

Re-representing African Identity: A Response*

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Francis Ngaboh-Smart's essay "Science and the Re-representation of African Identity in *Major Gentl and the Achimota Wars*" explores the effect of the electronic revolution on the African literary imagination through a searching analysis of Kojo Laing's 1992 novel, a work in which urban space is seen to be exploded into cyberspace, the modern city into the postmodernist zone, and character into computer-generated, digitally-enhanced electronic effects. The essay ranges, exhaustively, across a great many features of Laing's complex creative personality and multifaceted work, including language experimentation, science fantasy, social philosophy, and cultural polemic, though without always stating clearly the relations—the continuities and the tensions—between them. In this brief response I have not taken general issue with the critic's balanced, comprehensive reading of Laing's novel but, confining myself to a single passage, have chosen to qualify particular observations which have wider ramifications for the essay as a whole.

A few pages into his essay Ngaboh-Smart debates "Laing's insistence on the possibility and problem of a pure origin" (68) in the context of an electronic mediascape made up entirely of representations, where infinite replication has displaced stable primal referents and the direct, unmediated relationship of subject to world is no longer possible. He continues: "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).

*Reference: Francis Ngaboh-Smart, "Science and the Re-representation of African Identity in *Major Gentl and the Achimota Wars*," *Connotations* 7.1 (1997/98): 58-79.

But the 'returning citizens' or 'the first gentleman to return never failed to reject' their 'origins' (176)" (68-69). Ngaboh-Smart then remarks that "the elders of government almost seem to want to recreate a wholeness they can, at best, only imitate" and ponders on "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" (69).

Some of these points need enlargement or clarification. Firstly, the novelist's use of "whole" in the quoted phrase "the whole country" does not mean "united" or "undivided" as the critic appears to assume but "entire" or "complete"—unitary rather than unified—and is thus closer in meaning to Ngaboh-Smart's own subsequent usages in the noun form ("wholeness" as fullness or intactness, bodily soundness or spiritual health). What is called "Ghana" in Laing's novels often features as part of cosmic, ecological, and metaphysical wholes, but it is not conceived as a national whole or invested with an indivisible primal being prior to historical fragmentation. On the contrary, it is envisaged, past and present, as the locus of many discrete ethnic cultures, languages, and beliefs. Consequently, Laing's novels are fiercely heteroglossic works, employing words from a multiplicity of ethnic languages and dialects, and the effect of this multilingual rhetoric is to undermine the idea of the nation as a single integrated body of values and culture. In his first book, *Search Sweet Country* (1986), the multi-ethnic metropolis of Accra is inherently heterotopian, the projection of its patchwork population's random collective imaginings. No single group is able to apprehend its totality (or that of its macrocosm, the nation) or to command a linguistic monopoly; each is a fraction, a half that can never be unified into the whole pursued by the country's titular search. Many of the inhabitants—for example, the reconstituted witch Adwoa and the human fraction ½-Allotey—are already composite constructs, ripe for electronic dispersal, so their digital transformation in *Major Gentl* does not, in effect, violate some pristine cultural essence or integrity but merely gives new, apt expression to pre-existing fragmentation. Here, in this volatile disunity and rampant heterogeneity, lies Ghana's (and Africa's) real authenticity—an authenticity which is therefore not undermined by Laing but redefined and relocated in the postmodernist atomization that answers most closely to its historical

condition (the unilateral rejection of origins in the quoted passage implies the repudiation of the very *idea* of origins). If Ngaboh-Smart gives insufficient emphasis to Laing's revisionist notion of authenticity, it is perhaps because, even though he challenges Mary Kropp Dakubu's conception of Laing's writing as "the direct expression of unified, existentially authentic experience" (19), he tends, like her, to conflate "unified" with "authentic"; then, after establishing the modernist novel as a site for the construction of authentic postcolonial African identity, he proceeds to equate Laing's "shift from a modernist to a postmodern worldview" (72) with a progression from an "authenticist" to a "post-authenticist" phase of writing.

Two things are established at the outset in *Major Gentl*: firstly, that Ghana existed not as an indissoluble "whole" but did once, in some fashion, exist and now, effectively does not; and secondly, that this once extant country has gone "missing," not from an originary essence in precolonial, pre-slave history (for which there is no evidence) or from a native homeland but from the ultramodern modes of electronic representation in which its syncretic condition finds quintessential expression. After selectively siphoning off the Achimotans' cerebral energies into cyberspace for their own use, the West's cybercratic superpowers have declared Africa to be expendable and irrelevant to what is conceived as reality in the twenty-first century world, seeking no knowledge of it other than what they themselves have created. The powers who build the information highways also decide where they run. For countries not let onto the network in the year 2020 little or no data is available and consequently they cease to exist not intrinsically, severed from authenticating ancestral traditions, but informationally, on blank computer screens. The dematerialization of the Achimotans' city and country, and the negative virtualization of the inhabitants as insubstantial shadows and zeros, are metaphors for Africa's omission from the global village and its effective nonbeing in the informational universe.

And yet, to view the electronic culture as, in Ngaboh-Smart's phrase, "incapable of generating a counter-myth adequate to the moral needs of its era" and to assume genuine "wholeness" (fullness, not oneness) and "vitality" to be "irrecoverable" from this culture is perhaps to grant the

new informational neocolonialism more victimizing power than Laing actually does. Ngaboh-Smart argues, importantly, that Laing's use of the hybridized cosmopolitan English of the 1990s is not a capitulation to transnational neocolonial hegemonies but an inventive rearrangement which, like Achebe's refashioning of the colonial English of the 1950s, transforms the language into an instrument of postcolonial resistance by its release of peculiarly African (in Laing's case, Akan, Ewe and Ga) energies. But why should this not be equally true of Laing's revisioning of the electronic representational modes, language codes and varieties of technogese which are the transmission lines for the new millenium's cybernetic imperialism? Laing's cybercultural polemics are not ignored by Ngaboh-Smart but, surprisingly in an essay titled "The Re-representation of African Identity," they are allocated little more than a page at the end of a long essay, whereas in the novel under discussion they occupy a much larger space. Indeed, the last quarter of Laing's text is given over to the polemical musings of the eponymous hero on the recuperation of these same lost harmonies and vitalities. Gentl speculates, in particular, about the restorative aid that surviving holistic consciousnesses like Africa's can still offer to spiritually-truncated Western cybercrats who have externalized mind into sheer brain power, bereft of any moral intelligence and imagination.

Admittedly, most of Laing's imaginative counter-technology exists at the level of satiric whimsy and comic fantasy: for example, "soft" but serious African computers as alternatives to the ones that digitalize Rollo's roller-skates and map the route of his food from fork to mouth; the "brain-restoring machines" with which the Achimotan physicist Grandmother Bomb counteracts the West's "energy-stealing brain machines"; or the ecologically holistic armies, led by vegetable cybernauts, which rival Space Invaders and Star Wars. But underlying these poetic whimsies are serious imperatives about making intelligence human and consciousness whole again by relocating them in the entire pattern of being, and remedying the Information Age's ontological crisis by reestablishing direct contact between the electronic and organic orders, between virtual and vital reality. The Achimotans' Second War of Existence is, literally, a battle for physical, material existence and human experience in the virtualist

universe. Their task, as Africa's and the world's standard setters, is to revamp technology so that in the next century "humanity and invention allowed even the smallest human being to open out into the trees and into the universe, to see the whole, to touch the inner," restoring "a type of living that had sympathy, power and creation as well as harmony" (180, 165). This lost creative vitality and concord are external and in opposition to the electronic culture only insofar as the latter has been constructed according to exclusive Western imperatives; the vanished benefits, Gentl implies, are recoverable and expressible through that culture with the cultivation of the right relativist vision—"the sort of global subtlety that allowed you to move in and out of cultures, without shouting the greatness of your own through time" (165). It falls to the culturally mobile part of the planet, which has never "ceased to be human" (105), to recover what has been abandoned as "completely out of date" and "belonging to another century altogether" by the imperial superpowers (164)—namely "language and humanity" (2), both key features of Laing's crusade. The English in which his electronic characters are encoded is interspersed with words from African, other European and invented languages, thus preventing any single register from exercising an imperial monopoly over the others. And the brooding polemics of the long finale do, finally, contrive to reconstitute one homogeneous thinking human consciousness from the book's fractured simulacra and recyclable digital clones. The mild Major himself, at least, reacquires something of the physical integrity and ontological stability originally dispersed at his serial, computer-processed birth and, like Commander Zero earlier in the narrative, "bursts into a human being out of the profusion of his insubstantiality" (75). This paradoxical negation-into-creation is a striking trope for the generation from within the cybernetic culture of what outdoes and transcends it.

Laing's corrective counter-myth of a new transcendent humanism may not in itself constitute a force for electronic decolonization. But, in its appropriation and incorporation of Western technological givens into what is ultimately an African worldview, it foreshadows emulative triumph over rather than submissive victimization by Informationalist neoimperialism. In his pioneering importation into African fiction of cybernetics and hyperreality—complete with computerized characters,

video games, satellite wars and invented language codes—Laing states Africa's claim to a place on the information highways of the twenty-first century and reasserts its right to an existence—political, artistic, electronic—independently of the technocratic superpowers' negating images and denials.

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