

CHRONOTOPES OF A CONTINENT:

Ben Okri and the Spatial Dynamics of *The Famished Road*

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Introduction

The question of the African novel haunts the global literary canon. The use of “Africa” as a modifier to describe novels produced by authors from the continent immediately distinguishes these works from a more general conception of the “novel.” In the time since the novel’s conception in Europe in the eighteenth century, the form has spread to all corners of the globe.¹ Eileen Julien describes the illusion of universality in the form of the novel:

The novel is *the* global form because it exists everywhere and is supposedly for everyone. Yet at the same time, since its proliferation on the peripheries is read typically as a homage to the grandeur and potency of the novel’s supposed culture(s) origin, it paradoxically affirms European exceptionalism, thereby reinscribing the power of the center. (Julien: 2006, 676)

The African novel, then, is posited as both a byproduct of the idea of the European roots of the novelistic form as well as a creation of the continent itself.² This hybridized concept of the African novel has faced an uphill battle in its integration into the literary canon. Toni Morrison, in her lecture “Unspeakable Things Unspoken,” discusses the rise of African-American literature and the response of the established literary world to the intrusion of these works into the canon:

From the seventeenth century to the twentieth, the arguments resisting that incursion have marched in predictable sequence: (1) there is no Afro-American (or third-world) art; (2) it exists but is inferior; (3) it exists and is superior when it measures up to the “universal” criteria of Western art; (4) it is not so much “art” as ore— rich ore— that requires a Western or Eurocentric smith to refine it from its “natural” state into an aesthetically complex form. (Morrison 129-30)

¹ See Ian Watt’s *The Rise of the Novel*. Other theorists have offered alternatives to the Eurocentric conception of the origin of the novel, for instance M. M. Bakhtin argues in “Epic and Novel” that

² The “African novel” does not always refer to the entire continent: North African and Egyptian literatures are less associated with Africa than the literature of sub-Saharan Africa due to Arabic and Mediterranean influences.

The African novel has had to fight for its place in the literary world, combating the presupposed notions of inferiority that have faced the form without confining itself to the “universal’ criteria of Western art.” In J.M. Coetzee’s novel, *Elizabeth Costello* (2003), a fictional Nigerian author gives a lecture on a cruise ship titled “The Novel in Africa” in which he discusses the controversies surrounding the form. He ends his lecture with, “Read my countryman, Ben Okri... Okri negotiated the contradictions of being himself for other people [in] a much more complex way. Read Okri. You will find the experience instructive.” (Coetzee 48) I read Okri’s “[negotiation of] the contradictions of being himself for other people” as his reinvention of pre-established notions of his identity. Okri’s seminal work, *The Famished Road* (1991), reworks the idea of the African novel in the same manner through a narrative structure that imagines the space of the novel in Okri’s own terms.

The narrative of *The Famished Road* makes use of Bakhtin’s idea of the chronotope, where “spatial and temporal indicators are fused into one carefully thought-out, concrete whole. Time, as it were, thickens, takes on flesh, becomes artistically visible; likewise, space becomes charged and responsive to the movements of time, plot and history.” (Bakhtin 84) For Bakhtin, narrative is not just the intersection of events and characters; the place of the novel cannot be separated from the way the narrative moves through it, nor can the narrative progress without accounting for space it occupies. The chronotope of *The Famished Road* reinvents space through the integration of a world of spirits and a world of physical reality. This new space responds to a question asked by Wai-chee Dimock: “What is the appropriate scale for the study of culture, and, in particular, the study of literature?” (Dimock:2003, 488) “Africa” is the accepted modifier

for works emerging from the continent, but Dimock's question opens up this assumption of continent as the basis for analysis of African texts. Other possible scales of analysis include tribe, nation, race, and the postcolonial world. This thesis examines the position of *The Famished Road* and its chronotope in relation to these spaces.

Before moving into the novel itself, I will briefly address the influence of the above spaces on Okri's biography. Ben Okri was born in 1959 in northern Nigeria to an Urhobo father and a half-Igbo mother. His family left for London in order for his father to study law, but returned to Nigeria in 1968, in the middle of the Biafra War (1967-70). As Okri's mother was part Igbo, the family faced threats of violence from anti-separatist groups; Okri says, "We had to move constantly, hiding Mum." (Okri via Jaggi) Okri was given a grant by the Nigerian government to study Comparative Literature at Essex University in the late 70s and published his first novel in 1980. In 1991, Okri was awarded the Booker Prize for *The Famished Road*, his third novel. Since then he has gone on to publish six more novels, including two sequels to *The Famished Road*, several collections of poetry and short stories, three works of nonfiction and a play.

While much of Okri's work take place in Nigeria, or spaces with Nigerian characteristics, the author himself has lived in London since the mid-1980s. The geographical distance between Okri and his birthplace has led several critics to label him a "hybrid" author, but Okri himself works to create texts that represent Africa from an African perspective: "I realised you cannot evoke a place truly till you find a tone, a narrative, in tune with the dimensions of that place. You can't use Jane Austen to tell stories about Africa." (Okri via Jaggi) *The Famished Road* draws on Igbo and Yoruba folklore as well as the narratives of other Nigerian authors to evoke Okri's homeland.

The bulk of this thesis will discuss the potential drawbacks of reading *The Famished Road* entirely through the lenses of tribe, nation, and continent, but understanding the cultural background to the novel is integral for piecing together the narrative structure.

The Famished Road is a chaotic novel whose narrator is an *abiku* named Azaro. The *abiku* figure appears in both Yoruba and Igbo folklore (in Igbo the term is *ogbanje*) and refers to a spirit-child who is born, dies, and is endlessly brought back to life. The novel opens with Azaro, whose name is derivative of Lazarus³, in the world of the unborn. Azaro, unlike his fellow *abiku* children, decides to stay in the world of the living rather than continuing to oscillate between death and life. In the physical world, Azaro's mother hawks goods in the marketplace and his father is a laborer who moonlights as a boxer. Azaro spends much of the novel resisting the pull of the spirits, but often he finds himself wandering through the spirit world with little warning. Other characters also find themselves interacting with both spirits and humans simultaneously, notably Madame Koto. Madame Koto owns a bar in Azaro's community and invites the spirit-child to frequent her bar in an attempt to attract the business of spirits; her quest for power, both economic and political, ties her to the political organizations that operate in the community, the Party of the Rich and the Party of the Poor. The spirits of *The Famished Road* interact with the everyday aspects of life.

The union of the magical realm of the spirits and the gritty reality of Azaro's physical community is a fundamental aspect of the novel. Derek Wright says of *The Famished Road*, "Even in the magical and marvelous world of his *abiku* novels, where

³ This is not the only instance of Christian imagery in *The Famished Road*; the novel opens with a direct reference to John 1:1, with Okri's "In the beginning there was a river" mapping on to "In the beginning there was the word," but the intertext between the novel and the Bible will remain outside the scope of this thesis.

everything is in a constant turmoil of transformation, the obverse of the epic wonderment, with its echoes of folkloric magic, dream-lore and creation myths, is a harrowing social realism which graphically depicts the poverty, squalor, disease, brutality, and humiliation in which the hapless slum dwellers live their exploited lives.” (Wright 185) The realism of Okri’s novels differs from that of his literary predecessors who have written novels based in a more familiar reality that also confront this political and economic strife in Africa, from Ngugi wa Thiong’o’s *Weep Not, Child* (1964) to Ayi Kwei Armah’s *The Beautiful Ones Are Not Yet Born* (1968) to J.M. Coetzee’s *Disgrace* (1999) to offer a small sample.

Other authors, too, have explored the very concept of the *abiku*. Prior to *The Famished Road*, the *abiku* had appeared in the literature of two of Nigeria’s most prominent writers, Chinua Achebe and Wole Soyinka. In Achebe’s *Things Fall Apart* the character Ezinma is feared to be an *ogbanje* as a result of her frequent illnesses features. Achebe’s portrayal of the *ogbanje* child is a representation of the way the idea of the *ogbanje* manifests itself in the physical world of Nigeria: the medicine man digs up the *ogbanje*’s *iyi-uwa*, the token which ties the *ogbanje* to the spirit world, but there are no obvious magical occurrences in the novel. The narrative of *Things Fall Apart* never crosses the border between the two worlds; the spirit world remains unseen in Achebe’s narrative despite its assumed influence on the *ogbanje* child. In contrast, Okri’s *The Famished Road* is dependent on the unquestioned and visible coexistence of the spirit and physical realms.

In Soyinka’s poem, the *abiku* is painted as a trickster figure with little empathy for the community in which he belongs: the *abiku*’s irreverence is evident in the lines

“dig me deeper still/ Into the god’s swollen foot” and his disregard for others made clear by “Abiku sucks the oil/ From lamps.” (Soyinka 15-6, 25-6) The *abiku*, here, is not an individualized character but an embodiment of the Yoruba idea of the *abiku*. Okri’s novel is not an exploration of the concept of the *abiku*; rather, he puts the tradition to use for his own purposes. The *abiku*’s ability to move between the spirit and the physical world allows Okri to collapse the two worlds. This literary move has a precedent in Amos Tutola’s *The Palm-Wine Drinkard*, (1952) in which a man follows his favorite palm-wine tapper into the world of the dead and begins a journey that sutures together a plethora of Yoruba folktales. Ato Quayson writes of the relationship between the two authors: “we are speaking not only of a relationship between identifiable motifs available through a common recourse to the form of the folktale, but of a relationship between one configuration between literature and orality and another, differing configuration.” (Quayson: 1997, 17) Though Okri and Tutola both put Yoruba folklore to use, *The Palm-Wine Drinkard* features only one crossing between the world of the living and the world of the dead whereas Okri’s worlds are in constant contact within the narrative.

Quayson comments on the use of oral tradition in Okri’s work. Several widely discussed aspects of African literature fall outside of the scope of this paper, including, but not limited to, questions of orality and native language. I will briefly discuss Okri’s position regarding these issues, but the focus of this paper will remain on the strategies of interpretation of *The Famished Road* in regards to its chronotopic structure.

Okri’s decision to write in English puts him firmly on the side of Chinua Achebe in the language debate between Achebe and Ngũgĩ wa Thiong’o that has defined much of the later scholarship on native language use in African literature. wa Thiong’o’s

Decolonising the Mind: The Politics of Language in African Literature frames his decision to write in his native Gikuyu language as such: “[A] specific culture is not transmitted through language in its universality, but in its particularity as the language of a specific community with a specific history.” (wa Thiong’o 15) Decolonization, for wa Thiong’o, is dependent on the use of precolonial languages across Africa. Achebe, on the other hand, argues for the use of English and other colonial languages as “a medium of international exchange” not between African writers and audiences outside the continent but across it, between African countries and regions with differing native languages. (Achebe 21) Kwame Anthony Appiah notes that English in Africa can also be an expression of wa Thiong’o’s specific community and history in the way that it is adapted in myriad African cultures:

Highlife music is both recognizably West African and distinctly not precolonial; and the sounds of Fela Kuti would have astonished the musicians of the last generation of court musicians in Yorubaland. As they have developed new forms of music, drawing on instrumental repertoires and musical ideas with a dazzling eclecticism, Africa’s musicians have also done astonishing things with a language that used to be English. But it is *as* English that that language is accessible to millions around the continent (and around the world). (Appiah 59)

The issue of accessibility of African narratives is a fundamental part of the question of orality in African literature. The discussion of orality includes the debate on native and European languages but also takes on the form of African literature (oral vs. written) and its style. On form, Christopher Miller writes, “The advent in Africa of writing as we know it was the direct result of European conquest and colonization.” (Miller 69) Orality, for Miller, represents “the authenticity of the precolonial world: ‘tradition’ and orality are synonymous.” (Miller 70-1) This sentiment of orality and tradition as indelibly linked is echoed in the work of Chinweizu, Onwuchekwa Jemie, and Ihechukwo Madubuike, who

state, “the African novel is a hybrid out of the African oral tradition and the imported literary forms of Europe” (Chinweizu et al. 8) The hybridity described by Chinweizu et al. posits the novel as a Western form, and thus at odds with traditional African (oral) narratives. Eileen Julien, whose *African Literature and the Question of Orality* is a comprehensive examination of the use of oral traditions in African literature, specifically the African novel, disagrees with the designation of orality as the primary characteristic of African texts:

Oral elements may well be a vestige of oral narrative and will therefore be experienced as aesthetically African, but a work that does not contain, or that transforms, such elements is not necessarily less African. To fail to make use of oral traditions is not to forgo Africanness. (Julien: 1992, 40-1)

The relationship between oral tradition and narrative structure has been parsed out in various other works of African literature, including Okri’s predecessors Wole Soyinka and Amos Tutuola. Ato Quayson’s *Strategic Transformations in Nigerian Literature* more fully examines the role of orality in Okri’s work on its own and in relation to the literary landscape of Nigeria. However, both the question of orality and of native language lay beyond the scope of this paper’s examination of the possible spatial readings of *The Famished Road*.

Before I introduce the overall structure of the paper, I would like to make a note about genre. While I have already discussed some of the implications of referring to *The Famished Road* as an “African” and “postcolonial” text, and will go on to explore this topic in more depth in Chapter One, many critics have defined the novel as an example of magical realism. *The Famished Road* is not only included in the canon of magical realist literature but is said to be “at the heart of the genre.” (Faris 102) However, Okri eschews the label of magical realism, saying that the use of this term to describe his work is “like

saying about a horse that it has four legs and a tail. That doesn't describe it." (qtd. in Anrys) The basic definition of magical realism, where magical events are brought into a realistic text in order to subvert the conventions of reality and narrative, cannot capture the fundamental belief that such supernatural occurrences are not mere intrusions of magical fiction upon reality but a part of reality itself. Okri stated in an interview, "Everyone's universe, everyone's perception of the world and of time is unique to them. It's a world in itself. It's a complete world. An important part of my tradition is that we do not believe that the dead die." (qtd. in Ogunsanwo 40) For Okri, it seems, there is not the diametric split between life and death; there is no boundary between the magical and real.

While magical realism draws fruitful interpretive parallels between Okri and other authors from the global south, specifically Salman Rushdie and Gabriel Garcia Marquez, the genre must be wary of becoming, in the words of Wendy B. Faris, a sort of "commodifying kind of primitivism that, like the Orientalism analyzed by Edward Said and his successors, relegates the colonies and their traditions to the role of cute, exotic psychological fantasies." (Faris 101) Stephen Slemon argues that magical realism is a form of postcolonial resistance, but in his discussion he recognizes that "the concept of magic realism itself threatens to become a monumentalizing category for literary practice and to offer to centralizing genre systems a single locus upon which the massive problem of difference in literary expression can be managed into recognizable meaning in one swift pass." (Slemon 408-09) Magic, in Okri's novel, is not an invented force for the purpose of postcolonial subversion as "the world of spirits is not metaphorical or imaginary;" rather, it is a distinct part of Okri's reality. (Appiah: 1992, 146) Magical

realism can prove a useful genre in other contexts; however, it is a trivializing characterization for *The Famished Road*.

Alternative reading of *The Famished Road* include the idea of “animist realism,” which Harry Garuba describes as an essential aspect of traditional Nigerian culture: it acts to “[spiritualize] the object world, thereby giving the spirit a local habitation,” knitting together the world of ancestors and gods with the world of the everyday. (Garuba 267) Unlike magical realism, the idea of animist realism is directly tied to Africa and the threat of exoticization is less likely with an animist reading. Animism represents the relationship between the spirit and the physical worlds as a one-way dialogue, with the spirit world having agency over the physical and not vice versa. *The Famished Road* operates on the concept of the simultaneity of these worlds and the ability of all of the different realms to affect the others is fundamental to the novel. This leaves the idea of animist realism unsuitable for the novel.

Animist realism attempts to create an indigenous model for reading African texts with supernatural occurrences, including *The Famished Road*. The multiplicity of worlds that exist simultaneously in the narrative produces a barrier to interpretation. This thesis takes on the question of how to read *The Famished Road*, of how to hold all of these worlds simultaneously while still moving forward through the narrative. In searching for a theoretical space which does not trivialize or flatten the novel, I will move from the physical, exterior spaces of the novel to the textual spaces of Okri’s other work and finally to the space of the road in the novel itself.

In Chapter One, I will examine the geographical and cultural space in which the novel exists. The first section focuses on the role of tribes and nation in *The Famished*

Road. Okri rejects the reading of the novel as solely an example of Yoruba or Igbo literature by tying the idea of “tribe” to the way the British colonizers of the early twentieth century codified cultural practices of native groups living in the Niger Delta. The British “invention of tradition” (Ranger 1994) produced a vision of the indigenous societies as one-dimensional, as a set of customs that remained stagnant over history. This conception of tribe is incompatible with the dynamic worlds that populate *The Famished Road*. Though the space of the nation is both culturally and geographically larger than the space of the tribe, the same Western generation of identity affects the idea of Nigeria. Existing theoretical approaches to the concept of nation imagine it as a two-dimensional space and this framework cannot contain the chronotope of Okri’s novel.

The second section of Chapter One expands to include, first, all of Africa and, second, the entire black community both in and outside of the continent. The Pan-African movement and the Negritude movement were founded in an attempt to combat the legacy of colonialism, but both causes unintentionally reinforced Western notions of Africa and blackness. In claiming African and/or black solidarity, these theories erase the specific characteristics of different regions and cultures. Within *The Famished Road*, Okri notes the ease with which these movements can be misappropriated by political figures. He questions the usage of the term “Africa” rather than African solidarity itself. Okri’s relationship to postcolonial theory in *The Famished Road* features the same issue of homogenization, though its application to *The Famished Road* can provide insight into the novel’s narrative structure.

I will perform an inductive reading of Okri in Chapter Two, starting with an analysis of *The Famished Road* through the lens of Okri’s 2007 novel, *Starbook*.

Starbook takes the form of a fairytale and throughout this ethereal narrative Okri espouses his theories on art and storytelling. While the ideas of *Starbook* are relevant to *The Famished Road*, the later novel is didactic and prescriptive. Okri's own offering of an interpretive lens for *The Famished Road* is philosophically interesting, but in attempting to decode his seminal novel Okri removes much of the specificity and nuance that makes *The Famished Road* such an engaging text.

While all of these theoretical readings produce interesting insights for the text, the second chapter of Part Two will demonstrate how *The Famished Road* defines its own space. The chronotopic structure of the novel can be parsed out through the road that runs through the story. The road of *The Famished Road* is able to account for the proliferation of simultaneous worlds because it was once a river, according to Azaro, and thus has depth. By implying both direction, through the linearity of normal roads, and multiple dimensions, through the road's history as a river, Okri is able to explore the existence of many worlds without sacrificing a coherent narrative structure.

Part One: Geographical and Cultural Space

Nigeria and *The Famished Road*

Okri situates *The Famished Road* in an ahistorical period, one tenuously aligned with pre-Independence Nigeria, but Okri never names either the nation or time period.⁴ The novel offers the trappings of Nigerian society with its gritty descriptions of West African city life, including culturally Nigerian foods, drinks, and rituals. Palm wine, ogororo, lorries, ground-nuts as well as the vast swath of references to Yoruba folklore locate the reader firmly in the cultural and physical space of Nigeria. Even the novel's invented political parties bear a close resemblance to post-Independence Nigerian politics: the slogan of the Party of the Rich in Okri's novel, "We Will Make You Rich Like Us," (*TFR* 123) maps well onto "Life More Abundant," the mantra of a left-wing political group in post-independence Nigeria. (Falola 191) Yet Okri does not name the nation "Nigeria" and only once mentions tribe in *The Famished Road*.

The explicit naming of tribe, specifically the Yoruba tribe, occurs in the Tale of the Blue Sunglasses. This story emerges as Azaro and his mother sit around the desperately ill body of Dad. Dad is trapped in a dream of the Land of Fighting ghosts after a boxing match with the man in white, a mystical figure whom Dad defeats after stripping away the man's white suit. Mum's attempt to draw Dad back into the physical world takes many forms, including her own venture into Dad's dream, but throughout all these efforts she and Azaro hold vigil around the unconscious body. Before the Tale begins Okri has introduced ideas that will be brought to a head within the Tale itself, such

⁴ Ato Quayson describes the amorphous temporal space as such: "It is as if the mood of post-Independence disillusionment is transferred onto the period before Independence when the mood was supposedly more euphoric and hopeful." (Quayson 131-2)

as the simultaneity of different worlds, apparent in Dad's straddling of the physical world and the Land of Fighting Ghosts, and European colonization of Africa. Okri is directly playing with the intrusion of whiteness into the narrative: the only way in which Dad can successfully win his fight is to rip the white suit of his opponent to shreds. In wrecking the suit, Dad destroys the whiteness that is present in the novel as a signifier of Western power. The Tale itself combats the Western invasion of African narratives, indirectly, and spatial and temporal linearity, more directly.

Time passes quite strangely in the tale, which takes place in a span of only a few weeks for Azaro's mother but spans centuries for a character known only as the white man who gives her blue sunglasses. After their first meeting, during which the man asks Azaro's mother how to get out of Africa, the man becomes feverish, murders an African man and wanders around Africa until he awakens from his madness five centuries later. In this elapsed time, the man changes his thinking from "The only way to get out of Africa is to get Africa out of you" (*TFR* 483) to "the only way to get out of Africa was to become an African." (*TFR* 484) The white man tells Azaro's mother that in order to leave Africa, "I changed my thinking. I changed my ways." (*TFR* 484) In doing so, he is able to find his way out of Africa and dies in England only to be born again and appear to Azaro's mother as "a Yoruba man with fine marks on his face." (*TFR* 483) The length of time during which the man wanders around Africa, "500 years," not only jolts the reader by altering the expected linear stream of time, but also refers to the length of time Europe has been engaged with and exploiting Africa as a whole. Nigerian historians agree "the fifteenth century is traditionally taken as the beginning point for relations between the people of Nigeria and Europe." (Falola 42) The white man's attempt to get out of Africa,

then, temporally spans the entirety of the Niger territories' interaction with Europe. I refer to Nigeria pre-1914 as the Niger territories because Great Britain's "Niger Committee" proposed Nigeria as a colony in 1898 and "created" the state in 1914. (Falola 186-92) The space in which the white man wanders is not a city in Nigeria as such but a physical landscape populated by people who will later be referred to as "Nigerians."

As previously noted, the characters of *The Famished Road* are never identified as Nigerian, despite the images of Nigerian culture and society that adorn the novel, and the mention of tribe occurs only once. The white man's rebirth into Africa as a Yoruba man directly follows his realization that "The only way to get out of Africa was to become an African" (*TFR* 483) and effectively sutures the category of tribe to that of continent. "Yoruba," for the white man, becomes a signifier for African. Yet this is the only occasion within the novel in which tribe is explicitly named, rather than inscribed in the customs and folklores that inform the novel. Tribe, then, becomes a medium for Africa as seen by this white man. This positioning of tribe in the novel follows the actual invention/imagination of African "tribes" in the early twentieth century as a result of British colonization. (Ranger: 1983, 598)

The British colonization of West Africa, as well as other parts of the continent, was defined by a systematic effort to investigate and exploit existing African political systems. (Falola 186-92) The British conducted anthropological studies of the political and social structures of the tribes in the Nigerian delta prior to establishing colonial rule. By identifying patterns of power in the areas of intended colonization, the British were able to adapt their strategies for control of the colonies to these local political orders. The British codification of the observed customs, Terrence Ranger observes, resulted in "the

importation of European neotraditional inventions of identity... and the invention of Africans within them as subordinates, but also by the systematic invention of *African traditions*.” (Ranger: 1994, 6) Ranger later trades out the term “invention” for “imagined,” borrowing the latter term from Benedict Anderson’s *Imagined Communities*, in order to emphasize the joint African and European acceptance, or “imagining,” of these new terms. “Invented” proves problematic in describing this process of codification because the British took advantage of existing customs and power structures. While “imagined” is an apt term, I believe a useful corollary to the development of tradition is the idea of “mapping.” By representing existing customs in the form of British “traditions,” the vast and nebulous cultures that populated Africa were flattened. Maps, by reproducing three-dimensional areas in a two-dimensional space, eliminate much of the nuanced landscapes they purport to represent. The actual, literal flattening of space through mapping is an apt metaphor for the flattening of indigenous cultures through British attempts at codifying “tradition”: both forms of representation lose much of the texture of the original physical and cultural spaces. Just as maps alter the perception of immense swaths of land by representing the landscape in two dimensions, so too did the imposition of “tradition” on groups of Africans alter the forms indigenous cultures were able to take.

Ranger and other historians, notably Obaro Ikime, observe that the Africans with some form of power within these systems, chiefs and what Ikime terms “young literates,” tended to reify this new structure during the colonial years. The interaction between imagined traditions and imagined communities is a problematic but fundamental aspect of Nigerian history; Kwame Anthony Appiah notes that across the continent, “these

invented traditions have now acquired the status of national mythology, and the invented past of Africa has come to play a role in the political dynamics of the modern state.” (Appiah 61) This “national mythology,” despite its potent presence in the politics of nations, is not necessarily a unifying force. Ethnic-based political parties emerged in the period of decolonization leading up to Independence, creating tension between the new Nigeria and its solidified tribal identities. (Falola 161) The naming of the Yoruba tribe as an indicator of the former white man’s newly discovered Africanness allows Okri to place the tribal in the realm of the former British Empire. It becomes a tongue-in-cheek reference to the construction of identity as well as the perception of tradition and tribe outside of Africa.

The petrification of tradition in the form of early 20th century ideas of custom takes its toll on the perception of African art and narrative. For Western readers, Eileen Julien writes, “there arises simultaneously an aesthetic interest in and demand for those creatures of local indigenous artistic traditions that would give specificity and authenticity to the ‘African novel.’” (Julien: 2006, 676) African novels, she posits, are asked to perform Africa in order to maintain their readership both outside and across the continent. Julien defines these canonical African novels as “extroverted novels that have tended to explain Africa to the world, and especially, to a hegemonic West.” (Julien: 2006, 695) Her approach assumes a critical mass of readership *outside* the continent with influence on the publishing industry within Africa such that readers *across* the continent also become accustomed to the literary performance of Africa. Okri averts this performance of Africanness not by removing the trappings of his conception of culture from the novel, but by revealing the “spatial paradigm” of extroversion as a dialogue

between Africa and Europe. (Julien: 2006, 682) By giving the Yoruba identity to the reborn white man, he draws a line between the European expectations of Africa and the conception of tribe.

Okri's linear conception of tribe is striking given the nonlinear creation of the white man as a Yoruba man. The white man wanders the city naked for five hundred years before he is reborn, but when he meets Azaro's mother in the market again only two weeks have passed in her character's temporal version of events. Yet, the white man is the only character in the novel given a tribe. If the white man's transformation into a Yoruba man occurs in Nigeria, or a Nigeria-like nation, around the time of Independence, the political crisis surrounding the independence movement can offer insight:

[Ikime] attributes the crisis in the immediate postindependence period to the numerous political and constitutional flaws that can be traced to 1914, when the Nigerian state was artificially created. Scholars thus have been consistently reminded that the origins of the Nigerian Civil War should be traced to 1914. (Falola 192)

Despite placing the white man in a temporal flux, Okri remains tied to the idea of this linear dialectic between Europe and Africa, as emphasized by the imagining of tribes. By linear dialectic, I refer to the direct effects of British colonization on Nigerian political strife. By codifying the idea of tribes, Britain effectively rewrote the customs of native groups as ahistorical, permanent traditions. The cultural practices of these groups in the early twentieth century were essentially frozen in time. The differences in culture between Igbo and Yoruba, Urhobo and Hausa was classified during the early days of colonization and when posited as "traditions," eternal and unchanging "traditions," these differences became paramount to the identities of ethnic-based political parties. Effectively, the idea of tribes imagined in the early twentieth century moved without

change through history until Nigeria was granted independence in 1960. Though the post-independence crisis of Nigeria had many mitigating factors, much of the political strife can be traced directly, or linearly, to the destructive codification of “tribes” that emerged from the relationship between the British and the pre-colonial Nigerians. The linear dialectic, then, is the way that this initial dialogue between the colonized and colonizer sparked the rigid movement of the idea tribes through time. Okri, by limiting the explicit mention of tribe to the occasion of a white man becoming Yoruba, rejects the pre-defined space inscribed by codified traditions. Though the imagining of tribes required both European and African participation, the result was a stagnant, British idea of tradition that resulted in a nation unable to stabilize itself due to ethnic politics, among other factors. Okri explores political tension in *The Famished Road*'s Nigeria-like state, but refuses the limits imposed by the brittle ethnic groups by denying their names, which stand as emblems of the twentieth century imaginings of customs.

The imagining of nations, as posed by Benedict Anderson, depends on a similar dialectic, this time within communities themselves. Anderson theorizes the nation as “an imagined political community,” and one “conceived as a deep, horizontal comradeship.” (Anderson 6, 7) If tribes are a one-dimensional representation of Nigerian people, the nation itself is a two-dimensional space, a “horizontal” concept of community. Members of any nation, say, Nigeria, may exist in entirely separate places and one Nigerian will never encounter the millions of other Nigerians in the course of his or her life, but it is a hallmark of the nation that a Nigerian can have “complete confidence in [the] steady anonymous, simultaneous activity” of other Nigerians. (Anderson 26) The coexistence of

a people in both space and time becomes a fundamental part of the idea of a nation. This concept of simultaneity is paramount to an agreed-upon national identity.

Like the British codification of “tradition” in its imagination of African tribes, the imagining of nations required records. Anderson describes the use of maps and the census as methods of defining territory as nation:

European-style maps worked on the basis of a totalizing classification, and led their bureaucratic producers and consumers towards policies with revolutionary consequences. Ever since John Harrison's 1761 invention of the chronometer, which made possible the precise calculation of longitudes, the entire planet's curved surface had been subjected to a geometrical grid which squared off empty seas and unexplored regions in measured boxes. The task of, as it were, 'filling in' the boxes was to be accomplished by explorers, surveyors, and military forces.... They were on the march to put space under the same surveillance which the census-makers were trying to impose on persons. Triangulation by triangulation, war by war, treaty by treaty, the alignment of map and power proceeded.
(Anderson 173)

The planar space of the map becomes emblematic of the nation itself. While tribes may have been encoded in a single dimension, with the pre-colonial characterizations of “pluralism, flexibility, multiple identity” coopted by British colonial forces and “bounded by the rigidities of invented tradition,” the nation takes on another axis to span both temporal and geographical space. (Ranger 6) The nation may be two-dimensional, flattened by the imposition of maps, but it moves linearly through space as defined by Harrison’s gridded longitudes and latitudes. For both Ranger and Anderson, the map becomes a more egalitarian method of representing communities as it defines geographical space rather than enumerating customs.⁵

This horizontal space is matched by a linear conception of time within the bounds of the nation. Anderson writes that “the idea of a sociological organism moving

⁵ The census, however, retains the same properties as the British codification of traditions.

calendrically through homogenous, empty time is a precise analogue of the idea of the nation, which is also conceived as a solid community moving steadily up (or down) history.” (Anderson 26) Okri’s refusal to work within linear constraints of time and space causes him to reject both the map as referent of the nation and the nation itself.

Geographical space, for Okri, is not horizontal. Azaro, while residing in physical, “real,” space, experiences several worlds and times at once: “The wind of several lives blew into my eyes. The lives stretched far back and when I saw the great king of the spirit-world staring at me through the open doors of my eyes I knew that many things were calling me.” (*TFR* 446) The multiplicity of worlds that coexist in the novel refute the idea of space that can be mapped. The simultaneity of these worlds challenges the notion of linear time as well. Okri does not work within codified traditions or planar representations of space and time; rather, *The Famished Road*’s characters exist in a multidimensional space without clear borders.

Simultaneity in the worlds of *The Famished Road* is directly at odds with the Newtonian concept of time. Dimock, in writing of the displacement of linear time within literature, describes how Newton codified time:

“[Space] is actually the antecedent, the originating idea from which time derives its shape, as a longitudinal ‘order of succession,’ much like a latitudinal ‘order of situation’ Newton spatializes time and, in the same gesture, standardizes it. The temporal axis now becomes a series of synchronic planes, a series of numbered cross-sections. Events are assumed to be unified if they happen to fall on the same plane; their common identity is guaranteed by their common serial address. Newtonian physics thus assigns a tremendous regulative power to simultaneity, the condition of being at an identically numbered cross-section. (Dimock:2006, 127-8)

The nation is dependent on simultaneity and exists in this spatial and temporal plane. The tribe takes this linear experience of time and condenses it, imagining tradition as it

appeared in one temporal instant rather than as a series of customs subject to change over time. The tribe, as codified in the early 20th century, denies simultaneity; the nation depends on it; Okri expands it:

Given the fact of the immortality of spirits, could these be the reason why I wanted to be born — these paradoxes of things, the eternal changes, the riddle of living while one is alive, the mystery of being, of births within births, death within births, births within dying, the challenge of giving birth to one's true self, to one's new spirit, till the conditions are right for the new immutable star within one's universe to come into existence; the challenge to grow and learn and love, to master one's self; the possibilities of a new pact with one's spirit; the probability that no injustice lasts for ever, no love ever dies, that no light is ever really extinguished, that no true road is ever complete, that no way is ever definitive, no truth ever final, and that there are never really any beginnings or endings? It may be that, in the land of origins, when many of us were birds, even all these reasons had nothing to do with why I wanted to live.
(*TFR* 488)

Okri refuses to work in the planar spatial and temporal dynamics that define the nation. He challenges the concept of nation in general, aligning with Dimock's theory that "*deviation* from the national timetable surely matters as much as synchronization under the sign of the nation... the effect of off-beat reading is to generate a temporal bond at odds with the chronological progression of the nation." (Dimock: 2006, 133) Time here is cyclical, with "births within births, death within births, births within dying" etc., but it is not inevitable. Okri cannot doom time to repetition when "no way is ever definitive," and instead opens up the possibilities of time—and, indeed, space for the imagination of simultaneous births and deaths requires something beyond a two-dimensional reality. The linearity of roads is denied as "no true road is ever complete," and if the story of the nation is necessarily linear, then it cannot exist in the conception of a novel where "there are never really any beginnings or endings." If the nation is dependent on standard time, then by "inhabiting this domain [of nonstandard time], literature yields a temporal axis

startling to contemplate: longer than we think, messier, not strictly chronological, and not chronological in a single direction. Literature... is the clearest sign of a temporal order outside the jurisdiction of number.” (Dimock:2006, 132) Nonstandard time, such as that which appears in Okri’s work, disrupts the “nation” as a concept.

Okri directly addresses the idea of the nation only once in the novel, but he conceptualizes it as nonlinear. Azaro’s *abiku* friend Ade tells him, “Our country is an *abiku* country. Like the spirit-child, it keeps coming and going. One day it will decide to remain. It will become strong.” (*TFR* 478) The impermanence of the nation is explicitly discussed in the text even if the nation of Nigeria is not mentioned. The problem of the nation, both in general and specifically in Nigeria, becomes paramount, but Okri stops short of generating the “national myth” so feared by Appiah. Okri’s dual challenges to tribe and nation are sutured by the problems of the nation as generated by problems of tribe: “The primary implication of the popularity of ethnic-based parties, as Ikime demonstrates, is that it stood in the way of the emergence of ‘Nigerians.’ In other words, while we have a nation-state called Nigeria, we do not have Nigerians.” (Falola 162) By positing Nigeria, or the Nigeria-like-state in which the novel exists, as “an *abiku* country,” Okri sheds the idea that his Nigeria can function as a nation in the manner proposed by Anderson and Dimock. The “flattening” of culture caused by the imagining of ethnic groups in the early twentieth century, and the effect the political parties based in these ethnic groups had on postindependence Nigeria, created a two-dimensional idea of nation that cannot contain the nuances of culture, time and space imagined by Okri. By refusing to work within the temporal bonds of nationalism, Okri avoids what Ashcroft, Griffiths, and Tiffin describe as “the impetus towards national self-realization in critical

assessments of literature [which] all too often fails to stop short of nationalist myth.”

(Ashcroft et al. 17) Okri’s idea of “national self-realization” does not put his country on a pedestal but rather reconstructs the space of Nigeria. If the nation emerges in its current form as a function of British colonialism, Okri challenges this influence by negating not only the traditional idea of the nation but by imagining a new spatial and temporal paradigm in which his conception of the nation can flourish.

Africa and *The Famished Road*

The multiplicity of worlds and times offered by Okri in *The Famished Road* would seem to require a broader space. It is tempting to offer the entire African continent as an arena for the novel. The sprawl of *The Famished Road* could be contained by nativist sentiments; Azaro could find boundaries in racial and geographical solidarity. Blackness as a characteristic and Africa as a place are present forces in the novel; Dad, in a drunken dream, imagines that he has a continent inside of him but is displaced from his homeland:

The continent vanished. I found myself on a strange island. The people treated me roughly. They were also white. Unfriendly people. Unfriendly to me, at least. I lived among them for many years. I couldn't find my way out. I was trapped there on that small island. I found it difficult to live there. They were afraid of me because of my different colour. As for me, I began to lose weight. I had to shrink the continent in me to accommodate myself to the small island. (*TFR* 437)

The continent that is Dad's homeland is a fundamental part of him, as is his blackness, his color. Both the geographical disparity between Dad's current location on the small island and the continent inside of him as well as the blackness of which the white people of the island are so frightened become so integral to Dad's identity that the inability of the island to accommodate these characteristics literally sickens him. Much of the novel could be read through the lens of both the Pan-Africanist movement and the Negritude movement. The two carve out space for themselves by erasing the borders of nation and tribe that unintentionally reified British colonial structures; the uniting forces for these movements are not national or subnational structures of cultural and governance that follow the prescriptions of colonial powers; rather, the movements define themselves by their attempts to negate colonial thought.

I will define the Pan-Africanist and Negritude movements, as briefly as possible without risking the loss of the nuance of their arguments, before focusing in on the movements' relationship to the text of *The Famished Road*. The Pan-Africanist movement preceded Negritude and can be considered to have its origins in Black Nationalism, which was initially a movement of eighteenth century Haiti that intended to establish the first independent black nation. (Simeon-Jones 10) Black Nationalism took a different form in the late nineteenth, early twentieth century United States as the former slaves of America could "only go so far as imagining the establishment of a nation within a nation." (Simeon-Jones 14) Pan-Africanism draws on aspects of Black Nationalism that focus on the idea of Africa as a homeland for the black Diaspora. While I gloss over much of the historical specificity of the movement, for the purposes of this paper, Pan-Africanism can be thought of as an attempt to unify Africa as both a continent and an area of geographical descent for the black Diaspora. The movement has cultural significance, but its primary influence on Africans in the twentieth century is socio-political as a result of many of its supporters' engagement in governance and political philosophy: Kwame Nkrumah and Jomo Kenyatta, the first presidents of Ghana and Kenya, respectively, are two of the most dominant figures in mid-century Pan-Africanist thought, and W.E.B. DuBois is posited as one of the leaders of diasporic Pan-African movement. Pan-Africanism becomes a tool for self-governance, for continental solidarity sans Western rule, a concept that Appiah finds problematic:

Despite the differences between the histories of British, French, and Portuguese ex-colonies, there is a deep and deeply self-conscious continuity between the problems and projects of decolonized Africans,... There is something disconcerting for a Pan-Africanist in the thesis (which I state here at its most extreme) that what Africans have in common is fundamentally that European racism failed to take them seriously, that European imperialism exploited them.

[This idea anticipates] Achebe's question: "When you see an African what does it mean to a white man?"—the presupposition that the African identity is, in part, the product of a European gaze. (Appiah 81)]

Negritude, an idea coined by the Martinician poet Aime Cesaire in the 1940s, is "the simple recognition of the fact of being black, and the acceptance of this fact, of our destiny as black people, of our history and our culture." (qtd. in Irele: 1977, 203) The movement posits a shared people, shared history, shared culture under the banner of race. In the latter half of the twentieth century, the Senegalese poet Leopold Sedar Senghor became one Negritude's champions. His work expanded on the idea of this unified African identity, adding to history and culture a kind of physiological characterization of black Africans:

Far back as one may go into his past, from the northern Sudanese to the Southern Bantu, the African has always and everywhere presented a concept of the world that is diametrically opposed to the traditional philosophy of Europe. The latter is essentially *static, objective, dichotomic*: it is, in fact, dualistic, in that it makes an absolute distinction between body and soul, matter and spirit. It is founded on separation and opposition: on analysis and conflict. The African, on the other hand, conceives the world, beyond the diversity of its forms, as a fundamentally mobile, yet unique, reality that seeks synthesis. (Senghor 198)

The African, for Senghor among other proponents of Negritude, is an inherently sensual being with a deep connection to his roots. Abiola Irele, an opponent of Negritude, writes, "the African's response to the external world in Senghor's conception is an upsurge of the sensibility, at the level of the nervous system, an intense, engulfing experience in which the whole organic being of the self is involved." (Irele: 1977, 204-5) Negritude, for Irele, becomes a "romantic myth of Africa," and instead of throwing off the shackles of Eurocentric ideas of Africans, Irele believes the movement trivializes African identity in the same manner as the colonial forces. (Irele: 1977, 204) This sentiment is echoed in later writing by postcolonial theorists Ashcroft, Griffiths, and Tiffin:

Black culture, [Negritude] claimed, was emotional rather than rational; it stressed integration and wholeness over analysis and dissection; it operated by distinctive rhythmic and temporal principles, and so forth. Negritude also claimed a distinctive African view of time-space relationships, ethics, metaphysics, and an aesthetics which separated itself from supposedly 'universal' values of European taste and style. The danger was that, as a result, it could easily be reincorporated into a European model in which it functioned only as the antithesis of the thesis of white supremacy, a new 'universal' paradigm. (Ashcroft et al 21)

Senghor's language in defining Negritude hinged on the existence of the "traditional philosophy of Europe" if only so his philosophy could be "diametrically opposed" to these colonial forces. (Senghor 198) Ashcroft et al. recognize the dependence of this ostensibly innately African concept on European models, but Appiah goes further in identifying European ideas of Africa not only as an outside force but a fundamental aspect of the Negritude movement:

Black philosophy must be rejected, for its defense depends on the essentially racist presuppositions of the white philosophy whose antithesis it is. Ethnocentrism—which is an unimaginative attitude to one's own culture—is in danger of falling into racism, which is an absurd attitude to the color of someone else's skin. (Appiah 92)

Negritude's conception idea of blackness as characteristic not only of one's external identity but one's internal character is alarming for Appiah, as well as for some Pan-Africanists. Appiah writes, "Though race is indeed at the heart of the Pan-Africanist's nationalism, however, it seems that it is the fact of a shared race, not the fact of a shared racial character, that provides the basis for solidarity." (Appiah 17) Pan-Africanism, here, attempts to draw the line between commonality and stereotype by refusing the idea of inherently black characteristics.

The Pan-African literary manifesto is Chinweizu, Onwuchekwa Jemie, and Ihechukwo Madubuike's *Toward the Decolonization of African Literature*, and it is militantly opposed to Eurocentric conceptions of Africans and African literature:

The cultural task at hand is to end all foreign domination of African culture, to systematically destroy all encrustations of colonial and slave mentality, to clear the bushes and stake out new foundations for a liberated African modernity. (Chinweizu et al. 1)

In order to decolonize, the book espouses the same African solidarity as the Negritude movement, proclaiming, “African literature *is* an autonomous entity separate and apart from all other literatures.” (Chinweizu et al. 4) By creating African literature outside of the realm of European literatures, the authors attempt to define a space that defies colonialism. The Pan-African movement, in this conception, “is indebted to negritude” on the basis of negritude’s championing of African nationalism and orality, but the authors have reservations about the fundamental tenant of Negritude, its reimagining of African history. (Chinweizu et al. 257) They write, using the same kind of language as Irele in their criticism, “[Negritude’s] mythical portrait of traditional Africa can prove to be a new prison. In the task of decolonization we cannot afford an uncritical glorification of the past.” (Chinweizu et al. 257) Negritude offers the same manipulation and erasure of the past as previously codified by European notions of tribe and nation.

This theme of subtle re-colonialism is noted by Appiah in his argument against Pan-Africanism:

The very invention of Africa (as something more than a geographical entity) must be understood, ultimately, as an outgrowth of European racialism; the notion of Pan-Africanism was founded on the notion of the African, which was, in turn, founded not on any genuine cultural commonality but... on the very European concept of the Negro. (Appiah 62)

Despite Chinweizu, Jemie, and Madubuike’s rejection of the central idea of Negritude, Appiah believes that the Pan-Africanist attempt to smooth over the differences of regions and cultures across the African continent has at its root the same unintentional reiteration of colonial thought. The idea of one “African culture” cannot be considered a progression

from the colonial era; Appiah asks of the Pan-Africanist movement, “Surely differences in religious ontology and ritual, in the organization of politics and the family, in relations between the sexes and in art, in styles of warfare and cuisine, in language—surely all these are fundamental kinds of difference?” (Appiah 25) The vast expanse of both land and tradition that comprise the African continent cannot be unified under one umbrella of culture, and the Pan-Africanist movement does not always acknowledge that this attempt at continental solidarity is an entirely modern concept. Pan-Africanism is of the same invented nature as tribes and nations; “a return to traditions, after all, would never be a return to the contemporary nation-state. Nor could it mean, in Africa... a return to an earlier continental unity, since—to insist on the obvious—the continent was not united in the past.” (Appiah 60-1) Yet both Pan-Africanist and nativist concepts of Africa are a consistent feature of art, politics, and intellectual discourse across and outside of the continent throughout the twentieth and twenty-first centuries, from Nkrumah’s rallying cry for an “Africa for Africans, by Africans” to Okri’s own use of the term “Africa” in *The Famished Road*. Appiah acknowledges certain similarities of people from all of Africa:

We share a continent and its ecological problems; we share a relation of dependency to the world economy; we share the problem of racism in the way the industrial world thinks of us... we share the possibilities of the development of regional markets and local circuits of productions; and our intellectuals participate, through shared contingencies of our various histories, in a common discourse. (Appiah 180)

While Negritude may be out of fashion, which Peter S. Thompson claims is due to Negritude’s appearance as “an obligated or dictated response to Europe,” Africa remains a central and flawed concept. (Thomson 213) Okri’s use of “Africa” in *The Famished*

Road relies on both racial and geographical signifiers to define the boundaries of the continent as both a physical and cultural space.

In the Tale of the Blue Sunglasses, the white man is clearly created as an outsider. By displaying his virulence “to get out of Africa,” Okri emphasizes the distance the man feels from his own character and the land in which he is trapped. Blackness, or not-whiteness, becomes a signifier of Africanness. While some proponents of both Negritude and Pan-Africanism, notably Kwame Nkrumah, disagree with attempts to put the two movements in the same camp, Okri sutures the two together by identifying whiteness with non-Africanness and, by extension, blackness with Africanness. His conception of Africa in *The Famished Road* then becomes a site for the discussion of racial, geographical, and cultural solidarity. Okri directly defines the location of the novel as Africa, referring to the continent by name in five scenes. Aside from the Tale of the Blue Sunglasses, which I have previously discussed, each mention of “Africa” is tied to an attempt to manipulate the conception of the culture of “Africa,” either through the bemoaning of lost “African” values or the use of the term in political maneuvering.⁶

In the aftermath of the episode of the rotten milk, in which the Party of the Rich distributed free milk to the community only for Azaro’s mother to discover that the milk was poisoned, Azaro recognizes one of the members of the Party of the Rich at Madame Koto’s bar and spits at him; the people at the bar “commented on my behaviour and lamented the way children no longer respected their elders and blamed it all on the white man’s way of life which was spoiling the values of Africa.” (*TFR* 240) Okri cynically ties the “values of Africa” espoused by the people at the bar to the man’s rotten milk

⁶ The exception to the rule is a reference to “women of the new African churches.” (*TFR* 114) As noted in the introduction, I will not be directly addressing the relationship between Okri and Christianity in this thesis.

distribution, which itself is a representation of the corruption of politics. If the unfortunate state of affairs of national politics in Okri's Nigeria is tied to the legacy of colonialism, as discussed in the last chapter, the claim that it is "the white man's way of life" that is "spoiling the values of Africa" is tinged with irony as these so-called values of Africa are already tainted.

The Party of the Rich uses Africa as a draw for constituents, proclaiming "that they were going to stage the greatest political rally in the world and that the most famous musicians in Africa would be performing on the day and that there would be gifts for children, prizes for women, and jobs for men." (*TFR* 387) Africa, here, becomes a tool for politics as well as a geographical space. It is possible that Okri's description of the political rally is a reference to the real life Nigerian government's staging of the Second World Black and African Festival of Arts and Culture (FESTAC) in 1977. The Nigerian government, whose economic capital had grown as a result of the oil boom of the 1970s, funded the festival to support "the emergence of a distinctive black and African modernity from the collective wellsprings of traditional culture." (Apter 5) The cultural ideals promoted by FESTAC draw together the Pan-African and Negritude movements in a festival that aims for the same grandness as the Party of the Rich's "greatest political rally in the world." For the Nigerian government in 1977, FESTAC was "an important mechanism of national development," but the in the implementation of the festival "colonial culture was nationalized and indigenized." (Apter 45, 16) Apter notes that with the language of the festival, "its use of *negroid* and *negritic*, to designate peoples and hence make them eligible for membership in the new black world, the festival reproduced the very racial taxonomies of imperialism." (Apter 59) The Party of the Rich, whose

name implies the same affluence as the oil-rich Nigerian government at the time of FESTAC, uses the blanket term of “Africa” as a selling point for its rally. FESTAC, for all its promotion of Nigerian and African culture and solidarity, was a product of the “Nigerian oil-based commodity boom [which] owed little to social relations of indigenous production and almost everything to the state’s control over oil revenues and royalties, which were diverted into private hands and converted into social and political capital.” (Apter 44) Essentially, FESTAC was an emblem of Nigerian political corruption masquerading as a celebration of native culture. I do not intend to tie every political event in *The Famished Road* to a corollary in Nigerian history, but the parallels between the rally of the Party of the Rich and FESTAC prove useful in explaining Okri’s mistrust of the sweeping term of “Africa” in political contexts.

Later in the novel, the drunken ramblings of an herbalist unite the ideas of Africa as a cultural and physical arena in the same vein as the Pan-Africanists. When Madame Koto purchases a car, the community is enthralled and throws a massive party, during which the herbalist makes dire predictions about the changes in the community:

“Too many roads! Things are CHANGING TOO FAST! No new WILL. COWARDICE everywhere! SELFISHNESS is EATING UP the WORLD. THEY ARE DESTROYING AFRICA! They are DESTROYING the WORLD and the HOME and the SHRINES and the GODS! THEY are DESTROYING LOVE TOO.” (*TFR* 382)

For the herbalist, Africa is something equivalent to the world, to home, to the gods, but all of these are part of a rhetorical strategy designed to undermine Madame Koto’s grip on the community. Okri’s use of all capitals in the herbalist’s speech mimics the manner in which the political parties speak during their rallies earlier in the novel. The language of politics, then, remains constant regardless of its mouthpiece. Likewise, Africa, when

used as a signifier of culture, is something on the verge of destruction, something lost. Okri's inclusion of "Africa" in the text demonstrates both the abuse of the term by political forces and perceived degradation of Africa as an idea. If Okri's conception of blackness can be tied to his conception of Africanness, as suggested from his portrayal of "the white man" as an outsider, then the idea of Negritude and Pan-Africanism become intimately entwined in his portrayal of Africa. Okri's usage of "Africa" questions the appropriation of the term rather than completely rejecting the idea of African solidarity, putting him in line with Thompson's statement, "What the present seems to allow, then, in terms of Negritude's prestige, is an acceptance—sometimes difficult, sometimes condescending—of its place in history." (Thompson 217) Okri doesn't deny the existence of these spheres, but in acknowledging them as a fading part of his world *The Famished Road* negates the idea of Africa as a monolithic structure by displaying the abuse of the term.

The same homogenizing pitfalls of Negritude and Pan-Africanism are echoed in the use of postcolonial theory to explain the chronotopic structure of *The Famished Road*. The African and racial solidarity noted above is expanded to a global scale as all former subjects of colonial powers are brought together under the umbrella of postcolonialism, but the union of these disparate spaces can prove problematic: "The very concept of 'postcolonial' has been charged with abridging or warping time (the whole history of Empire is its purview), and squashing space (a homogenization that obliterates the historical specificities of the experience of colonization by difference societies)." (Olaniyan 639) Postcolonial theory, when it does not address the distinctions between the cultures it purports to represent, has a flattening and exoticizing effect on these cultures

as their primary characteristic becomes their status as non-Western. Instead of releasing the hold of colonialism on the former colonies, the identifying feature of postcolonial peoples becomes their former relationship to Western powers. Postcolonial theorists are aware of the precarious usage of the term: “Post-colonial literary theory, then, has begun to deal with the problems of transmuting time and space, with the present struggling out of the past, and, like much recent post-colonial literature, it attempts to construct a future.” (Ashcroft et al. 36-7) *The Famished Road* can be seen as Okri’s attempt to forge a future while acknowledging both his cultural roots and their interplay with colonialism.

In the narrative structure of *The Famished Road*, Olatubosun Ogunsanwo writes, “the European novel's convention of realistic detail and the African folkloric tale's mythic narration are played off against each other... There is no simple, unproblematic merging into one single monolithic discourse, as they remain distinct even while intermingling.... This non-assimilationist effect celebrates the "post" in "postcolonial" literature, signifying a "clearing of a new space" for African literature and so re-defining the relationship.” (Ogunsanwo 45) Ogunsanwo’s use of postcolonial theory to explain the narrative structure of *The Famished Road* designates a new space in which the narrative can operate. Postcolonialism, here, is helpful in understanding that the “colonial” is cleared not through the fusion of Western and African narratives, nor the negation of the European realist novel, but through a reworking of both forms of narrative that retains their characteristics. While this new space may “[celebrate] the ‘post’ in ‘postcolonial,’” postcolonial theory itself does not provide a definition for it. The idea of a singular postcolonial space has been discussed above and has proved to be dangerously homogenizing, and so the new, culturally specific space must come from Okri himself.

Part Two: Inter/Intratextual Space

Starbook and *The Famished Road*

Geographical and cultural spaces in the real world, outside of the text of *The Famished Road*, have proved inadequate in understanding the chronotopic structure of the novel. The remnants of colonialism embedded in the concepts of tribe and nation, as well as the unintentional smoothing of the distinctions between black, African, and postcolonial peoples by the philosophies of Negritude, pan-Africanism, and postcolonialism respectively, create a barrier to interpretation. These overarching theories have the capacity to overwrite the nuances of *The Famished Road*, reducing it to a representation rather than a narrative on its own terms.

In 2007, Okri came out with the novel *Starbook*. This new book offers the opportunity to read *The Famished Road* not as a product of Igbo or Yoruba tribes, of the Nigerian or Pan-African nation, of blackness or postcoloniality, but as a product of Okri. *Starbook* has neither the emotional nor political strength of *The Famished Road*--the book jacket declares *Starbook* a "fragile story"--but the novel, for all of its weaknesses as a narrative, offers a theoretical lens with which to read *The Famished Road* outside of the cultural and geographical constraints enumerated above.

Starbook is the story of a dying prince in a mythic land who discovers a tribe of artists that hides in the spaces between the prince's world and myriad other worlds. The prince falls in love with the daughter of a master artist of this tribe and in order to compete for her hand in marriage, he is apprenticed to this master artist. *Starbook* is framed as an oral narrative passed down from generations and handed from the narrator

to the reader. The novel draws on mythic tropes of good kings and sick princes, hidden tribes and elusive princesses as well as specific Igbo sculptural traditions.

Compared to *Starbook*, *The Famished Road* seems a realist novel. The spirits and *abiku* children of Okri's first novel bear the weight of poverty and corruption; the otherworldly is stained with the grit and banality of the everyday. *Starbook* stays in the realm of myth and when reality does intrude in the form of the transatlantic slave trade, the scene has an almost hallucinatory quality. The master artist's daughter sits in silence in her father's studio and "many years passed before the silence was over. Many dreams. She had been raped by a slave-master across the seas; repeatedly, at noon, when the house slept." (SB 113) The novel brings in the dregs of history, but these scenes are couched in dream language. The novel's characters are archetypal, its language grandiose, and its plot largely irrelevant. The mythological bend of *Starbook* allows Okri to explore the function of art rather than create a fully-fleshed narrative.

The site of Okri's philosophical musings on art is a tribe of sculptors that lives in the space between the world of the dying prince and the world of spirits. The tribe exists in a "land that is reached only through a unique gap in the world," a space that should not be. (SB 378) The physical nature of the space of the tribe of artists is similar to that of a hole: it has presence and absence simultaneously. When the prince first is made aware of the tribe, he immediately, develops an increased attention to all transcendental spaces, noticing "that between all things, between the trees, between the huts, between the walls and the gates, there were indistinguishable forms, like invisible beings investing the air with wavy shapes, that he had never noticed before." (SB 44) This fictional tribe of artists

occupying a space that by its very definition is unreal is the mouthpiece for Okri's theories on art. Art and its theories, then, live in this state of liminality.

In *The Famished Road*, the simultaneous worlds of the novel are traversed by Azaro, who "found [himself] oscillating between both worlds." (TFR 8) As a spirit-child, "an unwilling adventurer into chaos and sunlight, into the dreams of the living and the dead," Azaro could also be considered to be living in a liminal state. (TFR 487) Azaro is unstuck from both realities, floating freely between the realms of life and death as different forces call to him. The text itself reflects the coexistence of the spirit and natural worlds as Azaro occasionally appears in either reality without any attention paid to narrative continuity. Azaro, in one passage, is simultaneously walking a 2,000 year old, half-constructed road and laying in his bed, his father watching over him. (TFR 327) Later, Azaro is looking at parrot when he suddenly realizes he is walking through a forest: "I stared into its hypnotic eyes and felt myself being drawn into its consciousness... When that moment passed, nausea and bile rising in my throat, I found myself in a yellow forest, bounding through the emerald spangles of cobwebs." (TFR 456) Throughout the novel, there is no textual distance between the physical world and the world of spirits. Okri creates a narrative out of the collision of transcendent spirituality and gritty physicality. Azaro's wanderings through the marketplace first mark this cohabitation of natural and supernatural beings:

I saw people of all shapes and sizes, mountainous women with faces of iroko, midgets with faces of stone, reedy women with twins strapped to their backs, thick-set men with bulging shoulder muscles... I shut my eyes and when I opened them again I saw people walking backwards, a dwarf who got about on two fingers, men upside-down with baskets of fish on their feet, women who had breasts on their backs, babies strapped to their chests, and beautiful children with three arms. (TFR 15)

Okri's descriptions of the spirits amidst the market linguistically mirror his portrayal of the natural world--not only in the listing of observed characters, but the characters themselves: the women with twins bound to her back is paralleled by the women with breasts on their back and babies on their chests, a direct inversion of what had previously appeared. The reflection of the natural world in the appearance of the supernatural beings further cleaves together these two disparate realities, which here exist in overlapping space and time.

The oversaturation of worlds and beings in *The Famished Road* and the power of this simultaneity are matched in *Starbook* by an examination of absence. The most prominent artist in the tribe creates a work of art that is so powerful that it must be taken down:

In its place its absence shone, and caused greater rumors, made more crowds gather, for the space where it used to be became more powerful than ever. The space appeared to retain, in a pure white form, the very image that they sought to remove. In short, the work shone more in its invisible space. (SB 87)

Starbook theorizes silence and empty space as a site of fulfillment, a necessary component to art and storytelling. Hoping to learn the ways of a master artist in order to marry the artist's daughter, the prince serves as the master's attendant and is tasked to stand in the shadows with the master's own statues, not moving or speaking: "The silence was invaluable. The semi-darkness was invaluable. So also was the stillness in which he could learn to be free. He learnt more in the silence than in years of being told things." (SB 327) Okri does not give the reader the revelations of the prince; he simply informs us that this knowledge exists. Okri obeys the silence but points to the existence of the epiphanies. Silence gives agency to both the characters and the reader, leaving the mystery in tact: "[The girl's] father suddenly seemed gently transfigured, as if on the

verge of becoming invisible, as if he were a work of art himself, whose meaning ever eludes, and which is not seen by most even when looked at intensely by all.” (SB 114-5)

The idea of being simultaneously seen and unseen follows *Starbook*’s emphasis on the coexistence of presence and absence, which I conceive of as the idea of the hole, a space that is defined by absence. The site of true art in the novel resides in this same liminal space: “[The master] made a sculpture of pure air and sunlight, a work that all could see and not see, that induced a great dreaming in the whole tribe, a deep enchantment and silence.” (SB 149). In Okri’s description of the master’s sculpture, the textual space occupied by the details on how invisible, how unseen, how nebulous this sculpture is create the same kind of effect on the reader as the sculpture does on its viewers. The art exists, but in a transient state. The art occupies a place in the world of the narrative, but as Okri does not give us details about the work itself, the piece does not fill the space. The sculpture, like its description, exists and takes up space in the world, but the space is inaccessible to those that view it.

In *The Famished Road* there are similar absences, but these gaps are located at sites of transition, where Azaro jumps from one world to another. After coming home from school one day, Azaro looks around to realize “the walls dissolved, the room vanished, and in the relative space of that time we moved to somewhere else. ‘We are now on the moon,’ I said. ‘Isn’t food ready?’ Dad asked, getting up and dusting his trousers.” (TFR 315) Azaro is located in both the room of the house and the moon, but there is no transition in regards to the room melting into the moon, and Dad is entirely unaffected by the movement. The pull of the spirit world displaces Azaro with no indicators for the reader, and much of the time Azaro himself has no conception of his

own movement: “One moment I was in the room and the next moment I found myself wandering the night roads. I had no idea how I had gotten outside.” (*TFR* 307) Ato Quayson theorizes the missing information as a lack of agency on the part of Azaro. He writes, “The logic of arbitrary shifts seems to take precedence over the volitional acts of the central characters.” (Quayson: 1997, 137) However, *Starbook* allows us to read the gaps as a site of fulfillment instead, building the novel into Okri’s own conception of a masterpiece. The pull of these conflicting realities, rather than disempowering Azaro and his fellow characters, creates fissures in the narrative that allow both the characters and the reader to fill the spatial and temporal holes. These gaps expose the narrative framework of the novel, allowing Okri to explore the way stories occupy textual time and space. He has no intention of sewing up the narrative dissonances, in part because the worlds that are pulling on Azaro occupy the same textual space and time. The spirit world is always present, even when Azaro is in the physical world and vis-a-versa. These gaps, then, are unlike those empty spaces of *Starbook*, unlike the hollows that can be filled. Instead, the narrative holes of *The Famished Road* are collisions between worlds.

The disorder of *The Famished Road* is theorized in *Starbook* as an element for art to strive for: “[The tribe] favoured disjointed metaphorical thinking; fusion of unthinkable elements. The greater the discord, the greater the artistry required to bring forth the highest beauty and, paradoxically, the greatest simplicity.” (*SB* 95) Chaos is a crucial element of *Starbook* because order is too easy. Beauty conjured from symmetry and the laws of nature comes with no originality, no challenge. “For the tribe, to understand was not to see. To understand too quickly was a failure. It was a blinding. Understanding stopped them from seeing, and looking.” (*SB* 203) This tension between

beauty and chaos becomes a tension between comprehension and growth. Ironically, Okri spoon-feeds the reader this statement; *Starbook* is sprinkled with these treatises on how to read art at the expense of the novel form itself. By creating a comprehensive theory of art within the confines of *Starbook*, Okri betrays his own narrative prescription of chaos. *Starbook* is too clear-cut, too didactic to aspire to the level of art that it demands of its characters.

Starbook, then, becomes a demystified version of *The Famished Road*. Okri's later novel describes the artistic inclination behind *The Famished Road* and in doing so flattens the nuanced narrative. Okri falls into the same trap of oversimplification that overshadowed *The Famished Road* when read through the theories I have discussed in previous chapters, not in a reiteration of colonial modes of thought but in an attempt to decode the novel. This unveiling of Okri's theoretical inclinations undercuts the grit and physicality that gave shape to *The Famished Road*. The idea of revelation as anticlimax is perhaps best theorized by Roland Barthes in "Striptease," an essay from his *Mythologies*. While the space of the French striptease venue is, I am sure, quite different from a venue of the same purpose in Nigeria, and both of these spaces are far outside the scope of *Starbook*, the narrative of the striptease is an effective metaphor for the disappointments associated with revelation: "Striptease... is based on a contradiction: Woman is desexualized at the very moment when she is stripped naked." (Barthes 84) The elaborate dance of the striptease, like art, is designed to titillate, to challenge the audience. "The end of striptease is then no longer to drag into the light a hidden depth, but to signify, through the shedding of an incongruous and artificial clothing, nakedness as a *natural* vestige of woman, which amounts in the end to regaining a perfectly chaste

state of the flesh.” (Barthes 84-5) The asexual completion of the striptease is mirrored by the exposure of the “true meaning” of a work of art, an act which renders the art purposeless. The dance of the striptease, not simply the body of the dancer, is the true allure of the entire act, Barthes claims. Even when the dancer is completely naked, her movements cloak her nudity:

The faintly rhythmical undulation in this case exorcizes the fear of immobility... the dance, consisting of ritual gestures which have been seen a thousand times, acts on movements as a cosmetic, it hides nudity, and smothers the spectacle under a gaze of superfluous yet essential gestures. (Barthes 85-6)

The act of dancing is a crucial component of the illusion of sexuality. When the dancer stops, her naked body sans context, sans narrative, is “desexualized.” *Starbook's* unveiling of the undulations of *The Famished Road* offers the same anticlimactic response as the end of the striptease. The naked text offers insight to the reader, but it is a distant, cold analysis rather than a deep engagement with the text. Okri, by offering a straightforward and prescriptive reading of *The Famished Road*, reduces the novel to an example of his own artistic theories.

The Roads of *The Famished Road*

The problem of space in *The Famished Road* must be outside the constraints of tribe, of nation, continent, race, and even Okri's own theorization. The novel's multiplicity of worlds cannot be contained by colonial constructions nor simplified by Okri's later treatise on art and space. The homogenization of the text that results from these readings flattens the narrative; while Okri is influenced by all of these levels of analysis, the novel does not subscribe to any one sphere. The nuance of the novel is lost in these exterior readings that do not fully address the novel's narrative dissonances.

The Famished Road unites myriad simultaneous worlds, from the physical reality to the land of dreams to the land of spirits to the land of the unborn, and the presence of so many different possible realities for the text makes it difficult for the narrative to inhabit a cohesive space without smoothing over the characteristics of these disparate places. Quayson discusses this dilemma in the context of another Nigerian novel, *Palm-Wine Drinkard*, a novel stitched together from a plethora of Yoruba folktales by Ben Okri's countryman and literary predecessor, Amos Tutuola:

By stringing such stories together as he does, [Tutuola] prevents the affirmation of closure that these formulaic endings would signify in the context of oral storytelling. He generates a sense of the provisional nature of such closures. For, in stringing together all these stories, he suggests that there are numerous stories to be told and that they can be added *ad infinitum* depending on the opulence of the narrator's imagination. (Quayson: 1997, 58)

Quayson is quick to note that Tutuola does not simply transcribe the folktales—the novel is certainly a product of Tutuola rather than a blanket representation of all Yoruba culture. All the same, the unsutured stories of *The Palm-Wine Drinkard* provide fertile contrast to the narrative disjunctions of *The Famished Road*. The proliferation of stories evidenced in Tutuola's novel mirrors the abundance of possible worlds in *The Famished Road*.

Sara Upstone theorizes the city of Okri's novel as the site of interaction between these worlds. The space of the novel cannot be pinned to one reality or another, and so the city stands in as a multi-planar space. For Upstone, the city as an idea, as an archetypal place, exists in every dimension of the novel and as such becomes the arena in which the narrative can traverse many realms while remaining fundamentally cohesive. The city keeps its nuance and Azaro can flit between various spaces within some sort of boundary: "Azaro views all spaces as shared; as multi-layered, and we move away from the focus on colonial space and towards concentration on the complex and rich history of all places." (Upstone 152) Okri's city embodies the idea of simultaneous worlds, offering an alternative to the narratives of tribe, nation, continent, and race that have proved so problematic in understanding Okri's novel. The city is an identifiable, mappable place in which Okri's story can unfold. The city is a site of resistance to colonial ideology. The city is not enough.

The city, while providing a possible focal point for these worlds, is a space of permanence. The volatile nature of the narrative does not match with the stagnancy of physical structures. I should also note that the city is framed in *The Famished Road* as in direct opposition to the space of the forest. The novel confronts the destruction of the forest and the urbanization of Azaro's community, but ultimately the shift from rural to urban environments is irreversible. Even in the spirit world, Azaro hears "ghostly woodcutters axing down the titanic irokos, the giant baobabs, the rubber trees and obeches. There were birds' nests on the earth and the eggs within them were smashed, had fallen

out, had mingled with the leaves and the dust, the little birds within the cracked eggs half-formed and dried up, dying as they were emerging into a hard, miraculous world.” (*TFR* 242) There is a violence to the city in its incursion into the forest. The city, then, becomes a destruction of worlds, of nature.⁷ The city may be alive with people and spirits and other beings, but it is an industrial rather than an inherent liveliness.

Quayson posits Azaro as the locale for the simultaneous worlds; as the protagonist he is present in every scene. The narrative is filtered through Azaro, so defining the space of the novel within the confines of this character provides a volatile structure for the proliferation of worlds.

What this particular form of linkage suggests is that the spirit-world remains a vital life operating *between* the arena of real events. And yet it is not a betweenness that interferes with the space or temporality of the real world. The only direct link between the esoteric events of these passages and those of the reality plane is that they are both experienced through the consciousness of Azaro. (Quayson: 1997, 133)

Azaro’s stagnancy as a character allows him to be a venue for the events of the novel, but his status as an *abiku* also means that the physical and spirit worlds are both attempting to draw him into these separate realms. If Azaro is the main medium through which the multiple worlds of the novel interact, then Azaro is simultaneously a part of the story and the story’s conduit. The instability of Azaro as filter matches the unstable boundaries of the worlds that pull on Azaro. Instead of providing a site of coexistence for these worlds, Azaro is a fundamental part of their collisions. While *The Famished Road* is indeed filtered through Azaro’s perspective, Quayson neglects to note Dad’s forays into the spirit world, Madame Koto’s relationship with spirits, and the presence of spirits in the physical world. Azaro is just one of multiple beings that traverse multiple worlds.

⁷ I am neglecting to analyze the countryside as a space in the novel

Ultimately, Okri navigates the concerns and frustrations of the multiple worlds in the novel, as well as multiple spheres of theoretical influence, by writing a road. While the road faces some of the same ties to industrialization as the city, the forest is joined to the road even as it is cut down for the road's construction. Madame Koto threatens Azaro with the specter of the forest when he misbehaves:

'The forest will swallow you.'
'Then I will become a tree,' I said.
'Then they will cut you down because of a road.'
'Then I will turn into the road.'
'Cars will ride on you, cows will shit on you, people will perform sacrifices on your face.'
'And I will cry at night. And then people will remember the forest.' (TFR 219)

The road, here, is both a force of destruction for the forest and an homage to that former space. Azaro also *becomes* a road, at least in the world of Madame Koto's threats. The road is both a physical and metaphysical space in the novel, one that envelops the narrator himself. While Quayson imagined Azaro as the narrative's vessel, this idea of the road as the primary narrative space encompasses Azaro and the multitudes of worlds while appearing as a physical road in the novel.

The road as a motif in literature is well established; Bakhtin uses the road as a quintessential example of his idea of the chronotope:

In the chronotope of the road, the unity of time and space markers is exhibited with exceptional precision and clarity. The importance of the chronotope of the road in literature is immense: it is a rare work that does not contain a variation of this motif, and many words are directly constructed on the road chronotope, and on road meetings and adventures. (Bakhtin 98)

The chronotope of the road is paramount to understanding the narrative structure of Okri's *The Famished Road*, but the road of the novel's title is not Bakhtin's linear, mappable road. This road has depth; Okri opens the book with, "In the beginning there

was a river. The river became a road and the road branched out to the whole world. And because the road was once a river it was always hungry.” (*TFR* 3) The three-dimensional, voluminous space of the river becomes a fundamental part of Okri’s road. By positing the road as both road and river, Okri allows the novel both to use the conventions of the road in narrative and to transcend them.

The Famished Road’s relationship with time embodies this extra-dimensional linearity: the novel’s timeline is straightforward, with each event in line both textually and temporally, save for some digressions with storytelling.⁸ Okri does not dwell on certain events, or even reference previously important scenes. In the aftermath of the riots that occurred after the community is poisoned by the Party of the Rich’s rotten milk, the episode disappears entirely from the novel. Azaro is at first aware of its dissipations: “After a while, when nothing happened, when no reprisals fell on us, it seemed that nothing significant had happened. Some of us began to distrust our memories. We began to think that we had collectively dreamt up the fevers of that night.” (*TFR* 183) The riots are never mentioned again, and the trend of impactful scenes vanishing from the memory of the novel despite their prior temporal and textual presence undermines the plot’s linearity. Quayson writes, “No event is subordinated to another in terms of temporal duration. Thus, a homogenous sense of atemporality, only relieved by the vaguest time indices, is spread throughout the narrative.” (Quayson: 2006, 746) The events in Madame Koto’s bar hold the same significance for the narrative as the riots. The narrative progress outweighs the events themselves: “it is as if there is an effort not only to disperse a series of discrete events across time but also to enforce a sense of a continual forward

⁸ Gerard Genette’s anachronies are few and far between, so the narrative itself progresses with insistence.

movement.” (Quayson:1997 129) The steady succession of events does not render the plot insignificant, but rather falls in line with existing theories of the road in and as narrative.

Hans Gumbrecht, in “The Roads of the Novel,” defines the road as a fundamental feature of the novel, and the specific term of “road” is given special significance:

Way and *path* seems to emphasize, more than *road* that they will lead to a goal or any other kind of a predefined and therefore meaningful endpoint—which would suggest a teleological directedness that the genre of the novel does not imply. In comparison to *street*, which we tend to connect with the protectedness of a space within a town or a village, *road* brings out more clearly the always surprising and sometimes even dangerous character in the encounters and observations that can happen to a traveler. (Gumbrecht 612)

The essence of the road is its unpredicatability—while these other constructions for travel (*way*, *path*, *street*) have definitive intentions, the road only has its basic linear structure.

The road’s sequential nature is a driving factor for many narratives of the 19th century, according to Gumbrecht, and he notes a change from the road as a site of events to the road as an active participant in the novel, what he defines as “agent roads,” in the last century:

Unlike the roads in the novels of the early-modern centuries, the agent roads of our present hardly ever provide adventures that would allow the hero to grow and develop her subjectivity and agency. The events on the agent roads are rather encounters or departures that need to be survived. (Gumbrecht 645)

The road of *The Famished Road* eschews the passive nature of earlier conceptions of roads; in the same manner as Gumbrecht’s agent roads, Okri’s famished road becomes both a location and an actor in the novel. After Azaro escapes from a group women/demons that had kidnapped him in the night, he tries to run home but is waylaid by the proliferation of roads that confronts his journey: “All the roads multiplied, reproducing themselves, turning in on themselves, like snakes, tails in their mouths,

twisting themselves into labyrinths.” (TFR 114-5) Azaro is both walking on the roads and interacting with them. The roads here are part of a singular road upon which Azaro was originally traveling, but the linearity of the original road is undermined by the labyrinthine twisting of this multiplicity of roads; both the presence of multiple roads within one road as well as their refusal to move in a straight line add extra dimension to the shape of the original road.

The dimensionality of the road only expands when the other worlds of the novel are taken into account. While his father was shadow-boxing at night, Azaro “would wander our road. When he was around the night turned everything familiar into another country, another world... And the road was no longer a road but the original river. Majestically it unfolded itself in the darkness, one step at a time.” (TFR 353) The road’s origin story is never forgotten; the depth of the road remains a fundamental part of the novel as the road emerges in both the physical and spiritual worlds.

The river’s hungriness is given as the primary reason for the road’s angry and dangerous nature, but the Azaro’s father offer an additional reason for the road’s hunger. In the Parable of the King of the Road, a story Dad tells Azaro as the *abiku* child overcomes a fever, the King of the road has a huge stomach and is never satisfied. He demands sacrifices from the people who pass along the road, but when this does not fill him up, he begins to eat everything around him, and then:

He began to-eat himself. He ate his legs, and his hands, and his shoulders, and his back, and his neck, and he ate his head. He ate himself till only his stomach remained. That night a terrible rain fell and the rain melted the stomach of the King of the Road. Our great-great-great-grandfather said that it rained for seven days and when it stopped raining the stomach had disappeared, but he could hear the King of the Road growling from under the ground. What had happened was that the King of the Road had become part of all the roads in this world. He is still

hungry, and he will always be hungry. That is why there are so many accidents in the world. (*TFR* 261)

The road, then, is hungry as both a river and a man. The King is a part of the road as well as its ruler, just as the road is an agent and a setting in the novel, and the road consumes itself as well as others.

The close juncture of interiority and exteriority that seems to define the road is exemplified by the road's hunger, and it is this hunger and the accidents that it causes that tie the novel back to the world outside the novel. Both starvation and car crashes are fundamental aspects of life in Okri's Nigeria. Not only is food security tenuous in many parts of Nigeria, but, in the latter half of the Biafran War, the Nigerian government used starvation as a tactic against the rebels. (de Waal 73) The concept of hunger as an everyday reality for rural Nigerians in the world outside *The Famished Road* as well as a political tool is reflected in the novel itself. Traffic accidents are a leading cause of death across Africa, and in the novel we see Madame Koto's evil exacerbated by the purchase of the first car in the community. Okri uses the road to bring in these aspects of life in his community into the novel without tying them directly to the political reality of Nigeria. The space of the road allows Okri to confront these realities without positing the novel as a diatribe against governmental failings in Nigeria. Okri has refused the theories of tribalism, nationalism, and pan-Africanism, as previously discussed, because they cannot contain the other worlds that are so fundamental to his novel. The political reality that mirrors Nigeria's own is only one aspect of the novel, and the road allows Okri to expand the space of reality to include multiple other dimensions.

Ashcroft defines this opening of temporal and spatial linearity as a function of postcolonial hybridity, which "is constantly struggling to free itself from a past which

stressed ancestry, and which valued the ‘pure’ over its threatening opposite, the ‘composite.’ It replaces a temporal linearity with a spatial plurality.” (Ashcroft et al. 35-6) The negotiation of the past, with both its pre-colonial cultures and its colonial traditions, and the present, with a modernity that threatens to reify colonial structures despite independence, cannot be contained within a singular timeline. Okri, by creating a road that both moves in a linear fashion and holds many other roads of other intents and other worlds, refuses the limits of Ashcroft’s timid hybridity. Okri balances temporal linearity and spatial plurality by fusing the two within the road. Gumbrecht comments on the necessity of such agent roads:

To be in-the-world, to be in the world as a body, that is to experience the road in the spatial dimension, has turned into an existential value for many of us. Therefore, agent roads in the novel are not only the literary form of a loss of agency. They are also the literary place where we can recuperate the space that allows us to be-in-the-world. (Gumbrecht 645)

Okri both condenses and expands space with the trope of the road: the limits imposed on the space of the road by its inherent linearity are challenged by the influx of alternate dimensions, but the structure of the road remains intact throughout the novel. The road’s agency prevents the temporal linearity from falling into colonial conceptions of time and space; this new chronotope of the road allows Okri to “recuperate the space that allows us to be-in-the-world.” The world Okri is recuperating is not the world of *The Famished Road*; rather, he is writing a new space in the world that both recognizes the legacy of colonialism but refuses to be defined by it.

Conclusion

The chronotope of the road in *The Famished Road* defines the narrative structure of the novel. By creating a multidimensional space with a linear temporal movement, Okri opens up a new space that is not defined by the legacies of colonialism. The openness of the road falters as a narrative structure when the novel intends to come to an end. In *The Famished Road*, closure comes with Azaro's father coming to from a hallucinatory, death-like state after winning a fight against a spirit. The novel begins with Azaro deciding and fighting to stay in the world of the living and ends with Dad mirroring this decision. As the novel closes, both Azaro and Dad seem to have won their fights: "[Dad's] spirit was gentle through the night. The air in the room was calm. There were no turbulences... There were no forms invading our air, pressing down on our roof, walking through the objects." (TFR 500) This is the first extended instance of serenity in the novel, the first time spirits and other characters are not clamoring into Azaro's world, and Azaro feels "A good breeze [blow] over our road, cleaning away the strange excesses in the air." (TFR 500) Yet, the stillness that allows Azaro to sleep peacefully evaporates in the last sentences: "the good breeze hadn't lasted for ever. A dream can be the highest point of a life." (TFR 500) This ominous statement, which posits both calmness and closure as an impossibility, clears the way for the novel's reopening in its sequels.

There is a moment in *The Famished Road* that anticipates the trouble with closure. Azaro is in the spirit world with a three-headed spirit when they come across a valley:

The valley was essentially populated with strange beings... In the valley they were all hard at work.
'What are they doing?' I asked...
'They are building a road.'
'Why?'
...

‘They have been building that road for two thousand years.’

...

‘So why has it taken them so long to build so little?’

‘One of the things their prophet said was that the road cannot be finished.’

‘Why not?’

‘What their prophet meant was that the moment it is finished all of them will perish.’

‘Why?’

‘I suppose they will have nothing to do, nothing to dream for, and no need for a future. They will perish of completeness, of boredom. The road is their soul, the soul of their history. (TFR 328-9)

This scene reinforces the idea of the chronotope of the road in *The Famished Road*, but it also expresses an almost pathological need to continue with the narrative, to keep living in this new space. Okri’s narrative acknowledged and moved beyond theoretical boundaries of tribe and nation, Pan-Africanism and Negritude, postcolonialism and even his own demystified version of *The Famished Road*. The chronotopic structure of the novel reimagined the space that the African novel could occupy beyond these borders.

Okri speaks about the limits imposed upon African literature:

I personally find the African aesthetic in Homer and in a lot of the Greeks, and that’s not surprising because the Greeks got a lot of their aesthetics from Egypt, they got some of their gods from Egypt. So that’s not surprising at all, that journey of world-views through world history and world literature. Even [in] the Arabian Nights... I find a lot of African aesthetics and world-views there . . . I’d like to propose that we stop making so narrow what constitutes the African aesthetic. It is not something that is bound only to place; it’s bound to a way of looking at the world. It’s bound to a way of looking at the world in more than three dimensions. It’s the aesthetic of possibilities, of labyrinths, of riddles—we love riddles—of paradoxes. I think we miss this element when we try to fix it too much within national or tribal boundaries. (qtd. in Wilkinson 87-8)

Here, Okri simultaneously holds onto his identity as an African writer and refuses the limits imposed by such an identity. In attempting to find a space for *The Famished Road* that opens up “a way of looking at the world in more than three dimensions,” I have been wary of theories that impose boundaries that are informed by the legacies of colonialism.

Much of African literary theory in the past century has focused on the canon's decolonization; perhaps it is time to shift the conversation towards the idea of the "African aesthetic" in Western works. Okri's identification of the African roots of Homer and the Classics reframes the issue of "authenticity" and is a starting point for taking the conversation back to the West. I return to Toni Morrison's discussion of the Afro-American presence in American literature: "It only seems that the canon of American literature is 'naturally' or 'inevitably' 'white.' In fact it is studiously so." (Morrison 139) I have spoken of the integration of African literature into the global canon, but have neglected to note the influence of African narratives on the works of Western literature. The spectre of African literature, then, is not only the general absence of African texts in the established canon but the invisible and unacknowledged presence of these narratives.

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