with the reality of history and how it can be represented. This will include primarily events of cataclysmic proportions in the novel, which are at the same time events of historical significance to India as a nation.

However, one should also mention that investigating how *Midnight's Children* attempts to represent the unrepresentable will turn on the general problem of representation already central to the text. In other words, the challenge in capturing horrific events is not an isolated one in the text, but is just one manifestation of the problem of representation. It is for this reason that it is pertinent to make reference to other parts of the text that may not directly concern these horrific events but which have intertextual relations to one another. For instance, in the beginning of the novel Saleem states "[a]nd there are so many stories to tell, too many, such all excess of intertwined lives events miracles places rumors, so dense a commingling of the improbable and the mundane! I have been a swallower of lives; and to know me, just the one of me, you'll have to swallow the lot as well" (*Midnight's Children* 4). In essence, the various thematic

shifts in this novel are exclusive of one another but are interrelated just like the way in which Saleem's private life has been "handcuffed to history" (*Midnight's Children* 3).

However, to interpret the violence in *Midnight's Children* in terms of the novel's multiple narratives does not clarify the question of reality, or more specifically, of representation. In other words, one still needs to understand how the novel gives an account of its many violent moments resulting from the partition and the Emergency. But, to claim that *Midnight's Children* represents the unrepresentable is a paradox precisely because the narrator, Saleem, gives a description of carnage and terror and thus would seem able to represent the unrepresentable. If Saleem can give a description of the battlefield, littered with human bodies in grotesque forms, it appears that he could still represent these violent events.

The fact that he could describe what he sees does not mean that the portrayal of the events is entirely successful. This narrative operation is a complex one and it is pertinent that one turns to Julia Kristeva's notion of the relationship between what she calls "the thetic" and "the semiotic" in *Revolution in Poetic Language*, in order to formulate a model that can partly explain Saleem's encounter with violence and carnage. Kristeva describes the thetic as belonging to the realm of signification; that is, the thetic belongs in the symbolic order and adds that the thetic is required for all forms of enunciation. She explains:

> [w]e shall distinguish the semiotic from the realm of signification, which is always that of a proposition or judgment, in other words, a realm of *positions*. This positionality . . . is structured as a break in the signifying process, establishing the *identification* of the subject and its object as preconditions of propositionality. We

shall call this break, which produces the positing of signification, a *thetic* phase. All enunciation, whether of a word or of a sentence, is thetic. (43)

It then follows that if all enunciation requires the thetic, it certainly applies to *Midnight's Children*. However, the thetic by itself does not explain the narrative of the novel especially the one that concerns scenes of violence. The way the thetic is presented here requires Kristeva to situate it within the language of psychoanalysis. She explains the thetic as the concept that "permits the constitution of the symbolic with its vertical stratification . . . and all the subsequent modalities of logico-semantic articulation. The thetic originates in the 'mirror stage' . . . no signifying practice can be without it" (62). Of course, the mirror stage is the point of recognition; but Jacques Lacan argues that it is also the realm of the imaginary because this recognition is an illusion—rather than recognition, it is misrecognition. [3] The psychoanalytic angle that Kristeva introduces has to do mainly with the constitution of subjectivity, but it is intimately tied to the functioning of language. That is, the way that a child perceives itself during the pre-oedipal stage as whole, unified and spatially bound, is similar to the way an event is represented and also similar to the way that objects and experiences function within the symbolic order. Kristeva argues that "the mirror stage produces the 'spatial intuition' which is found at the heart of the functioning of signification. . . . [I]n order to capture his image unified in the mirror, the child must remain separate from it, his body agitated by the semantic motility" (46). The idea of reflection at the mirror stage resonates partially

[3] Terry Eagleton elaborates on Lacanian psychoanalysis by suggesting that "[t]he image which the small child sees in the mirror is [...] an 'alienated' one: the child 'misrecognizes' itself in it, finds in the image a pleasing unity which it does not actually experience in its own body. The imaginary for Lacan is precisely this realm of *images* in which we make identifications, but in the very act of doing so are led to misperceive and misrecognize ourselves" (143).

with the notion of art as reflection of reality, an idea that is fundamental to the operation of realism. According to Kristeva, the kind of image the child desires to capture is a unified one, which when applied to external reality translates to an entity that is graspable as whole, coherent and unified. The thetic must be viewed as subjective positioning, which constitutes a break in the signifying process. This thetic break, according to Gutkin, creates a "barrier between the semiotic and the signifying process" [4] and this barrier "is constantly being renegotiated" (10). Similarly, Oliver elaborates on the thetic break by arguing that "[t]he threshold of the symbolic is what Kristeva calls the 'thetic' phase, which emerges out of the mirror stage" (2). Oliver explains further that the relation between the semiotic and the symbolic must be seen as a dialectic oscillation; it is a process through which subjective positions are formulated but also challenged by the intervention of the semiotic. Ultimately, this oscillation makes possible the intrusion of the semiotic in order to destabilize the symbolic order (2). This means that by extension, if one applies the thetic by itself to the novel, it would speak directly to the representational logic of realism. After all, the child who "recognizes" itself, though to a large extent unaware of it, is simply constructing an idea of itself; basically, the child is trying to represent itself.

Meanwhile, to appreciate how the thetic might help to grapple with *Midnight's Children*, one must place it side by side with the semiotic. Kristeva says of the semiotic, "[t]hough absolutely necessary, the thetic is not exclusive: the semiotic . . . constantly tears it open, and this transgression brings about all the various transformations of the

[4] For Kristeva, "the semiotic" constitutes the force that always threatens "the thetic" by disturbing the stability of signs. However, the semiotic does not just disturb the symbolic order, but it tries to destroy it; but because the thetic always constitutes and reconstitutes the sign, the semiotic cannot destroy the thetic entirely. Their relation provides the basis for the functioning of language.

signifying practice that are called 'creation' " (62). From this notion of the semiotic, it is clear that the relationship between the thetic and the semiotic is both antagonistic and complementary in the sense that the thetic homogenizes and totalizes while the semiotic transgresses. It is this transgressive function of the semiotic that Kristeva implies when she says, "a text, in order to hold together as a text, did . . . require a completion, . . . a structuration, a kind of totalization" (51), precisely because it is this totalized representation that the semiotic destabilizes and through which the symbolic order is disturbed. The semiotic, for which Kristeva sometimes substitutes textual experience or practice, performs a destructive role in the sense that it destroys the basis of social representation within the context of the thetic. This combative relationship between the thetic and the semiotic can be explained further in the passage below where the foundationalist tendency of the thetic is juxtaposed with the transgressive attribute of the semiotic:

> The thetic—that crucial place on the basis of which the human being constitutes himself as signifying and/or social—is the very place textual experience aims toward. In this sense, textual experience is one of the most daring explorations the subject can allow himself, one that delves into his constitutive process. But at the same time as a result, textual experience reaches the very foundation of the social—that which is exploited by sociality but which elaborates and go beyond it, either destroying or transforming it. (67)

It should be stated that the functioning of the thetic and the semiotic refers directly to the signifying process and nowhere does Kristeva make reference to scenes of violence, which is why her theory of representation should not be confused with theory of violence.

But her notion of the signifying process certainly provides a model, not only for representing the carnage in *Midnight's Children*, but also all forms of representation which must include the constitution of identity or representation of reality. But more importantly, the semiotic disturbs the representability of reality by destroying the foundation of the thetic and consequently, it destroys reality as a coherent and unified entity.

This model differs from that of Lyotard in *The Postmodern Condition: A Report on Knowledge*. For Lyotard, realism is synonymous with horror and terror and that is why towards the end of his text he argues that one must do away with realism and embrace the language of the avant-garde. Realism, he believes assumes that reality is representable whereas, it is unrepresentable, which is why he cites Kant's idea of the sublime, the inability of the senses to grasp infinite beauty, an idea that Lyotard appropriates for his skepticism of realism. Lyotard argues further:

> it must be clear that it is our business not to supply reality but to invent allusions to the conceivable which cannot be presented. And it is not to be expected that this task will effect the last reconciliation between language games . . . and that only the transcendental illusion (that of Hegel) can hope to totalize them into a real unity. But Kant also knew that the price to pay for such an illusion is terror. The nineteenth and twentieth centuries have given us as much terror as we can take. We have paid a high enough price for the nostalgia of the whole and the one, for the reconciliation of the concept and the sensible, of the transparent and the communicable experience. Under the general demand for slackening and for appeasement, we can hear the mutterings of the desire for a return of terror, for the

> realization of the fantasy to seize reality. The answer is: Let us wage a war on totality; let us be witnesses to the unpresentable. (81-82)

This quote, to some extent, resonates with the reality of *Midnight's Children* specifically because the partition of Pakistan and India was a way of establishing identity and effectively totalizing identity. But the consequence of the partition is the bloodbath, which becomes one of the major subjects of the second half of *Midnight's Children*, and Rushdie alludes to it at the beginning of *Shame*, where refugees from both sides endure the anguish of the partition. Because realism tends to totalize experience, the danger of unifying or totalizing experience is hinted at in the above passage when Lyotard refers, though vaguely, to the tragedies of twentieth century like the carnage of the First and Second World Wars, and the genocide committed against Jews based on Hitler's illusion of ethnic or racial superiority. When he says, "[t]he nineteenth and twentieth centuries have given us as much terror as we can take. We have paid a high enough price for the nostalgia of the whole and the one, for the reconciliation of the concept and the sensible, of the transparent and the communicable experience" (81-2), it is clear that one can only be "witnesses to the unpresentable" (82). There is no doubt that one is supposed to renounce totalization; while it makes sense to do so and to embrace what Lyotard, in his criticism of certain unmentioned critics, calls "avant-gardes ["spread a reign of terror"] in the use of language" (71), totalization seems to be repudiated fully. Although Jameson alleges in *Postmodernism: or the Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism* that Lyotard formulated his notion of postmodernism more in terms of the social than the aesthetic, he agrees that Lyotard's "analyses turn on the antirepresentational thrust of modernism and postmodernism" (60). However, in order to grapple with the place that violence and

bloodbath takes in *Midnight's Children*, one cannot avoid reproducing totalized representation precisely because it constitutes a fundamental part of the signifying process as seen in the relationship of the thetic and the semiotic; the novel itself reproduces this totalized representation not so much as to validate it but to highlight its limitations. Therefore, the approach to *Midnight's Children* will reflect not only how it epitomizes the impossibility of representing reality, but also how totalized representation is invoked and reproduced, but more importantly how it is undermined.

Midnight's Children: Towards Representing the Unrepresentable

Salman Rushdie's works have received much critical attention especially on issues of migrancy and history; critics have also focused on his texts' self-referentiality. For instance, Hassumani in her book, *Salman Rushdie: A Postmodern Reading of His Major Works*, stresses the "enabling power of hybridity" in *Midnight's Children*" (31). Cundy in *Salman Rushdie* argues that Rushdie's texts are an attempt to reclaim the past, emphasizing how reclaiming the past is "subject to vagaries of memory on which its reconstruction relies" (33). Kortenaar observes in *Self, Nation, Text in Salman Rushdie's Midnight's Children* that Rushdie's skepticism about the nationalism is juxtaposed with the inevitable oscillation between nationalism and cosmopolitanism (10). In *Salman Rushdie: Fictions and Postcolonial Modernity*, Morton suggests that *Midnight's Children* explores the relationship between terror and freedom as the condition of postcolonial modernity (34). Morton also highlights the connection between the partition and violence, especially the displacement of India's Muslim population (13). Most of these critics offer valid observations of Rushdie's works and particularly, *Midnight's Children*; and while others, like Morton, identify the centrality of violence in the novel, the

question of how this violence is represented is still an issue. That is, one cannot deny the tragic consequences of the partition in *Midnight's Children*, but it is equally important to explore how the bloodbath that features prominently in the second half of the book is represented.

One of the ways in which *Midnight's Children* attempts to undermine the discourse of nationalism is the role Rushdie ascribes to Saleem. One finds Saleem, who is born an Indian but is forced to fight in post-partition period, on Pakistani soil. The fact that he is caught between the two national sides emphasizes the ambivalence of national consciousness and it underscores the triviality of expressing such patriotic sentiments, although the monumental scale of violence cannot be considered trivial at all. Located between India and Pakistan (although Saleem prefers India to Pakistan because India for him is hybrid and culturally fluid while Pakistan is repressive), Saleem becomes a witness to mindless atrocities following the partition and Indira Ghandi's reign of terror. It is crucial for to examine his experience on his return to India after his conscription into the Pakistani army. Saleem describes a scene of battle as follows:

> There was a small pyramid in the middle of the field. Ants were crawling over it, but it was not an anthill. The pyramid had six feet and three heads and in between, a jumbled area composed of bits of torso, scraps of uniforms, lengths of intestine and glimpses of shattered bones. The pyramid was still alive. One of its three heads had a blind eye, the legacy of a childhood argument. Another had hair that was thickly plastered down with hair oil. The third head was the oldest: it had deep hollows where the temples should have been, hollows that could have been made by a gynecologist's forceps which had held it too tightly at birth. (429)

This is an extremely disturbing scene for Saleem and for the reader because on Saleem's return to India he has to make sense of the aftermath of the partition, which involves confronting this scene of battle. More importantly, he has just witnessed an extermination of his friends, those he fondly calls "the midnight's children." With a close examination of the above passage, it is clear that it is not a quintessentially marvelous or magical realist narrative; but it does not follow that *Midnight's Children* is self-consciously complicit with the realist mode of representation. Even though the novel does not valorize realism, it cannot escape it precisely because the marvelous real and magical realism are contingent on juxtaposing realist and supernatural events. In fact, for the narrative of *Midnight's Children* to remain magical realist or marvelous, it must function simultaneously within both realist and supernatural modes or else it would soar into the realm of fantasy. The significance of highlighting this realist aspect of *Midnight's Children* lies in the centrality of Kristeva's notion of "the thetic," which is fundamental to all signifying systems. Just as "the thetic" in Kristeva's formulation always sets up the position of the subject, and "the semiotic" always disrupts the symbolic order, *Midnight's Children* self-consciously undermines the status of the realist narrative through the introduction of the marvelous dimension on the one hand, and historiographic metafiction on the other.

Midnight's Children foregrounds realist narrative and disrupts it in the passage below in which Saleem and his friends from Pakistan (Ayooba, Shaheed and Farooq) enter into the squalid part of the town, bearing witness to the devastation that result from the battle between India and Pakistan:

> I returned to that city in which . . . Shaheed and I saw many things which were not true, which were not possible, because our boys would not could not have behaved so badly; we saw men in spectacles with heads like eggs being shot in the streets, we saw the intelligentsia of the city being massacred by the hundred, but it was not true because it could not have been true, . . . we moved through the impossible hallucination of the night, . . . there were slit throats being buried in unmarked grave. (432)

Just as in the previous passage, Saleem recounts their encounter with horrific scenes of violence but the main difference between the two is that in this second one, he emphasizes their immediate perception of these atrocities. Both witness scenes of carnage where the battle has been concluded and those in which the killings are still going on. Shaheed's reaction to this horror launches the narrative onto the marvelous plane precisely because what they witness becomes an impossible experience. It is crucial to understand that from the points of view of the two parties, the carnage is not only understandable, it is a logical consequence of their beliefs in maintaining their borders. In their perception and beliefs about the war and its tragic consequences one finds out that the thetic is operative precisely because it pertains directly to their positioning, which is necessary for signification. But one must also realize that their positioning—the thetic—is inadequate to provide o frame that would enable them to comprehend their experience, which is why "the unrepresentable" and Saleem's self-reflexivity almost always disrupt this individual positioning. In addition, the marvelous dimension of this passage is not contingent on the perspectives of the Indian and Pakistani fighters and administrators for whom the war and killings are necessary

governmental policy. For the government and the soldiers, the killings have logical explanation. However, if one examines Shaheed's reaction-- "No, Buddha—what a thing, Allah, you can't believe your eyes—no, not true, how can it—buddha, tell, what's got into my eyes?" (432)-- we would notice that the events and scenes which Saleem describes above make no logical sense for Shaheed, and he is unable to provide a rational explanation for what he sees. More importantly, the certainty of Saleem's narrative is questioned when placed side by side with Shaheed's who is unable to believe what he sees. Shaheed's response also problematizes Saleem's temporary reliance on optical perception, because in his version of the events, expressions such as "Shaheed and I saw," "we saw men in spectacles" and "we saw the intelligentsia of the city," underscore Saleem's dependence on his sense of sight, an indication that he is to some extent operating within realism. However, the fact that he says, "we moved through the impossible hallucination," tells one that the marvelous dimension of this passage is realized by both Shaheed's and Saleem's perception of the events. In comparison to Saleem's partial dependence on the sense of sight, Shaheed does not display the kind of certainty found in Saleem's narrative especially when Shaheed asks the question, "what's got into my eyes?" It is the illogicality of these experiences to both Shaheed and Saleem that gives the scenes their marvelous temperament, following Carpentier's explanation that the marvelous does not have to be invented through a dependence on fantasy but can be realized through an exploration of irrational and illogical tendency of history. When Carpentier says,

> There are still too many "adolescents who find pleasure in raping the fresh cadavers of beautiful, dead women" . . . who do not take into account that it would

> be more marvelous to rape them alive. The problem here is that many of them disguise themselves cheaply as magicians, forgetting that the marvelous begins to be unmistakably marvelous when it arises from an unexpected alteration of reality, . . . from . . . an unaccustomed insight that is singularly favored by the unexpected richness of reality or an amplification of the scale and categories of reality, perceived with particular intensity by virtue of an exaltation of the spirit that leads it to a kind of extreme state. (86)

his definition of the marvelous resonates with the implacable horror that Shaheed and Saleem witness, emphasizing the fact that history produces the marvelous through a representation of these horrific experiences. It is pertinent though, that one observes how the marvelous interrupts and destabilizes the realist narrative through which the scenes of horror are presented. The marvelous displaces the realist discourse and thereby, calls into question the certainty of "the fact" since privileging empirical fact is one of the fundamental basis of realism. By dismantling or at least challenging "the factuality" of violence, the marvelous narrative of *Midnight's Children* disrupts the very "truth" of experiential discourse that is germane to narratives or realist orientation. In another context, Kristeva argues, "[m]agic, shamanism, esoterism, the carnival, and 'incomprehensible' poetry all underscore the limits of socially useful discourse and attest to what it represses: the *process* that exceeds the subject and his communicative structures" (*Revolution* 16). One can conclude that the role that the narrativization of violence, and its marvelous bent, plays in *Midnight's Children* is to break the normative value of facticity thereby exposing the process through which the narrative is constructed rather than masking this process through the illusion of realism.

The signifying process is foregrounded further when in the same episode Saleem responds to Shaheed experience of terror:

> "O, Shaheeda," he said, revealing the depths of his fastidiousness, "a person must sometimes choose what he will see and what he will not; look away, look away from there now." But Shaheed was staring at a maidan in which lady doctors were being bayoneted before they were raped, and raped again before they were shot. Above them and behind them, the cool white minaret of a mosque stared blindly down upon the scene. (432)

By stating that "a person must sometimes choose what he will see and what he will not" and by telling Shaheed to "look away," they both face the reality of describing their experience; Saleem and readers understand the horrifying effects of witnessing a bloodbath and it is clear that it can be so shocking that, as Saleem advises Shaheed, one sometimes would have to look away primarily because the traumatic gravity of the event undermines the character's ability to come to terms with it, and also because the trauma destabilizes the thetic—the character's positioning regarding the war. Shaheed's reaction is enough to conclude that it is the shocking effect of the killings which underlies Saleem's advice to Shaheed to look away. This is a classic moment at which what they perceive fails to be adequately represented because it is an experience that stretches the limits of the subjective perspective on the real and the epistemological perspective of the real. These killings represent an "alteration of reality," which "leads to an extreme state" that Carpentier speaks about in his theory of the marvelous; it also constitutes the moment that language fails, thereby disrupting the normalization of the sign.

Another problem arises from the passage above: one does not have a choice but to question the whole narrative of *Midnight's Children*. Since Saleem advocates that one has to choose what one sees, it is safe to assume that this is a strategy that he practices in order to mediate the traumatic effects of violence. Saleem does not hide the fact that he chooses aspects of experiences he would rather see because he seems to be addressing the readers or himself when he talks to Shaheed—he is aware that "Shaheed could not hear" (432). Such a moment of self-reflexivity evinces the difficulty in representing a shocking experience such as Saleem and Shaheed witness; one is aware that the story (or stories) of this novel should not be considered "whole," "unified," or "total" precisely because the narrator has warned the readers not to expect a total story. It is a story with a lot of "its parts missing," since the narrator himself has decided to choose objects he observes. But such a move raises another concern: both realist and all anti-realist writings involve authorial choice, and if this is so the difference between a realist novel and a marvelous one in terms of representability of reality becomes crucial. Because the realist novel, according to Belsey in *Critical Practice*, has to create the illusion of reality, the reader is most certainly "sutured" into the narrative since the story would not draw attention to its constructivity. However, in a marvelous story like Rushdie's *Midnight's Children*, Saleem constantly refers to his process of writing through which he emphasizes the discursivity of the novel. Gurnah argues:

> Saleem's narration repeatedly refuses a linear narrative, anticipating, delaying, at times unable to resist blurting out the significance of an event to a future outcome, at other times appearing to struggle with admissions. Part of this is to do with the retrospective nature of the narrative, so that the meaning and significance of what

is narrated is already known to the narrator, and the drama is created as much by withholding as by revealing. Linear narrative in these circumstances will lie. (97)

Gurnah is right to focus on the novel's self-reflexivity and how the retrospective manner of the story would emphasize the text's discursive process. He seems to have stretched his argument a bit too far by asserting that in such cases linear narrative will "lie." What is at stake is not whether the narrative lies or not; the fact that linear narrative conceals its process of construction does not imply that it ultimately lies. That all literature involves making choices means that they all "lie." At the moment that Saleem tells us that one has to ignore certain realities for others, the fundamental issue is that certain experiences are too shocking for the senses to register their significance because events of horrific dimensions tend to develop a marvelous reality in *Midnight's Children.*

To clarify this point, one has to understand the circumstances that influence the writing of the novel, and if one is not able to ascertain Rushdie's physical, emotional and psychological reaction to the violent history of *Midnight's Children*, at least one is sure of Saleem's threnodic involvement. In other words, Saleem writes the story of *Midnight's Children* at a time that his body is undergoing disintegration, just as the tragic consequences of the partition caused India to disintegrate socially and politically. His main business lies in the pickle factory: what Saleem describes as "chutnification of history; the grand hope of the pickling of time!" through which he plans to document this tragic moment in his private life and India's history (529). However, the irony is already apparent in Saleem's cynicism about "the grand hope of the pickling of time!", which tells one immediately of the limitation of writing history. It is precisely because of the limitation of representing the nightmare of history that one has to see *Midnight's*

Children as a good example of historiographic metafiction. Rather than lay claim to the totality of experience, Saleem demonstrates the provisionality of historical accounts, especially when his narrative concerns events of traumatic magnitude. Hutcheon is correct in claiming that:

> there are overt attempts to point to the past as already "semioticized" or encoded, that is, already inscribed in discourse and therefore "always already" interpreted. . . . . Historiographic metafiction self-consciously reminds us that, while events did occur in the real empirical past, we name and constitute those events as historical facts by selection and narrative positioning. And, even more basically, we only know of those past events through their discursive inscription, through their traces in the present. (96-7)

Therefore, when Saleem signifies the need for narrative choice he invites the reader to witness, not only the bloodshed of Indian and Pakistani history, but also his own involvement in the process of reconstituting this history. The narrator gives to self-reflexivity a kind of thematic significance; he does this by intermittently foregrounding the conflict between Padma, his pickle factory co-worker and friend, and himself. Writing about one of those conflicts, Saleem says, ". . . I must interrupt myself. I wasn't going to today, because Padma has started getting irritated whenever my narration becomes self-conscious, whenever, like an incompetent puppeteer, I reveal the hands holding the strings" (*Midnight's Children* 70). On another occasion he says, "I must return (Padma is frowning) to the banal chain of cause-and-effect" (338), a statement that tells reveals that both linear and self-reflexive narratives overlap in the novel; but by keeping the readers aware of when the narrative shifts to cause-and-effect, readers are

less likely to accept the illusion of reality that is so central to realism but which Saleem constantly undermines.

The novel's historiographic metafictional attitude reinforces the predicament of representation if one considers Saleem's and Shaheed's encounter with scenes of horror after returning to India from Pakistan. The reader has already seen how Saleem encounters three of his friends who have already become victims to the violence. It is the violence that undermines Saleem's ability to represent the carnage when he is face to face with the horror. On their entry into Dacca Saleem says, "[s]tudents and lecturers came running out of hostels [and] were greeted by bullets. . . . And while we drove through the city streets Shaheed looked out of windows and saw things that weren't-couldn't have been true: soldiers entering women's hostels without knocking; women, dragged into the street, were also entered, and again nobody troubled to knock" (410). The interesting thing about the way that Saleem describes these gruesome killings and rapes is that he relies on Shaheed's perception, and not his own, to account for the violent acts. Saleem is probably aware of the problematics of representation, which is why it would be safer to record the details "witnessed" by another character than to assume responsibility for such historical accounts, especially when he is conscious of the limitations of sensory perception. If one compares Saleem's reliance on his friend's perception to his own account of the battlefield, it will be clear that he embraces the provisionality of history. In his portrayal of his friends, Saleem refuses to identify them by names and he also resists constituting them as whole entities. Instead, he describes them as a pyramid, and what follows accentuates his resistance to a totalizing narrative, particularly when he says, "the pyramid had six feet and three heads" (429). He adds, "a jumbled area composed of bits

of torso . . . lengths of intestines and glimpses of shattered bones" (429). In these two excerpts, as a reader, one experiences a vicarious witnessing of war victims whose corporeality has been shattered by violence. Since their bodies are already shattered, Saleem does not try to totalize them, and in fact, it is impossible to represent them as whole. The impossibility of rendering whole bodies parallels Saleem's resistance to unified and totalized narratives so that with the full extent of ex-corporeality, the prospect of representing this scene in a coherent and linear fashion is equally shattered. Whether narrating through Shaheed's perception or thematizing the disintegration of body and narrative, narratives can only give approximate or partial accounts of reality. Therefore, when Saleem tries to pickle history or "chutnifies" history, he demonstrates the inescapable desire to totalize experience, and impossibility of totalizing reality, whether in terms of quotidian sequence or in terms of specific historical cases like that of violence that Saleem and Shaheed witness.

Despite foregrounding the story's discursivity, one should not imagine that linear narratives or realism can be eliminated entirely from historiographic metafiction like *Midnight's Children*. However, *Midnight's Children* only indicates the shifts from one to the other. Saleem also makes it clear that it is Padma (who in this case may mean the sum total of all audience expecting to read a linear story) who wants a linear story and who constantly forces Saleem to resort sometimes to devices of realism. But Saleem more often than not shatters this illusion of reality through self-reflexivity. Linear narrative might be present but it is always disturbed, according to Kristeva, "the semiotic" shatters "the symbolic" thereby initiating "linguistic changes [that] constitute changes in the *status of the subject*—his relation to the body, to others and to objects" (*Revolution* 15).

In this case "the semiotic" "also reveals that normalized language is just one way of articulating the signifying process that encompasses the body, the material referent, and language itself" (15-6). If Saleem has to resort to a linear narrative, it is not necessarily because Padma forces him to do so; it is because it is an inevitable aspect of the signifying process. Though the linear narrative aspires to totality, the marvelous intervenes by disturbing any kind of totalized representation. As seen above, the history that Saleem narrates is an extremely violent one, and in recording this history *Midnight's Children* simply epitomizes the violence. In other words, the discontinuity and defamiliarization in the language of *Midnight's Children* foreground the violence of history on the one hand, and the violence of representation on the other hand. *Midnight's Children*'s formal complexity must be seen as an effort that parallels Saleem's cynical but virulent denunciation of history, which is why the novel should not be considered solely as an aesthetic experiment. Adorno might be in support of the intersection of the aesthetic and *engagement* when he argues that "the form" could constitute the site for political *engagement* (213). Citing Baudelaire's and Kafka's literature as examples, "experimentations of the aesthetic avant-garde . . . continued to challenge the violence of a bourgeois, technocratic, and bureaucratic society through the shock of the aesthetic form" (Quoted in Sanyal 8). One cannot read *Midnight's Children* as fetishization of form simply because it draws attention to its signifying process; rather than reify history, the novel dramatizes the problem of representation as an ideological project.

If one considers Saleem as a witness, his status as a witness does not simplify the issue of representation. Of course, witnessing privileges the sense of sight and erects the status of the witness to an authoritative position; but Saleem self-consciously undermines that

purported authority by relying on Shaheed's perception, and also by giving a fragmented version of the narrative rather than rendering the story in a linear or a coherent form. Although the violence that *Midnight's Children* represents may not have the same magnitude as the Holocaust, its representation is equally problematic. The main reason why Saleem disjoints and fragments his accounts of the war is precisely because "[t]here are never enough words . . . to articulate the story that cannot be fully captured in *thought, memory* and *speech*" (Shoshana Felman and Dori Laub 78). The fact that the story cannot be captured through memory and speech does not mean that one can deny the occurrence of the events. Rather, literature highlights the limitation of language and memory in producing a coherent narrative. Saleem's representation might be seen as similar in its inadequacy to the account of someone who is not a witness. The key issue is not whether Saleem's version is more "authentic" than that of a non-witness but has to do with the nature of the event that he has witnessed because "the inherently incomprehensible and deceptive psychological structure of the event precluded its own witnessing, even by its victims" (Felman and Laub 80). Shaheed's inability to articulate his visual experience is contingent upon the events themselves which make witnessing almost impossible because they are so shocking as to surpass the witness's comprehension.

The task at hand now is to make sense of Saleem's determination, not only to represent, but also to preserve his private history and Indian political history. One would recall early in the novel that Saleem desires to preserve India's history as well as his own. This need is evident when he says, "I am literally disintegrating, slowly for the moment, although there are signs of acceleration" and "[t]his is why I have resolved to confide in

paper, before I forget" (*Midnight's Children* 36). His desire to preserve history as memory is reinforced by his parenthetical comment that "[w]e are a nation of forgetters" (36). Certainly, one cannot equate representation with memory but there is a reason why one cannot ignore memory in *Midnight's Children*. As Ricoeur has argued in *Memory, History, Forgetting*, "[w]hat forgetting awakens . . . is . . . the very aporia that is at the source of the problematical character of the representation of the past, namely, memory's lack of reliability" (413). Consequently, it is difficult to trust his memory since his body has started disintegrating, although it is not until the end of the novel that the reader realizes that his corporeal disintegration is a result of his violent encounter with history, which Saleem signifies when he says that he has been "buffeted by too much history" (*Midnight's Children* 36). In addition, to preserve this history he resorts to a means of representation, writing what he later calls "[m]emory's truth, because memory has its own special kind. It selects, eliminates, alters, exaggerates, minimizes, glorifies, and vilifies also" (242). This statement implies that the history that Saleem writes in *Midnight's Children* is subject to the vicissitudes of memory that he describes above. The fact that aspects of the story come from his memory, or that the story is actually his attempt to preserve memory, does not make representation less problematic; the events he narrates, including his encounter with the tragedy of partition, are constructed from memory, which one knows is already fraught with inconsistencies. If one considers that *Midnight's Children*, through allegory, "offers a means to reestablish individual and communal memory" (209), it is apparent that the memory being reconstituted is a fragmentary, and not a coherent, one. But because memory would try to put order to chaos, Saleem is right to observe that in the end "[memory] creates its own reality, its

heterogeneous but usually coherent version of events; and no sane human being ever trusts someone else's version more than his own" (242). The subjective nature of memory indicates that it can only supply partial truth and never an absolute one, which is why the narrative of *Midnight's Children*, according to Saleem, is an effort to resist forgetting through writing although this account of history can only give an approximate representation. No amount of "chutnification" of history can remedy the lacuna in representation because the events which are being represented are so traumatic they impose on Saleem, the burden of representing the unrepresentable.

Moreover, whether one describes the representational strategy of *Midnight's Children* as the marvelous real because of the way that horrific historical accounts assume supernatural dimension, or one sees it as magical realism because of the coexistence of ontologically disparate narratives, such categorizations always generate problems. For instance, Joyce Wexler in "What is Nation? Magic Realism and National Identity in *Midnight's Children* and *Clear Light of Day*" observes that it is not uncommon for critics to take the magical elements in Rushdie's *Midnight's Children* literally and therefore miss the metaphorical import of the style (149). Likewise, Chanady argues that the concept of magical realism "is no less vague to most readers and critics and it is frequently applied to any work that departs slightly from the depiction of conventional reality" (viii). It is therefore important to sound a note of caution that *Midnight's Children* may yield to categorizations such as the marvelous or magical realism: the novel is eclectic in its representational and formal properties, it cannot be rigidly framed by any of the two designations. Wexler also notes that critics tend to over-emphasize the link between novel's magical dimension and Indian spirituality like levitation, especially

when Amina, Saleem's mother visits a soothsayer to know about the future of her unborn child. His concern is justified if one considers Faris's claim that *Midnight's Children*'s magical realism is technologically derived because Saleem's supernatural ability to connect with other midnight's children is portrayed as radio transmission (63).

Although the marvelous has been instrumental in shattering conventional mode of representation in *Midnight's Children*, Rushdie's novel questions an aspect of the marvelous, which is the reason why any description of the novel in terms of the marvelous should reflect its complexity. More than halfway through the novel Saleem and his colleagues run from the war raging between India and Pakistan, and it is this moment that presents an opportunity for Saleem to reflect on the status of the marvelous in his narrative. In order to demonstrate his predicament in capturing an experience that is so gruesome that one finds it hard to make sense of it, Saleem alerts the reader to the tendency to veer into stories of a supernatural quality, specifically, in the manner of the marvelous. In fact, the violence of the war is so intense that it resists rational contemplation, so that "[w]hen thought becomes excessively painful, action is the finest remedy" (410). This explains why "dog-soldiers strain at their leash, and then, released, leap joyously to their work" (410). But when Saleem and his colleagues find themselves in the forest and Saleem presents to a predatory representation of the forest, the intertextual connection to Carpentier's *The Lost Steps* is unmistakable:

> But one night Ayooba awoke in the dark to find the translucent figure of a peasant with a bullet-hole in his heart and a scythe in his hand staring mournfully down at him, and as he struggled to get out of the boat (which they had pulled in, under the cover of their primitive shelter) the peasant leaked a colorless fluid which flowed

> out of the hole in his heart and on to Ayooba's gun arm. The next morning Ayooba's right arm refused to move; it hung rigidly by his side as if it had been set in plaster. Although Farooq Rashid offered help and sympathy, it was no use; the arm was held immovably in the invisible fluid of the ghost. (418)

However, in the next paragraph there is no doubt that the narrative self-consciously distances itself from the marvelous empowerment of nature and landscape. Saleem states:

> After this first apparition, they fell into a state of mind in which they would have believed the forest capable of anything; each night it sent them new punishments, the accusing eyes of the wives of men they had tracked down and seized, the screaming and monkey gibbering of children left fatherless by their work. . . . and in this first time, the time of punishment, even the impassive buddha with his citi-fied voice was obliged to confess that he, too, had taken to waking up at night to find the forest closing in upon him like a vice, so that he felt unable to breathe. (418)

In this passage, *Midnight's Children* veers away from Carpentier's notion of the marvelous in relation to nature; but the skepticism of the forest's marvelous powers is not without significance to Saleem's story. The significance of attributing supernatural power to the forest has less to do with the forest than with the characters' experience of the trauma of war. In support of this claim, one must examine Saleem's statement concerning "[w]hat I hope to immortalize in pickles as well as words: that condition of the spirit in which the consequences of acceptance could not be denied, in which an overdose of reality gave birth to a miasmic longing for flight into the safety of dreams. . . But the jungle, like all refuges, was entirely other-was both less and more than he had expected"

(415). As a result, what one experiences as a reader is a simultaneous appropriation and suspicion of the forest's supernatural power, which is why the marvelous becomes ambivalent in *Midnight's Children.*

In this quote, by telling the reader that, "they fell into a state of mind in which they would have believed the forest capable of anything," the narrator takes the representational mode away from both the marvelous and magical realism. The reader now knows that the author and the narrator are themselves skeptical of the supernatural and since they are, it will be difficult for the reader to accept it. By creating doubts in the reader, Rushdie deploys the style of the fantastic which is based on the questioning the supernatural event rather than believing it as required of the implied reader of magical realism. To emphasize the use of the fantastic one should examine Todorov's *The Fantastic: A Structural Approach to a Literary Genre.*

Briefly, Todorov's argument about the fantastic is that its realization depends on the reader's hesitation to believe the supernatural event which contradicts the logical laws of nature. That is, the reader is one who is grounded in a world governed by the laws of reason and who confronts a supernatural act but hesitates to believe or accept a supernatural explanation. Todorov stresses the importance of this hesitation when he says, " *'I nearly reached the point of believing':* that is the formula which sums up the spirit of the fantastic" (31). Todorov's argument reinforces the idea that *Midnight's Children* incorporates elements of the fantastic.

However, Rushdie is ambivalent in his use of the forest and the fantastic. That is, when he states that "the jungle, like all refuges, was entirely other-was both less and more than he had expected," the jungle still retains some aura that could not be explained

away by a character who knows only the rational laws, an irreducible requirement of the fantastic. He does not dismiss the supernatural quality of the forest as a rationally explainable phenomenon and neither does he accept a supernatural explanation. Todorov argues that "[e]ither total faith or total incredulity would lead us beyond the fantastic: it is hesitation which sustains its life" (31), and this hesitation cannot be more eloquent than Saleem's description of the jungle as less and more. This hesitation mirrors Kristeva's "oscillation" between the semiotic and the symbolic. Because Saleem, Ayooba, Shaheed and Farooq develop their notion of the supernatural aspect of the forest at a moment of anguish about the war and are unable to determine the validity of their experience (except perhaps Ayooba's stiff arm), the story still retains its resistance to linear and conventional representation where reality is presented in quotidian form that is empirically knowable and verifiable. Once again, the attempt to represent "the unrepresentable" falls short of totality; whenever the narrative aspires towards totality, "the semiotic," the provisionality of history comes in to tear it apart.

Chapter 4: Reimagining Political Engagement in Postcolonial Fiction

Ogundele observes in "Devices of Evasion: The Mythic Versus the Historical Imagination in the Postcolonial African Novel" that the most influential postcolonial novels in the past two decades are the ones that can be broadly described as marvelous or fantasy realism (126). Some of the writers who are quintessential examples of this narrative mode are Sony Labou Tansi, Syl Cheney-Coker, Salman Rushdie, Kojo Laing, and possibly Biyi Bandele-Thomas. Their works, in similar and distinctive respects, grapple with what it means to be postcolonial; that is, they rewrite colonial history (Cheney-Coker), depict the terrifying conditions that follow independence from imperial powers (Rushdie), and portray the nation-state, not as a site of convergence, but as a point of dispersal and conflicts (Rushdie, Bandele-Thomas). One other writer who should be included in this short list is Ben Okri, whose writings can be described as quintessentially "postcolonial" for their suspicion of the nation as a locus of domination and hegemony and for their skepticism of ethnic, racial, and all regional essentialisms. His works that particularly represent this literary and critical mood are *The Famished Road* (1991), *Songs of Enchantment* (1993), *Astonishing the Gods* (1995), *Dangerous Love* (1996), *Infinite Riches* (1998) and *In Arcadia* (2002).

These writers mark a generational break from the writers of the period immediately following independence. One major difference between the early Chinua Achebe's novel, say, *A Man of the People* (1966), and Ayi Kwei Armah's *The Beautyful Ones Are Not Yet Born* (1976), Ngugi wa Thiong'o's *Petals of Blood* (1985) and Wole Soyinka's *The Interpreters* (1970) on the one hand, and the works of Okri, Cheney-Coker, Kojo Laing on the other, is that, while the earlier group in different ways attempts to redeem the

beleaguered nation-states by lamenting the deplorable states of social infrastructures, exposing the decadence of political leadership, or by exploring possible alternatives to leadership issues within the framework of the nation-states, the latter group is more skeptical of the nation-state which has, in itself, become an apparatus for fostering repressive regimes. In other words, the works of the first category of writers can be relatively described as literature of commitment; and by commitment is meant literature of combat or struggle which is concerned with pursuing the viability of the nation-state by critiquing corrupt leadership and by advocating social and economical justice. There is no indication that the writers whose works fit into the latter group are opposed to the emergence of a viable social and political system. Rather, their works actually embrace such goals, and similar issues have survived in the more recent cultural production in Africa. Also, the earlier literature privileges realism as the dominant mode of expression and also a mode of capturing the world of the quotidian. However, the realism of the latter writers could be regarded as limited because it is more or less informed by "the ideology of liberal humanism that assumes a world of non-contradictory individuals whose unfettered consciousness is the origin of meaning, knowledge and action" (Belsey 67). This ideology, in its own interests, suppresses "the role of language in the construction of the subject..." (67). By suppressing the role of language in the construction of the world, realism tends to hide its own constructivity and thereby presents its characters and their world as "free, unified, [and] autonomous" (67).

In contrast, writers like Laing and Okri are sensitive to the limitation of language in representing their material conditions, which partly explains why their writings tend towards the marvelous. The marvelous, particularly in Ben Okri's fiction (excluding

Flowers and Shadows and *Landscapes Within*), calls into question the dominance of realism as a narrative mode intimately connected to the Enlightenment project and therefore, to colonialism. But it also provides the rhetorical space to pursue the vision of new social systems although without the kind of optimism characteristic of Odili in Achebe's *A Man of the People* or the kind of revolutionary impetus that describes Karega in Ngugi wa Thiong'o's *Petals of Blood.* The main argument here is that the later postcolonial fiction, particularly Ben Okri's writings, is a literature of commitment. In a more specific sense, postcolonial fiction participates significantly in projecting the ideology of *engagement.* In other words, Ben Okri's works constitute a way of imagining a world devoid of bloodshed, conflict and political decadence.

In order to pursue this thesis one should focus primarily on *Astonishing the Gods* for the following reasons: First, this novella offers the opportunity to re-imagine social systems outside of nationalist interests mainly because the text self-consciously avoids propagating social changes rooted in national politics. Second, *Astonishing the Gods*, in mediating the social conflicts which are by now characteristic of Okri's works, deconstructs ethnic and racial idiosyncrasies in order to engender viability of the nation-state. Third, rather than valorizing the nation-state, the novella undermines its hierarchical structures of power. Fourth, instead of a nation-state, *Astonishing the Gods* pursues the possibility of utopia rendered through the discourse of the marvelous.

Because the nation is a locus of power and domination, *Astonishing the Gods* undermines its structure of power by projecting a space where hierarchy is extirpated through the obliteration of all racial and ethnic categories. The narrative is situated in a liminal realm that is sensitive to the ambivalence of such categories. The utopian space of

Astonishing the Gods is not a world of repose but one marked by instability of signs; it is a world that calls into question the normalization of the symbolic order. In order to engage *Astonishing the Gods* as it projects its own version of politics of *engagement*, it is fundamentally necessary to situate it within a process that is already overdetermined by multiplicities of social formations. Deleuze and Guattari say in *A Thousand Plateaus* that "[t]he world has lost its pivot; the subject can no longer dichotomize, but accedes to a higher unity, of ambivalence and overdetermination, in an always supplementary dimension to that of its object. The world has become chaos . . ." (7). Literally, the world of Ben Okri's works, as will be apparent, is riddled with conflicts, and some of these conflicts are generated partly because of the regime of difference, which subsists through the valorization of ethnic peculiarity within the Nigerian nation. The marvelous dimension of *Astonishing the Gods* on the one hand fails to portray the nation as an unproblematic category but self-consciously undermines it as a unified and autonomous entity. It is in the light of its skepticism for organized categories that one must view the novel as it intersects with Deleuze and Guattari's conception of the world as chaotic. On the other hand, the marvelous narrative of the novella is suitable for intermingling, concentration and dispersal of people and spaces without at any time reducing them to fixities.

At the heart of *Astonishing the Gods* is the issue of power: that is, *Astonishing the Gods* deals with the formation or constitution of power while at the same time offering a paradigm for undermining oppressive regimes, which is why in the novella, social and racial categories are deliberately undermined. Social and racial categories tend to fix people into monolithic types, with the presupposition that they are unrelated or

unproblematic. In order to undermine the oppressive power of sovereign entities, constituted authorities are the first casualties. But if constituted authorities draw attention to their purported singularity, it also implies that racial, social and ethnic categories, to some extent, operate on the logic of power and domination. A recent example is Nazi Germany where the ruthless differentiation of race not only implied the gruesome extermination of "other races," but also was concomitant with the intention to achieve political domination over the rest of the world. Another example is the Hausa oligarchy in northern Nigeria that still views itself as "chosen" descendants of Uthman Dan Fodio and therefore considers itself a privileged group. It is no coincidence that this political class sees the Hausa ethnic group as possessing unquestionable political rights over the Nigerian nation-state. The interesting thing is that the Hausa oligarchy tends to claim the north of Nigeria as a unified and autonomous ethnic and political group, whereas nothing can be further from the truth because the north, as other parts of Nigeria, is pluralized in terms of ethnic composition and religious preferences. In fact, one of the reasons attributed to the Nigerian Civil War between 1967 and 1970 is the pogrom carried out against the Igbo people of South East Nigeria. *Astonishing the Gods* must be approached as an enterprise in political intervention especially in mediating conflicts and undermining excessive and destructive political power hierarchies.

To do this, the novella constructs a marvelous space where power, racial and social hierarchies are constantly challenged. To decipher how the political *engagement* of *Astonishing the Gods* is deployed, it is necessary that one situates its mediating force within the metaphor of rhizome expounded by Deleuze and Guattari. One must say at the outset that there is danger in assuming that there exists a one-to-one correspondence

between *Astonishing the Gods* and the notion of the rhizome; indeed, the rhizome is not interchangeable with the novella's obliteration of social hierarchies. The important thing to note is that the conscious undermining of centralized power in *Astonishing the Gods* can, to some extent, be explained and problematized through the prism of the rhizome. Deleuze and Guattari state:

> The multiple *must be made*, not by always adding a higher dimension, but rather in the simplest of ways . . . with the number of dimensions one already has available. . . . A system of this kind could be called a rhizome. A rhizome as subterranean stem is absolutely different from roots and radicles. . . . The rhizome itself assumes very diverse forms, from ramified surface extension in all directions to concretion into bulbs and tubers. (7)

One must understand that there are at least two major intersections between the concept above and the political thrust of *Astonishing the Gods*: the first has to do with the notion of roots. Ben Okri, like other postcolonial writers like Salman Rushdie and Syl Cheney-Coker, abhors the notion of roots or the originary and it is because of their tendency to repudiate the idea of roots and origin that the nation, as the purported site of solidarity and political allegiance, disappears altogether in *Astonishing the Gods*. The second is that fetishizing roots or cultural, racial or social categories inevitably produces hierarchies and consequently, in most cases, oppressive practices and intense conflicts. It is no wonder that one major feature of *Astonishing the Gods* is its obliteration of hierarchies, whether political or ethnic. By rejecting the idea of "a higher dimension," Deleuze and Guattari equally advocate a leveling of all categories at all times because such a higher dimension implies the inevitable presence of hierarchies, which in turn, precipitates domination.

Multiplicities must therefore be understood as perpetual proliferations on a level plain that makes impossible the emergence of what Deleuze and Guattari call "rigidified territorialities" (16). Rigidified territorialities can be understood, particularly in the context of Okri's *Astonishing the Gods*, embracing as all forms of unities, be they religious, political, cultural and national. One would not be surprised that Deleuze and Guattari too, are wary of unities when they assert that "[t]he notion of unity [...] appears only when there is a power takeover in the multiplicity" (9). This implies that the notion of unity is a destructive force because it parallels domination and it for this reason that multiplicities signify recognition of manifold differentiation but without establishing hierarchies. The passage below will help engage the idea of multiplicities and its relation to the rhizome:

> The point is that a rhizome or multiplicity never allows itself to be overcoded, never has available a supplementary dimension over and above its number of lines, that is, over and above the multiplicity of numbers attached to those lines. All multiplicities are flat, in the sense that they fill or occupy all of their dimensions: we will therefore speak of a *plane of consistency* of multiplicities, even though the dimensions of this "plane" increase with the number of connections that are made on it. (9)

One must admit that the notion of the rhizome is not a formula for understanding social and political formations: it resists the notion of formula precisely because the rhizome and multiplicities imply intense struggle which oscillates between constituting forms of domination and demolishing categories of oppression. There is now a problem to contend with, which is to interrogate how the marvelous dimension of *Astonishing the Gods*

engenders endless possibilities and yet foregrounds contradictions that beleaguer this marvelous space. *Astonishing the Gods* must be interpreted as a text that constructs a protean world where a struggle over power exists. The fact that it attempts to neutralize all categories of oppression does not indicate that this marvelous and utopian world is without contradictions. Rather than a simple and unproblematic world, the utopian space of *Astonishing the Gods* is riddled with conflicts. The significance of the notion of the rhizome here lies in accepting that social groups are never constant or fixed and in the same way, power is never static either. The idea of the rhizome brings about the recognition of the fact that this metaphor does not unproblematically translate to the process of interpretation or social schema. Recognizing the instability of social formations and interpretation, Deleuze and Guattari assert

> you will reencounter organizations that restratify everything, formations that restore power to a signifier, attributions that reconstitute a subject—anything you like, from Oedipal resurgence to fascist concretions. Groups and individuals contain microfascisms just waiting to crystallize. . . . Good and bad are only products of an active and temporary selection, which must be renewed. (10)

In this sense, both ontological formations and hermeneutical practices mimic the rhizome because just as the rhizome sometimes produces bulbs, multiplicities are also challenged by monadic discourses that attempt to fix interpretation and people into rigid categories. *Astonishing the Gods*' political *engagement* should be viewed in terms of subverting society's hierarchical systems, thereby foregrounding the possibility of a new social system in which corruption, leadership inadequacies, war and conflicts are constantly mediated.

But the question remains to be asked whether or not "bulbs," that is, totalizations, are always negative and threatening. Definitely, any form of totalization must be understood as a construct and in most cases associated with power and dominant interests. *Astonishing the Gods* should, on this account, be celebrated because by foregrounding a utopian space where hierarchies are obliterated, it attempts to reduce the power of dominant discourses and repressive political orders. Yet, totalizations can still be empowering: for instance, movements like Negritude and nationalism harbored their own contradictions; they operated partly within the parameters of the dominant ideology of colonization on the one hand and the Enlightenment on the other. But they were discourses which contributed in no small way to challenging British and French imperialism in parts of Africa and the Caribbean. As Bongie argues, "A reliance upon, and a reversion to, fixed and ultimately fictional (ethnic, racial, national, and so on) identities is inescapable, notwithstanding our ever greater immersion in and sensitivity to a creolized and creolizing world" (*Islands and Exiles* 11). Deleuze and Guattari's notion of the rhizome, which has some tangential relationship to Bongie's idea of a creolizing world, definitely has its merits, but their rejection of all totalizations signified in the metaphor of the "bulbs" indicates absolute intolerance for totalizations, whereas totalization can still be empowering in some instances. For example, the different social and cultural units that make up the Niger-Delta area of Nigeria for decades have sometimes asserted their local identities as a way of mobilizing resistance to Nigerian federal government's desire to homogenize them within the fictional Eastern Nigeria. They have also maintained their identity in order to spotlight atrocities committed by oil companies which have led to environmental degradation. In fact, Ken Saro-Wiwa fought

on behalf of the Ogoni people in order to minimize or stop the hazardous effects of petroleum mining by Shell Oil. Bongie says further:

> the laudable demystification of such identities, which is a necessary tactic of any post essentialist politics, is patently not a sufficient one: provisional affirmations of identity are often politically necessary, notwithstanding the fact that they are theoretically "unviable." . . . Even . . . the most fervent demystifications of a stable identity end up repeating—be it strategically or unconsciously . . . —the same mystificatory act they critique: this is patently evident . . . in the case of such post- or anti-identitarian models as those of "schizophrenic" or the "nomad" that Deleuze and Guattari . . . offer up in the name of pure "ethics of flow." (11)

The important thing is not to construe the notion of the rhizome and totalization as binary and irreconcilable opposites; the two are absolutely necessary to *Astonishing the Gods*, which reveals this same contradiction. That is, although *Astonishing the Gods* attempts to mediate political gloom by challenging its dominant discourses of identifications, it also demonstrates that fixed social formations are not only necessary, but are also inevitable. This tendency explains why references to fixed categories must be seen as "strategic essentialism" as Spivak puts it in her influential article, "Can the Subaltern Speak?" Also, one should come to terms with the fact that "[h]owever transnationalized or globalized today's world might be, the boundaries of a civil society still mark out the individual state and are still nationally defined" (Spivak, *Critique* 399). More often than not, critical reception of Okri's texts borders on the celebration of the transcendence of material reality on the one hand, and acknowledgement of regional or national categorization on the other. Okri's texts, particularly *Astonishing the Gods*, are also implicated in the same

discourse of fixity. Although it deploys narratives of fixity, *Astonishing the Gods* is not a nationalist text despite the preponderance of "essentialist" rhetoric in the text.

However, it is interesting to discover that the political thrust of *Astonishing the Gods* particularly, and other Okri's texts generally, is questioned and challenged. The main line of attack is that *Astonishing the Gods*, according to Pietro Deandrea, is a text that is far removed from social reality and therefore, disconnected from the concerns of the oppressed. Although Okri's text can be read thus, one should also be aware that *Astonishing the Gods* is one of Okri's less accessible texts, which means it is prone to misinterpretations. The fact is that *Astonishing the Gods* is an intensely experimental novella that offers a radical paradigm of political intervention. It is fitting that one examines in some detail, this trend of critical exegesis on Okri's work.

The Critical Context of *Astonishing the Gods*

In *Fertile Crossings: Metamorphoses of Genre in Anglophone West African Literature*, Deandrea contends that Ben Okri's *Astonishing the Gods* is a novella with a lot of shortcomings. He argues that the novella is lacking in political commitment primarily because it is "linked with the desire to shed the physical substance of human existence" (86). There is a sense in which the world of *Astonishing the Gods* resists any association with mimetic or quotidian reality but is immersed in marvelous enchantment. But it will be erroneous to claim, as Deandrea has done, that *Astonishing the Gods* "sheds physical substance of human existence" just because Okri has demonstrated the limitation of language in representing social reality. Contrary to Deandrea's assertion, Fraser contends in *Ben Okri: Towards the Invisible City* that while Lagos and London are recognizable in *The Famished Road* "the details of its architecture, the sumptuousness of

its fabric, mark [*Astonishing the Gods*] as faintly Italian" (84). Whether or not the world of *Astonishing the Gods* resembles any known human community, the crisis that the novella engages is far more significant than the urgency of mimetic relation of the text to human reality. The novella, in one sweep, self-consciously yokes together the problem of power and leadership on the one hand, and the problem of interpretation on the other. In other words, by distancing itself from concept-reality logic of Saussurean linguistics, *Astonishing the Gods* seems on the whole to issue a cautionary note on any haste to associate words with reality.

Deandrea pursues his argument against Okri and *Astonishing the Gods* by positing that Ben Okri "[u]nfortunately severs himself and his own book from any possibility of establishing contact with his readers' lives" (Deandrea 86). The implication of Deandrea's argument becomes clearer when he asserts that Okri's philosophy in *Astonishing the Gods* is antithetical to reason: "Okri's scepticism about the power of language is paralleled by an analogous attitude towards reason" (86). There is no doubt that this interpretation of *Astonishing the Gods* simplifies the text, which treats reason as a category of power central to the Enlightenment that is often reproduced in postcolonial societies, and particularly, in justification of despotic regimes. Examples abound: General Ibrahim Badamosi Babangida's eight-year rule in Nigeria was founded on rationalized policies aimed at perpetuating his reign; another example was that of the late Mobutu Sese Seko who used to rationalize all his repressive orders and carnage committed on his own people. So when Deandrea states that Okri associates "understanding" with "ignorance," he aims to show that Okri rejects reason, whereas, when the guide in *Astonishing the Gods* states, "[u]nderstanding often leads to ignorance," he is directly

addressing the protagonist's desire and haste in mastering the new world in which he finds himself. This means that he fails to take in the world of the invisibles; rather, he attempts to impose his own signs on a world he barely knows.

Deandrea's critique of Okri and his work is similar to McCabe's contention in " 'Higher Realities': New Age Spiritualism in Ben Okri's *The Famished Road.*" McCabe maintains that the spiritual world of Okri's texts serves to distance the narrative from the world marked by intense social struggles. Whereas Deandrea sees in Okri what he calls "Plato's epistemology," by which he means that "Okri seems to place emphasis exclusively on pure Ideas" (90), McCabe interprets Okri's work as dependent on New Age Spirituality the major characteristic of which is narcissism, detachment from social struggles and maintenance of bourgeois values. McCabe says further:

> [New Age] reflects and promotes . . . "the culture of narcissism," where self-centered consumerism is celebrated and sanctified as a [...] path toward enlightenment or authentic being. . . . Sure enough, the vast majority of those who attend New Age personal transformation courses, training seminars, healing retreats, and shamanic workshops are well-to-do urban professionals and corporate managers, many of whom see personal transformation and Self-actualization as giving them a competitive advantage in their work. . . . In short, the New Age movement, believing that social transformation is effected only through narcissistic spiritual self-pampering, reflects and contributes to the capitalist and individualist features of modernity that are widely held to perpetuate social and political inequality and oppression. This is one important ideological contradiction of New Age spirituality—"ideological" because New Agers . . . remain largely

> unconscious of the way in which their activities contribute to maintaining capitalism's sociopolitical injustices. (9)

It is crucial to set McCabe's criticism in the appropriate context: his major claims are as follows: that Ben Okri's *The Famished Road*, despite deploying the myth of the *abiku*, is not a novel informed by the *abiku* tradition precisely because Okri's use of the *abiku* myth contradicts its historical and literary references in the African context; that rather than the *abiku* tradition *The Famished Road* is influenced by Okri's personal spiritual preference, New Age spirituality; that New Age philosophy reinforces capitalist values rather than mediating social injustice; that Okri's other texts such as *Astonishing the Gods* and *In Arcadia* are steeped in New Age philosophy more than *The Famished Road.* McCabe has caused more problems than he has solved. First, it is not certain that Okri's spiritual concern is necessarily thematized in his work. Second, if *Astonishing the Gods* and *In Arcadia* are the perfect instances of New Age philosophy in Okri's work, McCabe refuses to base his argument on either of these texts. McCabe contends that Okri's texts have maintained and reinforced social stratification and that they have appropriated bourgeois class values, a move that he believes distances his work from the "wretched of the earth." The fact that Okri resists a quotidian narrative in *Astonishing the Gods* does not imply that the text is politically complicit with power; to the contrary, *Astonishing the Gods* aspires to create a world that is free of repression, conflicts and war.

Smith, in "Ben Okri and the Freedom whose Walls are Closing in," seems to combine aspects of Deandrea's and McCabe's arguments when he suggests that:

> The rule of cultural disinterestedness, emblematic of Okri's writing, and of postcolonial criticism's literary "anti-foundationalism" more generally, does not

> actually mean disinterestedness. Statements of detachment from the social world are perfectly in keeping with the perspectives of the owners of cultural capital whose first distinguishing assertion has always been . . . their *ascendance above the entanglements of the secular world.* This statement of adherence to the realm of true art is therefore a covert display of "disinvestment," an oblique celebration of freedom from the more urgent imperatives of material survival. (10)

Although these three critics, Deandrea, McCabe and Smith, have different approaches to, and interpretation of, Okri's work: the world of Ideas for Deandrea, New Age spiritual realm for McCabe and the world of artistic hedonism for Smith, they all tentatively agree on the supposition that Okri's work, particularly *Astonishing the Gods* in this context, distances itself from social and political concerns. Inadequate as they may be, these views are extremely difficult to refute precisely because, unlike *The Famished Road, Songs of Enchantment* and *Infinite Riches* which oscillate between supernatural realms and human world, the only reference to a recognizable place occurs in the first two pages of *Astonishing the Gods* while the rest of the novella details the protagonist's experience on the island of the invisibles starting from the third page of the text.

This structure of the narrative raises a fundamental problem. This problem has to do with the social context from which the traveler emerges before his excursion in the island of the invisibles. In other words, from the third page of the book, the protagonist has already been transported onto the utopian plane of spirituality, a literary device which makes the political commitment in *Astonishing the Gods* difficult to discern. Deandrea, McCabe and Smith contend that the text is either apolitical or politically complicit. Rather than claiming that *Astonishing the Gods* valorizes the world of Platonic pure

Ideas, thereby removing itself from existential struggles, one should examine the text as one having its social context and references elaborated more in Okri's other works. That is, *The Famished Road* (1991), *Songs of Enchantment* (1993) and *Infinite Riches* (1998) (usually referred to as "the famished road trilogy") provide the context for situating *Astonishing the Gods*. One might argue that this paradigm shift has created its own problem in that it depends on references outside of *Astonishing the Gods*, and is therefore, structurally deficient in terms of narrative. In addition, there is no certainty that Okri deliberately constructs *Astonishing the Gods* in parasitic relation to his other novels for its social and political struggles. One must accept that *Astonishing the Gods* is a unique text in the sense that its references to social struggles are presented as codes. For instance, in *Astonishing the Gods* "history books" refers primarily to colonial narrative while "invisibility" signifies the postcolonial condition of marginality, oppression, corruption and the vicissitudes of democratic aspirations. The main challenge in coming to terms with the political thrust of *Astonishing the Gods* lies in mastering the idiom of the text, which to some extent differs from the language of Okri's other texts where reference to the social domain is not as ambiguous. To capture the politics of *Astonishing the Gods* one must accept that its idiom relies primarily on coding, allowing the writer to compress whole histories within the first two pages of the novella. There is no question about the political thrust of *Astonishing the Gods* because issues of historical marginality, the oppression of the underclass, and the seemingly atavistic regression of political leadership are foregrounded and also operate as subtexts in the novella. Zeleza asserts:

> The question . . . is not one of whether or not African literature is political, for all literature is political, but what type of politics it expresses. . . . African literature

> produced since independence has been political. . . . [T]he theme of resistance has featured prominently. Indeed, it has been a literature of resistance par excellence. The finest of this literature . . . presents "a sophisticated testamentary tradition that taps the deepest democratic aspirations of the continent and its people." (484)

In fact, one can argue that the protagonist's quest to the land of the invisibles is informed by the desire to achieve social transformation and democratic fulfillment although *Astonishing the Gods* fails to demonstrate the kind of optimism expressed in literature of realism or socialist realism. But that it is committed to themes of the literature that Zeleza is speaking of cannot be denied.

The main challenge that critics of *Astonishing the Gods* encounter is that the slum and ghetto of *The Famished Road* and *Songs of Enchantment* are conspicuously absent from *Astonishing the Gods*. Because of the literal absence of the slum and ghetto, it is tempting to denounce the text as one perpetuating social hierarchies on the one hand, and on the other, divorcing itself from existential struggles. The political preoccupation in *Astonishing the Gods* requires an understanding that the language used to express the social concerns is coded so that political struggle attains metaphorical signification, which is suitable to the marvelous narrative of the text. Also, because the novella explores the possibility of utopia, *Astonishing the Gods* is marked by literary experimentation. Second, this short fiction needs to be contextualized within the framework of Okri's other texts precisely because the conflicts, leadership ineptitude, political repression, which critics fail to see in the novella, abound in *The Famished Road* and *Songs of Enchantment*. This does not imply substituting the social contexts of "the famished road trilogy" for that of *Astonishing the Gods* because this would mean that the

novella is not an independent work of art. Rather, one must argue that just as the famished road trilogy is concerned with pursuing a social vision, *Astonishing the Gods* is no less preoccupied with such social transformation. The main approach here is to describe the world of Okri's fiction precisely by examining his collections of short stories, *Incidents at the Shrine* (1986) and *Stars of the New Curfew* (1988), together with *The Famished Road* and *Infinite Riches*. The argument that rests on the apolitical interpretation of *Astonishing the Gods*, and Ben Okri's other works, is untenable because the structural and literary experimentation in *Astonishing the Gods* contradicts such a claim. *Astonishing the Gods* speaks in codes and metaphors that cannot be circumscribed within quotidian narrative. Even though one of the main preoccupations of the text is that political aspirations, social vision and democratic optimism must be approached with caution, one must be wary of any interpretive endeavor that assumes a one-to-one correspondence between the word and referent.

Background to the Political Vision of *Astonishing the Gods* in *Incidents at the Shrine*, *Stars of the New Curfew* and *The Famished Road*

While *Astonishing the Gods* has its own internal cohesiveness, the paucity of familiar references to social experiences might have influenced the assertion that Okri ignores the turbulent and traumatic experiences which characterize the world in which his readers live. It is crucial to stress that the world of Okri's texts is one ravaged by conflicts, and this is immediately apparent in his first collection of short stories, *Incidents at the Shrine*. In the story entitled, "Laughter Beneath the Bridge," one of the major trends in Okri's texts manifests and the link to *Astonishing the Gods*, though not equivalent, can be discerned: this has to do with how religious violence, ethnic tension and civil war were interconnected to reveal social political turbulence familiar to the Nigerian situation. In

this story, a ten-year old boy is rescued by his mother from an abandoned school compound. The intensity of war is immediately apparent when the boy narrator's mother is unable to rescue the other boys who are friends with her own son. Through this narrator, the story emphasizes loss, fear, dispossession and the disruption of a youthful life. Although the story is not set in the scenes of battle, the reader is not spared any of the tragic consequences that most definitely resemble those of the Nigerian Civil War.

The more frightening experience is the narrator's witnessing of a gruesome rape scene. The boy says, "[b]ehind the bushes three soldiers smoked marijuana. Half-screened, a short way up, two soldiers struggled with a light-complexioned woman" (Okri, "Laughter" 7). Here is an indication of thematic consistency in Okri's writings: social conflicts are intricately tied to ethnic politics; ethnic politics beget violence in ways that resonate fully with *Astonishing the Gods*. The narrator says, "[t]he soldiers asked mother where she came from in the country . . . as the soldiers, a short way up, struggled with and finally subdued the woman" ("Laughter" 7). In this excerpt, one would notice that the soldiers are intent upon superficial identifications, such as the mother's home region. In the same excerpt, the narrator blends together the demand for identity and the threat of violence that is immediately obvious in the women being assaulted by the soldiers. The narrator declares, "[t]hey shouted to mother to recite the paternoster in the language of the place she claimed to come from: and mother hesitated as the woman's legs were forced apart" ("Laughter" 7). So, when in *Astonishing the Gods*, Okri intensifies the marvelous dimension of the narrative and exhibits his distaste for rigidified identities, the thematic overlapping of "Laughter Beneath the Bridge" and *Astonishing the Gods* becomes clearer. The narrative in "Laughter Beneath the Bridge"

provides glimpses of the frightening level of violence, a consequence of the soldiers' and possibly Nigerian, leadership before, during and after the Civil War. Apart from showing the woman being beaten and trampled by the soldiers, the story also highlights how women are subjected to different levels of violence. When the narrator states that "[t]he soldier in the bush had finished wrecking his manhood on the woman and was cleaning himself with leaves," it is clear that the narrative is as much about the turbulent social landscape as the peculiar ways in which women suffer in a world of military dictatorship ("Laughter" 7).

Okri deploys a similar motif in the first story of *Stars of the New Curfew*, that is, "In the Shadow of War." Unlike the nameless narrator of "Laughter beneath the Bridge," the main character of "In the Shadow of War" is Omovo. Just as in "Laughter beneath the Bridge," the brutal reality of war manifests through an encounter with, and the killing of a woman suspected to be a spy. The story is also reminiscent of the dead bodies which exude their putrefaction in "Laughter beneath the Bridge," signifying how conflicts and war can be contagious and can contaminate post-war experiences, which probably explains why conflicts represent one of the constant social entanglements characteristic of all of Okri's writing. In "In the Shadow of War," "the dead animals were in fact corpses of grown men" (8), but the instability of these images, mixed with the forest's supernatural sensibilities, transports the conflicts from a mere social event to the realm of the extraordinary. "In the Shadow of War" ends as Omovo tries to escape after the soldiers fire a fatal shot, after which Omovo discovers that the alleged woman spy has fallen victim. As he tries to escape he falls down, only to wake up in his house, stupefied and unable to draw the line between what is real and what is unreal. The beauty of the

story lies in Omovo's dreaming of the whole ending because on waking up, he thinks everything has been a dream, which is why, in these two stories, scenes of war are self-consciously conflated with scenes outside of organized combat, making it difficult to separate the two. More important is the story's play on time: that is, the past and present are conflated in Omovo's dream-consciousness so that the Nigerian Civil War which ended in 1970 is given a sense of immediacy. This strategy is particularly crucial because the violence and conflicts which have characterized Okri's fiction, and coincidentally, the Nigerian polity, become like characters themselves. These are not merely historical events limited in reference to the past, but are events which continue to structure, and struggle with, social living in Ben Okri's later works.

The Famished Road and *Songs of Enchantment* are structured by an implacably violent social terrain, which in *The Famished Road*, *Songs of Enchantment*, and *Infinite Riches* is captured by the *abiku* myth. The abiku myth is not new in African literatures and can be traced to J. P. Clark's and Wole Soyinka's poems, both titled, "Abiku." Abiku is a Yoruba word which means "born-to-die" and has become the name of a child that is believed to be born, die, and be reborn by the same mother. Such a child is believed to possess supernatural powers used for malevolent purposes; and because they are believed to be part-human and part-spirit, their perception of the world is assumed to transcend, but incorporate telluric reality. Among the Yoruba people of Southwestern Nigeria, names like Kokumo,[5] Igbekoyi,[6] Kosoko,[7] and Durojaye[8] suggest a strong belief in the

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[5] S/he dies no more.

[6] The Forest Refuses This. Because the death of children is considered as tragic and ominous, they were usually buried in the bush designated for the purpose, unlike old people who were buried within the community.

[7] There Is No Hoe. The name implies there is no hoe to dig a grave for the dead child.

[8] Stay and enjoy life.

existence of these spirit-children and reinforce the faith in a world that comprises the world of the living, the dead and the unborn. Hawley in "Ben Okri's Spirit-Child: Abiku Migration and Postmodernity" supports this view by observing that "Mothers will give such children names like 'Malomo—Do Not Go Again'; 'Banjoko—Sit Down And Stay With Us'; Duro oro ike—Wait And See How You Will Be Petted' and 'Please Stay and Bury Me' " (30). Philips in "Ben Okri's River Narrative: *The Famished Road* and *Songs of Enchantment*" also suggests that the context of the above novels "is anchored to the truth of a worldview where many different worlds coexist" (168). The worlds of *The Famished Road*, *Songs of Enchantment* and *Astonishing the Gods* are shaped by implacable historical cycles that follow the pattern of the *abiku* children. The *abiku* in *The Famished Road* describe their entry into human historical, social and political order: "[t]here was not one amongst us who looked forward to being born. We dislike the rigours of existence, the unfulfilled longings, . . . the fact of dying and the amazing indifference of the Living. . . . We feared the heartlessness of human beings, all of whom are born blind, few of whom ever learn to see" (*Famished* 3). The horror of living can be discerned when again the *abiku*, whose name is Azaro, says, "[t]o be born is to come into the world weighed down with . . . an inextinguishable sense of exile" (*Famished* 5).

Azaro's description of the human world parallels the protagonist's in *Astonishing the Gods* in which he discovers that his people have been crushed by history's apocalyptic cycle of cataclysm, effacing them from historical records (*Astonishing the Gods* 3). There is another parallelism between Azaro and the protagonist of *Astonishing the Gods*: both of them resent life's painful drudgery and are determined to pursue the possibility of change. Just as in *Astonishing the Gods* the protagonist endures agony in order to

discover other social alternatives, in *The Famished Road* Azaro is frustrated by his coming and going and decides to stay in the world of the living. It is in Azaro's staying in the world that marks the political thrust of *The Famished Road* and probably explains why, despite the turmoil that the protagonist of *Astonishing the Gods* faces he refuses to abandon the struggle. This is how Azaro frames his intervention:

> How many times had I come and gone through the dreaded gateway? How many times had I been born and died young? And how often to the same parents? I had no idea. So much of the dust of the living was in me. But this time, somewhere in the interspace between the spirit world and the Living, I chose to stay. . . . It may simply have been that I had grown tired of coming and going. It is terrible to forever remain in-between. It may also have been that I wanted to taste of this world, to feel it, suffer it, know it, to love it, to make a valuable contribution to it, and to have the sublime mood of eternity in me as I live the life to come. But I sometimes think it was a face that made me want to stay. I wanted to make happy the bruised face of the woman who would become my mother. (*The Famished Road* 5).

The passage above connects *The Famished Road* to *Astonishing the Gods* in at least two fundamental ways. The first is that both protagonists are tired of the vicious cycle of history and they both want to discover the knowledge that would assure them of social renewal. Azaro's decision to enter into existence, his longing for historical change, intersects with the protagonist of *Astonishing the Gods*'s strong desire for cessation of pain, which is why he becomes desperate to learn from the ageless wisdom of the invisibles. The second point is that Azaro's conviction to stay in the world of the living is

basically inspired by the love of humanity, and his desire to ease the pain of humans, and for no other reason does he say, "I wanted to make happy the bruised face of the woman who would become my mother" (*Famished* 5).

A close examination of *The Famished Road* will reveal unequivocal connections between the *abiku* myth and national politics especially when, after an epiphany, Azaro's Dad explains, "[o]urs too was an abiku nation, a spirit-child nation, one that keeps being reborn and after each birth come blood and betrayals, and the child of our will refuses to stay till we have made propitious sacrifice and displayed our serious intent to bear the weight of our unique destiny" (*Famished* 494). Similarly in *Astonishing the Gods*, the protagonist's mission to the island of the invisibles arises out of his love for humanity: that is, to discover why he, his mother, and his people, are invisible and ultimately to subvert historical marginality, poverty and endless conflicts and wars (*Astonishing the Gods* 3). *Astonishing the Gods* is an attempt to subvert history's implacable cruelty by celebrating hybrid, liminal and syncretic cultural formations. The grim horror of "Laughter Beneath the Bridge" and "In the Shadow of War," which is predicated on fetishization of fixed and fictionalized identities, is mitigated when in *The Famished Road*, *Songs of Enchantment*, *Infinite Riches* and *Astonishing the Gods*, the narratives valorize a utopian world where ethnic, racial, social and political tensions are reduced.

Towards a New Social Vision in *Astonishing the Gods*

Astonishing the Gods chronicles the story of an unnamed protagonist who leaves his country in search of visibility because he believes he is invisible and banished from historical time and space. The narrator describes the protagonist's experience as follows:

> It was in the books that he first learnt of his invisibility. He searched for himself and his people in all the history books he read and discovered to his youthful amazement that he didn't exist. This troubled him so much that he resolved . . . to leave his own land and find the people who did exist, to see what they looked like. (Okri 1995, 3)

In this passage, the protagonist associates history with visibility, an observation that emphasizes what Deandrea calls "[t]he written culture" which he associates with "the colonial experience" (82). The mission of the main character is to search for "personal realisation" and "historical relevance" (Sánchez-Arce 123-4). *Astonishing the Gods* is, therefore, an intervention in historical invisibility of the protagonist, and in the novella, there are two main ways in which this is achieved. The first has to do with subverting the regime of "naming," which the novella paradoxically associates with historical visibility and fixity of the subject. The text resolves this paradox by later making the protagonist desire and embrace invisibility through which he overcomes cultural and racial monadism. The second strategy has to do with the protagonist's rite of passage into the island of the invisibles. The crucial issue with this ritual is that he acknowledges the impossibility of a Platonic universe or repose; instead, he comes to the understanding that the new world he desires must be re-imagined and must be nurtured with the consciousness that a new social vision comes at a price: learning through one's own suffering and pain. It is only through painful sacrifice that the new political order can be imagined and actualized.

Subverting the Regime of Naming

The protagonist's desire for visibility and knowledge is reinforced when on his arrival on the island of the invisibles he wants to understand things by names, a premise that partly supports nationalistic idiosyncrasy because to name is to establish difference. Naming signifies a strategy for revealing the absurdity of brutal consequence of racial, ethnic or gender oppression. An example was the pogrom in northern Nigeria shortly before the start of the Civil War in 1967; and the Civil War, which was fought mainly on ethnic and economic grounds. The short stories, "Laughter Beneath the Bridge," "In the Shadow of War and "Worlds that Flourish" are representative examples of how naming implies fixing a subject within a limited identity; but more important is its link to violence, war and conflicts. The distrust of ethnic politics and its gruesome material and spiritual reality become foregrounded when successive military and civilian administrations, rather than alleviating the problems, worsen them so that with each regime comes more misery through governmental repression, as with the regime of General Sani Abacha in Nigeria. *Astonishing the Gods* vigorously challenges the reader's attitudes to identity, which, as the guide told the main character, have become habitual. That is, our attitudes toward ethnic identity have become so perfunctory that they are no better than clichés, which explains why the protagonist has to go through a "purgatory" in order to destroy the habit of naming. Also, because naming in most of Okri's writings and particularly in the short stories cited above, along with *The Famished Road*, *Songs of Enchantment*, *Infinite Riches* and *Astonishing the Gods*, implies cultural limitation, *Astonishing the Gods* signifies a quest to undermine any sense of the originary and roots. It probably is because of this suspicion of the originary and roots that the central

character feels at home while away from his "home." His adventure in the island of the invisibles resonates with the concept of the rhizome developed by Deleuze and Guattari's in *A Thousand Plateaus*:

> [t]o be rhizomorphous is to produce stems and filaments that seem to be roots, or better yet with them by penetrating the trunk, but put them to new uses. We're tired of trees. We should stop believing in trees, roots and radicles. They've made us suffer too much. All of aborescent culture is founded on them, from biology to linguistics. Nothing is beautiful or loving or political apart from underground stems and aerial roots, adventitious growths and rhizomes. (17)

One should emphasize an important point: the notion of the rhizome does not suggest the disappearance of roots or stems and does not imply that "rigidified" identities do not exist. One must recognize that such identities must be constantly destabilized and in *Astonishing the Gods* the island of the invisibles is a place where invisibility is a metaphor for the possibility of transcending racial and ethnic cultural fixities while embracing not only cultural interstitiality, but also a post-hybrid disappearance of difference. When he asks, "[w]here is this place?" from his guide, one understands his attempt to reduce things and places to names (*Astonishing the Gods* 6). The question also implies that even when he is now in a different time and place, he is still asking the same questions, which ironically reinforces the idea that he has internalized the culture of naming. But his guide's response, "[i]t doesn't have a name. We don't believe in names. Names have a way of making things disappear," deconstructs the protagonist's fixation with naming and suggests that names create only the illusion of mastering an object or

idea, whereas in reality, they are incapable of adequately representing humans, ideas, and places (6).

In this regard, *Astonishing the Gods* is similar to Lewis Carroll's *Alice in Wonderland* in which Alice passes into a forest without names. In this forest, animals have no names and thus are not afraid of each other. The fact that names make things disappear is a paradox in *Astonishing the Gods*: first, names, like habituation, have weakened the main character's knowledge in the sense that he imposes his pre-given knowledge on a new experience without trying to understand his new cultural terrain; second, names also establish difference on which ethnic distinctions are based and for which the Nigeria Civil War was fought. The protagonist's experience on the island of the invisibles evinces the need for a renewal of approaches to the desolation of towns and obliteration from history. It comes as no surprise that later in the novella, one of the ways to transcend this historical black hole caused by conflicts and war and their brutal aftermaths is by first subverting this regime of nomenclature. It is the protagonist's first rite of passage.

The significance of the protagonist's loss of habit of naming lies in the connection that the story of *Astonishing the Gods* establishes between habituation and trauma of war. Nowhere is this issue made clearer in the novella than the moment when the main character learns the value of namelessness and invisibility. Invisibility reinforces namelessness precisely because visibility operates on visual economy and to be visible is potentially to be named. To buttress this claim, the narrator observes, "[a]s he went along . . . he felt himself becoming less substantial, less real. He seemed to be losing his identity to the mirrors. He felt as if the heaviest and least important parts of him were dissolving in the effulgent lights. At the same time he felt himself becoming more

peaceful, less questing, and freer from anxieties" (10). The experience of the protagonist suggests on the one hand that emphasizing difference can only lead to pain and grief; and on the other, renouncing his identity and the pedagogy of naming signifies the acquisition of peace. Without breaking his habit, he is trapped in the cycle of blood and betrayals as Azaro's father suggests in *The Famished Road* (494). *Astonishing the Gods* is a direct attack on tropes of racialism and ethnicity, which is not unconnected to the legacy of colonialism; this is why Kortenaar says in "Fictive States and the State of Fiction in Africa" that "Western narratives about Africa often imply that, while Europeans are defined by the nations they belong to, non-Europeans are defined by race" (229). It is unquestionable that *Astonishing the Gods* challenges this western discourse highlighted by Kortenaar especially by developing a major character that rejects limiting identifications such as race, ethnicity and nationality.

Just as *Astonishing the Gods* is intolerant of hasty racial or ethnic identifications, it also seems reluctant to accept conventional interpretations. In other words, the rejection of naming is concomitant with the renunciation of criticism that does not reflect the complexity of language and signification. Of all Ben Okri's novels and short stories *Astonishing the Gods* is one of the most difficult to classify into conventional genres. Most critics have determined "the famished road" trilogy to be "magical realism" although, if one pays particular attention to the ways in which social conditions, historical experience and existential struggles are rendered in horrific terms through which the "supernatural" element of the novel emerges, the novel is unequivocally marvelous in the Carpentier's use of the term. But the same cannot be said of *Astonishing the Gods* precisely because its formal structure is multiple. One would not be surprised when Smith

and Deandrea use terms like "oneiric," "poetic allegory," and "fantasy" to describe the novella. Whether intentional or not, it is clear that the book's reservation towards racial and national categories seems to parallel the novella's complexity of form. Ben Okri has been known to harbor suspicion for the term "magical realism" on the ground that such criticism lacks rigor and that critics simply impose existing categories on his fiction rather than looking for their intrinsic values. Bowers continues the discussion in her book, *Magic(al) Realism* when she contends:

> The traditional West African mythological content and narrative perspective of the narrative lead some critics to question whether this is indeed a magical realist novel. The question of whether the mythological aspect is considered to be real or magical depends strongly on the cultural perspective of the reader. If the reader lives within a cultural context where magical happenings of the type portrayed in the novel are considered to be a possible aspect of reality and not magical at all, then the reader may not recognize the magical realist element of the narrative. (56-57)

Of course, Bowers is speaking specifically of *The Famished Road*, but her analogy can help problematize the thematic and aesthetic preoccupation in *Astonishing the Gods*. Categories such as magical realism, magic realism, magico-realism, fantasy, the fantastic, the marvelous, the uncanny and the oneiric represent an attempt to fix literature within existing critical modes. While *Astonishing the Gods* seems to contain aspects of many, if not all above-listed categories, it cannot by any means be circumscribed by any of them. In essence, though *Astonishing the Gods* might exhibit certain qualities of the marvelous, magical realism, fantasy or the oneiric, none of these terms is adequate to describe it. Just

as the novella is a mélange of different narrative forms, people are also multiple in their identities and in no other place in the text is this issue emphasized more than when the narrator says that "[h]e seemed to be losing his identity to the mirrors" (*Astonishing the Gods* 10). The point is that in the same way that the text cannot be confined within a particular genre or narrative mode but is meaningful only when situated within its multiplicity of form, so also are people; the example of the narrative is a case in point because rather than having just one reflection of himself, there are multiple reflections and several mirrors, implying there exist several reflections of himself. Obviously, *Astonishing the Gods* is re-interpreting the Lacanian mirror[9] in this instance, questioning the validity of the reflection, and it is in consonance with Deleuze and Guattari's assumption that the rhizome displaces the "One" subject and the split subject on the ground that the split subject, still operates on the logic of unity and oneness. Rather than valorizing the split subject they celebrate multiplicities, an idea that connects with multiple reflections of Okri's character in *Astonishing the Gods*.

Okri complicates the metaphor of the mirror further by deploying it to undermine the regime of realism whose assumption is that art is the reflection of reality. The narrator tells states:

> He was mesmerized by the gyrating spectacle of an infinity of perfect realms, perfect interiors, pure landscapes of joy, and the atmosphere of bliss that dwelt in the shining depths of the mirrors; . . .

[9] While the mirror at the "mirror stage" produces for the child, the imaginary, the one in *Astonishing the Gods* functions to deconstruct that same imaginary by producing multiplicities of reflections, which do not necessarily have any "real" behind them.

> To his astonishment, as he looked deeper into the mirrors, as into the depths of a magical lake, he saw beautiful women playing mandolins, reading books, singing silently in chorus, reciting words that turned into radiant colours. (10)
>
> He was about to speak when another wonderful sight caught his eyes. He turned and beheld, in another mirror, a magnificent garden in which flowers bathed in celestial glow. (10-11)
>
> Further on, in the blue mirrors [...] he saw a green lake. (11)

The relation of the mirrors to art, and the process of interpretation, is undisguised; the reference to "an infinity of perfect realms" signifies that the guide piloting the protagonist is intent upon making his host aware of multiple significations and realms of meanings. The mirrors are therefore multiple just as the images they reflect are multiple; they are not confined to a fixed image in the same way that meaning in language is always deferred. The protagonist's experience with the mirrors highlights two important points: one discovers that one's identity is not constituted as a fixity, but multiplicities; the mirrors reflect different images every time the protagonist looks at them. In the first place, the central character, who sets out searching for visibility, loses his visibility to the mirrors, thereby putting to an end, albeit temporarily, to the economy of racialism. The significance of the protagonist's loss of his visibility lies in the connection that lies between horror and visibility, or a fetishization of cultural and national identity. The experience of the protagonist suggests that an unnecessary pursuit of the originary and national and cultural identity can only lead to pain and grief, whereas renouncing his identity to the mirrors in which his identity becomes nothing but a simulacrum signifies

the acquisition of peace, unlike previously when he was so burdened by the anxiety and weight of his illusion of identity.

To come back to the second point, in the same way the mirrors change images, *Astonishing the Gods* seems to emphasize that meaning in language is not fixed. Instability of meaning parallels the protean nature of identity; it is a lesson that the main character of this text learns in his dialogue with his first guide who leads him onto the island of the invisibles. The following passage from the text marks his entry into a different ontological landscape: that is, he discovers the presence of other invisible inhabitants of the island and also enters into the realm of linguistic neutrality:

> They went into the city at the most mysterious time of the night, when footsteps were heard and no one was seen. . . . The glow that was his guide was intense in the open legendary spaces. . . . On the stone monoliths had been inscribed the original words of the initiators of the new civilisation – words that had the brevity and authority of universal laws. They were words of a language he couldn't decode, a language no longer spoken. Then he realised that all along he had assumed a similarity of language, when in fact he had been communicating with his guide beyond words. (35-36)

Unquestionably, the entry into the city of the invisibles parallels the obliteration of linguistic difference, but one still has to ask the question about the very expression through which the guide and the visitor communicate. The desire to transcend the limitation of regional languages is evident when the protagonist realizes the possibility of communicating without resorting to pre-established languages. This new language must be seen as a new language of interpretation which defies orthodox critical models. More

important is the realization that communication is possible without national or ethnic affiliation. No matter how transnationalized Okri's conception of language and criticism may be, there is a subtle parallel to the Nigerian ethnic structures. In a country bound together by colonial expediency and not necessarily cultural similarity just as the protagonist assumed, the battle over the "superior culture" more often than not has led to constant conflicts and bloodshed. And probably because Okri comes originally from the area of Nigeria now known as Midwestern Nigeria or Niger-Delta, he must be quite familiar with the pain and agony of national politics, which Niger-Delta has experienced, no matter which side the Niger-Delta supported in national politics.

Re-dreaming the World

In *Astonishing the Gods*, the habit of naming impedes knowledge, and therefore to develop a new social vision, it becomes mandatory that old assumptions be renounced in order to welcome new knowledges that the protean nature of the novel's spirit realm. From the protagonist's experience, it is safe to conclude that even though he has now embraced invisibility, he is set to create his own history. In essence, in order to achieve a new world where conflicts, pain and suffering are mitigated, it is essential to learn and re-learn one's history. *Astonishing the Gods* is a "depiction of social *possibilities* . . . in the 'utopian'-like world where historical invisibility and political decadence can be overcome (Dandy 49) The guide tells the main character, "[o]n this island of ours learning what you know is something you have to do every day, and every moment," and goes further to develop a critique of amnesia by alleging, "[i]n the places where I have been, forgetting is what you do every day" (17). This quote immediately resonates with the statement made by a character in Ben Okri's short story entitled, "Stars of the New Curfew." The

character, Arthur, says, "human beings are notorious for having such a short memory" ("Stars of the New Curfew," 86). If one compares this notion of memory and the one offered by Deleuze and Guattari there appears to be a contradiction:

> Short-term memory includes forgetting as a process; it merges not with the instant but with the nervous, temporal, and collective rhizome. Long-term memory (family, race, society or civilization) traces and translates, but what it translates continues to act in it, from a distance, off beat, in an "untimely" way, not instantaneously. (17)

The confusion introduced by this quote is in terms of the opposition between short-term memory and long-term memory and how the latter implies race, family, society and other "rigidified territorialities." The question then is to consider whether the notion of the rhizome can undermine social transformation that is so urgent in *Astonishing the Gods*. In order to engage this issue one must acknowledge that *Astonishing the Gods* self-consciously attacks the originary and roots, which is why the protagonist has to conceive of a place where identity based on visual economy is discouraged. Memory in the novella is being used strategically, neither in the sense of short-term memory or long-term memory that Deleuze and Guatarri have advanced. Rather than being opposed to interstitiality and the notion of the rhizome elaborated above, *Astonishing the Gods* celebrates cultural fluidity; its use of memory in this instance is directly connected to the need to invent the future with keen consciousness of the past in order to mitigate the regime of suffering that characterizes the novella and other novels cited.

Moreover, other novels like *Songs of Enchantment* and *Infinite Riches* testify to the preponderance of suffering, a point that evinces *Astonishing the Gods*' immersion in

power-related conflicts. In an interview with Jane Wilkinson *Talking with African Writers*, Ben Okri reinforces the centrality of suffering in his novels, a condition that *Astonishing the Gods* tries to mediate:

> For me one of the central themes in the book is suffering, probably the only paradoxically democratic thing about our condition: suffering on the one hand and joy on the other, but especially suffering. Suffering is one of the great characters of the book, the different ways people suffer. It defines the boundaries of self but also breaks down the boundaries of individual identifications. So when Azaro sees Mum in all the market women, they *are* Mum. Any one of their children telling their stories would be telling a story just like this one, but with its own particularity. There are hundreds of variations, but there is just one god there, and that god is suffering, pain. But he's not the supreme deity. The higher deity is joy. Again, that's just part of the paradox. (85)

Admittedly, Okri's comments in the excerpt above are in direct reference to *The Famished Road, Songs of Enchantment* and probably *Infinite Riches*; it is also applicable to *Astonishing the Gods* where the narrative is quite parsimonious on the grim details of everyday experience and history. If *Astonishing the Gods* is as influenced by Nigerian history as *The Famished Road* and *Songs of Enchantment* are, then there is ample chance that the turbulent historical and social condition of the other novels may significantly impact *Astonishing the Gods*. As long as one can tolerate authorial evidence, the statement, "I've come to realize you can't write about Nigeria truthfully without a sense of violence," emphasizes the ubiquity of violence and suffering in Okri's works, including *Astonishing the Gods*. Consequently, when the guide educates the protagonist

that the main reason why they have to re-learn their history constantly arises from their suffering, one immediately understands the context in which he is speaking. He says, "[t]oo much forgetting led to our great suffering. We always have to relearn here" (17), a statement that serves as a constant reminder of the implacably cruel world of *Incidents at the Shrine*, *Stars of the New Curfew*, *The Famished Road* and *Songs of Enchantment*, but one, which is mediated in *Astonishing the Gods*.

Although much of the references to conflicts and pain must be located in Okri's other novels, *Astonishing the Gods* is not entirely devoid of pain and suffering as Okri mentions above. The marvelous realism of the novella allows the protagonist to gain access into "universal" history, the characteristic of which is agony. Through this ritual he understands his guide's theory about the link between forgetting and suffering; he must learn that his future society is not a Platonic world. Rather, it is a world whose memory must be nurtured in order to avoid reverting to cycles of pain:

> At this point his mind plunged into total darkness. He found himself spinning in that darkness. Then he felt himself falling, falling away from himself, falling without end into a darkness that got deeper and more unbearable. The only thing he could do to rescue himself from the sheer terror of his internal abyss was to scream. He screamed in absolute horror of becoming more invisible than he already was. So loud and so piercingly did he scream that the entire island seemed to resound with it. . . . He felt himself falling through layers of world's unheard agony. (14-15)

If before his journey to the island he had assumed it was a kind of paradise, he must have been disillusioned with his entry into world's apocalyptic history. He remembers this lesson "because he didn't want to have to go through it all over again" now that he is in

the new city (26). His suffering is doubled by the fact that he is magically transported into the world's misery, especially since his main reason for embarking on the trip is to mitigate his misery. But because he has not yet accepted the centrality of memory to achieving social transformation, he is made to experience the horror of world's history. The quotation below emphasizes the primacy of remembering the pain of the past in order to prevent its occurrence in the future. Here it is his guide educating him:

> At the beginning of our history there was great suffering. Our sages learnt that we tend to repeat our suffering if we have not learnt fully all that can be learnt from it. And so we had to experience our suffering completely while it happened so it would be so lodged in our memory and in our desire for higher life that we would never want to experience the suffering again, in any form. Hence the law. Anyone who sleeps through their experiences would have to undergo them as many times as it takes to wake them up and make them feel the uniqueness or the horror of their experiences for the first time. This law is the basis of our civilization [...]. (47)

This is the basis of the social vision in *Astonishing the Gods*: it is not a world of eternal repose but a world structured by intense awareness of the possibility of both suffering and social transformation, where the latter consists in relearning the pain of history. In relation to *The Famished Road*, *Songs of Enchantment*, and *Infinite Riches*, the protagonist of *Astonishing the Gods* is similar to Azaro, the spirit-child, at least in one respect: he is also an abiku. This similarity will be more obvious when one observes that both characters decide to enter into history despite its horror. Azaro says, "I wanted to make happy the bruised face of the woman who would become my mother" (*Famished*

5); the protagonist of *Astonishing the Gods* decides to enter the city of the invisibles with the knowledge that he must constantly experience his suffering until its memory becomes part of his consciousness. Soliman supports this observation when he states in "From Past to Present and Future: The Regenerative Spirit of the Abiku" that "[t]he implication is that Nigeria too can be a resilient abiku only if it transcends a history and a present of nothing but conflict" (166). Soliman is definitely right when he argues that Nigeria also can follow the example of the abiku and avoid its history of conflicts; however, as the excerpt above has shown, there is a great responsibility required of those who want the change. It is for this reason that Okri says in his collection of essays entitled, *A Way of Being Free*, that:

> The only hope is in daring to redream one's place in the world – a beautiful act of imagination, and sustained self-becoming. . . . New vision should come from those who suffer most and who love life the most. The marvellous responsibility of the unheard and the unseen resides in this paradox. . . . The real quarrel of the oppressed is not with the oppressors. It is with themselves. (55, 103, 133)

This statement speaks directly to *Astonishing the Gods* whose central character is on a journey to literally "redream" the world as Okri suggests. It is also apparent that Okri is concerned primarily with micropolitics in opposition to macropolitics, which is why the responsibility of social change is placed on the shoulders of the oppressed. However, Smith disagrees with this notion of social transformation because it holds the oppressed responsible for history when in fact they are primarily the victims of history. He elaborates further,

> Although it is undeniable that political action presumes a change in perception, there seems to me to be something perverse in giving primacy to a supposed failure to dream on the part of the oppressed. It is a statement without any possible effective political deployment, and one that is only comprehensible in the context of a fundamentally dematerialized understanding of social struggle. (8-9)

Although a cursory reading of Okri's texts can yield this kind of interpretation, a closer look at them shows that the politics in Okri's novels cannot be dichotomized into text and reality as Smith has suggested. Redreaming the world hardly implies abandoning social struggles; all of Okri's writings testify to the centrality of social struggles. Azaro's father is the quintessential activist who houses and feeds the poor and who himself labors in the market to provide for his family. Therefore, Smith's assertion, "Dad's continual insistence to Azaro that we need new visions [is] romantic privileging of a great act of imagination," and his conclusion that "all of this holds power and conviction only where the dominant metaphor of the social world is a textual one or where social change is understood to be a cultural matter rather than a question of systems of material production," border on the illusion that language can capture reality in an unproblematic fashion (8). The main challenge for Smith is that he does not seem to appreciate the fact that changing one's perspective is as important as social change. Another thing he fails to consider is that what the narrator in *Astonishing the Gods* calls "world's unheard agony" is a repetitive one, and without breaking this monotony of suffering, its repetitiveness would persist. Hence, the primacy of changing perspective and "redreaming the world." The island of the invisibles is a kind of prototype through which the protagonist understands that social transformation is possible, a notion reinforced by his guide when

he says, "it has taken us much suffering, much repetition of our suffering . . . to arrive at this condition" (53). If *Astonishing the Gods* "thwarts all efforts on the side of the reader to create a coherent illusion of history, meaning and representation in the text," it is precisely because Okri is sensitive to the instability of signification in language (Pordzik 46). The world of *Astonishing the Gods* is one of great promises for social change; it is also a world in which to acknowledge the instability of meaning, to discover the illusion of a coherent representation of reality or the purported transparency of history, is as important as social change.

In conclusion, it cannot be over-emphasized that *Astonishing the Gods* is a controversial text. This controversy is not unconnected to the problem central to postcolonial criticism: that is, "postcolonial literary theory, born under the sign of post Saussurian linguistics, and seeking to avoid the most reductive kind of Marxist cultural analysis, has come to accept as a fundamental premise the idea that there is *no* necessary connection between cultural forms and social formations and . . . no logical link between representation and the real" (Smith 3). This problem is not new at all: it has been one of the central issues in Western metaphysics since the time of Plato through Descartes, Hume, Kant and Hegel. *Astonishing the Gods* has contributed to this debate not necessarily by "resolving" the contradictions, but by acknowledging and celebrating this contradiction through its sensitivity to discursive constructions of reality. Admittedly, the "real" is not self-evident and the fleeting terrain of signification in *Astonishing the Gods* parallels the unstable process of interpretation, which is why one of the central motifs of the novella is paradox, particularly in the proliferation of mirrors and their images, where the mirrors represent the protean canvas of interpretation.

This leads us to the central issue that has been engaged so far, the extent to which *Astonishing the Gods* as a text promotes political action and social change. While this theme(s) can easily be located in *The Famished Road*, *Songs of Enchantment* and *Infinite Riches*, the same cannot be said of *Astonishing the Gods* because it is lacking in detailed quotidian experience unlike the earlier three novels, even though existential vicissitudes are captured within a marvelous motif. In some sense, *Astonishing the Gods* is a text that traverses metafiction and metacriticism mainly because it foregrounds both the problems of representation and interpretation. Politics and social change do not escape the dynamic of these processes of representation and interpretation. For instance, Azaro's father in *The Famished Road* "represents the active struggle that Okri holds to be requisite to escaping cycles of social and political destructiveness" (de Bruijn 179). Yet the problem arises concerning Okri's character that represents the model for social change. In a way, the abiku is the one who most represents the desire and the determination for social transformation and this is evident in his understanding of history, which he understands to be implacably cruel. He says in the beginning of *The Famished Road*, "[t]here was not one amongst us who looked forward to being born" and that "we dislike the rigours of existence, the unfulfilled longings . . ." (*Famished* 3). The horror of history captured in this novel can be discerned when again the abiku laments, "[t]o be born is to come into the world weighed down with . . . an inextinguishable sense of exile" (*The Famished Road* 5). The determination of the spirit-child and his desire to change his world resurfaces in the nameless protagonist of *Astonishing the Gods*, who like the spirit-child, thematizes self-sacrifice for the purpose of changing the cataclysmic historical condition to which he belongs. But the main difference between Azaro and the protagonist of

Astonishing the Gods on the one hand, and Azaro's father on the other, is that even though Dad is very determined, his efforts to change the world become repetitive. Therefore, when he tells his son that "we need new visions" he is admitting his insufficiency in vision. He needs to develop the kind of perspective that takes into consideration the transitoriness of signification, through which Azaro and the main character of *Astonishing the Gods* come to realize that reality is not rigid. Political intervention and social change must reflect this dynamic; Deleuze and Guattari alert us to this problematic when they state that "[t]he world has lost its pivot, the subject can no longer even dichotomize, but accedes to a higher unity, of ambivalence or overdetermination" (7).

Astonishing the Gods is sensitive to this ambivalence and overdetermination and goes to the extent of obliterating difference by creating the world of the invisibles where superficial distinctions are useless. Through the disappearance of racial, ethnic and national idiosyncrasies, the novella destroys the hierarchy of pigmentation, which was central to colonial discourse and, which in a different context, especially in Okri's *Incidents at the Shrine* and *Stars of the New Curfew*, are causative agents of conflicts and war. One concern that one must address is, in obliterating racial and ethnic hierarchies on the one hand, and undermining repressive rules on the other, there might be the possibility that he has simply replaced one form of social structure with another. One would recall that before entering the auditorium at the end of the story, there is no sign of organized state machinery; but the seemingly privileged pedestal given to the council of the invisibles appears not only to be a higher rung of power, it appears cultic. Words and phrases such as archangel, sages, higher life, and civilization suggest there might be

established hierarchies among the invisibles after all, despite the eradication of racial difference. This trend raises the fear that one may not escape monolithic subjectivities no matter how cosmopolitan our world becomes, as did the world of *Astonishing the Gods*. The novella seems to be saying that the struggle against difference, against "transcendental signified," against racial distinctions, against classism and against despotism and totalitarianism, is eternal. Deleuze and Guattari ask, "Does not a multiplicity have a strata upon which unifications and totalizations, massifications, mimetic mechanisms, signifying power, and subjective attributions take root?" (14) It is important to recognize that the world of *Astonishing the Gods* is a world of great possibilities, but it is also a world inevitably threatened by the obstacles it overcomes, but which are ready to coalesce and take roots. It will require the doggedness of Azaro and our protagonist to dismantle the totalizing force of power.

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