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Science and the Re-representation of African Identity in *Major Gentl and the Achimota Wars*

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At its inception and for a long time thereafter, written African literature was close to nationalist rhetoric.[1] That is, before and immediately after independence, African leaders were not averse to, and even encouraged, the writer's role of creating the cultural referents that would inspire Africans with a sense of nationhood. As Said says, "Literature . . . played a crucial role in the . . . reinstatement of native idioms, in the reimagining and refiguring of local histories, geographies, communities" during the "anti-imperial" struggle (316). In other words, literature complemented the nationalist agenda by teaching people about their history and traditions. So, as long as literature remained ineluctably tied to nationalist rhetoric, its representations were bound to privilege the collective identity posited by nationalism. In any case, for most nationalists, identity was only thinkable within a nation whose culture, whether invented[2] or not, was supposed to endow individuals with a sense of their uniqueness as Africans.

After independence, it was soon apparent that while the nationalist leaders may have given the writer the responsibility of re-inventing the nation's cultural psyche, its technological soul was reserved for another agent: the scientist. In fact as most African states gained a semblance of nationhood, and as writers became trenchant in their criticism of the venality of the new leaders, the gaps among artist, scientist, and politician widened, creating a dichotomy between science and literature. In 1986, while conceding that the "comprehensive goal of a developing nation is . . . modernization," Achebe, for example, lamented the wedge "literal mind[ed]" bureaucrats were forging between science and the arts (151). "The cry all around is for more science and less humanities for in the narrow disposition of the literal mind more of one must mean

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less of the other," Achebe criticizes (161). Thus, if we are looking for patterns in which scientific discourse in African literature enhances or contributes to the narrative on identity, we must go beyond the early or canonical writers. Most of them have been, understandably, too preoccupied with a cultural renaissance, and when they used tropes from science, as they often did,[3] it was primarily to create a body of signs that would distinguish Africa from the West.

Recently, though, writers such as Ben Okri seem not to embrace uncritically Senghor's suggestion of using the nation or culture as a space for creating "conscious will[s]" striving for a "harmonious whole" (68). For such writers even the meaning that the nation was previously asked to articulate is now seriously constrained, and they also seem to disagree with the use of culture as a site for generating an authentic identity. These are the writers whose works poach on other disciplines, or for whom the boundaries between science and literature, for example, are crossed at will to resituate African identity. Of course, they still talk about the nation or about how to be African, but their emphases no longer fall entirely on local values. Rather, they now underscore their "in-betweenness."

The Ghanaian writer, Kojo B. Laing, belongs to this new breed of writers, and, like Ben Okri, he challenges Africans "to widen the range of [their] dialogues," or to move away from the "nativist" paradigm of earlier years (2250). Unlike most of his contemporaries, though, Laing primarily uses tropes from science in his re-representation of African identity. Thus, it is within the context created by science or technology that one can discuss Laing's treatment of identity in *Major Gentl and the Achimota Wars*, a futuristic, part-non-mimetic, and highly poetic novel.

Of course, this does not mean that *Major Gentl* is a conventional science fiction narrative: "a fictional novum . . . validated by cognitive logic" (Darko Suvin 141). In fact, the novel so thoroughly combines elements of science and the supernatural that it can best be called a science fantasy, a hybrid form in which the narrative momentum depends on the overlap between elements of science and fantasy. Elements of science fiction are evident in *Major Gentl's* "extrapolative" concern, namely, its observation of trends in contemporary Ghana and in extending the pattern into a hypothetical future. This is a model Suvin now sees as not exhaustive

enough for describing science fiction, but which he himself still endorses in the "restricted sense of reflecting on the authors's own historical period and the possibilities inherent in it" (152). According to such a reading then, Achimota in 2020 is "about collective human relationships" in 1992. Also, the novel makes use of conventional science fiction motifs such as galactic travels, adventure and movement (as manifested by Torro's wanderings), the effect of science or technology on human civilization, and, among others, the appropriation of a science laden idiom.

Elements of fantasy are present through impossible or near-magical events: ghosts and reincarnations, magical revivals of Torro after each death. Also, although the two generals, Torro and Gentl, the central characters in the novel, make use of technology (computers and binoculars), there are mythical or supernatural dimensions to their actions. Each general is supposed to be the savior or source of salvation for those he represents, each has his talisman and helpmates (rats for Torro and snakes for Gentl), and both are severely tested like the supernatural heroes of folklore. In other words, Gentl and Torro have the potential of creating "the type of emotional charge that epic adventures arouse in the reader. . . ." It's just that Laing extends "the topography of the epos . . . into the future" (Sergio Solmi 12).[4] *Major Gentl* is thus a science fantasy because of its "mingling" of science and supernatural fictional narrative elements.

I do not, however, intend to suggest that the use of fantasy or even scientific metaphors in African fiction is reducible to Laing. But if, as I have thus far intimated, a writer's appropriation of the tropes of science pulverizes a bounded notion of identity, then Laing's writing affords us with an important example of the use of the genre in African literature. Indeed *Major Gentl's* metaphors, like most narratives that draw on science fantasy for their images,[5] create the impression of both an expanded spatiality and a decentered identity, a pervasive concern in Laing's entire fictional corpus. In both the first and second novels, *Search Sweet Country* and *Woman of the Aeroplanes*, for example, Laing questions the authority of the past by creating an active distance between culture and the self. In *Woman* in particular, he not only uses the airplane as a metaphor for reconstituting a world without hierarchy, but he also

creates a startling symbol, the stupidity machine, through which characters interface with the mechanical world. The airplane and the stupidity machine, as symbols of spatial dislocation, both make us realize that human identity is a tissue of perpetually changing meanings.

In these early works, I suggest, Laing lays the foundation for a deeper plunge into the world of modern electronics in his third novel. *Major Gentl* therefore only makes sense when seen as a culmination of the criticism of a unified identity started in the previous novels. In short, the characters, whose appropriation of electronic technology helps extend Laing's criticism of a unified identity, have already been anticipated by the stupidity machine in *Woman*. More than the characters in *Woman*, though, the characters in *Major Gentl*, because of their addiction to technology, bear a striking resemblance to characters or subjects in electronic culture, whom Baudrillard describes as "terminals of multiple networks" (16).

Framed by and set within the scientific developments of this century, *Major Gentl* is thus primarily about technological advancement. In fact it is the vision of an electronically transformed world that provides the novel with much of its impetus for meditating on existence. Which is to say that although the date 2020 is a reference to the future, Laing also underscores a "this-worldly" (Suvin 155) perspective. He, for instance, makes credible references to the present, which imparts an air of immediacy on the agonizing incidents. Also, most of the technologies of transformation are already perfected, and a first war of existence has already been fought. The new electronic gadgets are thus only signs of a second configuration of existence whose "possibilities" have already manifested themselves.

Laing, however, plots the reconfiguration of existence in the form of a war, which he labels the "Second war of Existence," and the war provides the book with its main narrative thread. At a deceptively literal level, though, the war becomes a conflict between Africa on the one side and the West and apartheid South Africa on the other. The West is represented by Torro, the terrible Roman, and Africa by Major Gentl. Preceded by a series of alliances and counter-alliances, the war starts late in the novel. While Achimota waits for the real battle, Torro and Gentl's children start their own war, a war that is never won by either

side. And when Gentl and Torro eventually go to war, Torro loses because of his reliance on technology: "Victory finally came with the destruction of Torro's hub of computers" (176). It is not a decisive victory, however; the ellipses at the end of the book seem to look forward to other strategies and other wars. Structurally, in other words, Laing turns to the open-endedness of science fantasy rather than be restricted by the closure characteristic of many realist narratives.

As important as the war may be for Laing's understanding of relations between the West and Africa, however, it may appear that he is primarily concerned with drawing on a science fantasy megatext to reconceive identity. This concern is evident in the numerous inter-galactic references or adventures in which *Major Gentl* abounds, and which seem to open up a space for a new subjectivity in African fiction. Torro, for example, wants "to burst out of the present galaxy," and he also anticipates inventions that would "negate distance, mass, and even space" (5). Also, most characters in Achimota have rooms in space: "The major had arranged with the golden crawl to rent two rooms on the moon" (1). In addition, the ambitious, power-hungry, wealthy, corrupt, philandering millionaire, Pogo Alonka Forr, wants to have a room in the sun: "Bamboozle the sun with attention and you could even end up having a hotel in it" (12). Further, The Grandmother Bomb, a dedicated scientist, has a "solar calculator," an "orbiting satellite," and "lampposts . . . suspended in the eternal darkness [with] lanes . . . for celestial bicycles" (44). Finally, the Golden Cockroach is usually suspended in the sky when eavesdropping on Western countries.

In addition to the extension of space through these inter-galactic activities is the use of one of the "icons" of science fiction narrative: the city. This is not the first time Laing has used the city in his work, of course. Reference to and use of the city first appears in his poetry, where it takes the form of what M. E. Kropp Dakubu calls "the spiritual town" (24). But it is in *Search Sweet Country*, predominantly set in Accra and its surrounding villages, that the city enters Laing's novelistic discourse. And by *Woman of the Aeroplanes*, Laing uses the twinning of two cities, Tukwan (Ghana) and Levensvale (Scotland), to show his bias for cultural intermingling. In one respect, then, the use of the city in *Major Gentl*

may well be the culmination of Laing's long-standing fascination with the urban landscape.

Laing's relentless concern with the city may however be due to another important reason, namely, to present a severely attenuated vision of the nationalist belief in an "authentic" African identity, which is what the explosion of the geography of Achimota City is probably intended to convey. "Over the last two decades," Laing writes, "Achimota City's fast new geography had devoured Accra almost completely while at the same time most of the rest of the country had inexplicably vanished, land and all" (3). Of course, this may be a reference to "urbanization," as Brain Robert has argued. But Laing's "urbanism" expressly depicts not a city "tied to the idea of place" as is evident in modernist depictions of the city, but rather what Sharpe and Wallock would call a postmodern, "decentered urban field," or an image of "the urban as no longer synonymous with locale" (11, 14). As such, Achimota, the " truncated city bursting to survive and to find the rest of its country," exemplifies the irruption of a new space, the "urban field," in African literature (3).

To reinforce the shift from the modernist city to the postmodern "urban field," Laing situates the actions in the novel within zones or heterotopias, sites that allow "a large number of fragmentary possible worlds [to] coexist in an impossible space" (Brian McHale 45). Structurally, then, in place of chapters, the novel is divided into seventeen zones. Indeed, the juxtaposition of the beautiful and the ugly, the believable and the unbelievable in the following description would show Laing's desire to create "an alien space within [the] familiar space" of Achimota City, an important method of constructing a zone in postmodern fiction:

> Thousands of delicately crisscrossing baked-mud pipes [were] hanging all over the city, and built to accommodate the voracious wandering of the soldier ants and termites. Thus ants and fruits were very much a part of the city, in and out of whose pipes dodged aeroplanes and helicopters. And at some points, changing permanently the architecture of the city, were vast anthills, orange, brown, and grey. Government House was itself a series of extraordinary anthills joined and reinforced by arcs, arches, gables, rifts, humps and multi-directional walls; and it looked like some gigantic cathedral dedicated to crawling. (17)

It may appear that the space described above, which is identical with the spaces straddled by Gentl's "house of bamboo" with its "kinetic walls

[and] strange patterns" (137) and Pogo's house of glass, cannot probably be "located anywhere but in the written text itself." However, as Laing's criticism of the West will later reveal, his use of the zone is in consonance with its use by other postcolonial writers such as Márquez, Cortázar, Fuentes, among others, in whose writings the non-Western world (Latin America) is conceived as "Europe's other, its alien double" (McHale 49-53).

Also, because of its affinity with science fiction narrative, *Major Gentl's* explosion of space is probably intended to foreground its creation of a cyberspace which, in contemporary science fiction, is "a vast, geometric, limitless field bisected by vector lines converging somewhere in infinity" (Scott Bukatman 119). The descriptions of Achimota, in their distortion of dimension, for instance, transform the city into such a "limitless field," since the "cyberspace arises at precisely the moment when the topos of the traditional city has been superseded" (122).

Among other things, however, the cyberspace is also the effect of the lack of dimension created by gadgets of the information age: computers, televisions, videos, and other visual mediums. In *Major Gentl,* the characters are addicted to technological contraptions such as the computer. Torro wears "computer-controlled roller skates," and the instruments with which he neutralizes his enemies are computers strategically "hidden at various points in the city" (123, 6). Mr. Cee, a cockroach that functions as the symbol or "emblem" of Achimota City, also has "supercables" that give him feedback to see things in a triple view; Gentl's binoculars, like most computer terminals, are "self-translating" (166). Finally, when one of the elders is accused of impotence, he uses a visual medium to disprove his accusers: "He had to walk on to the television screens with an erection to prove his potentiality" (70). The chaotic landscape of Achimota city and the emphasis on the visual are thus important as elements of spatial rupture.

Naturally, any writing that emphasizes a heterotopian space, as *Major Gentl* does, is likely to disavow nativist notions of identity, since in a heterotopia, Foucault reminds us, "'things' are . . . 'arranged' in" such a way "that it is impossible to find . . . a common locus beneath them" (xviii). Indeed, Achimota or the Ghana it is supposed to symbolize, because of its own "internal heterogeneity" as well as its implication

in European culture, can no longer create an undisturbed site for subjective articulation.

Specifically, in his use of the zone as both a structural device and a controlling metaphor, Laing seeks to rethink the supposedly collective subject of nationalist rhetoric. The rethinking of the collective subject will thus be in line with Grandmother Bomb's observation that "we are entering a new era" (134), as well as the novel's reference to the "new man" (123), the repatriated slave perhaps, whom even Gentl admits is neither Ghanaian nor Azanian (105). And Laing, through his mode of characterization, depicts this "new man" in various ways. First, he plugs the characters into electronic hardware, presenting us with bloodless anomalies. Second, but more spectacular, he allows the characters to transgress the boundaries between self and world, conflating the distinctions between humanity and machine, or nature and culture, and destroying, in the process, all the categories conventionally perceived as necessary for structuring identity.

The example that immediately comes to mind is the character called Mr. Cee who, we learn, "would shed its symbolic nature and become a real city cockroach crawling about looking for truth" (1). But, although Mr. Cee's love of home, community, culture, and life as opposed to Torro's love of death and weapons of destruction is a dramatic contrast between the two that also corresponds to the differences between the values of Achimota or Africa and Rome or the West, Mr. Cee still remains insubstantial and ephemeral. This is probably because his demand, "'Shape me, shape me!' . . . 'I am talking about love between you and this emblem that I am . . .'" (51) is a request that is analogous to nationalist quests for a strong sense of identity.

Another character whose lack of identity is stressed is Major Gentl himself. In his case, human reproduction is rendered through non-human means:

> Gentl was born in bits when the whole country existed: head on Monday, torso on Thursday, and the popylonkwe on Friday. He could thus be named after his own genitals. Like Torro, the major had maneuvered to be born at a particular place, leading his mother from the womb to give birth to him among the pendant guinea corn in the North. He spoke through her beautiful microphone placenta, which was finally released in the South. (3-4)

Ultimately, Gentl is nothing other than a shadow: "The military leaders promoted his shadow" (1). With Gentl, we see one way in which Laing undermines the physical integrity of his characters, since Gentl's truncated body resembles a computer processed portrait.

Gentl is not the only disembodied character; Commander Zero, deputy defense minister and organizer of the children's war, is another example. "At first," we are told, "Commander Zero was not even a human being: he was a convergence of shadows from various parts of the city. But he was so adept at collecting himself from shadow to shadow that, first, there was a general shortage of shadows . . . and second he burst into a human being out of the profusion of his insubstantiality" (75). In Commander Zero, Laing again grapples with the difficulty of presenting the subject in the electronic age, and no matter how hard he tries, Zero remains an electronic effect.

The splintering of the body of the characters is even more pronounced in Grandmother Bomb: "As soon as [she] was born she had power: she was immediately given the choice of bearing her mother back, and she did exactly that, traversing a mighty and wonderful pregnancy to give birth to her own mother in just two hours after herbs had fertilized her" (45). Furthermore, Torro is nothing other than a clone. This is not just because Torro's pedigree spans continents, but also because, at one point, he is represented as a vanishing chimera caught in Bianca's camera: "Then out came the camera. He called Bianca to take his picture . . . . And then lo! what came out was not a picture but a full-size clone of Torro. There were two big Torro's on the park . . . . When he spat his double spat" (125). Laing's characters seem like digitally enhanced portraits. Such uncanny creations are nothing but products of the electronic age, an era about which Baudrillard says, "There is no soul, no metaphor of the body—the fable of the unconscious itself has lost most of its resonance" (50-51). These monstrous creations, like those of most science fiction writers, redefine what normally constitutes the limits of the human community. For Laing, then, characterization seems to have become a way of rewriting the immutable subject in nationalist fiction, a subject whose status, for Laing, has become problematic.

The novel, consequently, lives up to its description as fantasy or romance, since the characters could possibly be cut off from any reference

to reality. Therefore, if Laing's aim is to transcend the prevalent mimetic impulse in African fiction, as it turns out, he is immensely successful, judging from his method of characterization. Because, whereas nationalist discourse assumed that mimetism is the ultimate way of representing society and culture, Laing, on the contrary, assumes that mimetic techniques are now susceptible to transcoding, since new ways of representing humanity have become available to artists. One can thus argue that Laing may be suggesting that by 2020 humanity will neither be limited by the tenets of the physical world nor by the present social codes as we now know them. He thus abandons narrative analysis or psychological presentation, the modes of characterization through which the realist artist may dramatize a stable world, for the devices that, to him, accurately represent his world of electronic monsters. Ideally, in re-representing African identity, Laing's "claim is not that there is no such thing as 'man.' It is, rather, that the distinction between man and the world is a variable one, which depends on the configuration of knowledge at a given period" (Jonathan Culler 28).

If, as I have thus far argued, Laing's knowledge of transformations in science and technology, and the urban fields or zones that result from such changes, has affected his perspective on characterization or identity, it seems to have an even more profound impact on his use of and ideas about the operations of language. For zones, he should probably know, not only deny the subject a locus for "fixed identification," but they are spaces that "secretly undermine language," "shatter or tangle common names," and "make it impossible to name" things by "destroy[ing] syntax in advance" (Foucault xviii). *Major Gentl* abounds in instances of semantic abnormalities or rearrangement, including deliberately misspelled words such as "freee" (31), "supaglass" (35), "ludicrum" (73), and "funnie" (73). There is also the use of non-standard sentence patterns such as "Let your wet truth reach my height up here" (48), the use of non-English diction to complete sentences: "A proper sexual manager, with some ayoungi popylonkwe pogolaaaaaa!" (118), among others. Also, the punctuation is both inconsistent and abnormal, especially the insertion of capital letters, which we know are not really intended for emphasis, in the middle of sentences. Moreover, the vocabulary is expanded not just to incorporate Yoruba, Italian, Akan, Pidgin, and Ga words such

as "logorligi" (50), "you ma-know" (53), but also Laing's own barbarous inventions, "dignitarial," "disestablishmentaristic," among others (56). The result is that one enters a world of vertiginous destruction of syntax, of "infinite mutability," the novel calls it, where even the act of narration seems to struggle with "the very possibility of grammar" (Foucault xviii).

Not every critic has been favorably disposed towards what Robert calls Laing's "linguistic acrobatics," however. Harold A. Waters has dismissed *Major Gentl* as an "awful novel" (427); comparing Laing and Tutuola, he argues, "Tutuola is indeed a literary hero full of such inventions, but he knows where he is going . . . *Major Gentl and the Achimota Wars* goes nowhere" (427). Water's criticism, while not by any means irrelevant, somewhat tends to ignore the issue of whether or not the unconstrained literalism is a vital part of the novel's universe. After all, there is ample evidence to show that the novel's "linguistic acrobatics" does not only successfully or capably carry the work's message, but that it is also a genuine attempt to capture the non-naturalistic world of the narrative. The style, in other words, may have been necessitated by Laing's determination to break with the realistic mode of his literary heritage. Indeed, it appears that the seemingly degenerate language is a way of projecting a world that the novel seems to represent, linguistically, as caught in a process of separation from a primal referent, a rupture that the novel has already dramatized through the ontological instability of Laing's characters.

That the text "destroys syntax" (Foucault xix) is nothing other than an enactment of a world displaced from origins and a primal referent is, for example, evident in a complex quasi-mythological subtext, which presents characters groping ceaselessly for an original unity. Of course, one does not have a naive allegory about the loss of Eden in mind, but rather Laing's insistence on the possibility and problems of a pure origin. There is, for instance, the reference to a time "when the whole country existed" (3) as an indivisible entity, but, presumably, it has now entered a period of division. The fragmentation appears in the reference to "a missing land," long separated from the country (a symbolic reference to slavery, perhaps). But the "returning citizens" or "the first gentleman to return never failed to reject" their "origins" (176). Also, in the following injunctions to the people, the elders of government almost

seem to want to recreate a wholeness they can, at best, only imitate: "Fruit was law: every street had to have dwarf banana trees in belts and lines, buckled with close groups of any other fruit trees, so many guavas and oranges. There was fruit in the toilets, fruit in the halls, and fruit in the aeroplanes, so that you could eat the city" (3). The images of fecundity, which obviously evoke vitality or life, allow us to see, through the activities of some of the characters, how irrecoverable that wholeness or vitality has become in an electronic culture that is incapable of generating a counter-myth adequate to the moral needs of its era.

Indeed, the preoccupation of some of the characters with sex shows how concerned Laing is with the theme of wholeness. For, the unfulfilled sexual urges of the characters introduce the wasteland motif, according to which we can construe the amorous liaisons as attempts at regenerating life, all of which fail because the relationships are either factitious or degenerate into decadent desire. Separated from her two former husbands by a door of steel, Grandmother Bomb, for instance, leads a sterile life. Her "two husbands of yore" complain, "When we wanted love, you gave us experiments when we wanted some sly night embraces, we ended up embracing bombs instead" (49). The aridity of her sexual life is underscored by the fact that her most important associates have become the "voices of the dead" (59). Also, Torro's sexual escapade could easily be construed not only as an expression of unbridled emotion, but also as a manifestation of sheer carnality, a debased desire, thereby becoming an ironic debunking of the myth of renewal through sex.

Finally, the attempt at recapturing a rational order of meaning by some of the characters is further demonstrated in the reference to the "ship of truth" (172). If, as it seems, it is the search for truth that motivates characters such as Gentl, Torro, or Mr. Cee, who is always "crawling about looking for truth" (1), then, these characters, like diminutive imitators of Socrates, are searching for a rational structure. The somersaulting of the "ship of truth," however, seems to present us, first, with the impossibility of finding such a rational order and, second, with what the novel calls a "tragedy," as humanity confronts a "cosmic nonsense" (71). The above examples indicate that Laing is presenting us with a world in which humanity's destiny has become its inability

to recreate a lost vitality or unity: "Foundations" have "cease[ed] being foundations" (129).

Therefore, *Major Gentl's* narrative grammar must be understood within the context of the catastrophe the novel presents. Within such a context, the technological advancement that has affected all forms of subjective stability also undermines the structure of language. As such, when Laing uses words such as "atonal," "psitteciformes," and "entilahatic" (sic, 49, 50), he firmly remains within a scientific register, but such locutions may also be his satire on arcane scientific language, which often eludes the average human being. On the other hand, though, he may be really allowing the vocabulary to function as an observation on the linguistic disaster he envisages. Hence, punning constructions such as "Nana Mai didn't care a hoot whether they hooted or not" (45), "a general of general importance" (56), and many more, may subsume the possibility or the type of linguistic transformation Laing anticipates.

Thus, when we come across a passage such as the following description of the encounter between Gentl and Torro, we are probably not supposed to look for its deep meaning:

> This evening aMofa Gentl wore a bofrot at each shoulder to emphasise the perishability of man and woman. The intuition he had as he waited for Torro was that whole platoons of soldiers would be ironing dead cockroaches when Torro arrived. Real cockroaches. Thus the army ironed insects with verve. This ironing was another way for a deflected intensity to pass, another wile for attacking the target by looking away from it. How old would you want your war to be before you won it? thought Gentl, with one foot lower on the mound than the other, and the camel with the eyes of effrontery leaning against him nonchalantly. He caught sight of Torro weaving in and out of horizons, with his bobbie-stand bulbs made translucent by vapour and distance. . . . His deputy's head continued to sail over the trees talltall [sic], and laughing into the spaces that his master was not looking in. (144)

The energetic prose catches our attention primarily because of its forceful visual images: platoons of soldiers continually ironing dead and real cockroaches, bulbs made of breasts (bobbie) that derive their "translucence" from "distance and vapour," armies that fire at their target by looking away from it, and a "Torro weaving in and out of horizons." But even more important is the capacity of the prose not only to evoke

an entirely different world, but to ensure that the forceful visual images dislocate the readers from their conventional world and transport them into its "rhetorically exaggerated space" (Bukatman 11) or world. In such a world, signifiers are not ineluctably tied to signifieds; or rather, images cannot faithfully reflect an authentic, integrated world since, as the above passage demonstrates, the images are themselves a set of disorienting objects. That is, language, as a feat of style, becomes an outrage on the readers' understanding of phenomena. Obviously, such an inflated language is an example of a "new mimesis" in science fiction, whose aim is to "resist the totalization of meaning" (Bukatman 11).

The "hyperbolic language" and decentered characters notwithstanding, Dakubu still credits Laing's works with a "peculiarly intimate relationship between language . . . and the ideas it both expresses and embodies" (76). Influenced by Laing's concrete style, she sees his poetry as an "effort to reach the concrete in experience . . . the extremely vivid material imagery, in which ideas and experiences are projected out onto objects" (87). Arguing that we use Laing's poetry as the "background necessary for a discussion of the novels" (76), Dakubu says that Laing's first novel, *Search*, for example, "was deliberately created for the direct expression of unified, existentially authentic experience" (19).

What seems to govern Dakubu's analyses of Laing's work is a long-standing fascination of critics and writers alike with that modernist foundation in African writing which emphasizes the search for cultural roots or an "authentic" African past and sense of being. Nothing demonstrates this fascination better than the privileged space the city or anxiety about urbanization has held in African literature. And this prodigious discourse about urbanism, often comprising experiences of poverty, wretchedness, crime, prostitution, and the ruin of traditional foundations or structures, invariably links the city to the West, to colonialism, and to modernity.[6] Such a sensibility appears at its most terrifying in Ousmane's Thiés and Ngugi's Illmorog, where we are presented with the most devastating accounts of the moral bankruptcy of capitalist colonialism in modern literature. Indeed without such accounts, which make the city or modernity an all-encompassing evil force, Ngugi's articulation of neocolonialism in his last three novels will easily lose its resonance.

In the works of most of Laing's predecessors, however, the city, despite its terrible evil becomes, paradoxically, the most formidable source for political and individual self-transformation. Ayi Kwei Armah, a Ghanaian like Laing, emphasizes the city's political and subjective functions, for example. The Accra of his *Beautyful Ones Are Not Yet Born,* with its concentration of population, is a locus for nurturing or shaping Ghana's modern political transformation, a massive site for the politicization of the masses, without whom Nkrumah's project of decolonization would have been impossible to contemplate. But the *Beautiful Ones* also underscores Accra's subjective function from a modernist perspective and in a way fundamentally different from Laing's view of Achimota. For, although Armah emphasizes the city's capacity for unhinging traditional moorings, he still assumes that the urban environment can shape the individual's sense of being or identity. The characters, for example, are always moving, experiencing, and seeking to discover their subjective integrity. As Peter Lazarus argues, and I think rightly, "The affirmative vision" of "*The Beautyful Ones Are Not Yet Born,* which is couched as a voyage of discovery," is "implicit in 'the man's' search for authentic values," his "adventure of interiority," despite the "blasted landscape" (Accra) in which he finds himself (46).

In short, early African writers, even though they presented the city as an instrument of exploitative capitalism, could not refrain from emphasizing its potential as a locus for Africa's modern political transformation and a site for the individual's subjective elaboration. They therefore could not avoid the reconciliation of binary, contradictory opposites so central to the modernist project in its desire to bring together equally diverse and contradictory cultures. Thus, by saying that Laing's work is concerned with the articulation of an "authentic experience," Dakubu presents Laing as yet re-accentuating his precursors' modernist construction of postcolonial identity, for Dakubu's notion of "authenticity" will probably not make sense to us if we do not believe in the enormous emphasis on subjectivity in modern culture.

So, although Dakubu has done a great deal to draw attention to Laing's remarkable poetics, her discussion of his style does not sufficiently address his shift from a modernist to a postmodern worldview. This is to say that rather than portraying authentic beings, Laing's "whimsical

post-modernism" forces him to compose "novels [that] . . . inhabit an altogether hybridised and heterogeneous world . . . [and which] do not effect any form of closure around exclusivist and traditionalist models of African identity" (Derek Wright 192, 187). Also, one would have liked to see comments on the displacement that seem to have occurred in Laing's somewhat postmodern use of the concrete. In postmodern aesthetics, the concrete is not as unproblematic as Dakubu presents it, since even "the visual element is often purely expressive and improvised" (McHale 184). In *Major Gentl*, it should be obvious by now, Laing seems to have privileged objects for the spectacle they create and not perhaps for their truth value. And like the simulated battles in the novel, language itself is staged: "improvised." Laing's style, in other words, is an example of what Stephen Heath would call a "'theatralization of language,' a foregrounding of the word . . . displayed as an object in its own right which bears the traces of possible meanings" (qtd. in Culler 106).

Furthermore, the problem with Dakubu's notion of "authenticity" or the essence of things is her reluctance to go beyond formal questions: the stylistic operations that ensure the creation of meaning and how the reader can perceive the unity between objects and the concepts they embody. This is to say that she does not sufficiently explore the temporal or cultural dislocation that governs postcolonial writing, a dislocation which raises different expectations or assumptions about the production of meaning by a writer like Laing. In other words, Laing's world is also the world of writers as varied as Achebe and Brathwaite. It is a world that allows for a great deal of linguistic inventiveness, for the rearrangement of semantic space, but still a world that cannot guarantee the self-sufficiency or authenticity of objects because it is a decoded space where things have fallen apart. Hence, the language which emanates from such a site can no longer disclose the essence of things, let alone their full meaning, since narrative itself must flicker between discontinuous, opposing cultural experiences.

Thus, the novel's inclusive vocabulary, its interspersing of English with words from Ghanaian and other languages, for example, can only make sense when situated within the context of postcolonial linguistic practice. Properly situated, the inclusive vocabulary becomes the most important

way in which the novel renders the exchange of bodies and worlds through a linguistic heteroglossia. Through such a heteroglossia, as in almost every other device in the novel, Laing's writing allegorizes the struggle for language as a marker of postcolonial identity, if not the impossibility of ever finding the "authentic" language. Incidentally, Laing's extrafictional comment in the author's preface to *Major Gentl* would justify such an interpretation: "It is usual in Ghana (with such a cosmopolitan mix of cultures) to intersperse one language with words from another. This ought to be done universally for the idea is to create one gigantic language." Laing's theory here, I suggest, is oriented towards Brathwaite's nation language: English that makes profuse use of African patterns of expression to release the "African aspect of experience" for long "submerged" beneath the tyranny of English forms (311). Of course, this mongrelized language is often designed to show the instability or fluidity of identity, since the language, in aspiring towards a global communication, defies territorial limits.

Indeed, it comes as no surprise that Torro, whose bastardized existence spans his experiences in Rome, Azania, and Achimota, is the character whose speech often vandalizes the space of meaning that a fixed culture would otherwise create. His use of language thus ranges from an affectation that strains normal English pronunciation ("darleeng" and "theenking" 35) to the juxtaposition of Italian and English ("I fan my humble fire with my best *nemico* . . . O *sculacciare*" 59). Such juxtapositions may indicate the possibility of a hasty correspondence among the world's languages, even where they continue to remind us of the crisis of identity the "cosmopolitan mix of cultures" tends to foreground. This is not the same as saying that the postcolonial writer in using a hybridized language has capitulated to the hegemony unleashed by a new transnational, corporate colonialism. As Laing's sustained criticism of the West reveals, language itself is or can now be used to underscore the existence or possibility of postcolonial resistance or local assertion. For Laing's contaminated constructions are, like Brathwaite's nation language, a postcolonial rearrangement of a metropolitan language in ways that turn the new language into an instrument of resistance: "a howl, or a shout or a machine-gun" (311).

Generally, however, even if we were dealing with only its linguistic convention, characterization, or imagery, the issue *Major Gentl* raises is whether its generic affinity with much of contemporary writing, namely, its textuality or postmodern appropriations, makes it an ahistorical and an uncommitted work. In short, can the increasing slide into postmodern aesthetic practice, of which *Major Gentl* is just one example, allow postcolonial writers to continue to articulate a sense of place, history or ethical responsibility? Indeed, in some instances, *Major Gentl* totters precariously on the brink of social or political vacuity. However, it does embody a certain relation to normative commitment in the tradition of anti-colonial novels of resistance. That Laing is at pains to render the novel socially relevant is present in the text's broad historical concerns as well as in its complex vision of identity.

Like most anti-colonial fictions of resistance, the fissure of boundaries between self and world and between Africa and Europe becomes, for example, the novel's mode of taking up ideological issues such as the construction and reconstruction of political, linguistic, and cultural boundaries, or the world as it is structured by race and otherness. Thus, *Major Gentl's* artful construction or its play with technological devices from computers and helicopters to flights to the moon and sun, like Okri's "neo-traditional" narratives, is to be seen as the image of postcolonial societies caught in the fold of a modern technological maze or an unrelenting global capitalism. When *Major Gentl* rails against Torro's strategy of extracting brain energy and sending it through the waves to the countries abroad, the technological image is unmistakable. But what such comments reveal are Laing's commitment to a socio-political vision, since he seems to be figuratively framing neocolonial forms of domination. In short, despite its postmodern techniques, *Major Gentl* avoids the asocial textuality most people have come to associate with the postmodern.

In other words, Laing's is the concerned voice of the postcolonial writer who laments the dilemma of the impoverished parts of the world as they lose most of their intellectual resources to the affluent countries because of the world-economic imbalance. Also, *Major Gentl*, like other postcolonial texts (Farah's *Gifts* is another), exposes the paternalism of the West to Africa because it shows a suspicion of any technology that

is overwhelmingly capitalistic and neocolonial, as it threatens to become in the hands of Torro and his bosses. The novel further shows its commitment by articulating the plight of the global civilization, since the West continues to believe in the ideology of earlier times, when it tried to represent and legitimize images of its own worth.

Probably, this is what Mr. Cee criticizes in one of his most memorable speeches in the novel:

> I'm busy generating attacking waves against the enemy, the enemy is aware also that I am having to generate defensive waves to defend our history. There is something wonderful about a subjugated people, so long put under the pile of history, now rising in a subtle and dignified defense of its very existence, and without bitterness that can't be got rid of in two decades either! They said we couldn't think and we thought, they said we couldn't make and we made, they said we couldn't worship and we did, and now they say we can't exist and we do! . . . . And the worst thing is that apart from this Torro here, we are fighting a people who are not even interested enough to seek more knowledge of us beyond that old knowledge that they themselves created of us for the benefit of their cursory glances. (156)

However, Laing makes his sense of commitment objective inasmuch as he remains critical of both the West's construction of the African and postcolonial dogmatic assertions of identity. As such, while the novel's injunction to Africans is not to "live in the historical concepts they [West] have manufactured for you [Africans]" (165), it also questions the carefully guarded identity the African maintains through recourse to the past. For example, on looking through his binoculars, the novel's figurative way of reading history, one of the "intelligences" that appears to Gentl says, "After allowing for natural attachments to known people and places, [one must] retain that sort of global subtlety that allowed you to move in and out of cultures, without shouting the greatness of your own throughout time" (165). The novel thus condemns both the West and Africa for the strong sentiment that insists on fine distinctions of worlds: "Those who dealt in outdated distinctions were merely thieves of conclusion and betrayers of premise" (159).

Accordingly, when the novel turns personal or family relationships upside down, we are supposed to interpret it as its general comment on the problem of maintaining a specific identity through membership

in a clearly defined racial or sexual group. The children of both Torro and Gentl, for example, are constantly redefining their attachments, and since the novel sees the future partly through the vacillation of the children, their unstable alliances are part of the novel's cultural statement on the necessity for the circulation of worlds or identities. We will thus probably have to agree with Laing that in the world's cultural wars, the configuration of existence in 2020 shall have to be a world where "invention allowed even the smallest human being to open up into the trees and into the universe, to see the whole" (180). One cannot therefore criticize Laing for a lack of social commitment, but rather for what, at certain points, appears to be an overwhelming fervor in his condemnation of the West, making the criticism somewhat farcical or superficial.

With the above points in mind, we can finally interpret the war of the title as Laing's ideological commitment to and meditation on the "ultimate existence of all human beings" (136). For as he insists, "Who is the enemy anyway?" "At the best of times we can't even tell who our enemies are" (88). As such, the narrative seems to imply that we should "treat all established relationships as unsacred" (128). It is therefore perverse to argue that *Major Gentl's* slippage into textuality supplants a sense of history and an articulation of place, privileged tropes in anti-colonial discourse. If anything, the integrity of the narrative emerges precisely because while presenting us with the exhaustion or enfeeblement of history and place, it nevertheless makes sociopolitical comments.

Thus, *Major Gentl* remains committed to the dilemma or the status of what it calls the "new man [woman]" and his or her strategies of existence, concerned as it is with a world in which electronic technology has the potential of rising beyond human control. In the process, Laing seems to have redefined the whole issue of value and relevance in African fiction which, according to this analysis, shows that, unlike the textuality of most Western postmodernists, form does still embody a certain measure of relevance or responsibility for the postcolonial writer. Of course, Laing's is still a transitional poetics. But he nonetheless demonstrates the propensity among some emerging African novelists to experiment with other narrative possibilities as the tenets of their

precursors become increasingly unsuitable for dealing with the problems of presenting the individual and society in an age of increasing technological transformation.

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NOTES

[1]Talking about political transformation in Africa, Senghor once said, "Our renaissance will be more the work of African artists than of politicians" (71). The late Ahmed Sekou Toure also echoed Senghor when he charged the artist with the responsibility of plotting the African's "profound content," his or her "right of existence" (12).

[2]Senghor's reference to the nation as a "creation after the fact" (68) is certainly not in consonance with the view of people like Gellner (1983) for whom "invent" means falsification. Rather, Senghor and other postcolonial leaders wanted to emphasize the role of artists as one of providing society with a sense of appropriate context.

[3]*Petals of Blood,* for instance, uses the European road as a symbol for the mechanical Western system whose promiscuous multiplication in rural Kenya becomes the nemesis of the once proud agricultural community of Illmorog.

[4]Quoted in Teresa de Lauretis, and the translation is hers, too (170).

[5]Note Samuel Delany's *The Einstein Intersection* with its mutated beings, whom the computer PHAEDRA says are a " bunch of psychic manifestations, multi-sexed and incorporeal . . . trying to put on the limiting mask of humanity" (148).

[6]I am indebted to Marshall Berman for his discussion of modernity. For Berman, driven by the capitalist world market, modernity seeks to unify people across ethnic, geographic, and national boundaries. And although modernity's dynamism inverts everything in its path ("all that is solid melts into air," 15), it still gives humanity the possibilities of transforming our worlds and our lives. Of course, one of the "visions or paradigms" Berman uses to explore the modern sensibility is the city.

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