Peripheral Visions: Postcolonial Images of Africa in the fiction of Margaret Laurence, Audrey Thomas, and Dave Godfrey

by

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Abstract

Africanist discourse has so distorted Africa that its reality is perceived only to the extent that it conforms to what has been previously written about the continent. This discourse has largely been constructed by countries with colonialist or imperialist interests, but the global impact of its cumulative influence becomes apparent when writers from Canada--itself a former colony--choose to represent Africa in their fiction.

The struggle which Margaret Laurence, Audrey Thomas, and Dave Godfrey undergo to resist and revise past representations of Africa places them in the larger context of postcolonial writing, even as their fiction carries traces of these same insistently pervasive representations. The meeting with the Other dramatized by these writers in many variations--friendship, fear, antagonism, rejection, reconciliation--signals an effort to close the gulf and dissolve oppositions such as subject/object, self/other, colonizer/colonized, and even male/female. In turn, such binomial relations parallel and inform the inherent power of language as a subjugating force. While their impulse to universalize experience is dependent on an ontology based primarily in the West, the narrative strategies these writers employ reflect attempts to decentre and disrupt the readers' complacency and force a break from preconceived notions of Africa. In their efforts to recover the image of Africa, the authors themselves often wilfully confine themselves to the margins of the text, and consign the readers' conventional vision of Africa to the periphery.

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To my mother and father who were always supportive and interested. To Ryan, Kate, and Ben, who lived with me throughout the writing of this thesis, and especially to Jane for putting up with so much.

Introduction

"The relation between what we see and what we know is never settled." John Berger, Ways of Seeing.

The impetus for this thesis arose from my personal involvement with one part of Africa. In 1983 I arrived in Zimbabwe for what would be my first of two extended stays. Barely two years after independence, the country was torn by violent rivalries between the Ndebeles and the MaShonas. Fuel was being rationed and tires were in short supply, so the 400 kilometre journey to the school at which I was to teach was painfully slow. Arriving late at night, the Headmaster showed me our "house"; the flashlight beam tracked a rectangular outline which had been scratched in the dirt of a clearing. Once we had finally settled into an actual bungalow some weeks later, I thought back to this introduction to Africa and I realized that neither the underlying tensions of a country threatened by civil war, the shortages, the roadblocks, nor even the "house" really shocked me; I realized that this was the kind of thing I had expected to find, but almost immediately began to wonder at how I had formed such preconceptions. This study, then, is not only a personal attempt to understand an individual experience, but an exploration of the process and means by which other Canadian expatriates, all of whom are well-known

writers, wrestle with the problem of representing a continent weighed down with the accretions of centuries of distortions.

This thesis is less about Africa than it is about how several Canadian writers have represented Africa in their works. Examining these writers from a postcolonial perspective, I recognize that the complicity inherent in the term "postcolonial" circumscribes my own study, and that my thesis participates in the making of the myth of Africa even as it explores the means by which writers attempt to write through the myth, striving to resist and disrupt fixed perceptions and alter our ways of seeing.

The electronic and print media continue to act as major influences in the shaping of society's global perceptions. In the case of Africa, though, literature--both popular and "serious"--has been equally important in formulating a particular vision of the continent. The public fascination with Africa has continued from the earliest accounts of explorers like Stanley, Burton or Thomson, who were read avidly by the British public, into the present with such events as Canada's questionable involvement with Somalia, and the nearly mythical dimensions of Nelson Mandela's personal achievement.

But events reported from Africa are superimposed on a literary tradition centred on Africa as the "other," and still very much alive today. Brian Street notes that the

bibliography of an earlier book by G.D. Killam "lists over 1,000 novels which deal with Africa alone, and this does not include many listed here."[1] More recently Abena Busia examines British and American popular novels using Africa as their setting and published since the 1960's, and finds that the tradition is still flourishing. He writes:

> The one factor which makes such a use of Africa possible is the acceptance, in western literary fiction, of the 'otherness' of the continent. By the time we reach the works of the middle of the century it can be clearly demonstrated that the supposedly unbridgeable gulf between Africa and Europe has become so much a part of the language of popular thought that it has long since become the very factor upon which fictions are created. Thus, what the language of these texts reveals is not so much what is seen in Africa, but what is preconceived about her.[2]

Studies such as Philip D. Curtin's monumental The Image of Africa and Jablow and Hammond's The Africa that Never Was support Busia's assertion as they painstakingly trace the accumulated impressions which gradually hardened into a stereotype. These studies and most others focus on British literature set in Africa, or on sources, whether historical, political, or scientific, that were written during the

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[1] Brian Street, The Savage in Literature (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1975), 16.

[2] Abena P.A. Busia, "Manipulating Africa: The Buccaneer as 'Liberator' in Contemporary Fiction," in The Black Presence in English Literature, ed. David Dabydeen (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1985), 169.

colonialist period.

Following centuries of distortions generated largely in the service of Empire, Africa clearly has been "orientalized," has suffered under an "epistemological ethnocentrism," gradually evolving into a textual construct which has come to constitute that now buried "real" Africa.[3] Itself a former colony, Canada could hardly escape these primarily British perceptions of Africa. Indeed, Prester John, written near the beginning of the twentieth century and still read today, is by a former Governor-General of Canada: John Buchan. And behind the adventure-story excitement Buchan's imperial vision is anything but subtle:

> Yet it was an experience for which I shall ever be grateful, for it turned me from a rash boy into a serious man. I knew then the meaning of the white man's duty. He has to take all the risks, recking nothing of his life or his fortunes, and well content to find his reward in the fulfilment of his task. That is the difference between white and black, the gift of responsibility, the power of being in a little way a king; and so long as we know this and practise it, we will rule not in Africa alone but wherever there are dark men who

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[3] V.Y. Mudimbe, The Invention of Africa: Gnosis, Philosophy, and the Order of Knowledge (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1988), 15. Mudimbe finds a tension within anthropology between an "epistemological filiation" and an "ideological connection." He adds, "In the colonizing experience, the mingling of these two aspects of ethnocentrism tended, almost naturally, to be complete in both the discourse of power and that of knowledge, to the point of transforming the mission of the discipline into an enterprise of acculturation" (19-20).

live only for the day and their own bellies.[4]

Buchan's paternalism shows him to be a man of his time, dedicated to a notion of Empire and its imperial burden, part of which included the colony of Canada. The commendatory description at the beginning of the book concludes with, "His popularity among Canadians was immense."[5] Even allowing for publisher's hyperbole, such a statement goes far to help explain how views from the Mother Country were disseminated and implanted in the minds of its colonial subjects.

In light of the fact that so much postcolonial criticism examines British texts written during the colonial period, or attempts to recover the colonial subject hidden between the lines, less attention has been focused on the way in which writers from a former colony write about other former colonies. In this case, how do Canadian writers, whose past history is bound up with a willingness to participate in a colonial venture, but who later lamented their colonial status, represent an "invaded" colony like Africa which has had inscribed upon it a collectively-written intention called by Christopher Miller "Africanist

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[4] John Buchan, Prester John Pan Books Edition (London: Thomas Nelson and Sons Ltd., 1910), 215.

[5] Buchan, unpaginated.

discourse?"[6]

Often perceived by itself and other countries as peripheral, how does Canada view other peripheries? Northrop Frye wrote that Canada "is practically the only country left in the world which is a pure colony, colonial in psychology as well as in mercantile economics."[7] Frye coined the well-known phrase, "garrison mentality," to describe a pattern which he finds in Canadian literature. Until fairly recently Canada has been mythologized as an empty space, a land without a mythology, with a concurrent identity crisis exasperated by its post-colonial but still strong attachments to Britain, and its fear and distrust of the power south of the border. In some ways, however, Canada's mythology has depended upon a persistent refusal to recognize its original inhabitants, as it writes a history about a land haunted by a lack of ghosts, to paraphrase

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[6] Christopher Miller, Blank Darkness (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1985), 16. Also, see the authors' examination of D.E.S. Maxwell's distinction between "settler" and "invaded" societies in Bill Ashcroft, Gareth Griffiths, and Helen Tiffin, The Empire Writes Back: Theory and Practice in Post-Colonial Literatures (London: Routledge, 1989), 24-27. Maxwell, it would appear, was not concerned with the political and human costs of colonialism, as Ashcroft, Griffiths, and Tiffin do point out. Perhaps two better terms--ones which differentiate, yet visually imply similarities--are offered by V.Y. Mudimbe, who writes, "the colonists (those settling a region), as well as the colonialists (those exploiting a territory by dominating a local majority) have all tended to organize and transform non-European areas into fundamentally European constructs" (The Invention of Africa, 1).

[7] Northrop Frye, preface, The Bush Garden (Toronto: Anansi Press, 1971), iii.

Earle Birney.

In an article which asks critics to rethink the established version of Canadian literary history created by modernist writers, Gary Boire includes the following assertions:

> In Canada the relationship between the native Indians and the immigrant Europeans has not, until recently, been a major concern of historians. In contrast to other former British settlement colonies in Australia and Africa, the aboriginal people have been seen as a peripheral rather than a central concern in the study of Canada's past; or, as some have it, the Indian provides a "background" for Canadian history.[8]

Boire then comments, "At this point one must begin to question precisely what political analogues correspond to, or underline, the modernists' declaration of independence: a golden-age charter of universal rights or Ian Smith's Unilateral Declaration of Independence?"[9]

Christopher Miller's image of Africa as a blank darkness may, in some ways, be likened to a view of Canada as a blank whiteness onto which writers have inscribed a history which ironically echoes the same process Britain underwent in its discourse on Africa. Frye's statement, taken at face value, discounts such countries as Ian Smith's

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[8] Gary Boire, "Canadian (Tw)ink: Surviving the White-Outs," Essays in Canadian Writing, No. 35 (Winter 1987), 6.

[9] Boire, 6.

Rhodesia even as it ignores Canada's own complicitous colonial history. Ironically, Frye's essay was reprinted in his book, The Bush Garden, the same year as were published Dave Godfrey's, The New Ancestors, David Knight's Farquarson's Physique and what it did to His Mind, and Hugh Hood's You Can't Get There From Here, and a year after Audrey Thomas' Mrs. Blood, all of which use Africa as their setting.

The coincidental appearance of these books did not go unnoticed by Canadian critics, and several articles and book reviews examined the phenomenon. Donald Cameron's conclusion in his review is typical:

> Conceivably the attempt to understand so various and exotic a society helps to define experience for novelists from a society which has never really defined itself.[10]

This inclination to turn Canadian writers' responses to "other worlds" back onto the Canadian experience suggests an inward-looking tendency which actually effaces the richly complex experience which such writers as Margaret Laurence, Audrey Thomas, and Dave Godfrey describe; ironically, as the writers attempt to explore the dynamics of difference and bring to the foreground different cultures, the articles and reviews relegate the Other to the margins. Given the

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[10] Donald Cameron, "The Mysterious Literary Fondness for Darkest Africa," Maclean's, Aug., 1971, 64.

nationalist temper of the times in Canada, such a focus may be understandable, but it also suggests a participation in a larger ethnocentric perception. For instance, in an otherwise thoughtful argument, Deane Downey lapses into the common association between Africa and sex and violence when she describes "the common heritage of savagery" that Farquarson (the protagonist in David Knight's novel) shares with Africans, and argues that Farquarson's infidelity "acts as a useful index of the degree of his adaptation to African cultural norms...."[11]

Downey's comment is by no means an exception, and it testifies to the manner in which perceptions of Africa are assimilated and then re-dispersed. In today's parlance we might say that her observation is far from being "politically correct," the term itself arising as a sardonic reaction and aggressive attempt to mask the puzzling experience of finding ingrained assumptions--and a corresponding vocabulary--challenged by society's "others," whose voices demand to be heard. Her comment is an unfortunate lapse into a Eurocentric vision of Africa as the Dark Continent, a vision which effectively silences the voices of contemporary Africa, preferring instead the Africa of Joseph Conrad's Heart of Darkness. One of the objects of postcolonial criticism is to shift the focus onto those

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[11] Deane E.D. Downey, "The Canadian Identity and African Nationalism," Canadian Literature, 75 (Winter 1977), 22.

other voices which are often consigned to whispers in the margins of the texts, and to understand the historical and cultural circumstances which allow this to occur.

Even the field of postcolonial literature, however, is controversial. For example, writing in response to the book, The Empire Writes Back, Vijay Mishra and Bob Hodge are critical of its attempt to formulate a unifying, homogenous theory out of a diversity and difference which is the very distinguishing mark of postcolonial societies.[12] Their article tends to concentrate on the plurality of previously settled colonies and, in challenging the authors' distinction between settler and invaded societies, also takes note of the multiple voices in a culturally diverse country like Canada which challenge from within attitudes and perceptions formed largely from its historical attachment to Britain. Mishra and Hodge remind us of this allegiance to the crown: "The settler colonies provided the manpower, the support system for colonialism to flourish."[13]

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[12] Vijay Mishra and Bob Hodge, "What is post(-)colonialism?" Textual Practice 5 (1991). I accept many of their concerns, and use "postcolonial" without the hyphen throughout this thesis.

[13] Mishra and Hodge, 410. A further controversy surrounds the relation of postcolonial to postmodern literary theory. See, for example, Kwame Anthony Appiah, "Is the Post- in Postmodernism the Post- in Postcolonialism?" Critical Inquiry 17 (Winter 1991), and Linda Hutcheon, "The post always rings twice: the postmodern and the postcolonial," Textual Practice 8.2 (Summer 1994).

The African novels and short stories of Laurence, Thomas, and Godfrey disclose the double-edged nature of their position as Canadians: as a former colony, Canada is normally sympathetic towards other countries which have suffered under colonial rule (despite the very real differences in the kinds of colonial encounters), but its historical role in settling the "blank space" of Canada creates an ineluctable bond with the centre of empire.[14] One of the most prominent tendencies which links and defines Canada as part of the West is its homogenizing impulse, its inclination to ignore difference and define experience in terms of the universal (an impulse which perhaps reached its apex of hypocrisy with Britain's grand rationalization of "the white man's burden," and which clearly identified the universal in Western terms).

Deeply critical of hegemonic structures of power, yet circumscribed by their own place in history, Laurence, Thomas, and Godfrey dramatize this tension in their fiction set in Africa, and their handling of the extremely complex fact of alterity. In his book The Discovery of America, Tzvetan Todorov summarizes the many permutations of the "discovery **self** makes of the **other**":

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[14] Perhaps the major difference between settler colonies and invaded colonies is that while those colonists who arrived in countries such as Canada or Australia soon became a majority culture, the colonialists in Africa remained a minority. Both, however, violently repressed the native populations, imposing their own social and political structures on the original inhabitants.

> We can discover the other in ourselves, realize we are not a homogeneous substance, radically alien to whatever is not us: as Rimbaud said, **Je suis un autre**. But **others** are also "I's": subjects just as I am, whom only my point of view--according to which all of them are **out there** and I alone **in here**--separates and authentically distinguishes from myself. I can conceive of these others as an abstraction, as an instance of any individual's psychic configuration, as the Other--other in relation to myself, to **me**; or else as a specific social group to which **we** do not belong. This group in turn can be interior to society: women for men, the rich for the poor, the mad for the "normal"; or it can be exterior to society, i.e., another society which will be near or far away, depending on the case: beings whom everything links to me on the cultural, moral, historical plane; or else unknown quantities, outsiders whose language and customs I do not understand, so foreign that in extreme instances I am reluctant to admit they belong to the same species as my own.[15]

Implicit in Todorov's description is not only an emphasis on perception, but also the sense of threat at the possibility of a breakdown of this fragile yet rigidly binomial opposition, an opposition that defines the self according to what it is not and that would therefore create a crisis of identity if the barriers were to collapse.

What Todorov, Edward Said, Christopher Miller and others attempt to do is expose how the authors of Western texts constructed the images of Africa, the Orient and other places and their peoples in order to affirm and enhance their own positions and identities. The importance of these

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[15] Tzvetan Todorov, The Discovery of America, trans. Richard Howe (New York: Harper and Row Pub., 1984), 3.

writers lies in their perception of language as a form of colonization and as a means of control over the Other.

Addressing the question of subject formation and the ongoing controversy of representing others in the field of anthropology, Johannes Fabian writes, "othering expresses the insight that the Other is never simply given, never just found or encountered, but **made**," and then goes on to ask the question, "if writing is part of a system of intellectual and political oppression of the Other, how can we avoid contributing to the oppression if we go on writing?"[16] In their very different ways, Laurence, Thomas, and Godfrey address Fabian's question by attempting to resist, or soften and remould stereotypes. They seek to expose or upset Western hegemonic configurations imposed upon the continent. The effort of re-presenting Africa, of striving to go beyond such binary oppositions as self and other, colonizer and colonized, or observer and observed is reflected in the narrative structure of their fiction which, in turn, foregrounds the very process of writing and the experience of reading.

In the introduction to a collection of essays on colonialism, Patrick O'Brien writes,

Although the stereotyping initiative, so to speak,

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[16] Johannes Fabian, "Presence and Representation: The Other and Anthropological Writing," Critical Inquiry, 16 (Summer 1990), 755; 767.

> is taken by the community that exercises power, it has to create a stereotype of itself as much as it does of others. Indeed, this is one of the ways by which otherness is defined. The definition of otherness, the degree to which others can be persuasively shown to be discordant with the putative norm, provides a rationale for conquest.[17]

As I have argued, Canada has in the past largely stereotyped itself as a land empty of ancestors, one in which the threatening "wilderness" allows for little individualism as isolated communities develop a "garrison mentality." D.G. Jones has supported Frye's theory, arguing that many characters project their inner lives onto the land. He writes, "The protagonist in Canadian literature is asked to accept the North American wilderness in much the same way as Conrad's Marlow is asked to accept the African jungle."[18]

An analogue to Canada's garrison might be the European compound in Africa, and Laurence, Thomas, and Godfrey, in breaking away from the larger, inward-looking garrison of Canada and its self-imposed stereotypes, find they have to undergo another departure--this time from the compound and its vision of the Other. This compound not only physically encloses their characters, but also acts as a kind of

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[17] Terry Eagleton, et. al., Nationalism, Colonialism, and Literature (Minneapolis: University of Mineapolis Press, 1990), 12.

[18] D.G. Jones, Butterfly on Rock: Images in Canadian Literature (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1970), 52.

encloses their characters, but also acts as a kind of ontological closure, effected by the shared influence of Western master narratives and the screen of Africanist discourse.

Consequently, many of their stories and novels attempt to disrupt the influential narrative form of realism, exposing its capacity for misrepresentation. In turn, this fracturing of conventional narratives forces readers to question their own assumptions, even as these narrative strategies signal the authors' own struggle with alterity.[19] The effect opens the way for an active questioning of the colonial past and places Laurence, Thomas, and Godfrey's writings in a postcolonial context: "The postcolonial text persuades us to think through logical categories which may be quite alien to our own. For a text to suggest even as much is to start the long overdue process of dismantling classical orientalism."[20]

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[19] The connection I am identifying between garrison and compound is meant to suggest a kind of expansion of vision which seeks to break free from the constraints identified by Frye as being part of the garrison experience.

[20] Mishra and Hodge, 406. The authors here refer to the use of culture-specific references by non-Western writers. I am suggesting that the move away from familiar narrative forms, and the self-reflexive questioning of their subject by these writers, places the reader in such unfamiliar territory that he or she must work at rethinking notions such as race and dichotomies such as self and other. Self-reflexivity by itself may not cancel the danger of appropriating the postcolonial struggle to be heard, but it does foreground, and therefore make the reader more aware of, the complexity involved in writing about the Other. This, perhaps, will better prepare the reader to more openly

Contrary to John Berger's assertion, quoted at the beginning of this introduction, Africanist discourse tends to profess that what one sees of Africa is all one needs to know, that in representing Africa one can categorize it within a larger system of knowledge. The tenuous relation between perception and knowledge figures importantly in much postcolonial criticism and in recent debates surrounding ethnographic representations. The constant deferral of meaning arising from the instability of the sign, and the split between the signifier and the signified, the word and the world, suggests that meaning is largely governed by one's social context. The discrepancy which arises during the process of writing down what one observes inevitably means that the object will in some way be misrepresented, and such an analogy opens the way for a whole series of oppositions, in which one side is always subordinate to the other, such as observer/observed, colonizer/colonized, subject/object, or male/female. While seeing and knowing are prominent features in the writings of Laurence, Thomas, and Godfrey, these writers hold in common a desire to offer alternatives to the fixed image of Africa and allow it to circulate in the space between vision and comprehension. Language and perception, therefore, are central concerns for these writers as they struggle to universalize very

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respond to non-Western texts--and to people of cultures different from their own.

particular experiences without imposing yet another form of colonization on their subjects. Readers experience their stories with a kind of peripheral vision which reflects the writers' own reluctance to act as authorities, and their questioning of the representational assumptions embodied in conventional narrative methods.

The idea that fiction should be linked to lived experience, that meanings experienced when reading a novel will have some connection to the reader's own life, is one which novelists writing in a tradition of realism would not dispute. Margaret Laurence, too, has repeatedly striven to communicate the world of her fiction to that of her readers. In The Prophet's Camel Bell, however, she experiences the problem of conveying an experience which she herself does not fully understand; for in rejecting a colonial construction of Africa, she is left with the problem of discovering another frame of reference. Even as she records the confrontation with her own incipient prejudices, she attempts to draw her experience away from the particular towards the universal. The impulse also appears in This Side Jordan and in many of her short stories in the form of mediatory figures who attempt to bridge cultural differences and clear away a space for common experience. These go-betweens also underscore her use of language. The emphasis on vision in her writings is equated with the desire for meaning, and this is reflected in her beautifully evocative

"translations" in This Side Jordan and in some of the stories in The Tomorrow-Tamer (as well as her equally sensitive, actual translations in A Tree for Poverty). Chapter One examines these issues as they appear in The Prophet's Camel Bell, This Side Jordan, and The Tomorrow-Tamer, and also considers the influences of Octave Mannoni's book Prospero and Caliban: The Psychology of Colonisation on her writings.

The universal, however, usually means that which is largely a construct of a primarily Western male discourse. This is what Audrey Thomas explores as she identifies the oppression of women with the colonial situation and, at least in part, forges a parallel between women in the West and in Africa. Like Laurence, who in The Prophet's Camel Bell draws attention to her participation in the myth of Africa, Thomas self-consciously comments on past representations of Africa even as she uses her setting as a metaphor. Her characters gaze outwards at a foreign world to gain insight into a largely internal experience of personal suffering or limited achievements. In turn, realizations they may achieve alter at times their perceptions of Africa and allow a more global vision of a shared humanity. Language is revealed as both a form of mastery and as a means of release, and in Blown Figures her protagonist even goes beyond conventional language forms to a participation in the language of the drums. In this most

allegorical of writers, the analogue of the compound is especially appropriate. Chapter Two traces a movement from within the compound to beyond and focuses on Thomas' use of Africa in relation to questions of perception, identity, and the play of language, as they arise in her short stories set in Africa and in her two novels, Mrs. Blood and Blown Figures.

Appropriately, given the treatment of Africa as an object onto which the West projects itself, perception figures importantly in the works of not only Margaret Laurence and Audrey Thomas, but also Dave Godfrey, and it complements their use of language and decision either to translate or to transcribe foreign speech. Dave Godfrey takes the reader farthest from the compound in a radical extension of Laurence's earlier concerns. Her moments of perplexity are consciously amplified by Godfrey until the act of reading becomes in itself a violently disorientating experience where the readers' assumptions are disrupted to such an extent that **we** feel confined to the margins of the text, viewing the story from a peripheral position. Intensifying this alienation is Godfrey's refusal to translate Akan passages which are dispersed throughout the novel. Significantly, photographic imagery appears throughout and draws attention to how discourse has enframed the subject--Africa--in a fixed, Western context and buttressed its interpretative image through the valorization

of reason. Godfrey, however, uses photography as a language in itself and as such parodies the assumption that it objectively defines reality. Chapter Three explores these concerns, setting Godfrey's novel in a tradition of resistance literature.

Summarizing Walter Ong's identification of "visualism" as the primary point of reference in the West, James Clifford writes that Ong

> argues that the truth of vision in Western, literate cultures has predominated over the evidences of sound and interlocution, of touch, smell, and taste.... The predominant metaphors in anthropological research have been participant-observation, data collection, and cultural description, all of which presuppose a standpoint outside -- looking at, objectifying, or, somewhat closer, "reading," a given reality.[21]

In Africanist discourse such visualisms repeat themselves so often that any element which does not conform to the general conventional view of Africa is rejected as false. As Laurence, Thomas, and Godfrey thread their way through stereotypes of Africa, at times succumbing to them, but more often challenging and subverting them, they bring some of the voices of Africa to life--in, for instance, Laurence's "ventriloquism" and translations, and in Godfrey's refusal to translate -- but perhaps more significantly they offer an

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[21] James Clifford and George E. Marcus, eds. Writing Culture: The Poetics and Politics of Ethnography (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1986), 11.

alternative vision which often necessarily blurs the historical image of Africa as it denies the authority of the objective gaze. The tensions and dilemmas resulting from their desire to universalize, together with their uneasy acceptance of having themselves to write from the margins are reflected in their often challenging texts, and we may agree with Margaret Laurence's steward, Mohamed, who, in his confusion over Laurence's refusal to maintain the expected master-servant relationship, says, "'Canadian peoples different.'"[22]

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[22] Margaret Laurence, The Prophet's Camel Bell (Toronto: McClelland and Stewart, 1963), 21.

Chapter One

Patterns of Paradox: Margaret Laurence's African Experience

i. Decoding the Hieroglyphics: Naming and Meaning in The Prophet's Camel Bell

Postcolonial writing extensively explores how perception can never purely reflect that which is perceived, and, consequently, how purpose and meaning shift with each new viewer. Michael J. Echeruo writes about the "conditioned imagination," while Edward Said refers to a "textual attitude."[1] Said explains that one such response occurs when an individual "confronts at close quarters something relatively unknown and threatening and previously different. In such a case one has recourse not only to what in one's previous experience the novelty resembles but also to what one has read about it."[2] In The Opening of Vision David M. Levin describes the process of "enframing," a postmodern malaise, he argues, caused by the ego's wilful confinement of vision.[3] Though Levin is not writing from a postcolonial context, his supposition that the West's mode

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1. Michael J. Echeruo, The Conditioned Imagination From Shakespeare to Conrad (New York: Holmes and Meir Pub., 1978); Edward W. Said, Orientalism (New York: Random House, 1978), 93.

[2] Said, 93.

[3] David M. Levin, The Opening of Vision (New York: Routledge, Chapman and Hall, 1988), 67.

of seeing remains tied to the past suggests that a "textual attitude" arises as a further and inevitable defensive barrier. Perception denotes mastery for all of these writers, an idea that Clifford Geertz illuminates and reverses in his pithy statement, "In the country of the blind the one-eyed is not king but spectator."[4]

The impulse towards dominance, then, reinforces itself through the West's epistemological tradition in which the observer searches out meaning with a kind of tunnel vision that flattens the observed into two-dimensionality and excludes the ground, the cultural context which largely forms the experience of the individual. Paradoxically, this impulse to pin the subject down also occurs when the observer widens the depth of field to such an extent that the subject becomes lost--loses its definition--as a result of the observer's bid for universality.

In the opening of The Prophet's Camel Bell Margaret Laurence playfully conjures the myth of Africa, a land of "great cats dark and secretive as Bast, men who change into leopards at the flick of a claw" (1), to comment on her initial wonder and innocence at first arriving on the continent. By the end of her penultimate chapter, Laurence admits her complicity in the making of the myth:

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[4] Cited in Johannes Fabian, Time and the Other (New York: Columbia University Press, 1983), 125.

> For we had all been imperialists, in a sense, but the empire we unknowingly sought was that of Prester John, a mythical kingdom and a private world. I recall how apt I considered Hersi's description of the Haud--**this island place**--more apt, even, than I realized at the time.
> (228)

Compelled by a fierce intellectual curiosity, Laurence, prior to her departure for Africa, read everything she could find on the Protectorate of Somaliland, and in The Prophet's Camel Bell as well as other of her writings she mentions such figures as Richard Burton, John Thomson, and Mary Kingsley.[5] But The Prophet's Camel Bell largely documents a process of the shedding of texts in favour of her own lived experience, of re-viewing her past, until she does arrive, near the end, at her self-realization, which is the true destination of this travel book.

Central to Laurence's experience is a profound respect for humanity, summed up in a verse she quotes from the Book of Exodus (and used as the title for her book describing other travels): "Thou shalt not oppress a stranger, for ye know the heart of a stranger, seeing ye were strangers in the land of Egypt" (9). The verse condenses within it the dialectic of self and other even as it suggests how easily such a duality can be reversed, while also holding out the

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[5] See, for example, her comment in The Prophet's Camel Bell, "Even the history we ferreted out from the libraries had a limited meaning for us..." (p. 4). Also page 227, where she mentions "the famous explorer," James Thomson.

possibility of a fusion between the two. Throughout The Prophet's Camel Bell it is this sensitivity which informs Laurence's writing, even as, paradoxically, she learns that she **cannot** know the heart of a stranger. Ironically, in her effort to know the stranger, to write a fresh account, independent of other texts, of a strange land and its people in order to make it familiar as part of a more universal struggle experienced by humanity, Laurence concludes with a reference to The Tempest and its use by O. Mannoni in his Psychology of Colonization. As will be seen, Mannoni's theory of the "dependence complex" infuses The Prophet's Camel Bell and much of her fiction set in Africa, and also appears in some of her other writing.[6] Even in her last novel, The Diviners, Laurence returns to Mannoni's theory, relating it to gender and to the Canadian colonial experience.

Laurence, in making use of Mannoni's theories situates herself, perhaps unavoidably, in a tradition which extends back to the Victorian period and earlier where writers of popular fiction drew upon contemporary anthropology and scientific theory to delineate character and give some credence to the adventures they wrote about. In The Savage in Literature Brian Street asserts that "The collective representations of other cultures are strengthened through

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[6] See, for example, Laurence's review of Ralph Allen's novel, Ask the Name of the Lion, in Canadian Literature, 14 (Autumn 1962), 57-58, 60-62.

the medium of popular fiction but grounded in the scholarship of the period."[7]

Several critics have thoroughly studied how a number of Laurence's stories dramatize Mannoni's dependence complex. Patricia Morley and Jane Leney have also speculated about when Laurence may have first read Mannoni, but quite rightly point out that such speculation is of little importance since Laurence had intuitively felt what Mannoni articulates.[8] More recently, Barbara Godard has added to the literature linking Mannoni to Laurence by rereading The Diviners as a postcolonial novel in which Morag breaks through the master/slave dependency pattern.[9] Godard describes how Mannoni later extended the argument put forward in his book by revising the question of universalism, and paraphrases him:

> To invoke a universalist answer that all human beings are essentially alike is to compound the situation by not offering a solution but merely an optimistic negation of the statement.
>
> The vital question is precisely the question

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[7] Brian V. Street, The Savage in Literature (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1975), 77.

[8] Jane Leney, "Prospero and Caliban in Laurence's African Fiction," Journal of Canadian Fiction 27 (1980), 63-79; Patricia Morley, "Canada, Africa, Canada: Laurence's Unbroken Journey," Journal of Canadian Fiction 27 (1980), 81-90.

[9] Barbara Godard, "Caliban's Revolt: The Discourse of the (M)Other," in Colin Nicholson, ed., Critical Approaches to the Fiction of Margaret Laurence (Vancouver: UBC Press, 1990).

> of differences: what will human beings do with differences? Confronting this question creatively, rather than hiding behind the traditional liberal screen of universal sameness, will lead, Mannoni suggests, to the 'decolonization of the self,' to the split subject continually oscillating between sameness and difference, self and other, the subject and the process.[10]

Godard adds in a footnote that Mannoni's revision was published while Laurence was in England and associating with African writers living there.[11]

The Diviners shows that Laurence clearly had revised her views on the possibility of an effacement of difference. With this novel her reading of Mannoni changes as it recognizes how any individual may become dependent on another. While Godard speculates on the possibility of Laurence having been aware of Mannoni's essay, Diana Brydon notes in an earlier article that Laurence knew George Lamming in England and may have read his The Pleasures of Exile, a study which places Caliban in the position of resistance to imperial powers.[12] In The Diviners Morag Gunn is caught between her paternalistic husband, Brooke, and her childhood acquaintance, Jules Tonnerre, a man who recognizes her autonomy and demands nothing of her. One of Morag's novels, revealingly called Prospero's Child, is

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[10] Godard, 216.

[11] Godard, 226.

[12] Diana Brydon, "Re-Writing The Tempest," World Literature Written in English, 23.1 (1984), 79.

greeted by mixed reviews, one of which calls it "'A revealing study of the dependence complex and its final resolution.'"[13] The phrase, a duplication of Mannoni's, is now transferred onto Morag, rather than onto the "African personality," and significantly it is in part through the novel's Caliban figure, Jules, that Morag decides to break free of Brooke's authority.

In The Diviners Laurence hosts a wide range of texts, from Shakespeare to Dickens, in order to comment upon them and disrupt their authority. Her writings on Africa at times also undermine stereotypical representations, but often Laurence fails to create a wide enough ironic distance between the mythical and the modern reality. Paradoxically, to a large extent this is a result of her very desire to bridge the distance between self and other.

This paradox of desire confronts Margaret Laurence in The Prophet's Camel Bell, and is one that she attempts to unravel throughout her African writings. As her last piece of writing on Africa, The Prophet's Camel Bell, with its intriguing confessional voice, represents a frustrated effort to read the meaning on the face of the Other. Her earlier diverse writings on Africa--personal diaries; A Tree for Poverty; This Side Jordan; The Tomorrow-Tamer--represent multiple angles, prismatic reflections of

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[13] Margaret Laurence, The Diviners (Toronto: Bantam Books, 1975), 334.

Laurence's efforts to go beyond otherness to universality.[14] After The Prophet's Camel Bell, Laurence shifts to critical writing in the form of a book of literary criticism called Long Drums and Cannons, and to essays which often return to analyze her earlier fictional efforts.[15] Throughout her life, Laurence could not, and did not wish to, erase her African experience, and The Prophet's Camel Bell offers many interesting clues as to why this may have been the case.

In a provocative article on Laurence's African writings, David Richards uses the image of a chameleon to capture her shifting efforts to place Africa in a context that she can make sense out of.[16] Laurence herself provides a more personal metaphor which describes not only The Prophet's Camel Bell, but also her anxious desire to come to terms with her experience. Early in the book Laurence describes her first contact with the African continent, recounting her purchase of an item in Port Said:

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[14] Margaret Laurence, This Side Jordan, NCL Edition (London: MacMillan, 1976); The Tomorrow-Tamer and Other Stories, NCL Edition (Toronto: McClelland and Stewart, 1970); A Tree for Poverty (Ont.: McMaster University Press, 1970).

[15] Margaret Laurence, Long Drums and Cannons (London: MacMillan, 1968).

[16] David Richards, "'Leave the Dead some room to dance!': Margaret Laurence in Africa," in Critical Approaches to the Fiction of Margaret Laurence, ed. Colin Nicholson (Vancouver: UBC Press, 1990).

> Then, in a back-street shop apparently unvisited by tourists, we saw inlaid cigarette boxes. The inlay was ivory, the man told us. We were not deceived. We knew it was not ivory but bone. We liked the patterns, however, so we dickered over the price and finally bought. We carried that cigarette box around with us for years, and ultimately in its old age it became a crayon box for our children. When it was left outside in the rain, not long ago, a small illusion was shattered.
>
> The inlay was not even bone--it was lacquered paper.[17]

In miniature, this account parallels the general pattern of the book and Laurence's process of discovery that she traces within it. Laurence emphatically did not want to be a tourist, nor did she intend to play the colonial, rejecting the "back-street" in favour of the compound and the British Hargeisa Club. The certainty, the hint of superior knowledge and confidence in that statement, "We were not deceived," is Laurence as she represents herself, in the first half of the book, in particular. The rueful irony that rings throughout this incident, only when at last, and by accident, the "truth" is revealed, follows a movement of discovery through time as Laurence shifts from the distant past, the memory, to "not long ago" near the time of composition.

Repeatedly in The Prophet's Camel Bell Laurence sets herself up by portraying a gregarious, self-assured

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[17] Laurence, 8. Hereafter all references to this text will be given in parentheses.

character whose public poses as healer, explorer, teacher, and anthropologist are constantly overturned or defeated, and whose private pose as psychologist is undermined by a process of analysis that often involves actual event, diary record of event, and the shattering of illusions that comes from the superior knowledge of hindsight.

From ivory to bone to "lacquered paper" is, to continue the conceit, Laurence's experience of Africa: ivory represents the Africa of "marvels" (1) that she playfully evokes in the opening of her book, while the bone **appears** to be real, lived Somaliland experience, **appears** to be what "we knew" (8), but turns out to be an illusion in itself. For Laurence learns above all that knowledge is uncertain, that, finally, the most she can hope to do is record "the patterns." The low key on which she ends this incident, a technique used repeatedly throughout the book, suggests disappointment and ambiguity. The "lacquered paper" of the cigarette box is the book she is writing, a book which attempts to go beyond the illusion to the reality, only to find that, paradoxically, truth cannot be fixed.

<u>The Prophet's Camel Bell</u> is the lacquered box, is the unravelling through time and space of layers of beliefs and meanings. But the book is also a frustrated dramatization of the elusiveness of meaning. Laurence has written that "Man can bear to die, but not with a total lack of meaning. So we invent meanings, and believe in them even if they fall

to pieces as we look at them."[18] This compulsion to understand, to find meaning in something as "difficult to read as a stone graven with ancient hieroglyphics" (182), exerts itself throughout her book.

This latter quotation refers to the expressionless face of Abdi, the Laurences' driver. The chapter in which it appears, called "The Old Warrior," is one of the most emotional and soul-searching ones in the book, for it recounts the events leading up to Abdi's dismissal by Laurence's husband, Jack, and explores the meanings that Margaret Laurence tries to draw from the experience. Laurence's complex response to this incident signals not only her ambiguous feelings toward the people surrounding her, but also demonstrates her methods in attempting to come to terms with her situation, attempting to decode the "ancient hieroglyphs" of this foreign world and her place in it.

Laurence's use of time is especially effective in this chapter. First, the incident is set up with a description of the ghelow, a "bird of magical powers" (184) whose appearance acts as an omen, which Abdi claims to have heard. With this use of local belief, Laurence both creates dramatic suspense and converts what follows into an inevitable crisis of misunderstanding. Like most writers of

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[18] Laurence, Long Drums and Cannons, 64.

travel books, Laurence here, and throughout, writes in the past tense and we, the readers, grow accustomed to her reflective voice. But part way through this incident, as Abdi grows increasingly "sullen" (186), Laurence suddenly shifts to her response as she recorded it at the time the conflict was unfolding. We are faced with a double response: in effect, Laurence's analysis of her own initial, immediate reaction at the time it was taking place. After describing Abdi's dismissal, Laurence writes,

> Trying, by writing it out, to unearth something of his meaning, I put in my notebook--'He is an exaggeration of all the qualities he possesses. He is courage and pride and anger writ large. Perhaps his is the face of Africa--inscrutable to the last.' My feeling at this time was that I would never understand.
>
> Probably I never will. But I no longer think it was a simple matter of his having hated us all along.... After a number of years, things do not look quite the same. (188)

Laurence then offers an explanation for the crisis with the aid of O. Mannoni's <u>The Psychology of Colonisation:</u>

> A possible clue to the puzzle was provided not long ago by Mannoni's description of the dependence complex in <u>The Psychology of Colonisation</u>, a book which I read with the shock of recognition one sometimes feels when another's words have a specific significance in terms of one's own experience. (188)

Through Mannoni, Laurence now feels that she understands what went wrong, whereas at the time "We did not comprehend his outlook, and he did not comprehend ours" (189).

In his book, Mannoni studies Malagasy society to draw general conclusions about the human significance of the colonial situation. He identifies in particular a pattern of dependence and inferiority in which a strong societal dependence is transferred by the Malagasies onto the colonialists, whose own situation of power triggers a repressed inferiority complex: "So, then, colonial life is simply a substitute to those who are still obscurely drawn to a world without men--to those, that is, who have failed to make the effort necessary to adapt infantile images to adult reality."[19] Mannoni supports this conclusion with his analysis of Robinson Crusoe, and sees it confirmed in his reading of The Tempest.

But, though his book called much needed attention to the effects of the colonial encounter, in many ways the text itself enacts and repeats the assumptions which made colonialism possible. In his view the Malagasy is passively dependent on the dominant power, and by extension such a dependence is inherent in all colonized countries. In reaction to Mannoni's book, Franz Fanon observed, "he leaves the Malagasy no choice save between inferiority and

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[19] O. Mannoni, The Psychology of Colonization, trans. Pamela Powesland (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan, 1990), 105.

dependence. These two solutions excepted, there is no salvation."[20] Mannoni's use of The Tempest reveals his underlying imperialist assumptions when he argues that Caliban does not complain about being exploited, but of being betrayed: Caliban has "fallen prey to the resentment which succeeds the breakdown of dependence."[21]

Laurence was not the only European in Africa to take up Mannoni's theory. Elspeth Huxley, in an article where she attempts to define "the African personality," uses his interpretation of Caliban's complaint:

> The cheated tribesman turns in anger on the protector who has failed him. You loved me once, Caliban cries to Prospero:
>
> **Thou strok'dst me, and mad'st much of me;**
> **wouldst give me**
> **Water with berries in't...**
> **and then I lov'd thee.**
>
> But now things have changed.
>
> **...you sty me**
> **In this hard rock, while you do keep from me**
> **The rest o' the island.**
>
> Resentment is born and hatred follows.
>
> **You taught me language: and my profit on't**
> **Is, I know how to curse. The red plague rid you**
> **For learning me your language.**

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[20] Frantz Fanon, Black Skin White Masks, trans. Charles Lam Markmann (London: MacGibbon and Kee, 1968), 93.

[21] Fanon, 106.

> Here lies the root of nationalist bitterness. It is not that independence was once taken away, but that Europeans are now trying to restore it.[22]

This passage deserves to be quoted in full because it so marvellously shows the uses to which Shakespeare's play can be put.

Laurence's own reading of The Psychology of Colonisation is at least partially a result of her acceptance of Mannoni's entire thesis. Mannoni examines both the colonizer and the colonized and, in recognizing a part of herself in his observations on the European, Laurence accepts his psychological analysis of the Malagasy people. In the Abdi episode Laurence sees in Abdi a reenactment of the classic dependence complex. Mannoni gives an account of the betrayal a Malagasy felt after having adopted Mannoni as his protector following Mannoni's innocent act of giving him some quinine tablets. After having been rescued by Abdi from possible death--Laurence and her husband had been stranded in a rain storm--Laurence offers Abdi a reward and Abdi subsequently becomes increasingly assertive in his demands. Describing Mannoni's account, Elspeth Huxley concludes in her article, "Repeated many thousand times all over the continent, this was the colonial situation--the white men had unwittingly stepped

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[22] Elspeth Huxley, "What Future for Africa?" Encounter 16 (1961), 13.

into the protector's position."[23] Abdi, the Somali, becomes a double of Mannoni's unnamed Malagasy. Given the shared perplexity described in the incident, the appeal of Mannoni's book for Laurence is clear: "This book sets out to describe colonial situations as primarily the results of misunderstandings, of mutual incomprehension."[24] But in accepting Mannoni's analysis of the European, Laurence implicitly accepts his interpretation of the Other.

Writing ten years after the event, Laurence remains troubled, even guilt-ridden, over the incident, as though even the comfort of Mannoni's theory is inadequate, and the only way she can close it off is with an insubstantial and bathetic vision of the Koran's paradise:

> If I believed, I would wish there to be battles somewhere in Paradise, for an old warrior who never knew--and who probably could not have borne to know--that his truest and most terrible battle, like all men's was with himself. (189)

Here is a tentative dismissal: Laurence resolves the past by universalizing the individual who is Abdi, at the same time describing his main flaw, a flaw which she can now pin down. The act of writing in the present has, it would seem, exorcised the past pain.

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[23] Huxley, 13.

[24] Mannoni, 31.

No matter how reflective Laurence is here, however, she lacks a self-reflexive awareness of the major irony: once before she had used the act of writing "to unearth something of his meaning," but found, in retrospect, that it was inadequate. Yet now she repeats the act and this time distances Abdi even more radically through first the filter of Mannoni's theory and then with her benevolent view of paradise. Laurence's narrative, therefore, depends upon not only hindsight, but a filtering process in which disclosure becomes an act of enclosure. Direct experience gives way to theoretical speculations that, paradoxically, cloud rather than clarify her gaze. She has moved from an image of Abdi as "inscrutable," to one in which he is at last contained in an epitaph, like an inscription on a tombstone.

By way of contrast, Laurence's use of her diary entries earlier in this same chapter does indicate an ironic awareness. Laurence describes how flattered both she and Jack were by Abdi during the happier days before his dismissal:

> In my diary, I recorded that it was surprising to find the ease with which 'one gains their popularity' by showing friendliness and courtesy towards them. The Somalis, I went on to say, speaking generally but referring to Abdi, were good judges of character (naturally, they must be, since they appeared to like me) and one of the chief ways in which they judged Europeans was whether or not the Europeans liked them. A later, much later, comment at the end of this paragraph bears in heavy lead pencil one word--<u>Bosh</u>. It was not all bosh, however--what I had really

> indicated by the initial statement was that I myself tended to judge people on whether or not I felt they liked me. (181-2)

A triple time frame records Laurence's growing awareness of herself, moving from a typical generalization--"The Somalis"--and we/them distancing to impatience with herself and finally realization. Whereas Laurence here reaches a self-revelation through an analysis of her direct response to Abdi, in the passage discussed earlier she is blinded by a desire to absolve herself, to make valid her newly discovered self-awareness, and therefore misses the deeper irony.

This incident with Abdi is also important because it takes us back to the book's beginning. Abdi's "inscrutable" face had been previously encountered when the Laurences were debarking to land on the shores of Somaliland for the first time:

> The launch set out for Berbera, and I held onto my broadbrimmed straw hat and felt the warm salt spray on my arms. Perched on the prow was a Somali coolie, and as the boat rode high, caught in a sudden swell of waves, I saw his face against the sky. It was a face I could not read at all, a well-shaped brown face that seemed expressionless, as though whatever lay behind his eyes would be kept concealed.
>
> I wondered if his was the face of Africa. (15)

By writing <u>The Prophet's Camel Bell</u>, Laurence is remembering through re-reading and re-writing her past experience, an

experience that originally resisted her efforts to decipher. The result is a tension of ironies, in which ironic self-awareness strains against a desire for meaning.

According to several critics, Laurence's uncertain response to Africa is a common one. Christopher Miller concludes his study, Blank Darkness, with the belief that "Ambivalence is the controlling force of Africanist discourse."[25] Homi Bhabna, too, sees ambivalence at the core of colonialist responses since, by its very nature, colonialism functions as both "a civilizing mission and a violent subjugating force."[26] Many of the stories in The Tomorrow-Tamer deal with this paradox, and The Prophet's Camel Bell is a conscious reflection on Laurence's own place as a foreigner in Africa.

In Time and the Other Johannes Fabian sees self-reflexivity as a form of objective distancing. He explains that, by reflecting on the past,

> We have the ability to present (make present) our past experiences to ourselves. More than that, this reflexive ability enables us to be in the presence of others precisely inasmuch as the Other has become content of our experience. This brings us to the conditions of intersubjective

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[25] Christopher Miller, Blank Darkness (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1985), 248.

[26] Homi K. Bhabha, "The Other Question: Difference, discrimination and the discourse of colonialism," in Literature, Politics and Theory, ed. Francis Barker et. al. (London: Methuen, 1986), 148.

> knowledge. Somehow we must be able to share each other's past in order to be knowingly in each other's future.[27]

Fabian's observation applies to Laurence and her attempt to understand her experience. But in re-presenting her past experiences she dilutes them through a process where the subject is strained through other texts, such as Mannoni's. This "textual attitude" obstructs the kind of self-reflexivity which Fabian describes and refracts Laurence's vision of her Somali experience. It suggests that Fabian's self-reflexivity itself may be unattainable, since any form of critical self-examination will be contaminated by a subjectivity arising from the experience of a particular time and place.

Laurence's impatient recognition of her own earlier rationalized prejudices which surfaced in the exclamation "Bosh," does, however, act as a careful controlling force in much of her narrative. Repeatedly she reminds both herself and the reader that the observer is also the observed. She writes that "they looked at me from their own eyes, not mine" (25); and again, "It was not a matter of intelligence but of viewing the whole of life through different eyes" (80); in one especially moving vignette she offers water to a destitute mother and child and thinks, "To her, I must have seemed meaningless, totally unrelated to herself" (66);

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[27] Fabian, 91-2.

and in response to the workers' difficulty with learning to drive the tractors, she writes,

> But the difference in the heritage of facts was not the only reason for our disparity of outlooks. We looked at the whole of life through different eyes. Our basic outlook came from science; theirs, from faith. We put our confidence in technical knowledge. They appeared to put their confidence in ritual. (139)

The balanced, parallel structure of this last quotation emphasizes the wide gap between "we" and "them," a gap that Laurence strives always to close. At one point, feeling that the tribesmen are not following her instructions on the proper way to administer malaria pills, she confesses that "My difficulty was in discovering how the tribesmen actually looked at things, for without a knowledge of basic concepts, communication is impossibly confused" (81). When Hersi, her interpreter, tells her that "'They are hearing all,'" she concludes, "Hearing, yes. We understood each other's words but not necessarily each other's meanings" (81). Laurence is presenting a balanced view throughout these examples, yet throughout the book observing cannot lead to understanding, nor can the sympathetic attempt to see through the eyes of the observed. For Laurence, though, the whole emphasis on sight is equated with meaning, with insight, for without this understanding Laurence's own identity is threatened: "To her, I must have seemed meaningless...." As I mentioned

earlier, in his introduction to Writing Culture James Clifford notes anthropology's reliance on "visualism," and how Ong argues that vision has predominated over the other senses in Western cultures. Laurence, too, depends on this visualism. A good part of her repeated references to vision derives from a frustrated sense of her own alterity, but at times she draws attention to visual references with self-conscious irony.

A device Laurence often employs involves a double perspective, as repeatedly she describes something from a distance or at night and then reveals its true identity as it appears close up or in the light of day. For instance, in describing the town near their first house, she writes, "The Hargeisa magala looked best at night, when the milky moonlight spilled over the town..." (23), and then continues on to describe its shabby squalor. Perhaps the most striking example of this kind of illusion occurs when, on their way to Zeilah to await the arrival of the tractors, Laurence sees something in the distance:

> Then I saw, dancing in the air ahead of us, a dozen pairs of yellow wings. Sun-drugged and dizzied by heat, I nonetheless took particular note, for these birds were the first pleasant sight since we came down onto the Guban. I pointed them out to Jack and Abdi. Look--yellow canaries!
>
> Jack and Abdi, whose eyes were better than mine, said nothing. I would discover my error soon enough. The dozen pairs of wings became two and three dozen, a multitude and I saw that the creatures were not little yellow canaries but

> large yellow locusts.... They fluttered blindly in through the Land-Rover windows, and launched themselves like bullets at our heads. (105)

Pleasant anticipation gives way to the near suffocation and violent threat of reality as the locusts swarm around the jeep.

This incident and others like it in which initial distanced perception gives way to a much different reality complement the many instances in which Laurence the author examines her earlier, often naive self. The former strategy tends to reinforce a sense of longing for "pleasant" sights that are relentlessly found to be illusory. Occasionally, however, the romantic or idealistic impulse does win out:

> Looking at Amoud, and then at the nomads' huts crouched at the bottom of the hills, I could not help thinking of the western world with its power and its glory, its sky-scrapers and its atom bombs, and wondering if these desert men would not after all survive longer than we did, and remain to seed the human race again, after our cities lay as dead as Amoud, the city of the sands. (102-3)

Laurence rarely allows herself this kind of fantasizing; instead she creates a double perspective by recording the process by which the hazy distance gradually and sharply comes into focus.

Similarly, Laurence the conscientious liberal constantly realizes her limitations, and her use of perception through space tends to temper much of the impulse

towards the romantic or exotic. Not only does Laurence allow room for the Somalis by devoting separate chapters to them, she also arouses respect for them at her own expense. Thus, only after enthusiastically offering to teach block-printing to some local women does she realize how wrong were her priorities, and she is slow to perceive her insensitivity in asking too many probing questions. After being given obviously false answers, she traces her reactions: "I was somewhat irritated at their pretence, and then amused. But finally I perceived that it was no more than I deserved. People are not oyster shells, to be pried at" (40).

While here it is Laurence's desire for knowledge that is undercut, in another incident she learns how inadequate she is as a doctor after being asked for help by an increasing number of seriously injured patients. She questions her original motivations: "Had I needed their gratitude so much?... The searching sun of the Jilal exposed not only the land but the heart as well" (62-3). Through these two incidents and many others Laurence undergoes a process of self-discovery that leads her to an ironic awareness of herself and of the limits of power. Furthermore, by probing her own faults she leaves no space for any possibility of condescension towards the Somalis.

Laurence's moments of illumination, as they are achieved through the use of double perspective or ironic

undercutting, do work to downplay the exotic and leave a space for the Other to be heard. But they also reinforce her assumption that illusions can be dispelled, that meaning is possible. Even her use of perspective in which an original response is re-examined assumes that understanding can be achieved, though--as mentioned earlier with reference to Abdi--this method can work against Laurence and cause more ambiguity than clarity. Laurence wants to go beyond difference to universality and these methods afford her a certain amount of success. Much more threatening, however, are the moments when she is confronted by what appears meaningless, by what she cannot pin down, and which therefore threatens her very existence. All perception and understanding are blocked in these instances and they act as powerful deterrents to Laurence's desire for inter-cultural connections.

Early in the book Laurence focuses on one of the mass of workers who are transferring the Laurences' baggage to the launch that will take them from Aden to Berbera:

> Goods were more expensive than men here. There were millions like him, in every city throughout the East, men with names and meanings, but working namelessly and with no more meaning than any other beast of burden. (10)

Even this early in the book Laurence's obsession with "names and meanings" stands out. The book is essentially about the

possibility of naming and finding meaning by attempting to break through the barricades of culture, religion, and gender. Repeatedly, however, she is confronted by a meaninglessness which she finds both perplexing and threatening, and which largely influences the form of the text.

The chapter called "Place of Exile" is the most haunting and surreal in the entire book. Not only does it include a ghost story, it also describes the hopeless existence of expatriates living in Djibouti and includes a whole cluster of perceptual deceptions--perhaps not by accident--including the already mentioned "yellow canaries." Most effective, though, is Laurence's description of the nearly deserted city, Zeilah. A once thriving port city and important centre of the slave trade, Zeilah was where Richard Burton delivered his famous sermon in the disguise of an Arab merchant. Laurence, however, cannot even be sure if the mosque she visits is the same one in which Burton preached. Further, "No one here had ever heard of Burton. Perhaps an old man dozing in one of the huts had heard the tale, but he did not emerge to talk with strangers like ourselves" (106). There is a parallel here between the insignificance of Burton's achievement (in contrast to its impact on Western readers, past and present) and the ambivalence that the Laurences feel on the eve of their

departure while watching the tribesmen making use of the earth dams, or ballehs, that Jack constructed.

Laurence goes on to describe the inhabitants of Zeilah as a people who have lost their culture, and recalls what a Somali friend had told her:

> They did something which he felt had a subtle horror about it--they chanted songs whose meanings they had forgotten. The words were Galla, or Dankil, mixed with Arabic or archaic Somali, all so blended and changed that they were unrecognizable. They would chant them over and over, the mysterious words and phrases of a dead past, possibly imbued now with a magical significance. Our friend said he could hardly believe it at first, and thought maybe it was only the young people who did not know the meaning of the songs. He asked the elders of the town. They smiled gently and said no, they didn't know the meaning of the words of the old songs, either. These were just the songs their people had always sung, that was all. (107)

Laurence, by association, also feels the horror of their mechanical incantation of "meaningless" words. Jack leaves as his legacy the ballehs but finds that he gains no recognition for his work, as a group of tribesmen look upon the Laurences with suspicion and Hersi interprets their remarks: "'They saying--what is these Ingrese doing here, beside our balleh?'" (236). Margaret Laurence's legacy becomes A Tree for Poverty, the result of an attempt to record the oral literature of the Somalis so that its meaning will not be lost, and yet one more attempt to probe meaning, this time through the medium of Somali literature.

In the desert Laurence had felt the sense of total separation, helplessness, and incomprehension during her encounter with the mother and child out on the Haud mentioned earlier. Dwelling upon this meeting, Laurence thinks of the fatalistic attitude of the Somalis which, during the dry season, allows them to reason thus: "If Allah wills, it will rain;" she concludes, "We, too, said the same thing now. What else was there to say? All other words had ceased to have meaning in the Jilal" (66). This utter helplessness in the face of nature's harshness seems to defy meaning, but Laurence's desire to know is just as strong when she describes her complex relationship with their cook, Mohamed, and her final thoughts as she boards the airplane which will take her back to England:

> We had misinterpreted one another very often, Mohamed and ourselves, and if we had been staying on here, we still would do so. But we had come to know something of him, and he of us. We had been present during a significant couple of years in one another's lives. **This must mean something, surely**. We found it hard to say goodbye to him, and it seemed to us that he felt the same way.
> (my stress, 173)

Ten years after their farewell, Laurence still desires reassurance, still feels ambivalence, and must settle for a tentative hope that her presence had not been completely meaningless.

Laurence ends her chapter on Mohamed with a brief summary describing what she sees as his chief conflict: the stress caused by being caught between tradition and progress. Here, as with the conclusions of all her chapters dedicated to the individuals who were her "servants," Laurence concludes on a sympathetic note that often teeters on the brink of bathos:

> Mohamed was compelled to seek the elders' blessing, but it is too late for him ever to return completely to the old tribe. And yet he will never be entirely free of his need for it. I wonder if he may have found, at last, a new tribe now? (173)

It is as though, after recounting the tensions of misunderstanding and uncertainty which she confronts with each person, Laurence feels compelled to close off or seal the experience inside the compartment of meaning, to somehow finalize it while at the same time she recognizes that such closures are not possible.

These chapters are less character sketches than they are eruptions in the flow of the narrative. Laurence feels compelled to allow the face of the Other to be seen, but the vision remains out of focus, so she must try again and again, until her attention finally turns to the resident expatriates in her chapter, "The Imperialists," as a possible and indirect means of understanding her and Jack's roles and their inability to locate "names and meanings."

Laurence makes fast work of the stereotypical colonials by grouping them all together and by not hiding her antipathy towards them. Then, as compensation she offers a series of brief character sketches describing an odd assortment of adventurers, eccentrics, idealists, and even committed administrators. Both types of colonials finally converge, though, when she analyzes her feelings as she and her husband are departing from Somaliland:

> And then I saw that my sadness had been partly for myself, and my fascination with the reasons for others being drawn to Africa had been in some way a veiled attempt to discover my own. It seemed to me that my feeling of regret arose from unwisely loving a land where I must always remain a stranger. (226)

The Prophet's Camel Bell is Laurence's confession of her own unconscious prejudices and admission of her inadequacies as an outside observer, but, simultaneously, an undercurrent of resistance to this position runs through the text. The interruptions in the narrative reflect a frustrated desire for a more complete understanding, even a transcendence of difference.

Later, in her Preface to the Second Edition of A Tree for Poverty, Laurence was to criticize her introduction to her translations of the Somali poems and legends:

> My main reservation now about those remarks would be that I was in places unwittingly condescending,

> in the manner of white liberals, out of pure ignorance, for Somaliland was my first contact with a culture other than my own, and I had much to learn about the validity of human differences--I still have, but at least I know now.[28]

Whereas here Laurence admits to "the validity of human differences," in The Prophet's Camel Bell--the record of her direct confrontation with another culture--she wants to accept such a position, but finds herself needing more than this awareness of the cultural gap which separates her from those around her.

Perhaps this is the reason why she repeatedly turned to the subjects of universalism and individual and cultural differences in her essays and by way of critical comments in Long Drums and Cannons even as she was writing her Manawaka novels. In many of these essays and comments Laurence attempts to reach a form of Fabian's intersubjective knowledge, to create a kind of globalized future in which difference is subsumed in a shared past.

In an essay entitled "Ivory Tower or Grassroots?" Laurence describes herself as a "Third World Novelist" and compares Canadian writers to African writers, both of whom "have to find our own voices and write out of what is truly ours, in the face of an overwhelming cultural

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[28] Laurence, A Tree for Poverty, v.

imperialism."[29] Elsewhere, responding to a question about her African fiction, Laurence explained that "whereas I thought...I was dealing with an African theme, in fact I was dealing with something which was as much a Canadian theme and as much a personal theme...."[30] For Laurence, Dave Godfrey's The New Ancestors presents a vision of man

> as both alone in the universe and accompanied by the ghosts of his long, long past; man bearing even in the face of his gods his own responsibility for his future, if there is to be any. We ourselves, whether African, European, North American or whatever, are the new ancestors of the novel's title.[31]

A Canadian critic, writing on The Prophet's Camel Bell, has said that Laurence's "method for achieving insight is to find the universal characteristics which link us all."[32] "Insight," though, is a loaded word. The universalizing impulse, too, often tends to be strained and, as David Richards points out, can work against Laurence's intentions: "The effacement of difference renders the world

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[29] Margaret Laurence, "Ivory Tower or Grassroots?: the Novelist as Sociopolitical Being," in A Political Art, ed. W.H. New (Vancouver: UBC Press, 1978), 17.

[30] Donald Cameron, ed., Conversations with Canadian Novelists (Toronto: MacMillan, 1973), 105.

[31] Margaret Laurence, "Caverns to the mind's dark continent," review of The New Ancestors by Dave Godfrey, in The Globe and Mail, 5 Dec., 1970, 16.

[32] Joan Hind-Smith, Three Voices (Toronto: Clarke, Irwin and Co., 1975), 24.

simplistically sundered into 'us and them,' colonizer and colonized; a dualistic pattern which is the essence of a colonial ideology, not of its opponents."[33]

Throughout her life, Margaret Laurence strove to come to terms with an experience that evaded her, that refused to surrender its meanings. Even at the end of The Prophet's Camel Bell she wistfully questions herself: "How many other things there may have been which we perceived not as they were but as we wanted them to be--this we have no way of knowing" (229). Laurence's ambivalence and frustration are never resolved, in good part because she cannot easily apply what she concludes about the Somali resistance leader and poet, Mohammed Abdille Hasan, to her own experience of Africa: "He himself remains hidden, as he did for so long to the British, who never once saw him in person. His life is patterned with paradox. The man evades any nets of neat phrases which might bind him."[34]

ii. "The Intolerable Wrestle with Names and Meanings"

Laurence restores Hasan's enigmatic qualities in her article, "The Poem and the Spear," by allowing him to slip back through the net. Her sympathetic reconstruction of his

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[33] Richards, 24.

[34] Laurence, "The Poem and the Spear," in Heart of a Stranger (Toronto: McClelland and Stewart, 1978), 38.

life--especially his later years in exile-- was enabled by the combination of her own Somaliland experience and the distance in time between his life and her own: Laurence could read and re-interpret without the complications of direct involvement. "The Poem and the Spear," though, is as much about imperialism as it is about Hasan and, as such, offers another example of her desire to universalize.

From another angle, however, Laurence's globalizing impulse in which she attempts to link Louis Riel with Hasan, and Canadian writers with Third World writers, is valid and makes her a participant in defining a postcolonial Africa in This Side Jordan and The Tomorrow-Tamer. In The Empire Writes Back the authors discuss D.E.S. Maxwell's classification of postcolonial societies into "settler colonies" and "invaded colonies," and quote him at length:

> There are two broad categories. In the first, the writer brings his own language--English--to an alien environment and a fresh set of experiences: Australia, Canada, New Zealand. In the other, the writer brings an alien language--English--to his own social and cultural inheritance: India, West Africa. Yet the categories have a fundamental kinship.... The 'intolerable wrestle with words and meanings' as its aim to subdue the experience to the language, the exotic life to the imported tongue.[35]

In a "settler" colony such as Canada early poets such as Standish O'Grady, Oliver Goldsmith, Alexander McLachlan,

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[35] Bill Ashcroft, Gareth Griffiths, and Helen Tiffin, The Empire Writes Back (London: Routledge, 1989), 25.

and Charles Sangster ignore the reality of the Canadian landscape, instead embellishing nature as though it had been transplanted from late eighteenth-century England. For example, Sangster domesticates the Thousand Islands region through his use of personification and through the conventional language of the time, painting them in ethereal hues and firmly establishing that their beauty has been created for the edification of man's sensitivity and intelligence:

> Here nature, lavish of her wealth, did strew
> Her flocks of panting islets on the breast
> Of the admiring River, where they grew,
> Like shapes of Beauty, formed to give a zest
> To the charmed mind, like waking Visions of the Blest.[36]

The history of Canadian literature can be seen as an attempt to define Canada and its people, and many feel as David Stouck does, that Laurence is "the first writer to create a feeling of tradition among Canadian novelists."[37] As suggested earlier, Laurence has drawn many parallels between Canadian literature and African literature. In fact, in her African fiction to a large extent she successfully subdues "the exotic life to the imported

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[36] Charles Sangster, From "The St. Lawrence and the Saguenay" in The New Oxford Book of Canadian Verse in English, ed. Margaret Atwood (Toronto: Oxford University Press, 1982), 11.

[37] David Stouck, Major Canadian Authors (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1984), 241.

tongue." But, while Maxwell links the "wrestle with words and meanings" to the taming of an unfamiliar landscape through the use of language, Laurence, in her African fiction, skilfully writes in idioms of a culture not her own, but cannot decode "names and meanings" (PCB, 10). As a result, This Side Jordan, with its self-conscious, taut manichean structure, at times lapses into stereotypical visions influenced by anthropologists and other writers on Africa she certainly read, even while she dramatizes many of the characters' struggles for independence. Paradoxically, Laurence both re-presents Africa as a text, and participates in dramatizing the painful process of decolonization.

Laurence's attempt to depict the mutual antagonisms and suspicions between the Africans and the British in a balanced manner is mirrored in the character of Miranda, who acts as an intermediary between her husband and Nathaniel Amegbe, and Amegbe himself when he takes on the role of interpreter near the end of the novel. Mediating figures also appear repeatedly in Laurence's short stories, usually searching for a common ground between a pre-colonial and post-colonial world, or between a previously colonized individual and a representative of the colonizer. As a Canadian, Laurence is in the unique position of one whose experience binds her to the imperial centre even as she opposes its impositions. The distance, though, between settler colonies and invaded colonies is apparent in the

tension created through Laurence's uses of language in the novel, despite the "fundamental kinship" which Maxwell identifies, and reflects a cultural difference which inevitably aligns Laurence with the West and its eschewal of the local in favour of the universal--itself concretized in the imperialist project.

The novel's rigid, artificial structure has drawn comments from many critics, most notably, Clara Thomas.[38] The oppositions are precise, with the Africans opposing the Europeans throughout the novel and the dominant theme of the conflict between tradition and progress acting as a counterpoint. This tension radiates from the first page as the scene opens in a night club where Johnnie Kestoe (a European) is dancing to modern high life music with Charity (an African), while being watched with equally intense repulsion by both an African man and by European women, including Kestoe's wife, Miranda.

Laurence also stresses the tension between the ancient and modern through the music:

> Music was the clothing of West African highlife, but rhythm its blood and bone. This music was sophisticated. It was modern. It was new. To

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[38] Clara Thomas, The Manawaka World of Margaret Laurence (Toronto: McClelland and Stewart, 1975), 50.

> hell with the ritual tribal dance, the drums with voices ancient as the forest.[39]

In this one short paragraph Laurence fashions a metaphor which prepares the way for the central object in the novel--the garment business--and the two main characters: Nathaniel, descendant of a Drummer, and Johnnie, prospective manager of the clothing warehouse. But Laurence moves from dramatization to narration as she implies that a response to music is a natural inheritance of Africans, since "Africa has danced pain and love since the first man was born on its red soil" (2), and goes on to romanticize her subject: "Into the brash contemporary patterns of this Africa's fabric were woven symbols old as the sun-king, old as the oldest continent" (2). The experience reinforces a perception of "them" and "us" which is further shaped by a connotative link between the "oldest continent" and Stanley's "Dark Continent."

The romantic image of Africa as a trope persists throughout This Side Jordan, beginning as early as the passage just quoted. Fecund, ripe, and supple, with "Sweat lay[ing] wetly between her breasts" (4), Charity exudes sexuality and earthiness, and represents a personification

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[39] Margaret Laurence, This Side Jordan, NCL Edition (Toronto: McClelland and Stewart, 1976), 1-2. Hereafter, page references for all quotations will appear within the essay.

of Africa which has "danced pain and love" since man's beginning. For his part, Johnnie Kestoe is described as "thin in a sharp, almost metallic way, like a man made of netted wire" and with "the extreme whiteness of skin that sometimes accompanies dark hair" (2). The use of vivid colour imagery like "extreme whiteness" is a common characteristic of traditional ballads, as is the inclusion of questing knights, and Kestoe is more directly linked to such an association by his sympathy for Bedford, an old Africa hand whom Johnnie thinks of as "the massive knight" (9).

While Laurence seems to be using such an image as armour to suggest the rigidity of the British, it has been used before in relation to Africa, and in books which Laurence had probably read.[40] In The Africa That Never Was, Hammond and Jablow quote the explorer, Joseph Thomson, who describes Africa in terms of withholding some precious secret:

> We might imagine...that some all-powerful evil genius held sway over the land and kept some lovely damsel or some great treasure deep hidden in the interior, surrounded by a land teeming with horrors and guarded by the foul monsters of disease, of darkness and savagery. That land is the pestilential

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[40] Rosemary Sullivan, "An Interview With Margaret Laurence," in A Place to Stand On, ed. George Woodcock (Edmonton: NeWest Press, 1983), 65. Laurence mentions that she read a great deal of anthropological books, as well as other books by Ghanaians on their culture. In The Prophet's Camel Bell she also refers to James Thomas (227).

> coast region where so many adventurous modern knight-errants have been doomed to die in their attempts to reveal to the world the fair spirit of Africa.[41]

Certainly Laurence read Mary Kingsley, whose book Travels in West Africa, also employs the romance motif: "the West Coast of Africa...is a 'Belle Dame Sans Merci"[42]

More prosaic, but valuable nevertheless, the treasure in This Side Jordan is the textile industry, and to the colonialists depicted in the novel, Africa remains full of "darkness and savagery." A tension, then, arises between consciously exposing the delusions and prejudices of colonials like James Thayer, and unknowingly evoking and reinforcing stereotypical notions of Africa, especially when it is represented in symbolic terms. Furthermore, this dual perception is emphasized by Laurence's linking Nathaniel's emancipation with finding his true voice: the only solution lies in sacrificing his tradition for the modern world and its heritage. While Laurence skilfully calls forth a variety of voices, from that of the rich cadences of both the Bible and the Akan language, to the highlife rhythms of "new" African music, and the hybridized speech of pidgin English, to the formal British speech of the colonials, by the end of the novel the Biblical metaphor triumphs as

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[41] Dorothy Hammond and Alton Jablow, The Africa That Never Was: Four Centuries of British Writing About Africa (New York: Twayne, 1970), 61.

[42] Hammond and Jablow, 89.

Nathaniel holds his child and urges him to someday cross Jordan.

Laurence's tendency to elevate the actions of individuals to the symbolic level in The Prophet's Camel Bell often gathers the individual into a collective abstract which then can be categorized and contained. Similarly, her extremely convincing characterization of figures like Nathaniel Amegbe repeatedly gives way to the generalities of Everyman as he proclaims his willingness to take up the challenge of the future, a vision which largely rejects African tradition. Through her use of symbolic language, which depends on the shared experience of the reader, who consciously or unconsciously associates it with preexisting or culture specific references, Laurence attempts to "elevate" Nathaniel and, therefore, break free of older stereotypes of the traditional African, but she cannot divest herself of an established set of Western values contained within her Biblical metaphor. Nathaniel's fearful memories, triggered by "primitive" beliefs, give way to the promise of a future clothed in a Biblical typology. Laurence's adherence to conventions familiar to a Western audience subverts the potential for Nathaniel to break through the oppositions which govern the novel: his emancipation from the savage past can only be attained by embracing Christianity, a pattern which, ironically, repeats

the historical complicity of missionaries within the colonial system.

Laurence sets up a romantic vision of the heroic white man ready to give his life in subduing the hordes, who are themselves fighting over the whiteman's stolen treasure, and then revises it. Cora Thayer describes how her husband had bravely withstood the riot:

> 'James wouldn't leave the shop. In case they tried to burn it, you know. He stood out on the balcony, all night, in plain view. He had his .303, but some of the Africans had spears. Toward morning, the mob shifted in the other direction.... He really was quite brave, you know.' (143)

Later, when Thayer's position in the firm seems certain to be lost, "The Squire" is re-visioned as "A frail and balding Jupiter, he had paced his temple in time of riot, waving an old army rifle, subduing and chastening his erring children" (179). Thayer is reduced to a pathetic figure with no real home, and the heroic knight/colonial stereotype undergoes an ironic transformation, yet traces of his former vision of a wild, chaotic Africa persist elsewhere--and are not undercut by the author.

The smothering effects of superstition, tribal enmity, and traditional charms and fetishes are all ills from which Nathaniel wants to escape. Throughout the novel the past is synonymous with the primitive, which, it is implied, exists

just below the surface in the present. In a moment of despair Nathaniel tells Victor Edusei that he is returning to his village: "'You know where I belong. The village--back there, far back, where a man knows what to do, because he hears the voices of the dead, telling him'" (227). To Nathaniel a return to his village means a regression in time. Just as in The Prophet's Camel Bell, where Laurence sometimes lapses from an ironic self-awareness into a less self-reflexive presentation of her subject, in This Side Jordan a similar pattern emerges, especially in the more abstract, symbolic descriptions.

The textile industry, with its dependence on tradecloth in particular for its success, affords Laurence many opportunities to comment indirectly on characters. For example, in one of her short stories, "Mask of Beaten Gold," Laurence describes the tensions within mixed marriages, especially as they are dimly perceived by a child, and suggests how alienated Marian Acquah, a European married to an African, is from Africa through describing her unsuccessful attempts at wearing mammycloth.[43] In This Side Jordan, defeated, forced to retire as a result of "Africanisation," James Thayer holds a piece of mammycloth: "The Squire was turning it over and over in his hands, and his unseeing eyes were fixed on the printed clocks" (240).

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[43] Laurence, "Mask of Beaten Gold" Journal of Canadian Fiction, 27-30 (1980), 23-40.

The description is heavy-handed, but appropriate, especially since early in the novel Laurence implies that Thayer's knowledge of this world is filtered through the fabric he trades. He remarks proudly to Johnnie: "'I think I can honestly claim...to know as much about tradecloth as any man alive'" and, while departing, "Johnnie left him there, stooped in intense scrutiny over the bolts of cloth, his fingers stroking lightly the black giraffe, the orange palm, the sea-monster and the serpent, the red appalling eye, the green and blue entangled grasses" (35-6). Thayer's vision of Africa is just as distorted as the patterns on the mammycloth, textiles which he uses as a means to read and interpret his African customers.

Unlike her character, Thayer, Laurence refuses to condescend and remains acutely aware of how little she understands of her subject. Despite her pointed criticism of the colonials, however, Laurence, too--and perhaps unavoidably--relies on colonial perceptions of Africa even as she exposes the rot of colonialism. Johnnie Kestoe's fascination with African women best illustrates this double vision. Kestoe's attitude towards Africa undergoes a series of readjustments throughout the novel. As already mentioned, in his first appearance in the opening pages he dances with Charity, and the ambivalent attraction/repulsion of his response here carries forward. Gradually he feels that he understands the country, but "Then Africa began in

various ways to taunt his knowing novice eye" (86). The taunt first materializes in the form of the young daughter of the merchant, Saleh, who slyly exposes Johnnie's sexual curiosity and desire. Sometime later, while Johnnie works on his car, he catches his servant's young wife watching him. Dazed by the somnambulant heat of the afternoon, Johnnie touches her breast, then abruptly disentangles himself when she looks at him. He realizes that "She was a bush-girl, and he, a whiteman, was of a species so strange to her that she could not see him as a man at all" (135). Seeing her rejection and fear, Johnnie strikes her, feeling "a quick flare of pleasure, then nothing" (135).

On the surface, Johnnie's desire derives from a repulsion toward the pregnant body of his wife, Miranda. Early in the novel, though, Johnnie was described as "still new enough to want to stare at them" (3), meaning the African night club patrons. Johnnie's attraction to African women, in miniature, represents the conquest of Africa, a desire to know without true understanding, to purge the darkness from his own depths. Ironically, while he strikes Whiskey's wife because he feels that his identity is threatened, Johnnie, in turn, refuses to recognize her as anything but a "bush girl."

Johnnie's growing acceptance of the uniqueness of individuals--African or otherwise--finally occurs in an overtly symbolic scene in which he rapes a young African

woman. The implications of Johnnie's encounter with Whiskey's wife finally crystallize as Laurence identifies Emerald, the apprentice prostitute, with a rich, dark continent waiting to be plundered: "She was a continent and he an invader, wanting both to possess and to destroy" (231). Laurence takes up the stereotypical vision of Africa as a "blank" (231) waiting to yield up its wealth and humanizes it through Johnnie's recognition of Emerald's frailty: "She was herself and no other. She was someone, a woman who belonged somewhere..." (233). In this case, Laurence has purposely drawn upon a long-standing vision of Africa in order to re-present it and create something closer to its actuality. Yet Johnnie's vision, his insight, comes only after Emerald's violation and, as the history of colonialism repeats itself in miniature, we are left with both Africa as a stereotype and as a place with its own unique history and culture.

Laurence looks in two directions at once: she offers a fresh re-vision of an image of Africa as filtered through many texts which, in turn, inform the new representation. Emerald is the double of the child prostitute before whom Laurence had appeared so helpless in her description in <u>The Prophet's Camel Bell</u>. At the same time, the rape of Emerald is a convention which reappears in Dave Godfrey's <u>The New Ancestors</u>, even as it is used by Audrey Thomas in its reverse form: the almost archetypal European fear of the

violation of its women by an African. Laurence, like Godfrey, draws attention to the dehumanizing violence of rape, but while Godfrey gives his victim a voice, Laurence uses the incident as the occasion for an epiphanic discovery on the part of Kestoe, even as she emphasizes the seemingly unbridgeable cultural rift between him and Emerald. At the moment of Johnnie's discovery of Emerald's humanity, he wonders about her history, but cannot ask because "He could not speak to her. They had no language in common" (233). Later, in The Prophet's Camel Bell, Laurence was again to grapple with such cultural discord.

For Nathaniel Amegbe language acts literally as a barrier to the realization of his dreams, just as it also highlights the fragmentation of his cultural identity. While Laurence attempts to break the rigid, binomial structure of her novel by presenting a stereotype as the occasion for Johnnie's recognition of the Other, with the character of Nathaniel she uses conflicting modes of speech to dramatize his struggle. In doing so, however, Laurence creates a situation in which a choice must be made, and her implicit surrender to the language of the imperial power--and its Christian religion--frustrates the novel's attempt to resolve conflict through the effacement of difference.

In the introduction to The Empire Writes Back, the authors stress the changing role of language in postcolonial discourse. They distinguish between "English" as the

"standard code" which is "the language of the erstwhile imperial centre" and "english," "the linguistic code...which has been transformed and subverted in several distinctive varieties throughout the world."[44] The linguistic code is a hybrid which evolved with the recognition that while the imperial centre's linguistic influence cannot be erased, it can be shaped to reflect the unique cultural identity of the colonized. Seen in these terms, Nathaniel's personal search for a unique identity fails because he capitulates; he accepts not only the standard code of English, but also the imperial centre's religion. The novel's structural formality refuses to yield to Nathaniel's dilemma. Africanisation triumphs, but it is revealed as yet another colonial imposition in the guise of a liberal policy designed to benefit the African population. The promise of a synchronic union of the past and the present from which a unique culture may emerge is darkened by the long shadow of colonial history.

The epigraphs to This Side Jordan, with their juxtaposition of the sacred and the profane, the religious and the political, and Western religion and traditional wisdom, would seem to be widely opposed but, nonetheless, hold in common a spiritual vision which appears uniformly Christian. The plea contained within the Akan proverb in its translated version reads like an extension from the

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[44] Ashcroft, et. al., 8.

Bible, and is not incompatible with the prophetic words from the book of Joshua. Even more interesting is the found poem Laurence creates from a number of sayings written on African buses:

> The Day Will Come
> Authority Is Never Loved
> Flee, Oh Ye Powers of Darkness
> Rise Up, Ghana

Together, these slogans can read like a song of freedom, or, individually, like titles from an evangelical hymn book.

The epigraphs seem to represent two very different cultures, along with a third synchronic one which blends together elements from both and marks the possibility of something new formed from the old. But more striking is the consistency of the three visions. While they prepare the reader for Laurence's use of different linguistic codes, they also point to the possibility of a new language or vision even as they are **made** (Laurence **has** bound the slogans together) to conform to a more homogeneous, universal outlook: the Akan proverb, translated into English, loses its traditional meaning as it melts into the context of the Book of Joshua. A similar ambivalence occurs in the novel itself as the language of the colonizer silences the indigenous languages, only to see the rise of a new hybridized language or creole emerge from the mouth of Lamptey, a scoundrel and a pimp.

Linguistic codes feature prominently to characterize individuals and underscore the extent to which a colonized culture is damaged by a foreign language even as it attempts to articulate its independence through this language. Laurence exposes language as a colonizing instrument in her depiction of Nathaniel's friends and associates. Jacob Abraham Mensah, the self-important Headmaster of Futura Academy, speaks only in meticulous English even though outside the classroom other teachers converse "in the vernacular, Ga or Twi or Fante" (23). But Mensah's insistence on speaking English is found to be hollow as he realizes the inadequacy of the more questionable traditional practices he employs in the operation of the school. His pretensions are embedded in the school's name which, even as it holds out the promise for future possibilities, corrupts the word "future" into a commercial, jingoistic version of itself.

Colonialism's impingement upon another culture through the vehicle of education humorously arises in the account Lamptey, the English teacher, gives to Nathaniel of the teaching of a poem by Wordsworth:

> 'Wordsworth.' Lamptey pulled a mock-earnest face. '"Stern Daughter of the Voice of God"--what kind of stuff is that? Some god--his voice can make a daughter? What you think of that? It's crazy, man. I tell you, it got no sense.' (20)

Lamptey conceals his own incomprehension by ordering his class to memorize the poem and not to ask questions. Despite his discouragement, the students assign their own values to the poem: "'Kwesi said what could you expect--the whiteman don't believe in having women, anyway'" (20). Laurence here offers a vision of a generation of students learning the language of the colonizer without understanding its cultural referents and projecting their own experience and perceptions onto one of the masters of the British literary tradition. Even as Lamptey's exhortation to the students not to ask questions offers an ironic criticism of educational imperialism, it suggests the constraints placed upon the spirit and individuality of a population living under colonial rule.

Lamptey protects himself from such deadening effects by adopting a linguistic code which subverts the formality of English and draws into it the imagery of his own country. At one point he advises Nathaniel, "'If you worry, bad luck'll land right on your shoulder like a cowbird on a cow'" (19). Opposing Lamptey's linguistic vitality is the correct English used by Victor Edusei, a British educated accountant who works as a journalist. Victor gains entry into Johnnie Kestoe's office because of his accomplished use of English: Johnnie had "expected pidgin English, or, at most, the heavily accented, stilted phraseology of the semi-educated African. But this man's speech had in it more of

Oxford than Accra" (38). Laurence does dramatize Victor Edusei's state of "in-betweenness": as a been-to he scorns the European centre where he was educated. Unfortunately, though, Lamptey (he is given only one name) with his pidgin language becomes associated not only with the energy of highlife music which Laurence periodically includes, but with a kind of cynical and desperate immorality. Edusei, by contrast, with his perfected Oxford English, becomes the agent for the dawn of Independence.

Nathaniel Amegbe is trapped between the traditional and modern worlds. Many forces, such as his wife and extended family, his own guilt, and his lack of confidence work together to frustrate his efforts to advance in the world of the city. His personal struggle is largely depicted through his inability to articulate his vision and to assert his independence: "He did not have the gift of spoken words--only of imagined words, when he made silent speeches to himself" (22). Nathaniel's stammer represents his suspended state: he lives in the slums but is not of the slums; he is half educated; although he rejects traditional religion and Christianity, both haunt him; and he is by inheritance a Drummer but by profession a History teacher.

As a reflection of the polarized structure of the novel as a whole, Nathaniel's struggle, by its very nature, will only be resolved with his rejection of the past or the future, of the Drummer or of Christ. But, while Laurence

dramatizes the movement towards Independence with the policy of Africanisation, she refuses to allow a vision of any kind of synchronic union between past and future to help resolve Nathaniel's dilemma.

Nathaniel's "silent speeches" are beautifully rendered by Laurence. She, at first, places the Drummer and the Bible side by side when Nathaniel remembers his father's funeral. The voice of the drum beats,

> The river fish comes out of the water,
> And asks the Crocodile,
> Can you drum your own names and praises?
>
> I am the drum of the Crocodile,
> I can drum my own names and praises--
> (30)

At the same time, Nathaniel hears the Latin words, "--I, the Lord thy God, am a jealous God--" (31). Throughout much of the novel Nathaniel is tormented by his gods as they vie for his soul, but in one instance they merge:

> King Jesus came riding, all in gold, and the brown skin of His body was afire with the dust of gold. Gold is the sun, gold is the King. He is my King, too. What do you think of that, you whitemen? He is my King, too. King Jesus rides, all in gold; He rides across the River, and His hands stretch out to the drowning men. Oh hear me.
> (77)

Nathaniel awakens to realize that "Jesus, fantastically, had been arrayed like a King of Ashanti" (77). But this union

seldom again occurs and by the end of the novel--as the title suggests--the Bible wins out over the voices of the Forest and the Drummer.

Nathaniel's spiritual struggle as reflected by these silent speeches and dreams parallels his humiliations and defeats in the world of the city. His speech fails him whenever he asks his Headmaster, Jacob Abraham Mensah, for a raise, as it does in his numerous encounters with Miranda. Nathaniel's most humiliating moment comes when Johnnie discovers that he has taken bribes from the students he had sent as prospective employees to the textile company. As Johnnie pours scorn on him, Nathaniel stutters and cannot explain himself: "He had no words that would rise beyond his throat" (207). Interestingly, Nathaniel's language changes when he finally asserts his independence during the second confrontation, this time in the nightclub featured at the beginning of the novel. Nathaniel demands, "'Get out, you. You go 'way. Who want you here? Go 'way you'" (222). In reverting to a language other than formal English, Nathaniel asserts his difference and his independence.

This does not last as the dominant voice again becomes English and the hybrid english of Nathaniel's highlife colleague, Lamptey, is implicitly criticized when Victor Edusei, the self-assured, successful, and British educated friend of Nathaniel scorns him. From this point, Nathaniel's newly found assertiveness and self-confidence

pull his gaze away from the past and toward the future. He rejects the "House of Nyankopon" for the church and finds that "My God is the God of my own soul, and my own speech is in my mouth..." (274). And his position as a teacher at Futura Academy is consolidated: fittingly, having discovered his voice, Nathaniel will become "an interpreter" (272) for Jacob Abraham.

Laurence, too, is an interpreter inasmuch as she attempts to understand Ghanaian culture and present it to a Western audience. Yet, just as something invariably gets lost in any translation, in This Side Jordan tradition is rejected for Christianity and the Futura Academy. The meaning of some things remains locked away:

> ...[Miranda] would never know what was inside the huts, what collection of bones or tangled hair or freak sea-spine comprised their godhead. They were tightly tied at the top of the hive, sealed off as their worshippers were sealed, defying curiosity.
>
> The green ragged leaves of the coconut palms rustled and whispered, ancient untranslatable voices. (280)

The vision of mysterious, darkest Africa remains hovering in the background even after having been rejected by Nathaniel and is supplanted by a vision of progress represented in Western, Christian terms:

> 'Aya!' he cried. 'Shall we call him Joshua? That's a good name, isn't it?'

> 'He has his names already,' she said smiling.
> 'But Joshua--that's a good name.'
> 'All right,' she said, 'if you want it.'
> Nathaniel held the baby up again, high in his arms.
> 'See--' he said, 'yours, Joshua.'
> --Someone saw it. Someone crossed that River and won that battle. Someone took that city and made it his. (281)

The dominant image at the end of the novel, then, is that taken from the West. The traditional Africa of the Drummer slips quietly away, like baby Joshua's true names, which are not revealed.

While Laurence becomes trapped in a system of inescapable polarities that she herself constructs, a merging of the two does suggest itself in the two major African female characters in the novel. Both Charity and Nathaniel's wife, Aya, are illiterate, speak little or no English, and remain closely attached to their traditional roots.[45] Aya, like Charity, is "a Baptist and a pagan" (68), in the puritanical words of Nathaniel, but both women act as counterbalances, suggesting the possibility for a synchronic accommodation uniquely its own. Such a possibility is, however, subverted by the negative image of

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[45] Given the fact that Laurence's novel has often been compared to Chinua Achebe's, and that Achebe himself has expressed his admiration for Laurence's African fiction, it is interesting to note that in Anthills of the Savannah (Oxford: Heinemann International, 1987) his major character, a well-educated "been-to" named Ikem Osodi, chooses to marry Elewa, a semi-literate woman who speaks only pidgin English, and whose sense of survival and inner strength infuses the conclusion of the novel.

the sealed fetish huts quoted earlier. As Laurence's dual vision, which she so successfully controls throughout, finally comes into focus, one of the images is lost, sacrificed for the desire for clarity and meaning. Despite this imbalance, and through the rhythmic cadences of Nathaniel's "silent speeches," Laurence has participated in presenting an authentic African voice. She also captures the vitality of highlife music and of pidgin English, but hesitates and retraces her steps, ending finally with the rich, solemn utterances of the Bible. Traditional Africa remains sealed, its voices untranslatable.

iii. Intermediators and the Split Self

The stories in The Tomorrow-Tamer span the years before and after Laurence wrote This Side Jordan. The rigid structure of This Side Jordan is deceiving in light of the variety of forms and issues that she handles in these ten stories. They inform and expand on both Johnnie Kestoe's experience and Nathaniel Amegbe's struggles, even as they address each other, probing, backing off, and reiterating images and ideas. As with This Side Jordan and the issues later raised in The Prophet's Camel Bell, Laurence writes in order to understand, to find meaning in experience, and to dramatize and probe difference in an attempt to discover common ground.

The primary figure in her stories is that of the go-between, who attempts to mediate and close the cultural or individual distance. In The Prophet's Camel Bell Laurence, older and more mature, attempted to reconcile her younger self with her often perplexing and certainly frustrating experience in Somaliland. In This Side Jordan intermediary figures inevitably appear because of the novel's structural design. Laurence's stories re-enact this state of in-betweenness through a number of manifestations and variations of the "split subject," as though restlessly striving for a means to merge self with other and refute the kind of inevitable separation which E.M. Forster recognizes and articulates at the end of A Passage to India when Aziz and Fielding swerve apart on their horses to avoid a rock and the whole of India seems to answer their question of why they cannot be friends with "'No, not yet....'"[46] Indeed, some of Laurence's characters actually recall the females in Forster's novel. Miranda's earnest desire to understand Nathaniel and his culture is in many ways similar to Adela Quested's efforts to see the "real India."[47] Language also again plays a key role, both in illuminating and subverting the texts, as does Laurence's reading of Mannoni, and her reliance on colonialist discourse.

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[46] E.M. Forster, A Passage to India (England: Penguin, 1978), 316.

[47] Forster, 46.

One such "Forsterian" female character who acts also as a go-between is Constance in "A Fetish for Love." The wife of a British expatriate, she takes on the role of protector over her servant's wife, whose name is Love. Despite Constance's best efforts to understand and help Love, whose husband beats her because he believes she is infertile, to Constance she remains an "enigma" (165). Unwilling to accept Love on her own terms, Constance persistently attempts to unmask the enigma by spying on Love and interfering in her life, but she is repeatedly frustrated. In a description reminiscent of Laurence's own reaction to Abdi in The Prophet's Camel Bell, the narrator writes, "Constance, confused and at a loss, tried to decipher a meaning from the girl's face but once again she could find nothing there" (175).

Constance is a go-between in that being from the West she wants to help someone whom she perceives as disadvantaged, and aid in resolving the conflict between Sunday and his wife. She is like Miranda in This Side Jordan, who moves back and forth between Johnnie and Nathaniel. Miranda, though, finally gives in to passivity as she tells Johnnie, "'I don't want to probe anymore. Just to accept'" (236). Constance refuses to allow herself to accept Love's predicament as something that cannot be gathered up and processed through her Western, rational experience. This kind of tension occurs repeatedly in The

Prophet's Camel Bell and, interestingly enough, influences the bathetic conclusion of "A Fetish for Love" just as it at times leads to blurry, emotional conclusions to various vignettes in The Prophet's Camel Bell.

W.H. New notes the split focus at the end of the story when he writes that

> The result of the contradictory impulses is that the **story** ends up participating in the sentimentalizing of Love--in making her a clinical object of pity--instead of evoking the inadequacies of moral and imaginative reach that inhibit **Constance's** ability to see.[48]

Constance's inability to see parallels Laurence's desire to decode meanings. W.H. New suggests also that Laurence is "drawn at once to historicity **and** orality" and, while "she sometimes adeptly uses the distinction between traditional and European modes of interpretation, there are times when either she appears not to have mastered the distinction, or else is trying to break past the simple dichotomy which the opposition suggests."[49] Like her intermediary figures, Laurence remains caught between a number of polarities which she does wish to break through, but she is trapped in the conventions and clichés of an entrenched vocabulary in part

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[48] W. H. New, "The Other and I: Laurence's African Stories," in A Place to Stand On, ed. George Woodcock (Edmonton: NeWest Press, 1983), 120.

[49] New, 115.

because, not satisfied with the play of difference, she wishes to understand and solve the enigma that confronts her. The mediated nature of language also obscures the distinction between writing and speaking. As a writer, Laurence seeks to interpret through the written word a cultural experience which can only really be known through the power of speech, drums or dance.

This dilemma is, of course, one which every writer confronts to varying degrees. George Eliot's confident belief, which she articulates in Adam Bede, that writing should be a mirror of nature has given way to a severe self-conscious awareness of the limitations of language and representation. Perhaps more pertinent here is James Clifford's question which addresses the crisis of representation in the field of anthropology:

> How, precisely, is a garrulous, over-determined cross-cultural encounter shot through with power relations and personal cross-purposes circumscribed as an adequate version of a more or less discrete "other world" composed by an individual author?[50]

Unlike anthropology's project, Laurence offers an imaginative version, or vision, which is dictated by an intensely sympathetic depiction of the foreign culture she seeks to understand.

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[50] Clfford, 25.

Laurence's commitment to portraying the struggles endured within both pre- and post-colonial Africa explains her desire to close the breach; indeed, Laurence's own creative struggle to write about the colonial subject is in part a reflection--even a result--of that larger historical event. In the introduction to Laurence's short stories, Clara Thomas writes, "We watch the emergent nations of Africa today with a sympathy that is, inevitably, far ahead of our Western understanding of the power and the depth of the forces that batter individuals within those nations" (xvii). In opposing sympathy to understanding, Thomas identifies a key response to Laurence's stories. Laurence portrays characters in a largely sympathetic light, but even as she does so, she attempts repeatedly to move beyond sympathy to understanding. Her intermediary characters are vehicles for this struggle, and their repeated failures to close the gap reflect Laurence's frustrated struggle even as, ironically, they form the basis for the stories' powerful evocativeness.

The story perhaps most closely linked to This Side Jordan is "The Drummer of All the World," with its portrayal of the European narrator attempting to come to terms with his African experience. At the same time, many of the issues that arise are later probed in The Prophet's Camel Bell. Interestingly, The Prophet's Camel Bell was Laurence's last piece of imaginative writing on Africa,

while "The Drummer of All the World" was her first published story.[51] Memory plays a key role in the story, dictating its ambivalent tone and fragmented form, both of which reflect the narrator's feelings of dislocation, disaffection, and betrayal, feelings which resurface in The Prophet's Camel Bell. Within "The Drummer of All the World" the narrator moves from his childhood in which he and Kwabena, his African age-mate, "are brothers in one way" (3), to an almost total estrangement from Africa, an alienation that Laurence probes in The Prophet's Camel Bell in an effort to find common ground between herself and the Other.

While Laurence's overriding sympathy for her characters sometimes tends to dilute the complexity of relations, such as the mutual incomprehension experienced by Constance and Love, her sense of irony often affords the possibility of turning stereotypical representations back on themselves. "The Drummer of All the World" exposes colonialism and how it taints cross-cultural relationships even as it calls upon conventional representations of Africa in order to comment upon them. The narrator, reflecting back on that part of his past life spent in Africa, traces his journey from innocent insider to mature stranger, and attempts to understand how and why this change came about.

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[51] "The Drummer of All the World" was first published in Queen's Quarterly in 1956.

As with The Prophet's Camel Bell, the tentative, probing voice complements a number of allusions to sight. Kwabena is "less-farsighted" (7) and when the narrator returns from a lengthy absence he tries to renew his friendship because, "to my unobservant eyes" (11), Kwabena seemed unchanged. He hardly notices the filth and sorrow in the village, and recounts how he had come across Kwabena's cousin, Afua, in a self-absorbed dance, and for the first time "I really saw her" (9):

> I had to stop and watch her. For the first time I saw her ripening breasts under her faded cotton cloth, and the beauty given to her face by her strong-shaped bones. (9)

The narrator holds this intimate moment of sexual awakening a secret until, years later, they meet again and out of curiosity on Afua's part she offers herself to him. The narrator remembers, "Possessing her, I possessed all earth" (12).

Up to this point the hesitant voice, in which suppositional words and phrases like "I suppose" and "perhaps" occur repeatedly, signals the narrator's maturer understanding of his idealized past, even as it implies a refusal to commit himself, a denial which is ironically revealed in his use of the word "possession" to describe their sexual encounter. The irony emerges when, years later, he visits Afua and is confronted with her bitterness:

"'I greet you--master'" (14). Afua's words reveal the fantasy that the narrator had been living. Whereas in This Side Jordan Laurence does not indicate any awareness of the hidden discourse of power embedded in the description of the rape of Emerald, here she uses irony to subvert the conventional image of Africa as a woman. The story culminates in the narrator's self-realization:

> We were conquerors in Africa, we Europeans. Some despised her, that bedraggled queen we had unthroned, and some loved her still-raging magnificence, her old wisdom. But all of us sought to force our will upon her. (18)

As with the rape of Emerald in This Side Jordan, Laurence transforms Africa into a Queen in order to replay the history of colonialism. And following this passage another reference appears in the form of an invocation: "Africa, old withered bones, mouldy splendour under a red umbrella, you will dance again, this time to a new song" (19). The optimistic vision of the future holds within it a reversal of the image of Africa as a queen waiting to be plundered. Scarred and "bedraggled," Africa refuses the passivity of its projected role; Afua melts into all African women and finally into Africa itself as she offers herself to the narrator simply because "it answered a question" (12) and then rejects him. Laurence reverses the roles here as the African female exploits the European male, and offers a

radically different version of Africa as "La Belle Dame Sans Merci." The separation is complete as the narrator prepares to leave Africa, but a lingering sense of regret and bewilderment remain.

Laurence's first published story, then, contains within it the dualities and tensions both in tone and subject which recur throughout her African fiction, and which she constantly attempts to overcome. In an article on Laurence's African stories, W.H. New discusses these tensions in terms of "saying" and "seeing." Saying, New observes, is "a functional act, an act with meaning and consequences," while to see is "to observe but not to act, and the failure to say is a failure to act."[52] While Laurence wants to "say," she is continually forced into an observer's position. Or, as argued previously with regard to The Prophet's Camel Bell, Laurence desires to penetrate the meaning, to go beyond difference, but must repeatedly fall back on seeing, observing, as the many references to vision in that book suggest. Often this vision is clouded by readings from other texts, but in her best writing Laurence attempts to mold stereotypes to her own use, transmuting them so that conventions are revealed as such even as something new is added.

"The Merchant of Heaven" also examines meaning and the play of differences, but in this story the division between

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[52] W.H. New, 114.

saying and seeing is not as precise as W.H. New suggests. Brother Lemon, in bringing the Word to Africa, relies first on the expertise of the narrator, Will Kettridge, to introduce him to the city, then on a translator to help him deliver his message. Brother Lemon's experience of Africa is doubly removed, since he refuses to accept the reality of the life being lived around him and because he speaks only English: he is shocked to discover that he can only build his house in one of the poorest slums of the city, and he causes disillusion and bitterness among a group of ancient blind men when his youthful interpreter mistranslates his speech from Revelation. His interpreter "had only translated them in his own way, and the listening beggars had completed the transformation of text by hearing what they wanted to hear" (72). The true extent of Brother Lemon's impercipience reveals itself in the concluding scene where the narrator's friend, Danso, shows Lemon his painting of a black Christ. Brother Lemon's only words are, "'Do many--do all of you--see Him like that?'" (76), and he then departs.

While Laurence means to expose Brother Lemon's character as a type representing many of the missionaries who lived in Africa, she also manages to create sympathy for him through the use of the narrator. Will Kettridge acts as a mediator who attempts to provide a balance for Danso's cynicism and Lemon's idealism. In one instance Will

explains that, "When I first met Brother Lemon, I had seen him as he must have seen himself, an apostle. Now I could almost see him with Danso's bitter eyes--as sorcerer" (55); yet later in the story he confesses that "The night before I could see only Danso's point of view, yet now, looking at the evangelist's face, I came close to betraying Danso" (69). As with "The Drummer of All the World," at the end of the story the European character departs in disillusionment and defeat. "The Merchant of Heaven," though, concludes on a slightly more optimistic note, as Will and Danso contemplate the painting of the black Christ and Danso wonders, "'But could anyone be shown as everything? How to get past the paint, Will?'" In a burst of careless enthusiasm he answers his own question: "'We will invent new colours, man,'" (76). Laurence's problem is like Danso's question: her stories are like Danso's painting. Repeatedly Laurence attempts to discover ways to "get past the paint," but the very structure of many of her stories and her novel subvert these efforts to efface difference, and confirm more generally the problem of writing about the Other.

As mentioned earlier with reference to <u>The Prophet's Camel Bell</u>, one of the means by which Laurence attempts to "get past the paint" is through the application of Octave Mannoni's theories to her subjects. Laurence may have further developed or re-thought her views on universalism by

the time she came to write The Diviners, but clearly she held to the idea of a global vision while despairing of the reality as she wrote all of her African fiction. Laurence's double vision, mentioned with regard to The Prophet's Camel Bell and This Side Jordan, can be attributed to her situation as the "split subject," as the narrator in her own story repeatedly oscillating between self and other, but doing so **unwillingly**, desiring instead to synthesize, to dispose of the mediator and make void the interpreter. Paradoxically, her desire for universalism compels Laurence to repeatedly fall back on various types of mediatory devices, such as Mannoni's theory, or mediator-narrator characters like Will Kittredge, in effect creating a wider gap.

Laurence's middle position repeats itself in a number of other stories besides "The Merchant of Heaven." In two very different stories, "The Perfume Sea" and "The Pure Diamond Man," the middle position in which characters find themselves determines the stories' structures. Archipelago and Doree in "The Perfume Sea" exist in a kind of suspended state, living apart and serving first the European, then the African women: "They had always been considered socially non-existent by the European community, while in the African's view they were standard Europeans and therefore apart" (33). Tettah, in "The Pure Diamond Man," invests himself with the role of go-between in order that the

amateur anthropologist, Hardacre, can discover the "true Africa" (187). What links these otherwise incompatible stories is a recognition of the elusiveness of naming and meaning. Serendipity determines success or failure for Archipelago and Doree: Doree's name evolves from an accident, while, in a playfully ironic spoof on the privileging of meaning, Laurence has Archipelago reveal that his name originates from the "Concise Oxford" (21). Hardacre's illusion of an empirically attainable traditional Africa which can be studied and defined is shattered as Laurence again allows her ironic humour to take precedence over her more earnest efforts to ascribe meaning.

In "The Pure Diamond Man" the meaning arises from the irony created by juxtaposing and then collapsing oppositional forms of experience into one another. Hardacre's fascination with a pure, primitive past gleaned from extensive readings in anthropology collides with a reality which he refuses to accept. We are reminded that his father's exploitation of the country's mineral wealth is only one act among many, as the inventory of the contents of Tettah's parents' hut suggests: Tettah collects a "basin of Japanese manufacture;" a satin pillow bearing the "insignia of the old Gold Coast Regiment;" china saucers "embellished with Biblical scenes," a gift from a missionary's wife; a bottle of "De Kuyper's Dutch gin" (191), and many other foreign objects. This detritus of Empire suggests why

Hardacre cannot find the perfect primeval culture. But Laurence here means to portray the resilience of a society adapting to the present by retaining what is useful from the past. This appropriation occurs throughout the story, in the language of highlife music, or that of Tettah, in the description of his old schoolmates, now self-important "been-to's," and especially through the image of the new brass bell the Reverend Timothy Quarshie acquires from Hardacre after conspiring with a newly converted fetish priest to stage a traditional ritual.

Laurence's use of a frame narrative technique complements the many mediatory positions in the story. The reader is a privileged observer as Tettah relates his story to his friend, Daniel, and we are allowed inside the conversations which take place between Tettah and his family even as Hardacre stands by uncomprehendingly. Tettah's deception of Hardacre depends upon his assumed position as intermediary, a position which itself mirrors the glimpse Laurence offers of a moment between past and present, traditional ritual and Christianity. And the partially educated Tettah himself, like Lamptey in <u>This Side Jordan</u>, is an intercultural figure who rejects his rural past for urban opportunity. The ironic effect results from a tension created through being invited to laugh at a character such as Hardacre, whose preconceptions may very well be those held also by the Western reader. The frame narrative closes

the cultural gap by staging a complicity between reader and character even as it underscores the unreliability of ethnographic representations.

In "The Rain Child" Laurence uses a first-person narrator named Violet Nedden, a European missionary teacher who again acts as an intermediary between characters in the story and between the events and the reader. Violet's description of the alienation experienced by Ruth, a young African student newly arrived from England where she had lived all of her life, is full of ambivalence because of her own sense of displacement. At one point in the story she comments on how Ruth's response to Africa changes from one of cynical disillusionment to curiosity after having met a young European friend named David: "The sense of adventure had returned to her, and all at once I realized why. David was showing Africa to her as she wanted to be shown it--from the outside" (124).

Most of Laurence's writings also examine Africa from the "outside," but in several stories the middle position held by characters such as Love, Tettah, or Violet is taken over by Laurence herself. Rather than presenting intermediary figures to enact repeatedly the separation between self and other, Laurence attempts to close the disjunction by finding a common psychological basis for behaviour or, as with the title story, acting as a translator herself, and presenting Africa from the "inside."

George Woodcock has noted that some of the stories "Have a remoteness of feeling, almost as if one were reading a translation."[53] Craig Tapping calls the writing of "The Tomorrow-Tamer" an act of "ventriloquism," and goes so far as to say that

> This magnificent tale bears no indication that I can find after several readings that its author is not one of the new generation of African writers which she praises and brings to our attention through her studies of their fictions in Long Drums and Cannons.[54]

In "The Tomorrow-Tamer" Laurence does skilfully translate pre-literate experience in order to present to the reader the shock of modernization on a traditional village. If translation can be defined, in Godfrey Lienhardt's words, as "'making the coherence primitive thought has in the language it really lives in, as clear as possible in our own,'" then Laurence succeeds brilliantly.[55] The culture of village life, in which "everywhere spirit acted upon

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[53] George Woodcock, "Jungle and Prairie," in Margaret Laurence, ed. W.H. New (Toronto: McGraw-Hill Ryerson, 1977), 147.

[54] Craig Tapping, "Margaret Laurence and Africa," in Crossing the River: Essays in Honour of Margaret Laurence, ed. Kristjana Gunnars (Winnipeg: Turnstone Press, 1988), 76.

[55] Quoted in Talal Asad, "The Concept of Cultural Translation," in Writing Culture: The Poetics and Politics of Ethnology, ed. James Clifford and George E. Marcus (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1986), 142.

spirit" (98) is sensitively evoked by Laurence, in such a way that the reader can partially experience--or, at least, certainly understand--why Kofi, the young man whose life is affected so tragically by the bridge, and the villagers invest the bridge with a life of its own.

At the same time, however, we do feel that this is a "translation." The pot used by Okomfo Ofori, the chief priest, to communicate with the river god is described as "an ordinary pot fashioned from river clay, such as the women use for cooking..." (88). After Kofi's fatal plunge into the river we are told that the village "understood perfectly well what had happened. The bridge, clearly, had sacrificed its priest in order to appease the river" (103). In both examples Laurence's position outside the narrative compels her to explain, to make "primitive" thought and ritual coherent, so that by the end of the story the reader is pulled away from the village's experience as the written word of the story strains against the oral re-telling of the tale: "'The fish is netted and eaten; the antelope is hunted and fed upon; the python is slain and cast into the cooking-pot. But--oh, my children, my sons--a man consumed by the gods lives forever'" (104).

Laurence's desire to connect, to efface difference, is perhaps nowhere better illustrated than in this story as she actually immerses herself in the experience, so much so that critics like Craig Tapping can judge the story to be an act

of ventriloquism. Yet there is a curious disjunction caused by the effort of writing about the oral, lived experience which culminates in a common understanding of the bridge and the way in which Laurence at times pauses to explain so that the reader can grasp how the villagers reach their conclusions.

This same split focus also occurs in "A Gourdful of Glory" when our perception of Mammii Ama's belief in the living power of words is constantly undercut by events and by the cold logic of the white woman. The final image of Mammii Ama standing "Like a royal palm..., rooted in magnificence, spreading her arms like fronds, to shelter the generations" (244) conflicts with the implied reality of Independence so that we are asked to sympathize with her, but not take her too seriously. As a result, her "magnificence" is tarnished.

Laurence assumes a final mediatory role in "Voices of Adamo" through her use of Mannoni. Laurence's reliance on Mannoni in this story allows her to universalize experience by probing a psychology of common experience. She had first explored Mannoni's "dependence complex" in "Godman's Master," the story of a moderately successful pharmacist, Moses Adu, who saves and cares for a dwarf who had been held prisoner and used as a fake oracle by a village priest, but finds himself, in turn, taking on the role of master. Moses is astonished when Godman, the dwarf, calls Moses his

priest. What follows is a clear statement of Laurence's view of the complexity of relationships in general

> 'What are you trying to say? Say it.'
> 'You are my priest,' Godman said. 'What else?'
> Moses could not speak. Godman's priest, the soul-master, he who owned a man. Had Godman only moved from the simple bondage of the amber-eyed Faru to another bondage? And as for Moses himself--what became of a deliverer who had led with such assurance out of the old and obvious night, only to falter into a subtler darkness, where new-carved idols bore the known face, his own? Horrified, Moses wondered how much he had come to depend on Godman's praise.
> (155)

Unlike the symbolic colonial encounters Laurence presents in <u>This Side Jordan</u> and in stories such as "The Drummer of All the World," here Laurence probes the inner depths of the master/slave relationship, and perceives it as a universal condition, not just as one which exists between the colonizer and the colonized. Primarily, again, a didactic intention motivates the story as a whole. This is especially evident when another passage is considered. After Moses meets Godman, now working as an oracle for a carnival, Godman describes what happened after Moses had forced him to leave:

> ...I ate cat, and slept cold, and trapped cutting-grass, and shrivelled in the sun like a seed. And I drank palm wine with a blind beggar, and pimped for a painted girl, and sang like a bird with a mission band for the white man's god. And I rode a blue mammy-

> lorry with a laughing driver who feared the night voices, and I walked the forest with a leper who taught me to speak pidgin, and I caught a parrot and tamed it and put into its mouth the words "money sweet" and we begged together until I tired of it and sold it to an old woman who had no daughters. And--the rest I forget. (158-9)

The almost surreal qualities combined with the naive listing of one incident after another in this passage is reminiscent of Amos Tutuola's The Palm-Wine Drinkard, and certainly could have been made into a short story, if not a novel, on its own. The passage stands out by contrast from the more formal and logical movement of the story, even as it reflects the character of Godman. But such an unquestioning attitude towards experience must give way to a more purposive narrative, so "the rest I forget." The fantastic elements in the story as a whole are muted by Laurence's realist impulse to convey a particular message.

Commenting on Mannoni's influence on Laurence, Clara Thomas has asserted that "Only the Bible has had so obviously a continuing influence."[56] We see her reading of Mannoni also in her review of another Canadian writer, David Knight, whose novel Farquarson's Physique and What it Did to His Mind is set in Africa: "And Experience, for him the African experience, turned out to be a mirror, as it has for so many others. If you look closely, you may see both the

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[56] Thomas, 19.

slavemaster and the slave, both the murderer and the victim."[57] In remarks such as this Laurence implies that each self holds within it its own other, that the play between self and other which she concretizes as the colonial encounter is a reflection of an internal condition common to all humanity, but which most individuals refuse to recognize.

In "Voices of Adamo" Laurence extends this theory by suggesting that Adamo's growing dependence on first Manu, the bass drummer, then on Captain Fossey, derives from the loss of his family and village to smallpox, and, consequently, the loss of his ancestors: "The chain that linked endlessly into the past had been broken" (210). Circumstances arise which lead Adamo to believe that Captain Fossey has rejected and betrayed him, and in his bewilderment he kills the Captain: Adamo becomes both the murderer and the victim.

Unable to transcend difference, Laurence here uses Mannoni as a means not only to understand the psyche of her subject, but also to suggest that the split self is a deeply submerged part of all humanity. In The Prophet's Camel Bell she had been repeatedly frustrated in her inability to name or find meaning. Here, in "Voices of Adamo," she narrates the story from the perspective of Adamo, who "was never

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[57] Margaret Laurence, "African Experience," Journal of Canadian Fiction, 1 (1972), 7.

quite clear about the other man's meaning" (217). Laurence projects her own perplexity onto her character, as if trying to place herself in the other's position. But, like Major Appiah, who searches to understand Adamo after the murder, and finds that "Adamo was not there. The face might have been shaped of inert clay" (223), the reader may also search in vain for a fully delineated character. The character of Adamo is seen as if from a great distance, like a shadow, whose essential humanity is usurped by the theory which Laurence depends on to bring him to life. In part, Laurence's method of commenting on Adamo creates this effect. Practically every character, from Captain Fossey and Appiah to the enlisted men, repeatedly discusses Adamo, until he becomes a kind of case study rather than a fully realized character. Adamo's otherworldly manner contributes to this sense of absence by making it difficult for him to formulate sharp impressions of his own experience.

Laurence, then, interprets Africa, offers an image of Africa which is unavoidably screened through texts and language, and her frustrated desire to know and find a common link between people of other cultures. Her compulsion to explain, however, creates a distance between story and experience so that any possibility of a merging between Laurence, or her readers, and the subject is deferred. In a novel such as Ben Okri's <u>The Famished Road</u> the refusal to explain the seamless shifting between seen

and unseen worlds disrupts the linear, historical perspective expected by Western readers and demands a new way of seeing.[58] Laurence cannot succeed in such a fusion because her perspective begins with the polarities of colonizer and colonized, self and other, dualisms which she can understand but, paradoxically, by representing them and moving back and forth, attempting to inhabit each at different times, she makes the separation even more rigid while always desiring a convergence of the two.

Laurence wants a mirror that reflects no colour, or she wants to "invent new colours," as Danso had said, but because of the terms in which she writes when she does hold up the mirror, she sees only herself, something which she had realized at the end of The Prophet's Camel Bell and which she writes at the very beginning of that book: "And in your excitement at the trip, the last thing in the world that would occur to you is that the strangest glimpses you may have of any creature in the distant lands will be those you catch of yourself" (PCB, 1).

A more appropriate image, though, also from The Prophet's Camel Bell, betrays Laurence's tenacity and desire for mutual understanding and repeats the almost magnetic tension of attraction and repulsion, even as it, for a short time, alludes to the possibility of the dissolution of

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[58] Ben Okri, The Famished Road (London: Jonathan Cape Ltd., 1991).

conscious awareness of self and other. The image is especially appropriate because it pictures Laurence in the process of struggling with a translation:

> Now that Gus and Musa were back, we settled down to work on the poetry. It was a three-way process. Musa knew a great many **gabei** and **belwo**, and had a wide knowledge of the background and style of Somali poetry, but while his command of English was fluent, he had to discuss the subtler connotations of the words with Gus in Somali. Gus and I then discussed the lines in English, and I took notes on the literal meanings, the implications of words, the references to Somali traditions or customs. I would then be able to work on this material later, and attempt to put it into some form approximating a poem, while preserving as much as possible of the meaning and spirit of the original.
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> (100)

Laurence's unease while in Musa's presence disappears during their creative discussion of one of the most renowned Somali poets: "...I was all at once aware of how easily we were talking and arguing. Tomorrow, probably, we would once again feel ill-at-ease with one another. But for a while, discussing this **gabei** which interested both of us greatly, the awkwardness was forgotten" (101). The poem becomes the occasion and the agent for a loss of self-consciousness, allowing the cultural gap to narrow into a shared purpose: the "ancient untranslatable voices," silenced in <u>This Side Jordan</u>, come to life as, for a moment, difference is effaced.

The complex method of translation is an analogue to the process Laurence uses in the writing of her African fiction. In both cases the cultural challenge is surmounted by a creative vision which offers the reader a dramatization of the complexity of inter-cultural relations, and a glimpse of how the self and the other mutually observe and interpret foreign bodies. Her African experience was a process of shedding preconceived ideas--or "visualisms"--and, in attempting to forge her own texts independent of past depictions, she often made use of these same representations in a process similar in some ways to Audrey Thomas's feminist re-writing of master narratives. Laurence's African writings, though, are firmly grounded in an experience of Africa, whereas Thomas' fiction set in Africa is preoccupied with the broader question of female colonization.

Chapter Two

African Configurations

i. The Problem of Writing About Others

In 1978 Chinua Achebe presented a scathing address in which he questioned the legitimacy of including Heart of Darkness in the English literature canon. In particular, Achebe objected to the defence of Conrad's novel as using Africa as "merely a setting for the disintegration of the mind of Mr. Kurtz":

> Africa as setting and backdrop which eliminates the African as human factor. Africa as a metaphorical battlefield devoid of all recognizable humanity, into which the wandering European enters at his peril. Of course, there is a preposterous and perverse kind of arrogance in thus reducing Africa to the role of props for the breakup of one petty European mind. But that is not even the point. The real question is the dehumanization of Africa and Africans which this age-long attitude has fostered and continues to foster in the world.[1]

A number of years earlier Dorothy Hammond and Alta Jablow had concluded in a study of British writing on Africa that in the twentieth century the emphasis on the "Dark Continent" had been replaced with the image of the "Dark

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[1]Chinua Achebe, "An Image of Africa," Research in African Studies, 9, 1978, 9.

Labyrinth" as writers moved from geography to psychology in their representations of Africa:

> For most of the psychologically orientated writers Africa is the Labyrinth, and at its centre is the African who represents the lost, natural self. Once contact with that self has been made and accepted, transfiguration frees the European from Africa. His need for it is over and he may continue his life, though with renewed self-acceptance, and away from the scene of his quest.[2]

Concurring with both these views, Michael Echeruo notes that

> In the more serious novels, Africa becomes the spiritual wilderness through which the European hero has to pass on his way to redemption. Altogether, the physical fact of Africa is subsumed in the simple moral symbol with which it is only accidentally...associated.[3]

In light of these views, Lorna Irvine's observation on Mrs. Blood reverberates with irony:

> The novel presents a moral landscape, a romance controlled entirely by the female body. Set in Africa, its landscape evokes a heart of darkness now perversely feminized.[4]

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[2] Dorothy Hammond and Alto Jablow, The Africa that Never Was: Four Centuries of British Writing about Africa (New York: Twayne, 1970), 146-7.

[3] Michael J.C.Echeruo, Joyce Cary and the Novel of Africa (New York: Africana, 1973), 11.

[4] Lorna Irvine, Sub/Version (Toronto: ECW Press, 1986), 28.

Before considering these various assertions, I offer two more quotations, both,this time, by Audrey Thomas. In response to Eleanor Wachtel's question about her use of Africa as a setting, Thomas explains, "I'm not sure what importance setting has but I think that if you set someone down in a setting that is not their normal one, you find out all kinds of things about them, things that can remain hidden at home, and that interests me."[5] In an earlier interview, Thomas is more explicit:

> ...for me, Africa is a metaphor for the unconscious. I think for a white person, you can never know Africa as an African; you mustn't even pretend to know Africa as an African. There's no way you can do this.... It's the other side of ourselves, it's the dream world, things seem to be the same but they're not.... Someone once said about the Ashantis, the only people that I really know, that for them, dreams are the only reality.[6]

Achebe's main criticism is the West's fixed distortion of Africa into a stereotype. Hammond and Jablow point to Conrad's novel as the prototype for using Africa as a reflection of an inner state of being which must be confronted in order to achieve freedom and release. Echeruo echoes both these writers and introduces more explicitly the moral factor, as does Irvine, who also acknowledges the

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[5] Eleanor Wachtel, "An Interview with Audrey Thomas," Room of One's Own, 10.3-9 (1986), 48.

[6] Elizabeth Komisar, "AT: a review/interview." Open Letter, Third Series, 5 (Fall 1975), 63-64.

romance element implicit in Echeruo's observation and explored at length in Hammond and Jablow's book. Moreover, Irvine's second statement, by its very syntactic order, takes for granted that it naturally follows that since Mrs. Blood is set in Africa it will explore a heart of darkness. The "perverse kind of arrogance in thus reducing Africa to the role of props for the breakup of one petty European mind" that Achebe notes in his criticism of Conrad's novella becomes the representation of an Africa as "a heart of darkness now perversely feminized." For her part, Thomas first devalues the importance of setting, emphasizing instead the, for her, more important issue of character, then conflates the impressions of an anthropologist and of C.G. Jung, thereby repeating the tradition of Africa as a Labyrinth.[7]

In almost all of her fiction Thomas probes repeatedly the subtle power struggle enacted in male-female relations, and its often devastating effects on the female characters' sense of self-worth. Rarely, however, does she manipulate setting or attempt to reconfigure place so that geography acts as metaphor; character remains in the foreground in all of her stories set in British Columbia or the United States.

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[7] On page 10 of her interview in "Songs & Wisdom: an Interview with Audrey Thomas," Open Letter, Fourth Series, 3 (Spring 1979) Thomas repeats her statement, this time specifically referring to "One of the great anthropologists...." In Memories, Dreams, Reflections C.J. Jung clearly equates Africa with the unconscious.

Perhaps Rona's musings in the story, "Timbuktu," may explain part of this:

> After a while, she found that because she was now working in England, she often had no sense of being there. She got up, ate a hasty breakfast, stood on the corner outside the fish and chip shop and waited for the bus to Five Ways.... She realized that this was how England must appear to the English -- and this came as a revelation.[8]

Unlike, for example, such Canadian writers as Jack Hodgins, who makes the reader see the landscape in a new way, or even Alice Munro, with her minute attention to the intricacies of the ordinary, Thomas tends to take setting for granted in her fiction set in North America, perhaps because she has "no sense of being there" and, anyway, is more interested in character. Even in Graven Images, a novel set largely in England, setting is realistically rendered, and it takes the hallucinogenic effects of opium to fracture reality and propel Charlotte into a dream-like state which is closer to the bizarre occurrences in Blown Figures and in some of Thomas's African short stories.[9]

Achebe's anger over Africa being used as a "metaphorical battlefield," Hammond and Jablow's examination of Africa as a "Labyrinth," Echeruo's objection to Africa as

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[8] Audrey Thomas, "Timbuktu," in Real Mothers (Vancouver: Talonbooks, 1981), 115.

[9] Audrey Thomas, Graven Images (Toronto: Penguin Books, 1993).

a "simple moral symbol," and Irvine's feminized heart of darkness together assign different values to the use of Africa as a metaphor. While Irvine does not involve herself in the controversy, Hammond and Jablow go about the business of academically identifying the trend. Achebe and Echeruo, however, react bitterly. Leaving aside the obvious fact that Irvine, Hammond, and Jablow are from the West, while Achebe and Echeruo are from Africa, the question of seeing Africa as a "figure" remains. For centuries Africa has been represented as the site of desire, dreams, and myths. Critics such as Hammond and Jablow, Patrick Brantlinger, G.D. Killam, and Christopher Miller have explored this issue in different ways, but Hammond and Jablow's conclusion would seem to be unanimous: "Four centuries of writing about Africa has produced a literature which describes not Africa but the British response to it.... The image of Africa remains the negative reflection, the shadow, of the British self-image."[10] If this is the case, then any use of Africa as a metaphor will carry with it the baggage of these four centuries and consequently contaminate any true insight into reality, which is what metaphor claims to offer.

Linked to this question is the problem of male-female relations as they occur in a continent with such a history of colonial rule. Again Irvine's reference to a "heart of darkness perversely feminized" comes to mind. Working from

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[10] Hammond and Jablow, 197.

a feminist literary critical perspective, Irvine, in discussing Mrs. Blood, describes how Thomas writes "the female body (interpreted by men and therefore unable to speak for so many centuries)," and "The narrator exhibits concern about what is felt rather than about what is seen. Women have too often been described as 'the object of the male gaze.'"[11] Then in conclusion she quotes from The Political Unconscious, asserting that Thomas responds to Jameson's description of the "stifled," "marginalized" voices of the underclasses. Irvine excludes Thomas' use of Africa as she emphasizes the position of women. Africa too, however, like women, has been marginalized in literature, and represented as a distorted object of the Western gaze.

Achebe's concern dovetails with Gayatri Spivak's observation in her article, "Imperialism and Sexual Difference":

> Thus, even as we feminist critics discover the troping error of the masculist truth-claim to universality or academic objectivity, we perform the lie of constituting a truth of global sisterhood where the mesmerizing model remains male and female sparring partners of generalizable or universalizable sexuality who are the chief protagonists in that European contest. In order to claim sexual difference where it makes a difference, global sisterhood must receive this articulation even if the sisters in question are Asian, African,

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[11] Irvine, 33, 28.

or Arab.[12]

The postcolonial situation and the feminist movement collide with and inform each other. The position of women throughout history as an exploited and undervalued group can be equated to the position of the colonized under the colonizer: in both situations there is a relationship of power and correspondent silencing of the voices of the oppressed. As Spivak notes, though, the equation is flawed, since feminism itself is often accused of empowering itself without fully considering the experience of women in countries other than North America or Europe.

When Thomas, a writer intensely concerned with gender and male-female relationships, chooses to set much of her fiction in Africa colonialism and feminism intersect. This is further complicated by Thomas's acceptance of Heart of Darkness as a seminal work probing the Dark Labyrinth. Even if her recognition of Conrad's novel is feminized, such a move may only strengthen the identification of feminism with imperialism. More generally, Linda Alcoff writes, "One cannot simply look at the location of the speaker or her credentials to speak, nor can one look merely at the propositional content of the speech; one must look at where

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[12] Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, "Imperialism and Sexual Difference," in The Current in Criticism: Essays on the Past and Future of Literary Theory, ed. Clayton Koelb and Virgil Lokke (Indiana: Purdue University Press, 1987), 320.

the speech goes and what it does."[13] In the case of Thomas's fiction, it goes primarily to a Western audience and makes the reader more aware of female experience. It also subverts the male writer's authority. But in both instances the setting (as location) is integral to Thomas's intention. Thomas understands that she is writing from the outside, as it were, and as she reveals the misrepresentation of women in literature, Africa too is revealed as a literary distortion created by and for men. Africa as metaphor undergoes yet another transformation, but this time it is evoked self-consciously in order to undermine past representations as Thomas repeatedly draws the reader's attention to the inadequacy of foreigners' conceptions of place despite their desire to inscribe meaning.

Feminist discourse is, in part, an attempt to assert and celebrate difference, even as it strives to recover the lost voices of women. By using Africa as her setting, Thomas attempts to expose the effects of a history of colonial mastery, and how it has so violently contaminated perceptions of the other. In drawing attention to the plight of women and the process by which perception is conditioned by culture, Thomas also accentuates and forces a questioning of the manner in which images of Africa have

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[13] Linda Alcoff, "The Problem of Speaking for Others," Cultural Critique 20-22 (Winter 1991-2), 24.

hardened into stereotypes. Much more than simply a "prop," as Achebe uses the word, Africa figures in a kind of parallel existence to the lives of women: like women, it too has been marginalized in Western discourse. It remains a metaphor, but one which Thomas makes resonate with the multitude of perceptual distortions imposed upon it by the West.

As well, Africa acts as a site for the romance novel in its most popular form: the adventure story set in an exotic land. It becomes the dark land through which the hero must pass in his quest, a journey which typically ends with his reward: a bride. Lorna Irvine's description of Mrs. Blood as "a romance controlled entirely by the female body" suggests that Thomas appropriates the romance genre. Even more readically, however, Thomas's parodic techniques allow her to problematize conventional representations of women and of Africa by transforming her writings--Blown Figures in particular-- into anti-romances.

Two short stories, "Omo" and "Out in the Midday Sun," take up these concerns, at the same time as they echo patterns and structural techniques which Thomas employs in much of her other African fiction. Though less concerned than the majority of Thomas's African fiction with issues of gender, "Omo" highlights the cultural and perceptual ambiguities triggered by Africa, while "Out in the Midday

Sun" subtly draws parallels between colonialism and the male suppression of female independence.

"Omo" distinguishes itself among Thomas's African stories in being the only one told from a male point of view. Its concerns, however, are like those of the other stories, and it exemplifies many of Thomas' preoccupations. The story is told from the point of view of E.K. Jonsson, a Peace Corps volunteer who is trying to come to terms with the disappearance of his roommate, an African-American named Walter Jordan. On the surface, E.K.'s narrative describes a typical love triangle, with E.K. and Walter jealously vying for the favours of a British nurse named Miranda. Intruding on this conflict, however, is Omo, an Albino and the product of an interracial marriage. First the spectacle, then the history of Omo come to haunt Walter, whose sense of self even before the meeting is fragile. By the end of the story, Omo's body is found, his head bashed in, and Walter, apparently gone mad, has disappeared into the bush.

Africa as a geographical place is key to the story since it forces Walter, E.K. and Omo to confront and question their identities and relations to others. The narrative in turn acknowledges setting by refusing to allow E.K.'s voice to dominate the story. In Blank Darkness Christopher Miller tracks the etymology of the word "Africa" and finds no definitive origin, concluding that "Africa was a blank slate on which the name of the first comer would be

forever inscribed.... Africa is conceived of as void and unformed prior to its investment with shape and being by the Christian and Islamic outside."[14] This absence should mean that E.K. or Walter can fill in the blank and fashion their own image, as countless individuals and countries have done in the past. Instead, Africa's ambiguity comes to represent an absence of certainty, clouding their perceptions and, for Walter in particular, placing even more into question his own identity. This becomes clear in one of E.K.'s ruminations:

> "This is Africa." You know, you try to look back on first impressions and of course it's impossible--you know too much later on--or you know a lot more, yet not enough. What I mean is, I'm not sure what I meant by "this is Africa."[15]

In the midst of E.K.'s confusion is the repetitive insistence on fact, on knowing and meaning. Yet even E.K.'s understanding of reality is ironically questioned a few sentences later: "I guess the insects and the heat and the rain fitted in, though. I used to be a real Stewart Granger - Humphrey Bogart fan and expected these" (24). At least a part of the natural environment conforms to a popular image

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[14] Christopher Miller, Blank Darkness (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1985), 13

[15] Thomas, "Omo," in Two in the Bush and Other Stories (Toronto: McClelland and Stewart Ltd., 1981), 24. Hereafter page references will be cited following the quotation.

and placates E.K., helping to position him in a context he had anticipated finding. Walter notes that E.K. writes letters home "out of a desire to gather and immortalize local colour" (25) and, with his camera and notebook, constantly records his impressions. In his ironic detachment, Walter recognizes that neither of them see "the real Africa," nor will they get to know the people: "Know about them, maybe, but that's not the same thing" (25).

In this series of impressions, Thomas combines her major concerns. Unlike writers of past literature on Africa who sought to fill in the blanks and create a place which reflected and fulfilled the needs of the West, Thomas carefully stresses the distance between the West's preconceptions of Africa and its reality by emphasizing her characters' inability to pin it down. At the same time, both E.K. and Walter's observations reveal more about their inability to accept the reality of their own prejudices, a problem reflected in the structure of the story itself.

The desire to control and order experience through the act of writing in Africanist discourse acts as a form of imperialism. Africa has been repeatedly subdued through language, made to conform to the desires of others. E.K.'s letters, as Walter points out, are fairly innocuous examples. But the structural strategies of the story itself also signal a refusal to try and capture and unquestioningly represent place as a truth. Despite his control of letters

written home, E.K. is denied the privilege of dominating the narrative and acting as an authority.

The story opens with E.K. Jonsson admitting, "I don't know, I just don't know" (19) and, while it concludes with the knowledge suggested by such adjectival absolutes as "sure" and "certain," these are ironically undercut by what follows: "He had told them he was going home" (47). Home is truly a blank for Walter, or it is the hyphen between African and American. The ambiguity of the declaration is further enforced by the manner in which it has been gathered. Apparently Walter had appeared before villagers almost naked, trying "to tell them something in a language they didn't understand"(47). Despite this, the village elders are certain of the one fact, and E.K. learns of Walter's intent through the words of an interpreter. In such ways does Thomas create layers of irony and ambiguity. Between E.K.'s opening words and the translation of Walter's final words, "Omo" explores the elusive nature of meaning and the unreliability of language to define experience. The story's structure reflects this disjunction as E.K.'s description of his relationship with Walter and the events leading up to the disappearance are juxtaposed with Walter's diary entries which offer a contrastive perception of events. The reader is left to "interpret," but is finally at a loss to discover the "truth."

Bound up with the problem of language is the question of racial difference. The attempted objectivity of E.K.'s account is subverted by his incipient prejudices, just as Walter's more emotional diary entries betray an individual deeply troubled by his racial identity. Thomas once again uses their conflicting visions of Africa as a means to reveal Walter's antagonism towards E.K. Responding to Walter's sardonic diary entry which accuses E.K. of viewing Africa as a "picturesque ruin," E.K. turns defensive:

> I can't tell if he agrees or disagrees.... Of course I think it's "picturesque" here--you'd have to be blind or blasé not to think so. But a ruin? I don't know where he got the idea. Anyway, if it's being ruined, it's being ruined by the Africans themselves. But that's another story. (28)

E.K.'s desire to see Africa in the idealized form of a Bogart movie is frustrated by the more mundane reality of Africa, a reality he refuses to acknowledge as he irritably apportions blame in order to distance himself and justify his own presence in Africa.

E.K.'s ambivalence towards Walter appears in different forms. First, he feels antagonistic because he had been denied a place at Yale, the university his family traditionally attended and whose exclusivity has been breached by Walter. He finds Walter's face "too negroid" (21) to be handsome, but later says he realized for the

first time "that Walter at a casual glance, could be mistaken for an African" (29). He describes his surprise at discovering Walter's jealousy over his relationship with Miranda: "But Walter, black, was out here among blacks and I guess I thought if he went for anybody he'd go for a native girl.... No, that's not true, I didn't think about it at all" (24). This pattern of statement and denial occurs repeatedly in E.K.'s account of Walter and has the effect of heightening the ambivalence he feels while also emphasizing Thomas's concern with the unreliability of memory and the difficulty of expressing any truth.

Behind E.K.'s shifting positions and the multiple perspectives the narrative structure offers up is the major conflict enacted between Walter and Omo. Their relationship is informed by the way in which language and perception are unable to fix meaning, have in fact wilfully distorted meaning. If language refuses to be pinned down, then any attempt at self-discovery, at finding one's true identity will be frustrated. Despite efforts by E.K. and other fellow Peace Corps members to get Walter to explain his motives for coming to Africa, he remains silent. His meeting with Omo, however, changes this. Previous to their meeting, judging by Walter's diary entries, he had remained cynically detached from his experience. With his meeting with Omo he suddenly comes face to face with the ghost of himself. He tells E.K. and Miranda that "I've just seen a

white man" (32). The chance meeting is given further significance by the emotional chaos Walter feels over his desire for Miranda, which the more than usually fragmented and conflicting perspectives in the narrative suggest:

> "I watch E.K. and Miranda dancing, E.K. not a very good dancer. {I accept that I'm not} When it is my turn I can feel E.K.'s eyes on my back, hating me as a moment ago I hated him. {I don't accept that....} ...I take her back to E.K., and excuse myself on the grounds that I have to go to the men's room. There I met a curious man -- like a ghost." (31)

The comically petty, yet urgent disruptions reflect just how real the competition for Miranda had been. And this moment becomes crucial for what follows: not only is Omo an Albino, but the product of a mixed marriage. Walter's subsequent obsession with Omo, then, arises from his guilt at denying his origins and fear over his attraction to Miranda.

Barbara Godard observes that "At the centre of the story is the paradox of the white man who is really black and the black man who is really white, suggested in the palindrome, 'Omo'."[16] In fact, Omo's mixed heritage is also Walter's. Omo sneeringly calls Walter "White Man" (42) at one moment, then "BLACK BOY (45). In another diary entry Walter's consciousness of his colour reveals itself:

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[16] Barbara Godard, Audrey Thomas and Her Works (Toronto: ECW Press, n.d.), 28.

> When I finish my note, all very friendly and polite, it occurs to me that on the face of it--two pieces of white paper, hers and mine, covered with the little footprints we call words--there is nothing to show that in the one case the pen was held by small white fingers, and in the other, by my own--large, pink-palmed and black. (33)

Walter wants to believe that only colour determines race. As an American, he feels he is no different from E.K., and the written word, like tracks in the snow, effaces difference. Of course, from a scientific perspective Walter is correct, as the presence of the "white man," Omo, suggests, though such objectivity accounts for little in the face of subjective responses to race, such as those which slip into E.K.'s "reasoned" observations.

Words written on paper may not betray skin colour, but the duplicitousness of language, Thomas implies, is like E.K.'s self-deception and Walter's self-denial: just as meaning is always deferred in the play of language, so will E.K.'s attempt to understand Walter never be realized. Further, Walter's own flight towards "home," and the extent to which his physical and psychological search for a whole integrated identity succeeds, will remain obscured, will remain open to interpretation, even though E.K. himself does not grasp the ambiguity of his own interpreter's translation: "He told them he was going home" (47).

Writing is not only a barrier to communication in "Omo," it also fails as a means to represent the truth. The

whole problem posed by the question, "Is this the real Africa?" announces a desire for certainty, for a control of the external world in order to compensate for an absence of self-knowledge and self-definition. Africa, though, in "Omo" refuses to reveal itself as anything but the Africa of the popular imagination. Both E.K. and Walter are trapped within this vision, weighed down by their culture's racial attitudes and perceptions.

Movies such as "The African Queen," however, are only one means by which a country may become fiction. Writing, of course, often serves the same purpose. Popular culture, by often exaggerating reality, both distorts and celebrates societal concerns, which historically have been given expression through a Western, male-dominated discourse. E.K. cannot know what he means by "This is Africa" because he has momentarily been shaken from a branch of power which he has taken for granted (just as he had taken his acceptance at Yale as an inherited right) and which allows him to perceive places and people, as from a height, with confident certainty. Another narrative--Walter's diary--intrudes and, while E.K. tries to control the story, he is often, ironically enough, forced into a marginal position, like an eavesdropper listening to some larger drama. In this way, Thomas indicates that she will not continue the hegemonic discourse on Africa because her concern rests with the "other" in any relationship of power. Typically, in

"Omo" Walter, the black American is the central character and his encounter with the Other--Omo--is an ironic reversal both visually and psychologically of Hammond and Jablow's observation quoted at the beginning of this chapter.

The racial concerns probed in "Omo" parallel Thomas' larger preoccupation with gender. Africa, in her writing, is both geographic space and metaphor, and each informs and enriches the other while defining Thomas' female characters. To write as she does about women while depicting the setting --Africa--as it has been represented for so long by primarily male writers might suggest support of the very imperialist, power-laden structures she means to explore and expose.

"Out in the Midday Sun" acknowledges this problem. The title, of course, conjures up Noel Coward's witty, sophisticated comedies, but also signals the self-conscious literariness of the story: Maugham, Greene, and Blixen are mentioned, and the unnamed female and her husband discuss Hemingway, calling each other "Mama and Papa as a joke."[17] Ironically, the male ethos of Hemingway's Africa is here reversed by the female character who awaits with trepidation the right moment to break her secret: the manuscript she had submitted under a false name has been accepted for publication. She knows her writer-academic husband, a man

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[17] Thomas, "Out in the Midday Sun," in Real Mothers (Vancouver: Talonbooks, 1981), 94. Hereafter page references will be cited following the quotation.

"who will love you only so long as you walk a few steps behind" (96), will react with anger, but tries to "face her fear":

> Her fear had nothing to do with Africa. That was what she had known all along. Africa, like a dream, had merely provided the symbols. She had refused to recognize the reality behind them. She had to leave him. (95)

Just as the reality of Africa has been made to conform to the largely male ethos represented in particular by Hemingway and his ideal of grace under pressure ideal, women too have allowed themselves to be shaped and identified in male terms. The symbols, themselves constructed by male writers, obscure the reality in which the female character recognizes her dependence on her husband and fear of being rejected by him.

"Out in the Midday Sun" also examines how symbols are created, while participating in another tradition of writing on Africa. Near the end of the story the female character feels that the narrow maze of streets in Old Town is "like a labyrinth" (98). Here, she is approached by a leper, the embodiment of all her fears, and reacts with horror and revulsion, while unknown to her, her husband looks on, "enjoying the composition" (99). The labyrinth into which she wanders suggests the psychological use of Africa which Hammond and Jablow reveal in their book. They write that in

the twentieth century "Africa is each man's unexplored continent which he alone must discover; no one else must interpret it for him"; then they provide a quotation from Graham Greene's In Search of a Character: "'...Africa will always be the Africa of the Victorian atlas, the blank unexplored continent, the shape of the human heart.'"[18]

Thomas, as it were, is rewriting Hammond and Jablow's book from a feminist perspective. Her main character's earlier epiphany, in which the curtain of symbols created by four centuries of largely male writing on Africa opens to reveal the truth of her relationship, repeats itself as she glimpses her husband recording her reaction to the leper. His record may in turn be "interpreted" and used in his fiction showing the vulnerability and helplessness of a female character (perhaps like Mrs. Weaver in "Timbuktu," whose encounter with leprous beggars sends her hysterically running through the streets of Bamako). She, too, is a writer, though, and can observe her husband and transform her insights into a fiction composed by a female, as well as interpreting her own experience: "Would she notice all that, and then, when she got free of him, write about that, too" (100). By identifying herself with her husband as writer as objective observer, she also implicates herself in the tradition.

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[18] Hammond and Jablow, 136.

Throughout the story, however, as with Blown Figures, there is a self-reflexive irony that suggests that Thomas is aware of the problem of representation and knows that her own composition, while undermining past male visions, also relies on them in presenting Africa as a text. The refrain, "Is this the real Africa," which echoes throughout her writing, functions, in part, as an ironic acknowledgement that such a dilemma is unavoidable and can perhaps only be addressed by calling attention to itelf. Later, in Blown Figures, Thomas attempts to circumvent and disrupt traditional images of Africa by using a surrealist technique in some ways similar to Dave Godfrey's disorientating narrative method in The New Ancestors.

From E.K. Jonsson's "This is Africa" to Africa being "like a dream, merely provid[ing] the symbols," the emphasis remains on the difference in language and implication. The act of writing and the product itself serve as metaphors for the gulf in understanding between individuals. Writing itself is like powerful magic. The husband in "Out in the Midday Sun" sits writing, "oblivious to everything except his thoughts," and "It was as if the black pen...were magic, like the broom of the 'sorcerer's apprentice'" (89). As the many references to male writers in this story suggest, though, it is a particularly male magic and, as such, erects structures which lock others in marginal positions. This paradox, the power of language to build and maintain

positions of dominance, yet (as with magic) its inability to ultimately define reality, is the point which Thomas focuses on. In both "Omo" and "Out in the Midday Sun" she introduces counter narratives which threaten the master narratives and act as a slow and painful movement towards self-discovery. In turn, the image of Africa is reconfigured to reflect this new emphasis.

"Omo" largely concerns itself with the question of male identity and seems less preoccupied with gender than many of Thomas' stories and novels, but the female character does play a crucial role, paradoxically, by her very lack of presence in the story. Of all the characters in the story, Miranda appears to have adjusted best to Africa. Unlike her counterpart in The Tempest, she seems independent and self-assured, the only character without any emotional self-questioning. To a large extent this may be because Miranda is literally blanked out by the prevailing individual crises of E.K., Walter, and Omo, much as women in novels traditionally have been assigned secondary roles.

Counteracting the object-like portrayal of Miranda, perhaps, is the female character in "Out in the Midday Sun." Though she remains unnamed, her association of her husband with the "sorcerer's apprentice" who demands complete dominance recalls Prospero's magic, making his wife a

Miranda figure.[19] The independent spirit of Miranda in "Omo" moves to the foreground in "Out in the Midday Sun" as Thomas takes her out from the shadows of male tyranny, gives her the place of first-person narrator, and allows her to express her emergent sense of autonomy in turning Prospero's magic against him.

"Out in the Midday Sun" recalls sections of Thomas' earlier novel, Latakia. The novel is in the form of an imaginary letter written by an established writer named Rachel who is working on a novel and living in Crete, to her former lover, an as yet unpublished writer staying in Tanzania. The novel explores the nature of writing, of spoken and written communication, and of the differences between male and female creativity. Not until the final pages does Thomas describe Rachel and Michael's arrival in the Syrian port city of Latakia, a shocking entry into a world where written and spoken language is so foreign and indecipherable that they feel confounded and disorientated. Latakia becomes a metaphor for the inability of language to communicate meaning:

> Trying to make things clear. We invent alphabets and language systems in order to make things **clear**. But it doesn't really help. Once you get beyond letters, into words, into emotions

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[19] In her earlier book, Munchmeyer and Prospero on the Island (New York: Bobbs-Merrill, 1971), Thomas had re-written The Tempest.

and ideas, it doesn't help at all.[20]

Neither the spoken nor the written word allows perfect understanding. Just as literature fails to touch reality, the arbitrariness of language opens meaning to interpretations which are often at variance even as the speakers believe they have communicated their message. Watching a student writing in Arabic, Rachel is shocked to discover that he writes from right to left: "Since then, I have found out a little more why some people write in one direction and others in another..." (170). Rachel's humble admission refers just as much to relationships as it does to differences in approaches to writing by men and women and the instability of the written word.

At the same time, in the process of writing a novel about her relationship with Michael, she is faced with the problem of "How to capture the island [Crete] and leave the myth alone--it's difficult" (30). For his part, Michael had told her that foreign settings allow a healthy distancing: "The trick is to get outside one's environment" (80). Rachel responds in the present: "Well, my dear, you really rode your pony out into 'the Other,'--me, as well as Greece and Africa" (80). Taken together, Rachel's observations apply to Thomas' decision to use Africa often as a setting.

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[20] Audrey Thomas, Latakia (Vancouver: Talonbooks, 1979), 117. All future references will follow the quotations cited.

In Mrs. Blood and Blown Figures in particular she wants to tell the "other" story, to explode the myth of male dominance by exposing how it has affected women and by rewriting it from a feminist perspective. At the same time, Thomas struggles with the problem of how to present Africa and leave the myth alone. Both are intimately related since the image of women and the image of Africa have been created within a largely Western male rationalist tradition.

The binary opposition of colonizer/colonized has often been applied to male-female relations. In this context, Margaret Laurence's use of Octave Mannoni extends itself to some feminist concerns. Mannoni argues that the colonialist vocation derives from a secret guilt, the result of the failure "to make the effort necessary to adapt infantile images to adult reality."[21] To such a person the colonized subject confirms his sense of self worth, or acts as a substitute for his inability to take responsibility for himself. Mannoni writes,

> The savage...is identified in the unconscious with a certain image of the instincts--of the id, in analytical terminology. And civilized man is painfully divided between the desire to 'correct' the 'errors' of the savages and the desire to identify himself with them in his search for some lost paradise....[22]

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[21] O. Mannoni, Prospero and Caliban: The Psychology of Colonialism, 2nd edition. Trans. Pamela Powesland (New York: Praeger Pub., 1964), 105.

[22] Mannoni, 21.

The colonized, according to Mannoni, act as a reflection of the colonizer's self, his dark Other who both attracts and repels.

In a feminist context, explaining Luce Irigaray's critique of Freud's theory of sexual difference, Toril Moi describes how Irigaray reaches her belief that "Western philosophical discourse is incapable of representing femininity/woman other than as the negative of its own reflection."[23] Moi goes on to explain a related idea:

> Woman is not only the Other..., but is quite specifically man's Other: his negative or mirror-image. This is why Irigaray claims that patriarchal discourse situates woman outside representation: she is absence, negativity the dark continent, or at best a lesser man.[24]

Paradoxically, in shedding light on the dark continent of woman, Thomas must first take the reader through her character's dark, nightmarish unconscious. Such a journey acts as a necessary ritual of cleansing, of facing all that has sought to bury women's identity. Both women and Africa as "blank darknesses" must be redefined. Rachel's discovery that "some people write in one direction and others in another" becomes an analogy for Thomas's refusal to write in the direction of the patriarchal tradition and to re-

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[23] Toril Moi, Sexual/Textual Politics: Feminist Literary Theory (London: Methuen, 1985), 132.

[24] Moi, 133.

inscribe both women and Africa from a different perspective. Just as she must first portray the effects of self-confinement on women caused by their conditioned belief in the traditional role of women, so too will Africa conform to conventional Western representations. But Thomas's depiction of characters on the verge of hysteria also often breaks down these representations. The inability of Thomas's characters to complete themselves and come to an understanding of their true selves is everywhere reflected in the breakdown in language, which also ensures that Africa itself will never be fixed in any one firm representation after its traditional image has been disrupted.

It is in this sense that Thomas uses Africa as a metaphor, though one which is very different from the "metaphorical battlefield" described by Achebe. The Congo in Heart of Darkness, closed as it is to the rationalist dependence on an ordered world in which the sign will yield up its meaning, represents and triggers the repressed potential for savagery in Western man. The well-known description of Marlow's journey up the river deserves to be quoted in full:

> We were wanderers on a prehistoric earth, on an earth that wore the aspect of an unknown planet. We could have fancied ourselves the first of men taking possession of an accursed inheritance, to be subdued at the cost of profound anguish and of excessive toil. But suddenly, as we struggled round a bend...the prehistoric man was cursing us, praying to us,

> welcoming us -- who could tell? We were cut off from the comprehension of our surroundings; we glided past like phantoms, wondering and secretly appalled, as some men would be before an enthusiastic outbreak in a madhouse. We could not understand because we were too far and could not remember, because we were travelling in the night of first ages that are gone, leaving hardly a sign -- and no memories.[25]

The depiction of Africa as an unknown planet outside of time and inhabited by gesturing, prehistoric creatures is what Achebe especially objects to.

Achebe stresses how Africans are silenced in Heart of Darkness, and are allowed to speak only in order to further reveal their savagery.[26] Achebe does ignore the many anti-imperial references in the novel, not the least of which is the gruesome structure of human skulls surrounding Kurtz's compound. And a number of critics have come to Conrad's defence, noting his ironic handling of the white characters, or arguing that it is not meant to be an objective study of Africa: "Psychological complexity, yes--anthropological fullness, no."[27] Marlow's narrative here describes himself as an outside observer, and the comparison to watching an "outbreak in a madhouse" opens even wider the distance

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[25] Joseph Conrad, Heart of Darkness. Norton Critical Edition (New York: W.W. Norton, 1971), 37.

[26] Achebe, 6.

[27] P.J.M. Robertson, "Things Fall Apart and Heart of Darkness: A Creative Dialogue," International Fiction Review, 7 (1980), 109.

between the rational and irrational worlds. Kurtz's own madness and final utterance of "the horror" signals his recognition of the capacity for human violence when freed from the restraints of civilization, and how man can plunge into a world of chaos without the restrictions of an ordered society. But Conrad's emphasis on the incomprehensibility of Africa is so relentlessly stressed that for the reader the symbol becomes synonymous with the "reality." For instance, Hammond and Jablow note that Conrad (and Haggard) were so influential that "It has become common practice to cite them as if the mention of their names added authenticity and heightened effect to the account."[28] Africa is like Heart of Darkness, rather than the novel being a literary representation of the Congo.

An important difference in Mrs. Blood is that whereas Conrad's Africa is created as an image which frustrates objective observation and therefore comes to symbolize all that is irrational in man, Thomas writes from the inside, as it were, from within the madhouse, where her deeply troubled character has withdrawn because of civilization, and gazes outward with a longing to be part of the vital and sane community existing around her. Even as she internalizes the surrounding environment it is clear that she projects upon it her own subjective, intensely emotional fear. The reader sees both the physical surroundings as things in themselves

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[28] Hammond and Jablow, 118.

and the way in which they are appropriated in order to act as metaphors for her own psychic state.

Writing about Marlow's "saving lie" to the Intended in Heart of Darkness, James Clifford interprets it thus:

> In sparing the Intended Kurtz's last words, Marlow recognizes and constitutes different domains of truth--male and female as well as the truths of the metropole and the frontier. These truths reflect elementary structures in the constitution of ordered meanings--knowledge divided by gender and by cultural center and periphery.[29]

Thomas, however, reverses and subverts such distinctions in Mrs. Blood and many of her short stories. As suggested earlier, Thomas, in speaking to a primarily Western audience, is writing from the periphery, but far from creating a pure, ever-faithful character like the Intended from whom one kind of truth must be shielded, she portrays a woman wrestling to reconstitute female truth from the many saving lies of men, lies which emanate from the cultural centre. By surrounding her character with women set apart from her by cultural difference, Thomas acknowledges other female rituals than those found in the West. It is in this sense that Mrs. Blood is a "heart of darkness perversely feminized": Mrs. Blood, as the dark continent of woman, draws upon that other dark continent in an effort to

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[29] James Clifford, The Predicament of Culture (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1988), 99.

overcome her fear even as, paradoxically, Africa feeds it and resists her compulsion to project meaning.

In "Out in the Midday Sun" the female character's recognition that Africa had merely provided the symbols is the impetus for her to begin to strike out on her own. In "Omo" the way in which these symbols are supported--and then questioned--leads to Walter's despairing need to go home, to journey towards something that he, as another peripheral figure, can be a part of. Further, as a Marlow figure, E.K. Jonsson never learns from his experience. Isobel, in Mrs. Blood, recalling her past as she recontextualizes the great archetypal works of the past whose symbolic force implicitly shaped the way in which she and others perceive women, cannot finally break out of the compound of canonic closure and the novel ends in a stillbirth. Blown Figures represents another effort, but the ambiguous conclusion may suggest that the main character's journey, like Walter's in "Omo," will strip off so many layers of civilization that nothing remains to act as a foundation from which to rebuild.

ii. Imprisoned in the Cultural Compound

Compound n. 1. In the Orient, an enclosure containing a residence, factory, etc., especially one occupied by Europeans. 2. Any similar enclosed place.[30]

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[30] Walter S. Avis, ed., Funk and Wagnalls Canadian College Dictionary (Toronto: Fitzhenry and Whiteside, 1982), 278.

In Africa the neatly enclosed space of the compound is usually protected by steel fences or high concrete walls. More decoratively, hedges of hibiscus, bougainvillea or other richly coloured plants often surround the space. Whether for reasons of security or aesthetic pleasure, the compound creates an instant border into which only those with the proper credentials, or "passport," may enter. It is a legacy of colonialism, which attempted to effectively separate towns or cities into two distinct areas. As Frantz Fanon has noted, "The colonial world is a world divided into compartments" and "The zone where the natives live is not complementary to the zone inhabited by the settlers."[31] Fanon also examines how these zones remained with neocolonialism. The compound as a physical representation of European power also reflects Western epistemology in its clean, well-regulated, and ordered layout, and, as such, is psychologically important to its residents' well-being. To expatriate communities who have replaced the colonialists, it affords luxuries--large houses, servants, pools--which they would never acquire at "home." The words of Isobel's father, acting as an ironic refrain in Mrs. Blood, echo this perceived privilege: "You don't know how lucky you are" (153).

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[31] Frantz Fanon, The Wretched of the Earth. Trans. Constance Farrington (London: MacGibbon and Kee, 1965), 31.

But in Thomas's fictional world the compound takes many shapes, and privilege is in the eye of the beholder. As much as the compound attempts to lock out the unpleasant reality of Africa, it persistently creeps in: snakes crawl through holes in the wall, cockroaches are omnipresent, servants must be hired and fired. The compound encloses as much as it keeps out; it demands conformity to a transplanted cultural norm dictated by patriarchal systems of power, and for Thomas's characters it often becomes a physical prison which reflects their psychological strangulation caused by feelings of enclosure and dependence. While Thomas probes such questions, her fiction radically questions and attempts to dislodge such ordered structures through both its form and content. The novels and short stories spill into each other, constantly referring to, expanding on, and playing with images and characters in a fluid cross-fertilization. The confined limits of the traditional novel form are invaded by fragments of newspaper clippings, obituaries, horoscopes, reports, and announcements, themselves creating a fragmented narrative which displaces linear progression. Throughout all of this Thomas attempts to articulate female experience by introducing allusions to literary classics in order to break out of the canonic enclosure and clear a space for the Other to be heard.

Mrs. Blood is an intense articulation of this experience, and circling around the immobile body in the novel a number of short stories examine life within the compound from different angles. But while stories such as "One is One & All Alone" and "Xanadu" refuse to acknowledge Africa as anything but a threat, Isobel in Mrs. Blood wishes to become part of the community of women she discovers outside of the compound. The differences signal the degree to which the female characters submit to or resist their subordinate positions and Africa acts as an ironic measure of the extent of their self-deception.

"Xanadu," one of Thomas's earliest stories, is set primarily in the compound. Told in the third person, it contains within it an altered version which is related as an "amusing tale" by the female character.[32] Appropriately enough, as an early story it ironically explores initial responses to a first arrival in Africa by a woman whose fragile sense of self is held in balance by a romantic vision she constructs and projects upon Joseph, the steward, a vision which shatters when a snake enters the charmed circle of the compound.

Africa remains an unreal setting throughout most of "Xanadu." The extended equation of the compound with paradise into which, inevitably, a snake appears to shatter

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[32] Audrey Thomas, "Xanadu," in Ten Green Bottles (Ottawa: Oberon, 1967), 32. All future page references will be cited following the quotation.

the illusion at times folds into the exotic oriental vision of Coleridge's "stately pleasure dome," just as Joseph appears variously as a "genie" (35), as an "Ariel with hosts of spirits at his command" (36), and "like a huge black Prospero" (42). While the allusions to both paradise and Xanadu reflect the main character's own fantastic constructs, the references to The Tempest suggest something closer to the colonial encounter which "Xanadu" does probe. In turn, both Africa as a setting and Joseph as an individual are subordinated to the tenuous and egoistic fantasy of the main character.

For the main character, her "enchanted island" (42) means a world in which she is freed from domestic responsibilities and no longer need suffer a "moral hangover" (38) over things left undone. But while she would like to believe in her new freedom as a release from domestic pressures and cares, she cannot, finally, escape from her inability to define herself in any terms other than those of a housewife. The unease she feels about her new-found leisure even reflects itself in her half-conscious awareness that she does so at the expense of Joseph.

For the narrator does play ironically with a number of general, colonial stereotypes before funnelling them more specifically into personal, emotional reactions by the main character. When, for instance, Joseph first appears, she thinks he is the original steward that they had found

sprawled in a drunken stupor on the verandah upon their arrival because "She was still in that state, not unusual for a European, when all Africans look alike..." (33). When she discovers her error, she apologizes, possibly, the narrator speculates, "because the awareness of centuries of what one might call, euphemistically, European bad manners made her feel that an apology was due and overdue" (34). The narrator's sly humour at the expense of her character signals the character's refusal or inability to face her own complicity in the historical reality of colonialism, and her need to live on the surface. Her uneasiness in her role as a female master and avoidance of the reality of her situation takes the form of a socially polite acknowledgement of past oppression which she never connects with her own situation. She soon transforms Joseph into a genie or an Ariel, a faithful protector gliding "behind her like a cool black shadow" (41) who, in her greatest romantic leap, "serves without being servile" (42). The inherited guilt of colonialism can thus be erased in such an ideal perception of Joseph.

The literary allusions applied to this black shadow named Joseph effectively distance his reality from both the main character and the reader. Appropriately, at first the nameless female character forgets to ask Joseph his name, and his voice is heard rarely in the story. Her awkwardness and refusal to accept the reality of her role as "master,"

which she projects onto nature as she and her husband, Jason, watch "the strange, almost embarrassed pink of the tropical sunset" (39), continues until she is forced to recognize the true position of the servant. While on Sundays she must cope without Joseph, she experiences the humiliation of servility because of her own domestic inadequacy, and through playing the role of clumsy steward: she becomes a kind of Caliban in the kitchen. The interminable complaints about servants which are a staple of conversation among the wives during "coffee mornings" suddenly become a reality for her, and it is at this point in the story that Joseph is transfigured in her literary imagination from an insubstantial genie or Ariel into the threatening "huge black Prospero." Her reaction to the python triggers the awareness that she, the master, has become totally dependent on the servant: "She felt, for the first time, that she belonged to Joseph and not Joseph to her" (44). As Joseph refuses to conform to her false perceptions, she feels increasingly threatened: "Each time that he increased in importance, she diminished. It was unbearable. She felt stifled, afraid" (45). She betrays Joseph by planting three silver spoons in his quarters, thus firmly (and falsely) establishing her authority and power, and her identification with the coffee-morning wives.

By the end of the story the reader perhaps better understands the narrator's ironic phrasing of "European bad

manners." Further, though, the narrator's flippant tone underscores the main character's own sophisticated and urbane voice as she relates her servant story to friends after having returned home, it is implied, from Africa. For the open ending leads the reader back to the main character's re-telling of the tale in which she revises her experience, embroidering and exaggerating because "it made a better story the other way" (33). Both time and space separate her from the original framing of Joseph and her own shrinking self, so she can reframe the images of both herself and Joseph. As she had observed in an earlier context, referring to her luck in having caught the first steward drunk, "A bad beginning...does not necessarily imply a bad ending" (37).

In "Xanadu" the main character, unable to live her romantic vision of Africa, creates an imaginative version from a safe distance. At the same time, she constructs a strong, capable self whose urbane self-deprecation masks a deeply insecure reality. By employing a third-person narrator who tells the "real" story, which informs the female character's "tale," Thomas accentuates not only the dishonesty and cruelty of colonialism, but also the paradox of the colonial encounter, a paradox which applies equally to the traditional role of women. In the master/slave dialectic the master's identity depends on the servant; similarly, the female character's sense of self is defined

only in relation to the extent to which her family depends on her. As Patricia Waugh explains in Feminine Fictions:

> Women's experience, historically, has been defined almost entirely through interpersonal, usually domestic and filial, relationships: serving the needs of others. In existential terms her identity exists largely as being-for-other (needing to please; narcissistic vanity; mothering as institutionalized in western social practices; deriving security from intimate relations with others) rather than being-for-herself.[33]

In being elevated to the position of female master, she has found herself surrounded by an emptiness: her position of power propels her into a void because she is no longer recognized by others and is not capable of refashioning herself into a self-reliant, independent individual.

Even more relevant to Waugh's observation is the intensely claustrophobic atmosphere caused by a character's fear and inability to venture out of the compound in the early story, "One is One & All Alone." Again the female character is without a name and again this signals her lack of identity. Unlike "Xanadu" where the character appears to reshape herself upon her departure from Africa, here she remains submerged in a barely contained hysteria caused by her sense of inadequacy in being able to cope with the

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[33] Patricia Waugh, Feminine Fictions: Revisiting the Postmodern (Toronto: Routledge, 1989), 43.

responsibilities placed upon her since her husband has left on a ten-day-trip.

The character crosses off the days on her calendar to mark how long her husband (again Jason) has been gone. She feels herself to be an "emotional cripple" leading an anxiety-ridden life beneath the surface, a condition she believes she inherited from her mother.[34] She likens herself to the wooden carvings her husband had bargained for with a Hausa trader, figures which had cracked from the heat: "Yet the figures were beautiful, and their cracks revealed nothing sinister--nothing was released from their depths that was not there on the surface" (102). However, "A cracked figure was one thing--a cracked wife quite another" (102).

Surface and depth, romance and reality, wholeness and fracture all signal a divided self, a self cracked even wider in Mrs. Blood and magnified (or blown up) in Blown Figures. The schizoidia here, though, announces itself through the catalyst of Africa, with its almost overwhelming heat and imagined threats. Aware that the face she presents in actuality masks her nearly incapacitating fear, she sees hidden motives in others. During a severe storm, with thunder cracking and the electricity off, her steward (this time named Samuel) appears with a candle, "his hand and face

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[34] Thomas, "One is One & All Alone," Ten Green Bottles (Ottawa: Oberon, 1967), 100.

grotesque, distorted in the flickering light. He looked horrible, savage," and "She was afraid to look at him" (106). The thunderstorm encroaches on the compound and Samuel is transformed into primitive Africa: the saying she had earlier recalled, "Safe as a house" (99) loses its meaning as she is wilfully confined by her own fear. Her unconscious self leads her to project onto Samuel a self divided, in which he is an irritatingly efficient servant who also holds within him Africa's "savage" past, the kind of inexplicable world evoked in "Joseph and his Brother."

For her part, mirror imagery indicates an equally fractured self and the struggle to contain her fear. After recalling the saying, she dreams of what for her would be the ideal house:

> She would have liked to live in a solid, square beautifully ugly house like that. Safe, ugly, beautiful and cool. "You're being romantic," said her heavy-eyed reflection in the mirror. "Ah no," she waggled her finger severely at this other woman. "If I were romantic I should like it here. Colour, light, eternal summer--and servants. I am not romantic--somebody else is," she muttered darkly to the other woman, then slammed the top down hard, and smiled. (99)

Two interpretations of romantic, but both hinge on the absence of fear, on safety. While the character's triumphant retort sounds right, she forgets that the romantic vision is removed from reality. The saying is then

further undermined when she loses her filling after having begun to feel a small degree of confidence and control. She has literally cracked, exposing the raw nerves of her fear. She thinks of suicide: "She could lie down and rest, triumph over the pain of the aching tooth, all the accumulated pains which tore at her, stripped away her masks. Triumph over the woman in the mirror, too--shut her mouth once and for all" (112). The woman in the mirror is her mask, that part of herself she is expected to put forward, but which she can barely contain.

iii. The Dark Continent of Woman

The barely contained hysteria of the women in these stories reaches its peak in Mrs. Blood. Both the fantasies of the character in "Xanadu" and the split self in "One is One & All Alone" resurface and, accordingly, the vision of Africa reflects the character's unstable state of mind. In Latakia Rachel jokingly refers to herself as "The Horizontal Woman" (32) because of her propensity for sleep. Lying prostrate in a bed either at home or in the hospital, Isobel, in Mrs. Blood, has no choice: she is confined because, as she believes, her body is betraying her as she struggles to bring her pregnancy to term. While she remains physically immobile, Isobel's mind ranges back and forth through the

past, at times calmly reflective, at others violently convulsive and hysterical in her remembrances of past victimizations.

The novel is split into two narrative voices. They are given the names Mrs. Blood and Mrs. Thing and each is a manifestation of Isobel, the former acting as the "objective distanced woman" and the latter as "the visceral woman."[35] While both voices inhabit the present, Mrs. Blood's memories range from Isobel's childhood and concentrate on her student days and a passionate and troubled relationship with her black lover, Richard, ending roughly with her marriage to her present husband, Jason, and the constrictive existence while living with his parents. Mrs. Thing's memories focus almost exclusively on her marriage to Jason, as though guiltily screening out any references to Richard. Elizabeth Potvin argues that one of the causes for the split is sexual repression, and she adds, "But the divided sensibility is also triggered by a genuine victimization of women in contemporary society, and the exaggerated perception of this by the narrator is what drives them to despair."[36] The curtailment of sexual desire by the demands of social

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[35] Elizabeth Komisar, "Audrey Thomas: a review/interview," Open Letter Third Series, 3 (Late Fall 1975), 59.

[36] Elizabeth Potvin, "The Bell Jar and Mrs. Blood: Portraits of the Artist as a Divided Woman," Atlantis, 13.1 (Fall 1987), 41.

propriety and convention everywhere creates a tension which threatens Isobel with total dissolution.

Confined to a hospital in Africa, Isobel's mind and body reveal themselves from an openly female perspective at the same time that she constantly wonders about, feels shut out from, and admits her prejudices towards the African patients and nurses. As an "allegory that revokes women's culturally assumed silence and marginality," Mrs Blood also refuses to repeat the historical representation of Africa by stressing Isobel's foreignness and feeling of estrangement from the hospital community.[37] The utter strangeness of the setting to Isobel allows Thomas to translate setting metonymically so that it becomes a part of Isobel's body as well as a projection of her fears.

The split narrative also reflects a dual vision of Africa, one which juxtaposes metaphor with physical reality, but both of which emphasize Isobel's foreignness. While on their way to Ghana, Jason and Isobel tour a museum in Freetown and Isobel feels impatience with the artificial arrangements of a culture:

> What was important was not the fertility dolls or stylized masks...but me, being there in Freetown with Jason, and breathing African air. I felt as though I were a diver about to begin a slow descent in search of treasure. I took deep breaths and was impatient to submerge.
>
> The museum and its artifacts were not the

[37] Irvine, 35-6.

> treasure I was looking for. I wanted to walk in the crowd and feel the pressure of living Africa.[38]

Opposing this impatience for lived experience is her bed-bound realization that "the real Africa (whatever that may mean) is none of these and my Africa is only real for me" (p. 43). Both coalesce, then separate and blur when Isobel recalls her arrival and compares it to her present state:

> For Africa moved into focus at that moment and as the gangplank went down I felt an almost irresistible urge to run quickly off the ship and into this strange adventure as one might run into the arms of a waiting lover.
>
> And Jason, with Nicholas on his shoulders and Mary jumping up and down beside him, laughed and said, "My God, it's like all the Humphrey Bogart movies rolled into one." And that's what I **must** remember too, and hang onto when they ask me, "What was Africa like?" But is that not as false a picture as my Africa? And wasn't the stink of the river the important thing? Or was it the crowds of people laughing? (43-4)

As with "Out in the Midday Sun" and "Omo," Thomas once again signals the unreliability of the observer to interpret and therefore represent that which she observes. Elsewhere Isobel admits this: "It is impossible for me to see other people as separate from myself" (191). Besides the

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[38] Audrey Thomas, Mrs. Blood (Vancouver: Talonbooks, 1975), p. 155. First published by the Bobbs-Merrill Co., Indianapolis, 1970. All future page references will be cited following the quotation.

egocentric self-reference which makes up so much of Isobel's character and stems from the suffering she must endure, such a statement also acts as a warning with regard to how place is represented. While E.K. Jonsson had been reassured in the way that some aspects of Africa at least conformed to a Bogart movie, Isobel realizes that each version is equally false: the reality as filtered through the popular imagination, the individual immediate reaction, the understanding accorded by present circumstances, none can fully articulate the experience. Instead, Africa will be the sum of Isobel's experiences; it will be both Mrs. Thing and Mrs. Blood, distanced object and internalized metaphor.

The central irony of Mrs. Blood relates to Isobel's perception of Africa. Isobel, a white woman who historically is held to be superior to Africans finds herself at their mercy, as it were, and shut out from any communion with the other women in the ward. Thus, because of the patriarchal desire to dominate and the ensuing imperialism by the West, Isobel finds herself bereft of any true empathy from her husband, unable to define herself or find a unified centre, and set apart from others in the hospital. Isobel's fears, prejudice, and alienation at least partially result from the foreign environment, but the very otherness **she** feels is exactly the sense of marginality which women have felt for so long. In much the same way as E.K. Jonsson finds himself decentered by opposing voices, or

Omo himself is cut off from both Europe and Africa, Isobel, a character existing on the periphery, is further marginalized by her difference--in skin colour, in language, in culture--from those around her. The disadvantages of privilege are humorously summed up in the "Full European" (67), a bland menu of boiled potatoes and meat which Isobel must suffer through while the other patients are served rich, spicy dishes. Not only does the novel disclose the psychological effects of female victimization, then, it also undermines male superiority and the pretensions of the full European (which, in Africa, refers to race, not geography).

One aspect of the split within Isobel derives from her desire to conform to society's expectations, while at the same time she feels inadequate because she cannot conform. To her, the sheltered, artificial life within the compound is as tepid as the hospital meals. Browsing through ladies' magazines that Jason has left, Isobel concludes, "What a clean, well-lighted mythology they set forth." She continues: "Escape literature. Or is it really? Is it not sadism of a particularly nasty kind? Can you live up to this woman or that dress or this complicated recipe? And of course you can't" (67). The reference to Hemingway suggests just how women have adapted to male expectations and, in doing so, have trapped themselves in an impossible position where they expect themselves and other women to live up to a sanitized version of themselves. Yet, despite Isobel's

awareness of the position of women, she too is ensnared. She is intensely conscious of what other women may be thinking about her and worried about such things as whether her children's buttons are sewn on properly. Even more, she feels threatened that Jason may be doing a competent job of coping without her, since that would undermine her own position in the family. Just as in "Xanadu," Isobel's identity depends upon a perceived role which she is helpless to break out of.

Isobel's utter inability to adapt to and participate in the female social life of the compound is reflected in a story Jason tells her about one of the regular "Thursday coffee mornings." Mrs. Maka, a Polish woman, had been invited because she spoke Spanish and Eva, another girl who spoke only Spanish, was supposed to be there. Eva does not appear and Mrs. Maka is left sitting on the fringe of the group. Isobel identifies closely with her:

> I feel my strangeness, my foreignness, as much as that girl must have felt it while these healthy, hearty, competent women sat around drinking coffee and uttering sounds which were mostly (to her) meaningless. (75)

Her parenthetical addition indicates the ambivalence of Isobel's identification. Literally, the women's conversation is without meaning to Mrs. Maka. To Isobel their talk is trivial, but she also wants to be a part of

this healthy competence. She feels the cultural pull to conform and is both alarmed and dismissive about her own feeling of foreignness.

A much more sordid version surrounds the circumstances of another expatriate family, this time introducing questions of race. While Mrs. Maka remains outside the circle because of language, she is European, whereas Francis Hare is an East Indian woman married to a British teacher, with a son, Trevor, from a previous marriage. The many references to the Hare family are given coherence in another of Thomas' stories, "Degrees."[39] The circumstances are identical, with only the tragic ending of Trevor's death not included in Mrs. Blood. Francis Hare buries her cultural identity and projects her desire to be European onto her son, whose strange silence seems to be a reaction to the burden his mother places upon him. Her need to be a part of the European community strains against her deep feelings of otherness. The Hares live outside the compound, yet Francis desperately wishes access and sees Trevor as her validation. Jason tells Isobel that Francis "is a very strange woman and doesn't seem to be liked by the other women on the compound" (64). Francis Hare labours so hard at being British that she becomes a pathetic parody of the colonial wife, abusive towards servants and superior to other races. Her pose

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[39] Audrey Thomas, "Degrees," in Goodbye Harold, Good Luck (Markham, Ontario: Penguin Books, 1986). Also in Robert Weaver, ed. Small Wonders (Toronto: CBC, 1982).

alienates her from the other women, who unconsciously reject her because in her exaggerated social superiority she reminds them of themselves.

Thomas's intention in introducing the character of Mrs. Hare is clear. Not only is she emphasizing how identity is largely a condition of one's culture, and to deny it is to lose one's genuine self (India, of course, also suffered under colonialism), but also pointing to the violence of colonialism and its neocolonial traces. Within this paradigm women, the helpmates of their colonialist or neocolonialist husbands, have themselves been victims of an even more insidious form of colonialism.

Women on the fringes such as Mrs. Maka and Francis Hare fascinate Isobel as much as they are ignored by the other women. Throughout most of the novel she too is outside the compound, and lying in a hospital bed she begins to understand the position of the "other," as she herself becomes the object of other women's gaze. While she wonders about the world of the women who work or are patients in the hospital and begins to understand her own prejudices, along with noting the ways in which the West has influenced these women, as Mrs. Blood she recreates her world by appropriating and rewriting major Western texts. Thomas represents Africa through its women as, at the same time, her character, Mrs. Blood, internalizes the physical surroundings to such an extent that her body merges with the

landscape. As Isobel becomes the dark continent of woman she struggles to rewrite the myth, decolonize herself and break out of the man-made constriction of the compound. Her movement, then, towards a partial bridging of the distance which separates her from the other women in the hospital parallels the effort deep within her to reconstitute herself.

Isobel's otherness is visually evoked when she says of herself, "My skin gives me a kind of Gulliver-quality, for them, along with my virtual horizontal position" (110). The image suggests the popular story-book version of Swift's novel where Gulliver awakens to find himself pinned down by the Lilliputians. Her allusion to the man who finds himself to be a giant also indicates her exaggerated sense of herself. It is also reversed, however, in that the perception considers what the others in the hospital think of her: she is a novelty, a kind of freak.

This perceptual reversal also occurs in one of the numerous references to Alice's Adventures in Wonderland. Hospital dress being so much the norm, anyone dressed otherwise stands out: "the important-looking man in the white shirt and European trousers looks quite extraordinary and out of place, as Alice must have looked to the March Hare or the playing cards" (48). In both instances Thomas reverses the usual perceptual hierarchy to place the "European" as the subject of another's gaze. At the same

time, however, the utter foreignness of the world in which Isobel finds herself conveys itself through the literary allusions.

It is clear that, despite her identification of Africa with Wonderland, Thomas means for such a representation to inhabit the subconscious, figurative world of Isobel. Balancing this fantasy world are the more objective musings of Mrs. Thing as she notices a Lebanese boy who comes often and looks at her with curiosity:

> I have taken him in as part of my experience here, why should he not return the compliment? So that under the cedars of Lebanon (I have already created a history for him, in which he returns to his homeland) I may be discussed and recreated as part of the story of his life. We do not know how often we may be picked as details in another person's drama.
>
> "There was a young Englishwoman there and she smiled at me. I wonder, now, what she was doing there."
>
> And yet if he notices me at all it will be not because I am I, but because I am "the other," like the odd-kernels in an ear of corn. (78)

The self-conscious awareness that as much as the writer uses the imagination to shape and transform her subject, the object of her imagination may be simultaneously repeating the process, recreating her as an object, had been Thomas' concern in "Out in the Midday Sun" and "Omo."

Here, Thomas extends the process by showing how racial barriers--like gender relations--have inevitably led to a distortion of the other, but also allows for the possibility

for the perceived other to have a legitimate voice. The opening of the Lebanese boy's story is imagined by Isobel even as she begins to create an exotic history of him. In both cases, Thomas suggests, the eye cannot penetrate the "I," in fact is exclusively attracted to the "I" only as the "other," and, therefore, will inevitably misrepresent it. This acknowledgement of a double perspective is echoed in the structural arrangement as the restless intellect of Mrs. Thing attempts to come to terms with her position as a European woman in Africa and all that represents, and the visceral Mrs. Blood rewrites woman's history, searching for fresh metaphors to express who she is, struggling to fuse both halves into a whole that accommodates the other.

Thomas offers a range of perspectives and reactions to Africa and to race through the character of Isobel. When Isobel first arrives at the hospital she feels overwhelmed by the contrasts between the clean, well-ordered institutions back home and the chaotic activity which she walks into, and thinks of "Stanley Park Zoo and was ashamed and frightened...to think such a cruel non-liberal thought" (38). Contemplating her attendant as she sits in the back of the ambulance on the way to the hospital, Isobel calls attention to the difficulty for a foreigner to place in the proper context a description of someone from another culture: "These are all 'back home' similes but they'll have to do" (16). She then shifts to a kind of

anthropological mode, generalizing from the female attendant and creating a whole series of comparisons using the balanced they/we construction:

> They are not stupid or bovine. It's simply a different philosophical state. We hate to wait or to "waste time".... We chatter endlessly .... But they do not waste their words on strangers. (But that's not true, either, if you're white. "Hey, Madame, you give me shilling?"... What is it that I mean to say?) I was nothing to this girl. (16-17)

Thomas' wry humour in presenting her character's frightened, rambling thoughts also emphasizes Isobel's ambivalent reaction to Africa as represented by the attendant and sheds light on her guilty association of the hospital with a zoo. Buried under her tolerant liberalism is the same kind of incipient prejudice as that noted earlier in E.K. Jonsson. His attempts to objectify had also broken down, but whereas Jonsson refuses to see his flaws, Isobel recognizes that she has been simply mouthing empty generalizations, in much the same way as the coffee-morning wives.

More important is Isobel's conclusion, "I was nothing to this girl." Casual liberalism carries with it little sense of commitment and is a luxury only the privileged can afford. Neocolonialism in the guise of expatriate workers holding positions of responsibility such as Jason, who, ironically, is teaching students their own culture, ensures that the old imperialist power structures will continue,

though in new guises. In this sense Isobel's feeling of emptiness at not being recognized recalls Margaret Laurence's description of how the Somalis ignored both herself and Jack as they sat guarding the **balleh** which Jack had built. Isobel's speculation about the Lebanese boy had also as part of its concern the desire to be recognized as herself, while at the same time she admits how artificial such a need becomes when placed in a political context: "Is this why we come--so that already we are unique and will be recognized and singled out?" (78). Thinking about the wealth the boy will inherit, she concludes, "But to be born white is to be born with a dowry he can never hope to have. How rich must the boy become before it doesn't matter?" (79). Such political musings work primarily as a kind of superstructure within which the more closely focused questions of difference circulate and interact with Thomas's major concern with gender relations and the victimization of women. King Lear's "Nothing will come of nothing" (217), echoed throughout Mrs. Blood, refers to Isobel even as she struggles to give birth and recreate herself.

In an interview with Thomas, George Bowering connects one of the many found pieces scattered in particular through the final part of the novel with the question of personal and national identity. The news clipping reads, "I, George Tetley Odonkor...wish to be known and called Rynors Mensah Odonkor...." (189). Thomas concurs with the parallel

Bowering draws between the clipping and Thomas's use of the name "Mrs. Blood": "She's changing back to her real name," like many Africans, inspired by the new nationalism.[40] Thomas is careful, however, to avoid allowing such neat parallels to stand on their own. Just before this clipping Isobel reflects on the multiple ironies surrounding their steward, Joseph. Joseph's nostalgic reminiscences about the lavish meals served in "Gold Coast time" and disapproval over Jason's unorthodox dress and behaviour in wielding an adze improvised out of a truck spring leads Isobel to wonder about such a skewed arrangement:

> Both are happy--at least I think so--and the steady thud-thud of Jason's adze is like the beat of the great heart of Africa which produces our Joseph (corrupted, although he does not know it) who has come in from the heart of darkness and is frying onions in a clean well-lighted place.... When I think of Joseph and maybe all the others his age who grew up before Independence--particularly those who were stewards and houseboys and proud of it--I remember that bit from Arnold about wandering "between two worlds, one dead, the other powerless to be born." (189)

Behind Isobel's romantically wistful voice is Thomas' ironic hand. Isobel's clichéd literary references are undercut by her unconsciously superior pose, in which only she is aware of the extent of Joseph's corruption, and then

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[40] George Bowering, "Songs & Wisdom: an interview with Audrey Thomas," Open Letter Fourth Series, 3 (Spring 1979), 23.

her ponderings culminate in Arnold's Victorian lament. Behind her placid musings, however, Isobel is really describing herself. Both Hemingway's The Green Hills of Africa and Conrad's novel contributed to the representation of Africa as a place from which commodities--human or animal--could be taken or used. In both, as well, though, women are perceived as marginal. In Hemingway's book on Africa his female companion is referred to only by her initials, P.O.M., or described as "a little terrier," while Kurtz's Intended (also lacking a name) must be sheltered, like P.O.M., from the male impulse towards savagery.[41]

Isobel's special concern for the stewards and houseboys suggests an unconscious identification with herself as a housewife and the conflicting desire to conform to cultural expectations while experiencing an intense bitterness and resentment at the stifling, enclosed world in which she is expected to live-- as figured by the compound in which she s s watching "my men." Arnold's birth metaphor, then, r berates with both the post-independence concerns which Margaret Laurence explored in This Side Jordan and some of her stories, but also with the feminist problem of trying to articulate and define female experience. Isobel, split into Mrs. Thing and Mrs. Blood, lying helpless in the hospital, trying to give birth and experiencing a crisis of identity,

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[41] Ernest Hemingway, The Green Hills of Africa (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1935), 64.

becomes the dramatic figuration for a kind of global colonialism which includes women everywhere.

But Thomas also carefully acknowledges how the identification of feminism with colonialism can only go so far, as has been noted in Isobel's ambivalent responses to Africa. Isobel largely turns from the male world of Conrad, Hemingway, and Arnold and their ways of looking to the female world of the hospital ward. Men and women, Thomas suggests, perceive the world in different ways. As she wonders about the women in the ward, Isobel thinks, "I would like very much to be objective and anthropological toward them, as Jason apparently can be when he visits the stool village..." (83). Her rational observations throughout the novel can really only scratch the surface of Africa, picturing a culture in much the same way as the neat colour photographs and insipid texts of National Geographic portray cultures free from violence or poverty. She confesses:

> I would like to know them, but I sense that they are only as verbose as they are because I am a stranger.... I must arrange the snippets of information I gather on a thread of the purest conjecture. (84)

Isobel, foreign body, alienated from both her own society and the dominant culture, resentful towards a husband whom she no longer loves, frightened by her body's betrayal, turns increasingly away from observing the circumscribed

world she views through her peripheral vision--itself a metaphor Thomas uses for the way in which one's perception of another is always limited--and towards experiencing herself and her surroundings through the senses of smell and sound, senses which rely much less on the intellect and more on emotion.

Part of the movement towards the emotional, subconscious levels implies an escape from herself and is reflected in an impulse towards primitivism. Isobel repeatedly wonders about the sexuality of the women around her, and at one point meditates on sexual desire and how it has become so civilized:

> The old myths about the enormous size of the Negro's penis have been dissipated, but it is interesting that they ever got started; for this is white man's myth--savagery, lust, enormous prowess and enormous appetite. "Like animals." Our lust has been intellectualized into love between the sheets.... Gentleness masks indifference, "love" masks the absence of desire. (118)

The old myths, Isobel realizes, were created by a "civilized" society as a means to channel the Europeans' repressed sexuality and guilt. Isobel romanticizes the elemental level of primitive man, but knows that she is as trapped in conventions as the other women in the ward.

The opposition between love and desire is exemplified in Isobel's mind by her husband, Jason, and her former

lover, Richard. Richard is remembered almost solely by Mrs. Blood, while Mrs. Thing only refers to him towards the end of Part II when she begins to merge with Mrs. Blood, and then she compares them as lovers. But the utter abandonment that she had experienced while making love with Richard becomes, after all, only another loss of self, just as she feels the absence of any individual identity in her marriage to Jason. Mrs. Blood attempts to deny her victimization by Richard by splitting her memories: "And it was the real Richard who said, 'There is no nice way of saying this,' and the unreal Richard who said in the pub, 'Fuck off'" (86). As Isobel observes in "Two in the Bush," the veneer of civilization is thin. Both versions of Richard are real, just as Jason in Mrs. Thing's recollections and in his actual visits to the hospital is both considerate lover and reluctant visitor. Isobel, too, is both conventional housemother and highly sexual and passionate woman, but while the former is a condition of cultural restraints, the latter is both creative and destructive, and both, Thomas seems to suggest, place the female in the role of victim, just as the myth of the African male, itself a product of colonialism, was created to both project and contain desire.

A number of critics have noted how Isobel's struggle to bring her unborn child to term is a metaphor for the act of writing, in particular the difficulties of shaping a female

experience unique and separate from male texts.[42] At the literal level Mrs. Thing's alienation and sense of isolation within the compound, as well as her many observations about the nurses and patients, repeatedly equate the victimization of women with colonialism, with enclosure. Opposing this is the metaphorical, even sacred form of writing in which Thomas draws the reader's attention to male dominance in its textual form through Mrs. Blood's fantasies as she attempts to rewrite these texts. At the same time, Africa too becomes re-imagined. Mrs. Blood's seething hatred of her circumstances radiates from the following passage:

> There are no victims. Life cannot rape. There are no bad experiences. Say your beads and be silent. And call out to Jason who has no ears, "This is my body," and fling back the sheets and cry out to him who has no eyes, "And this is my blood." And take his head between your hands and force it down, crying, "Drink this, eat this in remembrance of me," and afterwards cry, "Bow down," and cut off his head with the beautiful silver blade of the fury and pain you have been hiding underneath the white vestments in which you clothe yourself and behind the white altar upon which you sleep. (91-92)

The frustrated, intensely passionate violence of Mrs. Blood's utterance distorts and subverts Biblical text even as it imagines woman as sacrificial victim. The dark continent of woman is demanding to be heard as the sexual and sacramental merge. Woman as sacred object and as

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[42] See Barbara Godard and Lorna Irvine.

victim, both male constructs, surfaces in all her pent-up fury as she struggles to claim a place of her own. Lorna Irvine carefully examines this aspect of Mrs. Blood and notes also the many allusions to the Grail legends, all of which Isobel rewrites: "No Mary, Isobel revises the Christian structures that insist on passive, virginal motherhood, on a female body that is no more than a receptacle for male continuance."[43]

Running parallel to this interiorized reworking of patriarchal texts is a metaphorical rewriting of the image of Africa as the two dark continents undergo a surrealistic merging:

> The woman is the Venus flytrap, tinted a mordant pink, mouth open wide to catch the unsuspecting guest.
>
> But who is to blame? She did not ask him to be enamoured of her scent. And this land too is female and open and deadly. There is always the warm sticky smell of charcoal in the air, like dried blood, and the flowers wait with swollen lips for you to stumble against them in the dark.... The people burn in the daytime and lie like half-dead embers in the night. The drums beat against the walls of darkness with their bandaged fists and the vultures look sideways at one another and put their greedy heads beneath their wings.
>
> The smell of the female flows across the land and the insects whine with excitement. "Take this in remembrance." "Drink this." And the warm lips close around them as they die.
>
> (107)

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[43] Irvine, 29.

Africa becomes linked to the dark, sinister underworld of the instinctual, but it is also pictured as female, evoked by using the same ritualistic language as the previously quoted passage.

As noted with reference to This Side Jordan, Africa as the sinister woman often surfaces as a stereotype in European writing on Africa. Hammond and Jablow write in this connection, "Like 'the strange woman' of the Book of Proverbs, 'many strong men have been slain by her. Her house is the way to Hell.'"[44] By introducing such an identification of Africa with the strange woman in the Bible, the authors mean to stress the moral and spiritual superiority of Europeans who create an image of Africa as the temptress as a justification for "taming" it. Thomas, by rewriting the Bible and other great archetypal works, suggests that the claim for universality in patterns of myth and ritual which writers like C.G. Jung or J.G. Fraser make are really claims defined within the limits of a Western ontology.

While Mrs. Blood's fantasies are extremely trenchant, the dislocation which the slippage of language causes also is so exaggerated that it operates as parody:

> All flesh is glass. This is my body
> which was riven, my body which was roven--
> my flesh all scattered and tattered and torn,

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[44] Hammond and Jablow, 148.

> and Rosie is the riveter who nailed me there as a totem in front of the door. And he said why seek ye a living among the bread. He is not here; he has risen. (59)

Mrs. Blood's chanting, ritualistic voice parodies Biblical authority even as it extends already established images alluding to childbirth such as the punning refrain, "Avez-vous du pain?" (147) which captures the pain of birth, and incorporates African ritual, all of which reflect Mrs. Blood's fragmented state of mind and the struggle she is undergoing to redefine herself. In a similar fashion, Thomas's previously referred-to vision of Africa as a woman parodically subverts a stereotype constructed by men as a means to project their desire and vicariously overcome it.

The fragmented language, while subversively disrupting established texts, also admits that it is a writing done from the margins: neither the Western texts nor the images of Africa are absolutely replaced by a new vision which goes beyond parody, for such a move, even if possible, would only be replacing one form of authority with another. Within the movement of the novel itself, Isobel finally is not able to break through the stereotypes and the violence imposed upon her as a woman. She remains fractured, unable to reconcile the sacred and profane.

Her marginal position is heightened and exacerbated by her peripheral, often enclosed space in the hospital and her white skin. Esther, Elizabeth, and Alexandria, the three

nurses who care for her, exclaim over the whiteness of her skin and treat her like a foreign object, but Isobel also imagines an exclusively female ritual which binds them all together:

> Do they talk about me with the other girls and say here, look, this is the white woman's blood, so that a crowd gathers around while the charcoal is heating and they pass my bloody garments from hand to brown hand and comment softly, because they are women and maybe because they are nurses, on the universal calamity of pain and birth and blood? (83)

Thomas evokes a female world in which childbirth binds women everywhere.

While Isobel's body is forgrounded, Gulliver-like, other voices are also heard: one woman dies, another hallucinates while in the throes of a malaria attack. Men come and go under the judgemental eyes of the women as do the male doctors, one cold and threatening, the other gentle and sympathetic, but unable to empathize with Isobel's suffering. Throughout the novel the humanity of the nurses and other women provides a centre of quiet humour and warmth. But Isobel loses the struggle to break out of the compound and make a place for herself within a community of women, just as she loses her baby. Under the intense anxiety and pain, Mrs. Thing does not so much merge with Mrs. Blood as become subsumed by her. At the same time, the

novel breaks down into a series of decontextualized fragments and the new texts which Mrs. Blood had been trying to create are aborted.

Simultaneously, the traditional image of Africa as a savage threatening land in need of taming re-emerges as Isobel surrenders to the pain:

> This land is treacherous. There are snakes in the grass and the puff adder hangs waiting in the branches until I pass.
>
> The soldier ants converge upon the compound but no one listens when I try to warn them, and the talking drums are too far away for me to untangle the threads they weave. The air is heavy with hate, and downstairs Joseph sharpens my bread knife on the stoop and if I tiptoe down he will still know I am coming and slit my throat neatly and without much effort. He is in collusion with the insects, for I have seen him open the kitchen door and turn the light on and catch them in his frying pan. He knows their language now, also the language of the flowers, for I found a plucked hibiscus, like a fresh clot, in the hall outside my bedroom and later I saw him touch his index fingers to the frangipani tree.
>
> The pain moves over me like an explorer in heavy boots. It tramples me down in its eagerness to find the child. (206)

Joseph is once again the threat of "One is One & All Alone," imagined now as a savage murderer conspiring with the land whose meaning remains closed to the European, as it was in Heart of Darkness. But, while standing on its own, this passage would certainly arouse Achebe's fury, within the context of the novel it serves the double purpose of evoking the stereotype in order to show just how much it has been

transformed. Isobel, whose pain violates her "like an explorer in heavy boots," is the dark continent of woman who, in attempting to bring herself inside representation and give truth and substance to her absence, has fought to expel the explorer. Contradicting Echeruo's perceived formula of the whiteman testing himself and undergoing a transfiguration, Mrs. Blood breaks down in a fragmented collection of lines, ending with the hidden secret of Isobel's earlier abortion exposed in Richard's cruel command: "'Get rid of it'" (220). Against the claustrophobic darkness of this final section, though, the actions of Elizabeth and Esther act as an affirmation based upon a common female experience: "...Elizabeth holds me, weeping" and "Esther rubs my belly" (220).

For Thomas, traditional Africa's rituals offer a means of coming to terms with crisis. Such rituals are missing in North America:

> ...we've done away with all the signs and rituals. If anything overwhelming happens in North America, we ignore it or hide it, or put it in an institution. We're not supposed to grieve, we're not supposed to raise our voices, and we are not supposed to do anything excessive.[45]

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[45] Pierre Coupey, et. al., "Interview/Audrey Thomas, Capilano Review, 7 (Spring 1975), 89.

Ritual in North America is largely based on those myths which, through Mrs. Blood's imaginings, Thomas attempts to dismantle, and in the process she begins to move away from authoritarian orthodoxy and towards a space where the female body, as figured through the primordial image of blood, can begin to claim a space. Thomas continues this effort in Blown Figures. In this final novel of the trilogy which began with Songs My Mother Taught Me Isobel moves far from the compound as she travels across West Africa on a quest for her lost child and a desire for expiation. As a result of this movement Africa is more geographically visualized, and everywhere Thomas makes the reader aware of just how much place is a construct of the self.

iv. Out of the Compound and into the Myth of Africa

The bifurcated narrative form of Mrs. Blood draws attention to Thomas's preoccupation with one of the oldest themes in literature: illusion and reality. In the majority of her fiction she introduces dichotomies such as the conscious and unconscious; reality and dream; body and spirit; or health and madness. But she does so only to blur the rigidity of such boundaries in an effort to show how each is dependent on the other. Most of her characters experience an imbalance and corresponding desire to fill the emptiness which is caused by another imbalance in the physical world.

such as racial or gender conflicts. As long as the characters find themselves immured in the compound, they have little hope of achieving any kind of integration. They are unable to break free of the thraldom of their cultural positions. In turn, their insecurity, even psychic terror, projects itself on an Africa which they imagine to be real only because they exist in an enclosure which shuts out any actual contact with the country.

As long as this happens, Africa is envisioned as ominous and threatening. For instance, in "Joseph and His Brother" Thomas exposes how preconceived notions of Africa insinuate themselves into the experience of the newcomer. Having just arrived in Africa, the narrator notices a sign: "REX 8:30 TONIGHT/PAY UP OR DIE."[46] In her disorientated state she reads this as a sinister threat, and feels ashamed when her steward, Joseph, explains that it is a playbill advertised by a local cinema. Unknowingly, the Africa of the popular imagination is, ironically enough, triggered by the advertisement for a movie, doubly distancing the narrator's perception of Africa.

"Joseph and His Brother" is a story about perception and the attempt to penetrate the essence of place through the false signs. The narrator recalls the events of her

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[46] Thomas, "Joseph and His Brother," in Two in the Bush and Other Stories (Toronto: McClelland and Stewart, 1981), 124. All future references will be cited following by the quotation.

stay in Ghana from a temporal distance of ten years, and is profoundly moved by the experience. The story centres on the companionable relationship between the narrator and Joseph, but culminates in the vision of Joseph's brother who has been maddened by the ghost of a woman he had picked up and slept with. The narrator visits the village where she finds him handcuffed to a tree, and remains haunted by the spectacle. Thomas suggests that explanations are inadequate; this ontologically perplexing sight can only hint at inexplicable planes of existence for the Western mind. There is no shock of recognition except that of realizing there are some phenomena which cannot be understood.

In deliberate contrast to Joseph's story of his brother stands a rational generalization: "The white man is ashamed to be afraid of Africa and yet the shame does not completely obliterate the fear" (124). The shame derives from a crack in the armour of the colonial past which consequently gives rise to a fear of that which cannot be controlled and subordinated. Thomas evokes a paradigmatic colonial mentality in order to comment on a lack within Western tradition. Joseph's brother, chained to a tree, is cared for by the community. His condition is mourned by Joseph, but he is not shut away in the world of the State asylum that Thomas depicts in Songs My Mother Taught Me. It is the very oppressive power structures, so dependent on reason as

they are, which subdue or confine any individual who deviates from the perceived norm, and which are behind the psychological terror, desire to conform, or alienation of the characters in "One is One & All Alone" and "Xanadu."

It is to escape from such destructive confines that characters in some of Thomas's stories venture out of the compound. At the same time, they are searching for something which they find inextricably bound up with Africa. Part of this is associated with the female identification of her own victimization with that of colonization, or neocolonialism, as suggested earlier with reference to Mrs. Blood. As well, though, the fear that the something they quest after does not exist also arises, and is ironically intensified by the romantic illusions many of these characters maintain. In turn, the elusiveness of meaning and the problem of perception, explored so radically in Mrs. Blood and denied by a logocentric culture, is demonstrated in the recurring search for the "real Africa," which had been important in "Omo" and "Out in the Midday Sun," and continues to be echoed in "Rapunzel," "Timbuktu," and "Two in the Bush," culminating in a highly charged, yet ambivalent discovery by the end of Blown Figures.

The double vision of Africa as reality and as metaphor emerges from two such disparate quotations as the following ones. In trying to displace existing notions of Africa, the anthropologist Janheinz Jahn writes:

> A 'real African'...lives in the bush, carves 'primitive' sculptures, can neither read nor write, goes naked, lives carefree and happy from day to day and tells fairy stories about the crocodile and the elephant. The more 'primitive,' the more 'really African.' But an African who is enlightened and cosmopolitan, who presides in the most cultivated fashion over congresses, who makes political speeches or writes novels, no longer counts as a 'real' African.[47]

Writing specifically on Thomas' African fiction, Eleanor Wachtel notes that

> Modern Africa with its bedazzling array of modern impositions folded onto tradition 'camouflages' the real Africa. Nature, though, remains unmarred, but acts as a metaphor and constitute[s] what is tangible, sensuous, real in Africa.... Nature not only stands for that essence which is obscure at the cultural level but also it is that essence in itself.[48]

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[47] Janheinz Jahn, Muntu: An Outline of the New African Culture (London: Frank Cass, 1973), 44.

[48] Eleanor Wachtel, "The Image of Africa in the Fiction of Audrey Thomas," Room of One's Own 2.4 (1976), 24. The complexities of talking about Africa, created largely by the seemingly all-pervasive influence of Africanist discourse, are well illustrated here. Even as Wachtel offers the blanket statement cited earlier, identifying nature as a metaphor for what is sensuous and real in Africa, she is critical of such essentialist notions as the real Africa. In the same article she comments, "The question and the search [for the real Africa] imply a preconception, a deep-lodged notion of some discrete definable entity called Africa" (23). In a footnote, she adds, "In a way the question itself is like the patronizing, 'naive' remark: 'I'll never understand women' as if there were **one** thing, a handle which could finally be grasped, seized, and called real" (28).

Whereas Jahn ironically comments on popular expectations which refuse to accept that Africa, like Europe, has progressed, Wachtel (whose own essentialist perception of the real Africa is precisely the kind of attitude Jahn's irony is meant to emphasize) implicitly believes in a numinous reality or essence that is camouflaged, but which whispers its presence through Nature. Jahn then goes on to offer a sensitive description of Ashanti culture, while Wachtel points out that, "The problem is that by its very nature, to ask the question (Is this the real Africa?) is to express doubt. Whenever the question is posed, the tacit answer is no."[49] Thomas knows this, in fact plays with the notion in the title of her collection, Real Mothers. As Barbara Godard explains, the word "real" in this collection is an "equivocal word situated at the point where two sequences of semantic or formal associations intersect."[50]

Whereas Margaret Laurence had repeatedly dramatized the tension between modern and traditional Africa, and the effects of the transitionary period of Independence and the imposition of Western culture, Thomas consciously introduces a third element which had been implicit in Laurence's fiction: the myth of Africa. In Laurence's fiction Africa stubbornly appears in the form of stereotypes even as she

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[49] Wachtel, 26.

[50] Godard, 70.

consciously exposes other traces of the myth. The pervasive power of such a textual construct means that unconscious intrusions may be unavoidable, even inevitable. As argued earlier, however, Thomas' concern with questions of subject-formation with regard to her female characters also allows her to place in question fixed images of Africa: in a labyrinthine search for a real self separate from the myth of woman, Thomas' characters travel through Africa in quest of the real Africa behind the myth. In most cases, however, they never get beyond the myth because their movements are an escape from the self into the romance of Africa.

The search for the "real Africa" becomes a comment on the centuries of colonization which invented a continent in order to justify the colonizers' own presence, as well as to maintain an illusion of cultural superiority and to uphold order and reason through a channelling of sexual desire. Patrick Brantlinger notes,

> Just as the social class fantasies of the Victorians...often express the fear of falling into the abyss of poverty, so the myth of the Dark Continent contains the submerged fear of falling out of the light, down the long coal chute of social and moral regression. In both cases, the fear of backsliding has a powerful sexual dimension. If, as Freud argued, civilization is based on the repression of instincts and if the demands of repression become excessive, then civilization itself is liable to break down.[51]

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[51] Patrick Brantlinger, "Victorians and Africans: The Genealogy of the Myth of the Dark Continent" in "Race," Writing, and Difference , ed. Henry Louis Gates, Jr.

In Thomas' fiction social and moral values are largely dictated by males; women fear less the possibility of regression than the feeling that they are becoming smothered under such expectations. In attempting to escape the ordered world of the compound, however, many of the characters find themselves unable to get beyond the passivity of their traditional roles. This is reflected in their uncommonly sluggish movements and the dream-like or romantic visions they carry of their surroundings. Contemporary Africa, as Janheinz Jahn describes part of it, is largely ignored for a primordial essence, romantic and impossible to achieve. And often their escape involves a sexual encounter which is potentially or explicitly violent.

In the story, "Rapunzel," Africa is a fairy tale, is the imposition of one's desires on reality. As a result, there is barely a glimmer of any whole, integrated self in the main character, Rapunzel, whose real name is Caroline. "Rapunzel" plays on the irrational, instinctual world of fairy tales in order to expose the escapism of Caroline's romantic idealism, but also probes the narrator's own state of being and her curious yearning for the dream-like state of existence of Caroline. Rapunzel/Caroline, described by the narrator as "moving like a dream" and as living "a dream within a dream," floats through Ghana in search of "Images.

(Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1986), 215.

Forms. Old ways of looking at the world," but in her existential wanderings she actually distances herself from reality in the way she perceives and records experience.[52] She fills her notebook with observations recorded in mirror writing and claims to even see things that way. But, like the character in "Xanadu," whose desire for a dream-like existence is shattered by the reality of her betrayal and then "rewritten" for an audience far removed from the event, reality crashes in when Caroline is raped by an African.

Just as Caroline's life is described as a "Dream within a dream," the story itself is a story within a story. The narrator both describes and places herself and an unnamed companion within the story, and she too refuses to accept reality. Throughout there are subtle intimations that Caroline is the mirror, or double, of the narrator. Thomas may be mischievously playing on the relation between the role of author and the traditional distancing of author from the narrator she creates (as well as the characters). But in probing the relationship between author and character, she also explores the nature of perception and the construction of the self. The narrator describes Caroline's journeys as though she herself were beside her--indeed, inside her. And she attempts to see the world as Caroline does. After a few tries, her companion questions her:

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[52] Audrey Thomas, "Rapunzel," in Ladies & Escorts (Ottawa: Oberon, 1977), 71, 72. All future references will be cited following the quotation.

> "Hey, what are you doing, staring at that sign?"
> "Nothing."
> "Well, come on then, or we'll never get there."
> "All right."
> "All right." And I laugh. (73)

The laugh suggests embarrassment, but also an uncomfortable sense of things left unsaid. She seems mildly obsessed with this Rapunzel figure. A discussion follows, after some prompting by her companion:

> "She sounds as if she'd be quite happy to move around alone."
> "I guess so. I would want someone to talk to, to share it all with."
> "She's got her notebook."
> "So have I. It's not the same, believe me."
> "Not for you. Maybe it is if you write it all back to front. She talks to the woman in the mirror...." (76)

As elliptical and suggestive as the earlier conversation, this one creates an even closer identification: both she and Caroline record impressions in notebooks, but then the narrator becomes the opposite, the mirror image.

While Caroline seems comfortable by herself, the narrator needs others; while Caroline travels across Ghana, the narrator describes the journey. Caroline draws herself with "camera lenses instead of eyes" (76), suggesting again a barrier between herself and reality; the narrator is hesitant, "to see her," to invite her over, instead conjuring Caroline through the screen of her imagination.

Finally, Caroline comes to visit her and then departs for Accra. As she leaves, the narrator watches: "I feel as if I'm looking at one of those figures, not quite recognizable as known, who sometimes come to you in dreams" (79). The mirror and dream imagery merge here as the narrator looks at a blurred reflection of herself. Significantly, perhaps, the lorry Caroline had caught a lift on in her travels was called "Two Shadows" (74).

Describing "Xanadu," Barbara Godard writes that "This story also explores the blurring of boundaries--a dislocating of perception--this time between dream and reality."[53] More generally, Godard explains that "In her writing Thomas explores and explodes limits and boundaries in a perpetual search for meaning."[54] The "old ways of looking at the world" which Caroline seeks are attempts to attain a state of perception which can encompass both the seen and the unseen, the conscious and the unconscious, to plumb the depths as a means to discover, not escape from, the self. Joseph's brother, chained to a tree, resurfaces in "Rapunzel" as something Caroline has found as important in her search. This kind of linear expansion of an image enriches its significance as the dream world of mirrors expands to include the unseen world of ghosts.

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[53] Godard, 27.

[54] Godard, 25.

As quoted earlier, Thomas had read that for the Ashantis "dreams are the only reality," leading her, therefore, to probe how such a state of existence might affect Europeans. Caroline with the camera eyes meticulously documents in mirror writing the story of her rape by an African. As Caroline tells the story, the narrator imagines "Rapunzel flowing down the stairs like moonlight, the prince of darkness following behind" (79). By this point in the story a reversal occurs with the narrator imagining the rape in romantic terms and Caroline--at least momentarily--jerked out of her mirror world by the brutal reality. Both are suggested by Caroline's ambiguous response to her rapist's question, "Are you ready for me?:" "NONONONONO," which reads in her mirror writing as "ONONONONON" (80).

The narrator's identification with Caroline is similar to Isobel's fascination and repulsion in Blown Figures with her traveling companion, Delilah Rosenberg, whose "liberated" sexual life--which has resulted in four abortions--acts as a kind of parody of Isobel's own past. It certainly is more than a coincidence that Isobel and Delilah travel on a bus called "Two Shadows." The rape of Caroline takes on an ambiguity which suggests that the victim's complete detachment from her surroundings leaves her existing in a fairy tale gone awry.

The almost archetypal fear by Europeans of African sexuality--yet another irrational projection of the myth of Africa--is used by Thomas to expose Caroline's detached existence. Thomas builds on this fear with casually suggestive and threatening indicators. On the door at the hostel a sign reads, "Men! Do not proceed/beyond this point!" (72), and Hyacinth appears in the story, as he did in Blown Figures, eating the head of a chicken. Later, as he takes Caroline home, we are told, "She cannot see his face, his devouring mouth" (75). Thomas certainly does not mean to deny the violence of rape, but at the same time Caroline's indifference to the life around her, her passive recording and picture-taking activities, is equally suggestive of the rape of Africa, conventionally figured in much literature on Africa by the white man's rape of an African woman, and used by Laurence in This Side Jordan and Godfrey in The New Ancestors. The rapist's repeated question, "Why did you come to Africa.... Why did you come to this place," (80) suggests a depth of hostility beneath his violent sexual intent.

To varying degrees the real Africa becomes a matter of individual perception as characters search for some numinous essence or discover something of themselves which cannot be articulated. Thomas explains in an interview that when she read Jung's Memories, Dreams, Reflections she was stunned by

the similarities of some of his reactions to her own, and reads from his book:

> In travelling to Africa to find a psychic observation post outside of the European, I unconsciously wanted to find that part of my personality which had become invisible under the influence and the pressure of being European. This part stands in unconscious opposition to myself, and indeed I attempted to suppress it. In keeping with its nature, it wishes to make me unconscious (force me under water) so as to kill me; but my aim is, through insight, to make it more conscious, so that we can find a common modus vivendi.[55]

For Jung, Africa was a means to probe the inner psyche. In "Timbuktu," published well after she had read Jung, Rona, the main character is pictured at the beginning of the story as partly submerged in water:

> For the past few minutes, she had been doing a jellyfish float, head down and arms around her knees, bobbing just below the surface of the water, like a cork. The sea was a little too warm, a little too sticky, to be really pleasant, but it was better than going back and sitting under the striped umbrella with Mrs. Avis, and hearing, once again, about Sabina's malocclusion or the latest piece of villainy on the part of the Avis' cook-steward.[56]

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[55] Coupey, 90.

[56] Audrey Thomas,"Timbuktu," in Real Mothers (Vancouver: Talonbooks, 1981), 101. Hereafter all references will be cited following the quotation.

Holding what is close to a foetal position in water as warm as amniotic fluid, Rona hears the fragment, "'...up the river to Timbuktu,'" and "the words presented themselves to her with a strange, almost symbolic force. Timbuktu-ou-ou" (101-2). Whereas Jung's compound was Europe, Thomas's is that island of European--and sometimes educated African--society which huddles together, barricaded behind symmetrically cut hibiscus hedges.

In her story, "Degrees," Thomas portrays the pettiness of this sheltered, exclusive world, and in other stories such as "One is One & All Alone" or "Xanadu" she probes into the illusion of safety it represents, an illusion because Africa--in the shape of a Joseph or Samuel--always manages to penetrate the defenses. In the same interview Thomas explains that Africa, for her, is "the sense of the other, the dark side of ourselves, the nightmare side of ourselves, where everything is too big, or too bright, or too beautiful, or too overwhelming."[57] Like Jung, while within the fragile safety of their own little Europe these characters feel that the invisible part of their personality is forcing them under water, trying to kill them. Rona, however, chooses to float, head under, where she hears the echo and determines to follow it beyond "the Plateau, with its broad avenues and plane trees, its shops run by Europeans, catering to European tastes" (107).

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[57] Coupey, 91.

Rona's trip towards Timbuktu carries with it many religious overtones, from the first, almost mystical summons, to the description of the Muslim man and his prayer mat she sees on the train, and the meeting with the Weavers, a B'hai family from the United States. Whether Muslim or B'hai, though, Rona feels that neither offers any solutions for women. Mrs. Weaver is a pathetic figure who frantically desires to leave Africa, especially after her meeting with leper beggars, an even more emotionally distraught meeting than the one in "Out in the Midday Sun." Earlier Rona had reflected on Islam: "From what little she had seen, it was not a very good religion for women; but then, what religion was?" (112). For Rona, Timbuktu represents a faith in herself; the reality of the city is not important:

> "There's nothing up there any more," P.J. had told her. "Just a dusty crumbling town." Yet once, scholars gathered there to study and decipher the mysteries of their faith. Once, small boys had been put in chains for not knowing the whole of the Koran, while the king's daughters walked proud and beautiful, and unveiled, through busy streets.... (134)

At the same time, however, reality keeps intruding upon her romantic dream, and gradually she comes to realize that people can be dependent upon one another without relinquishing their personal freedom. Throughout the story, then, a tension emerges between the symbolic and the real. Africa is as embroiled in the double vision as Rona herself,

and the wry conclusion implies that practical reality will win out.

In "Out in the Midday Sun" Thomas's main character had realized that "Africa, like a dream, had merely provided the symbols. She had refused to recognize the reality behind them." Rona is a more experienced and practical visitor to Africa, having lived there for five years. She is not afraid to venture out and travel alone, but she is fearful of commitments: her journey is an attempt either to resolve or to escape from the problems and pressures of her marriage, and the need to resist expectations placed upon her as a woman to conform and to bear children. But as the urge to escape draws her closer to Timbuktu, Rona already thinks of going beyond the ancient city:

> The fact that she did not have her passport no longer seemed to bother her. Perhaps she would not need it ever again. Perhaps she would go up the river and down the river and simply disappear. A new life. Without ties.... Leaning on the bridge in the late afternoon, she saw her life, spread before her, as distant and magic as the mysterious veiled kingdom of Timbuktu. (129)

On this symbolic journey, Rona has given up her identity so that she can create a new self, freed from commitments and emotional entanglements. But this vision clashes with her stated intention: "A sense of my own

reality--my separate reality" (127). Physical reality, though, keeps encroaching on this almost religious--certainly escapist--vision, just as it does on the Weaver's idealistic mission to serve in Africa. Rona must wait a week in Bamako for the ferry and while there she meets P.J. Jones, a pragmatic American engineer working on the airstrip in Timbuktu. With his earthy manner and real concern for the plight of the Weavers, P.J. draws the unwilling Rona into a community of relationships.

Despite Rona's resistance, by the end of the story she takes P.J.'s place as caretaker of the Weavers, remembering his simple dictum, "You go to the people who need you" (137). Earlier, discussing Ruth Weaver, P.J had said,

> "But you and I both know that Africa isn't for everybody--and maybe, if she knows there is a way out, she'll be more likely to stay."
> "Timbuktu," Rona murmured. (135-6)

Timbuktu has come to represent a way out, a knowledge that Rona does hold within her a "separate reality" which is strong enough to resist the smothering confines of human relations.

In "Timbuktu" reality cannot be ignored: the small child leading the blind woman will not go away until a coin is dropped in his bowl; the lepers stubbornly demand recognition. The symbolic merges with the concrete as Thomas breaks down the boundaries between dream and reality.

While the narrative attempts this kind of synthesis, Rona herself must finally disengage and return to practical reality.

Similarly, in "Two in the Bush" Isobel, the first-person narrator, journeys to the Ivory Coast because "I wanted to find Africa. Was this it? Was this the real Africa?"[58] "This" refers to the seeming contradictions which surround her as she leaves the plush hotel in Kumasi, perhaps. Vultures circle over the fashionable hotel; Afro-beat is juxtaposed with a bewitched alligator; and Isobel's acquaintance, Jimmie Owusu-Banahene's "beautiful Ashanti face" is complemented by a "beautiful Oxford accent" (154). Thomas again presents a conventional narrative which relies on the setting to transmute a simple trip into a symbolic search for a kind of revealed fixed reality.

Two statements govern the intent of the story, complementing each other while placing into question Isobel's desire to find the "real Africa." From Blake, she recalls the line, "Without contraries there is no progression" (154), and later, reflecting on the sinister Angolan, Joao Kakumba, she pronounces, "The veneer of civilization is never more than a few inches thick" (170). Contraries multiply in the Ivory Coast--Isobel's destination. Isobel's travelling companion, Mollie, goes in

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[58] Audrey Thomas, "Two in the Bush," in Two in the Bush and Other Stories (Toronto: McClelland and Stewart, 1981), 154. Hereafter all references will follow the quotation.

search of sexual adventure, while Isobel's reasons are less frivolous; in Abidjan they taxi between the lowdown Hotel Humanité and the luxurious Hotel Ivoire, which itself is incomplete, its tour d'ivoire only partially erected; Isobel meets a Texan millionaire who travels on his tuna boat: the contraries are seemingly endless. With such contradictions reality is indeed placed in question. Drifting off to sleep to the incongruous but hypnotic rhythm of drums, Isobel wonders, "Was this Africa? Was Mr. Alamoody Africa or Joao Kakumba or even Sgt. Lee Lily or Arnie the tuna-fish king? I didn't dream--why should I? Africa was a dream" (165).

Isobel's comically perplexed voice comes close to merging with Thomas's own, the often repeated parallel of Africa to a dream encouraging such an identification. And, as in dreams, Isobel and Mollie drift through a threatening geography, meeting sinister male characters, their civilization a seemingly fragile veneer, finally emerging unscathed. Within the symbolic logic of the story, Isobel remains safe because she has not been anywhere; even more than Caroline in "Rapunzel," she had merely entered a fairy tale in which she was able to assign and exaggerate the meaning of places and people, while wilfully ignoring the Africa which Jahn describes in the passage cited earlier. Throughout the story Thomas playfully evokes an Africa of the popular imagination, full of threat and intrigue, only to give the last word to the sophisticated Jimmie Owusu-

Banahene. In response to Isobel's confession that she knows nothing of Africa, Jimmie says, "'That's a beginning.... A good beginning'" (175). Once again closure is denied.

v. "Tropenkollered" in the Text

Lorna Irvine has noted how in Blown Figures Thomas subverts such male texts as Homer's The Odyssey and Heart of Darkness by feminizing the archetypal male journey.[59] The parallels to Conrad's novel encompass both character and setting: "Like Kurtz's Intended, Jason...waits at home while Isobel penetrates deeper and deeper into the heart of Africa's darkness. Like Marlowe, the narrator records the journey." "Even the physical symptoms of [Isobel's] suffering recall the stifling intensity of Heart of Darkness."[60] As well, "Allusions to cannibalism, to dismemberment,...to necrophilia, to bizarre religious rites illustrate Isobel's nightmare."[61] Irvine perceptively notes the ironic function of Thomas' handling of Conrad's and other texts, but focuses on how such an ironizing affects certain

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[59] Irvine, 63-4.

[60] Irvine, 64-5.

[61] Irvine, 65.

"cultural revisions which radically alter a phallocentric view of the universe."[62]

In fact, as with Mrs. Blood, Thomas's revision of male texts functions not only as a means to create space for authentic female experience, but also to dispel the very Eurocentric representations of Africa which Irvine lists. She does this by placing side by side both subjective and objective experiences and accounts in yet another doubling so that each undermines and is undermined by the other in an often surrealistic display which disrupts fixed perceptions of reality, propelling them into an ambivalent borderland. At the same time, even more than simply feminizing the epic romance, as Irvine suggests, Thomas further disorientates the reader by putting in place many of the elements of romance, only to consistently subvert them.

As an epigraph to one of the chapters in The Predicament of Culture James Clifford chooses a definition of collage by Max Ernst: "The coupling of two realities, irreconcilable in appearance, upon a plane which apparently does not suit them...."[63] Ernst's words could just as well be a description of much of Thomas's fiction, especially the collage-like effect created by Blown Figures. The visual friction of collage is often surrealistic as it challenges the viewer's compulsion to order and integrate its disparate

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[62] Irvine, 65.

[63] Clifford, 117.

parts into a unified whole that can be understood. Clifford uses the term "surrealism" to

> circumscribe an aesthetic that values fragments, curious collections, unexpected juxtapositions--that works to provoke the manifestation of extraordinary realities drawn from the domains of the erotic, the exotic, and the unconscious.[64]

As a form of "critical cultural politics" (Clifford, 120), surrealism questioned and challenged the complacent, ordered view of reality through which powers at the cultural centre judged and dictated the world according to its own privileged terms. Clifford's definition of surrealism, like Ernst's, stresses the fashioning of a new vision out of a clash of opposing realities.

Thomas's use of collage problematizes conventional assumptions of both Africa and women by linking her characters' refrain, "Is this the real Africa," to their compulsion to seek some part of their lost female selves buried under the cultural perceptions of the role of women. By displacing received, stereotypical versions of each, Thomas attempts to free them from the authority of Western cultural hegemony while also offering a critique of the cultural centre.

Thomas has said that she has been very influenced by the Surrealists: "They do things like put a shadow in their

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[64] Clifford, 118.

paintings but the thing the shadow is of is outside the painting."[65] In Blown Figures Isobel remembers one of Richard's friends reading "a book on surrealism."[66] Part way along her journey, Isobel looks out on the river and its surroundings and finds the landscape "depressing, almost surreal," while a man also waiting for the ferry sits "chanting in a strange, almost surreal quavering voice..." (461-2). The narrator in Blown Figures is mad or schizophrenic, as Thomas has explained, thus providing a rationale for the surrealist technique, as well as a psychological projection of the many splits and couplings of separate and extraordinary realities which provoke such intense questionings of perceptions of women and of Africa by the West.[67]

But the question--"Is this the real Africa?"--also points ironically to the characters' failure to accept reality, and therefore acts a structural warning throughout Thomas's African fiction. In Blown Figures the collage effect frustrates any clear answer to such an implicitly essentializing question. At the same time, the subversion of romance conventions running throughout the novel places

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[65] Komisar, 63

[66] Audrey Thomas, Blown Figures (Vancouver: Talonbooks, 1974), 35. Hereafter, all references will be cited following the quotation.

[67] Komisar, 59-60. Thomas says, "The narrator is crazy, I think that's obvious." Earlier in the same interview she calls the narrator a "schizophrenic."

in question the use of Africa as a setting in which the hero struggles toward personal expiation, a feature which greatly obscure the "real" Africa.

The novel opens with Isobel on a ship departing from England for Dakar. Five years after her miscarriage she is still haunted with guilt and has left her family in Vancouver to undertake a solitary journey of expiation. The narrative describes her voyage on the **Pylades,** then the journey overland from Dakar to Kumasi, the city where she had lived with Jason in Mrs. Blood and now referred to as "the city of Death" (280). As with "Timbuktu" and "Two in the Bush" there are long periods of waiting, this time for ferries or taxis, false starts, or passive stretches of time such as when Isobel extends her stay at Bolga Mission. Irvine has noted that the twenty-four part structure follows that of The Odyssey.[68] But unlike Homer's epic, the narrative breaks down into fragments following all but two of the sections. These scraps of comic strips, obituaries, advice columns, horoscopes, and announcements taken from African newspapers circulate amidst other fragments taken from literary texts--including those of Thomas's other books--nursery rhymes, African myths of origin, oblique comments by the narrator, and blank pages. The effect is like that of a collage; indeed, on one page the reader is invited to participate: "Think of Something God's Book

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[68] Irvine, 53-4.

tells you to do. Then, in this space, draw yourself doing it" (120).

Thomas has said that the novel forces the reader to participate in the act of creation, and that it is "partly a novel about writing a novel or about creativity--how you create something."[69] Three levels are at work as the implied author creates an I-narrator who assumes the third person to tell the story of Isobel: illusion and reality interpenetrate as Africa is evoked as both a real place and as a metaphor. A characteristically enigmatic fragment suggests part of the rationale for the metaphorical use of Africa: "Ah Miss Miller, how can I tell? I am not of that country and was never there to see" (322). Accordingly, Africa becomes an imaginative construct known as "MAFROKA" (68) and the ship Isobel travels on is transformed into "BOAT." "Now it is symbol, a symbol, a dream representing change, exodus, adventure, anything to anyone..." (41). Readers who open the novel expecting a conventional romance are suddenly forced to participate in an elaborate parody of the romance form, signaled here by Thomas's ironic play on the epic quest.

The I-narrator, never having visited the setting of her story, self-consciously points to her artifice and scatters among it "real" scraps clipped from African newspapers. Once again Clifford's discussion of collage seems relevant:

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[69] Komisar, 61.

> Collage brings to the work (here the ethnographic text) elements that continuously proclaim their foreignness to the context of presentation. These elements--like a newspaper clipping or a feather--are marked as real, as collected rather than invented by the artist-writer...they are the message.
>
> To write ethnographies on the model of collage would be to avoid the portrayal of cultures as organic wholes or as unified, realistic worlds subject to a continuous explanatory discourse.[70]

Clifford here suggests a kind of ideal model for the ethnographer's interpretation and representation of the culture under study. As remarked earlier, Thomas too is extremely sensitive as to how she represents another culture. In challenging or revising dominant discourses, she avoids depicting female experience at the expense of her setting, and in fact uses Africa to uncover flaws in her characters.

In Blown Figures the novel's form and content balance perfectly through a kind of post-surrealist collage method in which the metaphorical--or invented--appears beside the collected artifacts. The result is an extremely self-reflexive narrative which places into question any form of representation. Unlike the story "Out in the Midday Sun," the symbol of Africa does not lift to reveal some essential reality; instead, as E.K. unknowingly discovers in "Omo," that essence remains uninterpretable. For the reader,

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[70] Clifford, 146.

Africa becomes a bizarre and unsettling landscape of the mind (as promised by the epigraph by Sir Thomas Browne, "We have all Africa and her prodigies/Within us"), as well as a collection of "real" information, fragmented and decontextualized so as to undermine both romantic and rational, fixed notions shaped by the accretions of Africanist discourse.

As I have previously mentioned. Hammond and Jablow's book identifies the image of Africa with the labyrinth in twentieth century fiction. "The journey through the labyrinth results in a confrontation with ultimate truth," they write, but they add that most novels are less inclined towards the extremity of Conrad's depiction of the "horror": "In [Graham] Greene's novels, for example, the hero's deaths are accompanied by transfiguration, but more often the modern Theseus emerges alive from his encounter in the African labyrinth, a new and better man."[71] Whereas this convention distorts and sensationalizes Africa by conjuring dark, threatening images, in Blown Figures the twisting, fragmented structure of the novel acts as a labyrinth through which readers grope their way, but also mirrors the experience of Isobel, whose female self searches for a means to break down the labyrinth of paternal discourse. Paradoxically, Thomas superimposes a new labyrinth onto

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[71] Hammond and Jablow, 144. The reference to Graham Greene here is especially apt: in Latakia Rachel quotes Greene, calling him "one of my mentors" (54).

older constructions in order to disorient readers and compel them to revise conventional assumptions about Africa. Thomas's labyrinth, however, has no way out; it is, she recognizes, yet another construction, yet another representation. Despite Isobel's desire to escape--at one point her husband, Jason, comments, "Isobel doesn't live, she exits" (22)--Thomas denies her the comfort of expiation through a foreign ritual, subverting instead the valorization of primitivism and exposing it as a romantic vision in which the Other acts as a screen onto which the West projects itself.

The linguistic oppression of women in one of its most potent forms--romance--therefore partially reflects how Africa has come to be used as a means to establish both personal and political mastery. And in subverting the romance form, Blown Figures also participates in a revision of the image of Africa.

In an article which identifies Isobel with Odysseus's wife, Penelope, Robert Diotte notes the way in which Thomas rewrites The Odyssey by freeing Penelope to wander instead of waiting at home.[72] Even in Mrs Blood, though, Isobel's

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[72] Robert Diotte, "The Romance of Penelope: Audrey Thomas's Isobel Carpenter Trilogy," Canadian Literature 86 (Autumn 1980), 60. Diotte seems ambivalent and dissatisfied with his own identification of Isobel with Penelope, however. While he detects Thomas's subversion of the epic romance, he can still insist that "Blown Figures doesn't measure up to the epic vastness it promises in the first few pages" (67).

very immobility subverts the romance form while evoking many of its permutations through her very active imaginative wanderings. The image of waiting woman is exposed as a male construct as Thomas shows both the damage this discourse has wrought on women, and the linguistic struggle to break free and reach an elusive female self-definition.

In his essay on the romance form, Northrop Frye writes, "The perenially child-like quality of romance is marked by its extraordinarily persistent nostalgia, its search for some kind of imaginative golden age in time and space."[73] Part of the romance of Africa derives from its distance from the West, allowing writers to conjure an exotic world where characters wander unfettered by social constraints, yet remain secure in the knowledge that they are supported by colonialist power structures. Thomas's repeated parody of this aspect of the romance builds until the reader begins to realize that even her use of Sir Thomas Browne in the epigraph is ironic. And Browne's words are echoed in the line, "I speak of Africa and golden joys" (267).

It is certainly no coincidence that this latter fragment appears amidst a large cluster of nursery rhymes that span approximately thirty pages of the novel. "Medieval" language such as that suggested by "Dame, get up, and bake your pie!/Oh, dilly, dilly, dilly!" (268) becomes

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[73] Northrop Frye, Anatomy of Criticism (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1957), 186.

linked to a rhyme on noble lineage--"Rock-a-bye, baby,/Your cradle is green,/Father's a nobleman,/Mother's a Queen--" (256)--and the epic journey is perhaps alluded to in the following lines: "And here we go backward and forward,/And here we go round, round, roundy" (261). Besides other allusions to babies and to the conventional role of women, like so many nursery rhymes the ones Thomas chooses to include are often violent: "Tell Tale Tit,/Your tongue shall be split,/And all the dogs in our town/Shall have a little bit!" (258). Thomas's inclusion of these rhymes, and the seemingly incongruous quotation on Africa and its golden joys, points to one of her major subversive strategies. The violence innate to so many nursery rhymes works in tension with their innocent, skipping form. In this case, they also appear nonsensical because they are isolated from context. In an earlier fragment the narrator had described her movements as "crabwise," and Thomas too indirectly parodies the innocence and naivete of the epic romance through these rhymes, while she alludes to the violence they have done to women and to the distortions they have created about Africa.

The acquisitive version of Africa is broadened and given an aura of romance and mystery reminiscent of Laurence's description in the opening pages of <u>The Prophet's Camel Bell</u>:

> "Africa," she said. "There it is." People clustered around the rails. Africa! Those

> whose first sight it was felt a shiver of--what? excitement? fear--at this heat-smudged vision. Those to whom Africa was merely another word, or so they thought, still could not take their eyes away. For them, perhaps, it was the universal cry of Land! rather than the specific thrill of Africa! but something drew them to the rails. (104)

An Australian couple, old Africa hands, warn Isobel not to travel alone, the husband offering his evaluation: "The African is a splendid fellow...so long as he's led" (104).

At one point Thomas also plays with popular detective romance forms in order to force the reader into an awareness of how popular culture often dictates perception when, as Isobel is detained at a border, the narrative pauses:

> Frozen, for an instant, in a snapshot, how would you construe this scene? The three-bladed fan, the crowd, the single European woman with her hand half-raised to her damp forehead, the man behind the wooden table--.... What has happened? Is someone being bribed? (144)

The function, then, of the collage of quotations, clippings, and other "foreign" bodies of information seemingly placed at random within the text, is not only to disorientate the reader, but to act as a kind of subversive running commentary, a polyphony of voices, on the plot. In particular, they undermine the romance form in order to comment on the use of language to oppress both women and Africa.

Frye identifies three stages in the quest romance:

> the stage of the perilous journey and the preliminary minor adventures; the crucial struggle, usually some kind of battle in which either the hero or his foe, or both, must die; and the exaltation of the hero... Thus the romance expresses more clearly the passage from struggle through a point of ritual death to a recognition scene....[74]

Thomas clearly ironizes this form, repeatedly channeling it into a female perspective, while also remaining aware of the conventional role of Africa in such romances.

The purpose of Isobel's quest is clearly explained:

> She knew what was wrong, and why, and what to do about it. She understood and accepted the terrible pull of the dead, knew she was as haunted as any old derelict house of her childhood, that there was within her a small ghost which had to be propitiated and set free. She had killed the child and then ignored its corpse--blasphemed the ghost-mother by her actions, her sacrilege, and thought she could get away with it. (194)

These thoughts occur while Isobel lingers at the White Fathers Mission. The complacent materiality of the Fathers, reflected in the descriptions of eating and of their ebony and ivory rosaries, contrasts with the insistent throbbing of drums outside the mission for the death of a young man. Isobel can find no spiritual sustenance through any male-

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[74] Frye, 187.

dominated orthodox religion; the very name of their order suggests a double colonization--of both woman and Africa. The quietly placed emphasis through repetition on the rational--"she knew," "she understood"--in Isobel's description, alongside the intuitive belief in ritual may indicate the extent of Isobel's delusions and her fractured psychic health, but it also uncovers the spiritual vacuum she finds at the mission. She concludes: "if there were to be rituals and exorcisms she would have to find them out herself--they could not be thrust upon her" (218).

Isobel, perhaps, is searching for a village described in one of the many fragments: "Somewhere in this land there is a sacred village in which no one is allowed to die. Nor is any woman there allowed to bleed" (337). In her quest, Isobel arrives at the Volta River where she waits for a ferry. The physical aspect of Africa merges with the symbolic:

> Just so might the dead souls have waited for Charon and his ferryboat. The sound of the Moslem's prayer, the grey water, the drowned trees, the sun which seemed to be stuck like a terrible burning lens above the huge silent crowd: the whole atmosphere was one of dream or myth. They were all shades--perhaps her dead child, arms outstretched in greeting, would run towards her on the other side. But she had no coin, nor honeycake; perhaps the ferryman would not take her. (462)

Thomas draws attention to her epic structure here only to parody the male epic journey, and in doing so the "real" Africa fades. This is one of the many moments in Blown Figures which draws the reader's attention to the act of writing, and clearly depicts the process by which geography dissolves into metaphor.

During the final stage of Isobel's journey, Thomas more openly signals her parodic intent by suggesting the possibility that Isobel is a creation of her I-narrator:

> Isobel, at any second I can pluck you like a paw-paw from a tree. However, I will let you dance a little longer. "Ripeness is all." The landscape changed to the "jungley" landscape you remembered and the conical huts of the northern region disappeared. The road was very winding and quite dangerous but for once you were not afraid--the greatest terrors which awaited you in Kumasi cancelled out the less. (477)

The I-narrator's antagonistic attitude may result from her resentment in having to follow epic conventions in order to bring Isobel to her moment of expiation. She, too, is trapped by a paternal discourse even as she creates a female quester. It is as though this narrator grudgingly resigns herself to working within the archetypal journey through the dark regions, or jungle, because she can find no alternative model.

Thomas even includes the ritual death which Frye identifies as the penultimate stage of the quest. In the

jungle Isobel stumbles upon and participates in a burial ceremony of a woman and her child. An old man

> handed the foetus to Isobel who moved forward and placed it in the grave with its dead mother. Suddenly she realized that the dead woman was not African at all, but white. A white woman coloured to look like an African from a distance, her head bound up in cloth. (514)

Isobel finally disappears into the forest followed by village children taunting her with "Basa-Basa" (525). It would seem that she has become "tropenkollered," or "maddened by the tropics," in much the same way as Walter in "Omo" became a "tropenkollered" figure wandering nearly naked through the bush.[75] The ending seems to suggest that Isobel has gone too far, that she cannot be healed of her madness. However, as with so much of Thomas' fiction, the conclusion remains ambivalent. For example, Lois Gottlieb and Wendy Keitner see "dissolution" as a structural principle through which Isobel is able finally to be rid of

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[75] Brantlinger, 212, 215. Brantlinger uses this term, which he notes was used by Captain Otto Lutken and quoted by Ian Watt in Conrad in the Nineteenth Century (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1979), 145, to describe Kurtz. He also writes, "Never far from their civilized surfaces, the potential for being 'defiled'--for 'going native' or becoming 'tropenkollered'--led Europeans again and again to displace their own 'savage' impulses onto Africans." Thomas's intention is notably different.

her old self, and call Isobel's participation in the ceremony "this triumphant salvation."[76]

Another structural device which would seem to support their claim is offered with the pun on tropics. In Latakia the main character had stated that "a writer always lives in the tropics," echoing Camus and suggesting the intensity of the creative act: becoming "tropenkollered" is a condition of the act of writing, not a Kurtz-like derangement. Early in Blown Figures Isobel says,

> "I am off to the Tropics.... I looked it up once. 'Trope:' turning, solstice. 'Trepo:' turn. GK. TROPIKOS. 'circle.' I return to the Tropics. Full circle...."
> (34)

Within the metaphorical structure of the novel Africa acts in part as a trope. As well, Isobel is returning to the Tropics after her miscarriage in Mrs. Blood.

A major change does occur, however, between the Isobel in the two novels, as well as within Blown Figures itself. While on the ship, previous to its departure, Isobel projects her insecurity and indecision onto the sound of the brass drum, which seems to be shouting, "GET OFF GET OFF GET OFF" (14). Paralleling this moment, Isobel once again

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[76] Lois C. Gottlieb and Wend Keitner, "Narrative Technique and the Central Female Character in the Novels of Audrey Thomas," World Literature Written in English 21 (1982), 372.

listens to drums during the ceremony at the end of the novel: "the talking drums began to shout Momra! Momra! Come ye! Come ye! Come ye!" (522). Holding an egg in each hand, she participates in the dance:

> She did not know how it was that she understood the language of the drums and of the horn but the strange insistent sounds Momra! Momra! Mmere dane dane! which went into her heart and her feet as rhythm, which drew her body along as a string, went into her head as words. (522)

As Mrs. Blood, Isobel had given in to the image of Africa as a sinister and treacherous land in which "the talking drums are too far away for me to untangle the threads they weave."[77] In Blown Figures the initial beat of the ship's drum seemingly beating a command to give up her quest finally gives way to the talking drums which Isobel can now understand as she participates in traditional rites along with other African supplicants.

Thomas, then, may be suggesting that her character has undergone a process of cleansing, and that it has taken an immersion into a cultural ritual wholly divorced from the inadequate rituals available in the West. But such a view can only reinforce the image of Africa as a primordial, instinctual force which, when tapped, may purge the questing European. Robert Diotte, for example, suggests as much:

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[77] Thomas, Mrs. Blood, 206.

"The events are terrible in that they can come true. The ceremony Isobel undergoes to get rid of her guilt anxieties reminds us that we still have a capacity for participation in primitive rites."[78]

The novel's conclusion, however, avoids such essentializing pronouncements by extending the parody of romance. In particular, the image of the white woman disguised as an African is echoed by a whole series of fragmented voices placed throughout the novel which, again in parodic fashion, comment on the inadequacy of borrowed rituals. These fragments, in turn, emphasize the sense of dislocation caused by colonialism in order to create a parallel with the alienation Isobel feels, trapped in a discourse constructed by males.

Visually, the most potent comment on such cultural borrowing occurs with the advertisement promoting skin lightener and showing the black skin of a modern woman growing paler before our eyes (474). The smile on the woman's face undermines the ensuing ritual solemnity of the funeral--and the ritual death of Isobel, dressed as an African--even as it indicates the neocolonial impact on African bourgeous society. The romance in its most commercial form--advertising--appears in yet another advertisement which depicts an African man and woman dressed in Western style swim suits. As they admire each other's

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[78] Diotte, 68.

figures, the text promoting a food supplement announces, "don't be SKINNY!" (474). The commercialism of Western forms of communication completely obscures the very real malnutrition suffered by children in many parts of Africa.

Other voices which speak through newspaper clippings resist such commercialism and act as critical commentaries on cultural bromides such as the food supplements. Earlier in the novel a letter to the editor speaks out against cremation as a foreign practice and suggests alternatives which would "retain our culture, but most of all, prove to the developed countries that we do not imitate blindly" (53). Similarly, a religious leader is reported to have warned that "most of the present immoral activities of the youth in the country could be attributed to 'blind imitation' of fashions and ideas from other lands" (418). Thomas emphasizes the ludic possibilities of such blind imitation in the Dear Dolly columns, where letters from the lovelorn (all written by males) plead for advice on how to handle devouring, aggressive women. Dolly's advice to one such writer, afraid because he believes his girlfriend's parents to be cannibals, is to confront them and watch their reaction: "If they reach for the saucepan, make a dash for the door!" (421).

By including such fragments and scraps, Thomas manipulates a complex set of responses which together subvert the epic quest form to such an extent that the novel

becomes a parodic anti-romance. The voices of resistance to "blind imitation," as well as the wildly incongruous situations such as those described in the Miss Dolly columns which humorously emphasize the results of such imitation, are also voices speaking out against neocolonialism in some of its most insidious forms. The epic romance in its fully realized historical manifestation was colonialism; the "blind imitation" which is so widely evident appears in its actual form on the many occasions Isobel meets victims of river blindness. The horrible and marvelous accounts of cannibalism, dismemberment, and strange religious rites sent back to a hungry readership by romantic adventurers are ridiculed, even as the more prosaic versions Thomas includes in her novel indicate a very real malaise within modern African society caused by the successors to these wandering adventurers.

Thomas's subtle parody of the romance form, then, also implicates such narratives in the history of colonialism. If this is the case, her heroine's purgation through African ritual in the final scenes of the novel would counteract the very subversive strategies Thomas employs; it would be yet another appropriation of the subject in the guise of a feminine romance. Instead, Thomas continues the parody right through to the end of the novel. Isobel, the female "heroine" seeking expiation, journeying through a threatening landscape and repeatedly being rescued by men--

and repeatedly rejecting their subsequent advances--is brought to the verge of an expiatory experience only to be turned aside. Much earlier in the novel, the I-narrator had suggested as much:

> ...I marvel at this idea of yours that you have really undertaken this journey to exorcise your demons. Don't you know that the journey, as well as the exorcism, is of no use whatsoever; and if you think you are going to prove to Jason how brave and well and strong you are, then you are very much mistaken because at this moment he does not care one way or another what is happening to you.... (219)

If a moment of self-realization does occur, it takes place, ironically, during a quiet moment before the more dramatic conclusion. Isobel's repulsion at Delilah's easy attitude towards abortion softens after they reach Kumasi and before she boards the bus and enters the forest: "Is she not as trapped as you are? Go to her, lend her your right hand, the bus is here" (413). And in a line which reverberates back to Richard's final command in Mrs. Blood--"Get rid of it"--she says, "Delilah. It'll be all right. We'll get rid of it somehow" (414).

The tears which follow, again reminiscent of the nurses' human-kindness in Mrs Blood, suggest their mutual sympathy at the realization that they are trapped, much as Isobel the "romantic" (411) is trapped in the male discourse of epic romance. While their moment of consolation offers

no immediate escape from their predicament as women, the novel's anti-romantic play does suggest the possibilities for resistance, and the final pages--all blank--act as an invitation to the reader, perhaps, to rewrite the story, to create a fresh narrative free of the assumptions embedded in the romance form which have been exposed and parodied throughout.

Paradoxically, the pages also emphasize the duplicity of language by their very blankness, and by extension, language as a form of colonization, as a form of power, by making the reader consider the act of writing and, therefore, think back on what has already been written. In Mrs. Blood Thomas used a series of newspaper advertisements and articles to suggest as much. An article describing a corporation's use of "black legs," a kind of fascist police force formed to subdue revolutionary spirit, is followed by a "For Sale" advertising a stereo, golf clubs, a watch, and binoculars, the seller ironically named "Nede Newman" (Mrs. Blood, 120). These are preceded by two other headlines: "SLEEPING SICKNESS" and "LANGUAGE COLONIZED THEM" (119-120). Thomas's warning is clear, and emphasizes the need to "wake up" to the way in which language supports power structures, in both their colonial and masculinist forms.

Besides operating as a means to expose the effects of neocolonialism and parodying Western visions of Africa, though, the newspaper articles, as well as the descriptions

of African myths and rituals, also combine to present a richer and more complex view of the synchronic experience of traditional and modern Africa. These "artifacts" are allowed to stand on their own without any explanatory commentary, forcing the reader to widen his or her perceptual field and re-think typical notions of Africa.[79]

In yet another technique, Thomas suggests how the imaginative process works as she places records of descriptions of African ceremonies given by what sound like ethnographic informants after the fictional account of Isobel's attempted "exorcism:"

> "About nine o'clock--it was earlier, I was told, in the zestful days of the first priest--the talking drums shout MOMRA MOMRA, Come Ye, Come Ye. The elders, other drummers, shrine officials and the priest's wives then assemble in the walled yard, the gates being as yet unopened to the populace."
>
> (527)
>
> The old priest began to dance as soon as the sun was directly overhead.
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> (530)
>
> In their fireplace they put a human finger for firewood and they pour blood on it, but what they do to make it catch fire I do not know.
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> (536)

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[79] Louis K. MacKendrick notes that in the American edition of Blown Figures the African newspaper clippings are duplicated from the originals. See "A Peopled Labyrinth of Walls: Audrey Thomas' Blown Figures," Present Tense: A Critical Anthology, ed. John Moss (Toronto: New Canadian Press Ltd., 1985), 180. This would certainly give a much more visually immediate experience of foreign objects incorporated into a collage.

Thomas, in part, may be suggesting how the I-narrator created her setting by sifting through African newspapers, anthropological studies, and other sources. By including the material that, collected together, aided in the making of Blown Figures, Thomas also documents the way in which representations are fashioned and manipulated, while ensuring that her own setting--Africa--remains outside any one fixed image. The blank pages at the end of the novel further act as a stark warning about such assumptions as the transparency of language.

With her collage-like method, Thomas demands a great deal from the reader. As with Mrs. Blood, she uses the play of language to explore the associative power of words--as her insertion of many dictionary definitions, such as "Tropics," underscores--and to force the reader to reassess ethnocentric and phallocentric perceptions. Barbara Godard writes,

> If Mrs. Blood is about the character's quest for signs and significance, Blown Figures is about the reader's quest for meaning, about an inward trip into our own minds. The journey is ours as we fabricate the connections, "make" the story, seek out the linear links between points on the journey in hopes of finding formal consolation.[80]

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[80] Godard, 46.

The readers' compulsion to order, to perceive in the mirror of fiction an ontological structure which supports and strengthens their own perceptions of themselves and their world, is everywhere frustrated. Like Isobel, we too become "tropenkollered" during our sojourn; however, again like Isobel, our own maddening experience may (or may not) enable us to cast off that cultural baggage and widen our perception and understanding outside the confines of our culture.

Chapter Three

Dave Godfrey's Deforming Vision

i. Contested Realities

Dave Godfrey's concern with the impact of colonialism and other forms of political and personal oppressions draws his novel, The New Ancestors, away from the realm of metaphor, placing it in a broader context of struggle.[1] Following in the wake of writers such as Frantz Fanon and Aimé Césaire, Godfrey participates in a literature of resistance which refuses traditional representations of Africa. At the same time, he subverts the notion of the author as authority in order to decentre and move beyond such oppositions as the observer and the observed and the colonizer and the colonized. Godfrey radically disrupts conventional visions of Africa by deforming them into a surreal fracturing of images which confounds perceptual clarity. The image of Africa at times sharpens into focus, but more often remains blurred as though caught in the reader's peripheral vision. This effect serves to deny the official version of Africa constructed over centuries by the West.

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[1] Dave Godfrey, The New Ancestors (Toronto: New Press, 1970). The page references for all quotations cited from this novel will appear after the quotation, and will be taken from the New Canadian Library Edition (Toronto: McClelland and Stewart Ltd., 1984).

Godfrey's novel shares many similarities with Audrey Thomas's two African novels. Blown Figures and The New Ancestors use the same epigraph by Sir Thomas Browne, both authors set their novels in Ghana, and Godfrey too explores madness and obsession. Like Thomas, Dave Godfrey also displays a suspicion for and subversion of the conventional narrative form, and of past representations of Africa. But, while Thomas's characters fail to recognize and accept the Other in the double sense of the Africans they meet and their own selves, Godfrey's narrative technique struggles with a tension between the desire to go beyond otherness and the refusal to efface difference.

A short story Godfrey published three years before The New Ancestors entitled "The Hard-Headed Collector" anticipates his novel in its style and its concern with colonialism.[2] The story tells of seven men who journey from the Queen Charlotte Islands to the Bay Chaleur in a quest for Egsdrull, a tree of mythical proportions. One by one the travellers drop out of the journey until only the leader remains, and his reward is ultimately refused him. Godfrey employs elements of the fantastic to evoke a timeless, mythic quality which infuses the characters' quest with an almost sacred purpose. Juxtaposed with the main narrative are what may be excerpts from a newspaper article

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[2] Dave Godfrey, DEATH GOES BETTER WITH COCA-COLA, 2nd edition (Ontario: Press Porcepic, 1973).

describing the life of a businessman named Mr. Hirshorn and the bequest of his art collection to Washington. The contents of the collection are ignored in favour of the prestige and power it confers on the United States capital. Such disregard for the collection itself, and the off-handed report of Mr. Hirshorn's acquisition of what would be roughly one quarter of Ontario, suggest why the group of artists are unsuccessful in their quest. The variety of language registers, inclusion of "real" material, ironic tone, ideograms, and often oblique references, of course, are also characteristic of The New Ancestors.

Godfrey's story is in part an allegory describing the ravages of imperialism. Like his novel, "The Hard-Headed Collector" sets up an opposition which generates others and the narrative attempts to force its way through the many barriers towards a resolution which is denied. W. H. New's description of the story could apply equally to Godfrey's novel:

> As the technologically useful takes precedence over the beautiful in the life of a society, the profitable and powerful take precedence over the true and the emotionally genuine in its scale of values. In such an environment, heroism becomes less possible, even less admirable, and the heroic romance carries less appeal...[3]

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[3] William H. New. "Godfrey's Uncollected Artist," Ariel 3-4 (1972-3), 7.

Godfrey's allegorical warning to Canadians regarding the dangers of colonialism, not the least being the loss of a unique identity, is broadened in The New Ancestors to consider colonialism in its historical context--the scramble for Africa--and the crippling aftermath. By the time he writes his novel, the linear movement dictated by the quest pattern has been fractured as even the archetypal journey, so integral to Western literature, is subverted. As was noted with regard to Margaret Laurence's fiction, popular literature on Africa often used the quest romance as a means to glorify the imperialist cause. Godfrey's concern for Canadian autonomy is transferred to Africa in the form of a violent denunciation of colonialism and its postcolonial traces, and a subversion of those complicit narratives which fixed a whole continent in the minds of the West.

The structure of The New Ancestors reflects this subversion as it enacts the absence of any controlling certainty in its circular design. The novel is divided into six sections, including a prologue. The final section, "The Agada Notebook," records the thoughts of the main European character, Michael Buxton, alias Burdener, in January, 1966, while the Prologue, dated 5 February, 1966, introduces Burdener as an expatriate whose involvement with a counter-revolutionary group known as the "Core" leads to his deportation. At the end of the Prologue Burdener's notebooks are given to a British Council official, Geoffrey

Firebank, who forwards them to Britain. The second section, called "The London Notebook," is dated summer, 1965, and is presumably composed of one of the notebooks Firebank had sent to Burdener. In it we learn that Burdener taught at various schools in Lost Coast, had married Ama Harding, and, as with the later period described in the Prologue, had been deported at least once before. "The London Notebook" also records the death of their son, Cricket, probably by drowning, and Burdener's growing disillusionment with the Lost Coast government headed by Kruman, better known as the "Redeemer." While it looks back on Burdener's childhood and his life in Lost Coast, the notebook also looks ahead as the section concludes with Burdener's resolve to accept the invitation by First Samuels (Ama's half-brother) to return to Africa.

"A Child of Delicacy," the third section, also dated 5 February, 1966, describes the thoughts of Burdener's wife, Ama, as she awaits the arrival of a friend from her school days, nurses her child, and agonizes over her relationship with Burdener and his lengthy absence. Ama's thoughts inform us of her past, but the section also complements and fills in many gaps about Burdener's past in Lost Coast. The next section, "Freedom Peoples' Party," spans the year from February, 1965 to February, 1966. It, therefore, covers the period of Burdener's earlier life in Lost Coast as well as his later return following "The London Notebook," and

broadens the context into the political realm as it follows First Samuels' involvement with a group of young counter-revolutionaries called the Core, their disastrous attempt to sabotage the huge Kruba Dam project, and the death of First Samuels following his murder of Ama's brother, Gamaliel Harding.

The precise time period in which events occur in the section called "In the Fifth City" remains uncertain. It does, however, incorporate within it many of the strands found throughout the novel, but, in keeping with the novel's overall sense of fragmentation, deforms them in such a way that they shift and merge into a surreal delirium of images which centre on the repeated murder of an enigmatic American named Rusk. Within its circular structure the novel accommodates proverbs, a psychiatric transcript, epigraphs in different languages and registers, and presents experience as a seemingly random scattering of fragments with no clear beginning or ending, circulating within the frame of the novel.

The New Ancestors has received limited critical attention, at least partly because of its difficulty. Calvin L. Smiley warns that the novel is "so obscure in its meaning that anyone wishing to understand it fully could easily get confused or discouraged."[4] Full of

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[4] Calvin L. Smiley, "Godfrey's Progress," Canadian Literature 75 (Winter 1977), 27.

exasperation, Theresia Quigley concludes that "the effort to read and understand this novel is an exercise in mental gymnastics."[5] Alasdair A. MacDonald suspects that it may be a roman à clef, since "anyone reading The New Ancestors for the story might be tempted to hang himself...."[6] More exotically, John Moss has described the novel as a "massive koan," and, in an illuminating analysis, writes,

> Some read it as a political novel; some, a literary pastiche; some might find it parastic [sic] anthropology; and some will take it as psychological witness. It is, of course, all these and more. The theme is reality and consciousness. Reading it for meaning and order makes distortions inevitable. It does not mean but is.[7]

In particular, the section entitled "In the Fifth City" has frustrated many critics. The words most often used to describe this chapter, but also other parts of the novel, are "pastiche," "collage," and "surrealistic."[8] In an

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[5] Theresia Quigley, "The New Ancestors: A Critical Analysis," Antigonish Review, 28-31 (1977), 71.

[6] Alasdair A. MacDonald, "Illusions Perdues: The New Ancestors Revisited," Dalhousie Review 60 (1980/81), 707.

[7] John Moss, Sex and Violence in the Canadian Novel (Toronto: McClelland and Stewart, 1977), 224, 200.

[8] See Jane E. Leney, "'In the Fifth City:' An Integral Chapter of The New Ancestors," Canadian Literature, 96 (Spring 1983), 72; A.C. Morrell, "The I and the Eye in the Desert: The Political and Philosophical Key to Dave Godfrey's The New Ancestors," Studies in Canadian Literature, 12.2 (1987), 264. See also Quigley, 61, and Smiley, 38.

effort to make sense of this section, Jane E. Leney has carefully explained the fetish called "kambu" which acts as a central image.[9] Earlier, Robert Margeson's article had made the novel more accessible by ordering the novel's events chronologically, and also including translations of the Akan proverbs which head the beginning of each chapter of the "People's Freedom Party" section.[10]

All of this effort represents, to varying degrees, attempts to place the novel into contexts which will make it more accessible to the Western reader, attempts which naturally derive from the expectation that meaning in the novel arises from the narrative flow. Stephen Heath describes such expectations as being part of an assumption of a familiar set of conventions:

> A story is to be extracted from the text which, as it were, instrumentally assures its passage. This is the product that the text offers to the reader...; the point of the text's fulfilment of the reader-consumer in order to read the text. The text is the moment of an act of exchange and what is exchanged (the merchandise) is the story. Faith in the contract, which is, in fact, not known as such but as a set of 'natural' expectations is sacrosanct; the reader must be able to assume the validity of the question 'Que'

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[9] Leney, 72-80.

[10] Robert W. Margeson, "A Preliminary Interpretation of The New Ancestors," Journal of Canadian Fiction 4 (1975-6), 96-110.

> arrive-t-il donc...?,' of the demand of the story.[11]

Considering the Marxist-based ideological politics of the Freedom Peoples' Party, Heath's general observation on such readers' assumptions would seem apt. Heath incorporates religious language into the language of capitalism to highlight a righteous expectation for coherent meaning on the part of many readers. If not fulfilled, then time has been wasted. Heath implicitly describes an acquisitory form of knowledge which seeks to confine the novel within the limits of conventional assumptions: having purchased the book, the consumer should "own" the story.

Such expectations are certainly reasonable, but they also indicate a mode of reading which feels uncomfortable with plurality and difference. Novels tend to get more "difficult" the further they venture from realism into the world of metaphor or myth, or the stream of consciousness and surrealist modes which Godfrey employs. But even here the reader assumes that the novel's meaning will unveil itself since we share a common archetypal experience. Northrop Frye's Anatomy of Criticism remains a monument to order, to the assurance that literature does address reality in ways which can be classified and categorized. But Frye's

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[11] Stephen Heath, The Nouveau Roman: A Study in the Practice of Writing (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1972), 137.

critical approach assumes that the worlds of myth and ritual which exist in other cultures, and which have for so long been the domain of anthropologists and ethnologists, share a common origin with those of the West and can be studied collectively and categorized. Many recent critics, though, writing in the field of anthropology, have paused in their writing about the other to wrestle with the problem of representation and authenticity. In other words, the West's hegemonic compulsion to dominate encompasses all facets of social, political, and cultural life to the extent that the act of reading, just like the study of another culture, for example, also involves the desire to impose systems of meaning in order to assimilate the text.

Describing the complex interplay between the observing subject and the observed, Roland Barthes emphasizes the interdependence of the subject/object, asking the question in psychological terms, "who should be paying whom," and in political terms, "who should be exploiting whom"? He then links the problem of subject formation in anthropology to language:

> In the act of anthropological inter-subjective interpretation, a fundamental discrepancy always prevents the observer from coinciding fully with the consciousness he is observing. The same discrepancy exists in everyday language, in the impossibility of making the actual sign coincide with what it signifies. It is the distinctive privilege of language to be able to hide meaning

> behind a misleading sign, as when we hide rage or hatred behind a smile.[12]

Barthes here stresses the apparent futility of "knowing" the other, or of discovering a language which is somehow unmediated.

In a more political context Robert Young labels such a desire "ontological imperialism":

> In Western philosophy, when knowledge or theory comprehends the other, then the alterity of the latter vanishes as it becomes part of the same.... In all cases the other is neutralized as a means of encompassing it: ontology amounts to a philosophy of power, an egotism in which the relation with the other is accomplished through its assimilation into the self.[13]

These issues circulate in both colonial and postcolonial literature, with the former having evolved a set of conventions which act as screens to prevent the risk of inter-subjective knowledge and to securely place the other in a marginal, silenced position.

In an effort to free itself from such stereotypes and challenge the centre, postcolonial literature underscores the paradox of the subject/object situation, very often by using language in unexpected ways. In traditional literary

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[12] Roland Barthes, cited in Paul de Man, Blindness and Insight (New York: Oxford University Press, 1971), 11.

[13] Robert Young, White Mythologies: Writing, History and the West (London: Routledge, 1990), 13.

terms, past explorers, ethnographers, missionaries, and writers sought to make the strange familiar, to evoke the exotic in order to tame it and exaggerate difference so as to further justify the colonial project. V.Y. Mudimbe calls this process an "ordering of otherness."[14] Mudimbe offers as an example how Africa was etymologically linked to Abraham's son, Afer, while also represented in bizarre images. He concludes, "The African has become not only the Other who is everyone else except me, but rather the key which, in its abnormal differences, specifies the identity of the Same."[15] Beginning, however, in approximately the 1960's with the slow movement towards independence writers from the liberated colonies began to reverse the process, to make the "familiar" strange by taking possession of and shaping their unique difference from the West.

Godfrey participates in this reversal by omitting cultural markers familiar to the Western reader and refusing to repeat formulaic conventions in representing Africa. In The New Ancestors Godfrey uses aggressive strategies of defamiliarization to explore the impact of colonialism, imperialism, and independence on the individual. His narrative technique mirrors the societal fragmentation caused by the violence of a colonialist past even as it

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[14] V.Y. Mudimbe, The Invention of Africa: Gnosis, Philosophy, and the Order of Knowledge (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1988), 12.

[15] Mudimbe, 12.

functions as a barrier to any repetition through the act of reading. His strategies are radically different from Margaret Laurence, who, nevertheless, as an amateur explorer, ethnographer, and writer in colonial Somaliland avoided such "ontological imperialism" through, paradoxically, her very desire to efface difference. Her sympathy was such that she discovered, to her profound disappointment, that she could never truly comprehend a culture so different from her own.

Godfrey's novel thrusts the reader out of the security of the colonial compound and into a position which might be compared to that of an expatriate. Expatriates, for whatever reasons, enter a foreign country, participate in the work assigned to them, then depart. The depth of involvement in things other than those which touch upon the contracted work depends upon the individual, who may remain aloof or, as Geoffrey Firebank, the British Council man who figures in the Prologue of The New Ancestors observes about an American Peace Corps worker, scramble "Down in the dirt getting the job done" (13). Unlike a tourist, the expatriate has the opportunity to delve more deeply into the host culture in order to gain some understanding of its dynamics, but, as Laurence discovered, knowledge will remain incomplete as a sense of dislocation persists. The reader, too, enters the world of the novel for a time, enters into a "contract," then closes the book after having skimmed the

surface or having become deeply involved. In much Africanist discourse, however, the reader is a kind of voyeur who peers into an exotic locale, expecting the unexpected, perhaps horrified by the spectacle, but secretly delighted. What, too often, is not recognized is how such an act implicates the reader.

Whereas Audrey Thomas focuses the reader's attention on the subjective experience of her foreigners, who at times attempt an objective look outward at the surrounding world, Godfrey even more intensely places into question subjective and objective experience. In The New Ancestors the reader is provided limited access to the content of the book whose cover beckons, frustrated by the effort of trying to organise and understand information, and is continually pushed to the fringes, much like the main European character, Michael Burdener. The vicarious satisfaction of the novel of expiation in which the white man goes forth to finally discover his human flaws, identified as a recurring pattern in novels on Africa by Michael Echeruo, undergoes a severe disruption.[16] As the novel opens Burdener leaves Africa in a state of disgrace, and despite his efforts to move into the centre of the story he is continually pushed to the periphery. As with Thomas' story, "Omo," other

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[16] Michael J.C. Echeruo, Joyce Cary and the Novel of Africa (New York: Africana, 1973).

voices claim a space, which effectively place Burdener's motives, presence, and actions into question.

The New Ancestors, then, holds a curious place within postcolonial literature. Written from the centre, it seeks to bring back Godfrey's African experience in the form of fiction, much like writers such as Joyce Cary, Elspeth Huxley, Conrad, and many others: despite the epigraph by Sir Thomas Browne, Godfrey has said the novel "is about Africa."[17] His intention was "to really show what an African society revolution was like," thereby placing the novel within a specific historical period which ranges from pre- to post-independence.[18] Literally, the novel reflects the compound word "post-colonial" as it crosses back and forth in time to show how the traces of the colonial past act to disrupt the present. But The New Ancestors also takes part in a violent disruption of the centre's traditional control by exposing--through the use of parody, multiple perspectives, a labyrinthine narrative structure, untranslated speech and texts, and fragmented language--the violence wrought upon a culture by both colonialism and neo-colonialism.

In a double sense, then, Godfrey's novel illuminates the complicity inherent in the term, "postcolonial": his

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[17] Graeme Gibson, Eleven Canadian Novelists (Toronto: Anansi Press, 1973), 163.

[18] Gibson, 162.

decision to speak on behalf of Africa and in opposition to past versions of the continent is problematized by his own historical position as a white Canadian.[19] Such a venture, therefore, also faces the risk of finding itself in a kind of no-man's land. Godfrey's concern with maintaining the integrity of the Africa he represents--a concern made evident through the political content with its thinly-veiled indictment of Kwame Nkrumah and sympathetic portrayal of individuals fragmented by the past and the present, and practised through his strategy of defamiliarization--perhaps widens the gap between the centre and the periphery even as it discovers that its voice cannot find refuge in a culture different from that of the author's own. As both critic and sympathetic observer, Godfrey presents a harsh critique of imperialism while also introducing a hateful character like Michael Burdener, inevitably inviting the reader to identify with some of its African characters, but also closing off the opportunity to participate fully in those characters' cultural and personal lives.

If, as Alisdair MacDonald speculates, The New Ancestors is a roman à clef, then perhaps the key may be found in another of Godfrey's writings. While working as a teacher in Ghana with CUSO he wrote the essay, "Letter to an

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[19] Godfrey's position is certainly more tenuous than that of a writer such as V.S. Naipaul, whose complicity derives from his decision to critically observe his country of origin, as well as other non-Western countries, from a position within the centre.

American Negro," which he describes as a "reportage of my impressions of Africa" in the form of a letter to an unnamed (perhaps fictional) African American who had expressed a desire to move to Ghana.[20] Many of the places, people, and events in his novel are mentioned in the essay, which Godfrey wrote on the eve of the referendum called to install Kwame Nkrumah as head of a one-party state. Godfrey describes in passing Ghanaian street life, cynical students from the Workers' College, the firing of Chief Justice Korsah and detainment of the Cabinet Ministers whom Korsah had cleared of charges of treason, as well as government hypocrisy, and the new elite. He also describes his trip to Mali--"the fairytaleness of being to Tombouctou" (190)-- and of spending his trip down the Niger on the rear deck of a pirogue, battling an attack of dysentery.

Many other concerns noted in the essay reappear in The New Ancestors, not least of which are observations on "rumour-mongering" (211), which surfaces everywhere in his novel under the guise of espionage, spying, and the general collapse of trust. In part the essay also provides a rationale for Godfrey's narrative technique in the novel. More central to Godfrey's purpose in the essay, though, are his observations, delivered in a coolly ironic tone, on the

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[20] Dave Godfrey, "Letter to an American Negro," in Bill WcWhinney, Dave Godfrey, ed. Man Deserves Man: Cuso in Developing Countries (Toronto: Ryerson Press, 1968), 187. Hereafter, all page references will be cited following the quotation.

myth of Africa on the one hand, and Nkrumah's uniquely African form of communism on the other. This duality of past and present also of course informs much of the novel.

In describing his flight to Africa, Godfrey foreshortens time. His first glimpse of the Sahara comes at sunset and he is awed by its primeval beauty: it is "fearsome, immense, primitive as rock.... A real power, not the power of evokers" (191). Flying into the darkness, Godfrey imagines history flashing forward through the centuries: "the old empires of Ghana and Mali and Songhai" and "the gold and slaves the old empires had sent north" (191). Finally, he registers the shock of the present as the lights of Accra appear, "that webbing of electric lights that heralds any city at night from the air" (191). Perhaps unconsciously, Godfrey describes the trip as a flight from light into darkness, but his mode of travel and the electric lights which greet him signal a major alteration in popular perceptions of Africa. As the narrator comments in The New Ancestors, "Kurtz has long since escaped to Arabia. The Cape Cairo walk is terminated. There is no forest of ghosts nearby" (346).[21]

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[21] Godfrey's description of his entry into Africa by airplane, where he is jarred by finding a city little different from cities in Canada, is neatly paralleled in Timothy Findley's The Headhunter, where Kurtz travels (from Arabia?) by plane, following the St. Laurence River into the interior to Toronto.

The spacious flat which awaits Godfrey compounds his shock, adding to his sense of disorientation at finding himself in a foreign country which refuses to conform to his expectations. The flat,though, acts acts as a vantage point in the essay from which Godfrey can objectively analyze his surroundings. Mary Louise Pratt has found that the device of observing from an elevated position the outlying panorama was a convention in the writings of British explorers in previous centuries.[22] Godfrey employs the device to frame the major points of his essay: "From the window of my study, on the second floor of a hilltop building, I can see much of the Ghana that is and the Gold Coast that was" (192). Whereas the explorers whom Pratt examines see in their present surroundings promises of future wealth, Godfrey looks for traces of the past as he views the present. He directs our gaze to first one, then the other claw of the "wide-armed crab," which forms the shape of the harbour. On one side stands the town with its mixture of modern and older houses and on the other the remnants of "the 'real' Africa" (192), what he describes as "this village."

For Godfrey, the past and present merge in a coeval clash of disparate sound:

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[22] Mary Louise Pratt, "Scratches on the Face of the Country; or, What Mr. Barrow Saw in the Land of the Bushman," in "Race," Writing, and Difference, ed. Henry Louis Gates, Jr. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1986), 146.

> This morning the harmattan has brought a "fufu" mist, and there has been a death, so I can hear the mysterious pulse seemingly coming from some lost village; but more important, though it is not yet 7:00 a.m., there has been for several hours the roar and honk of thick motor traffic that sounds like it's lost. (193)

The structural balance created through Godfrey's repetition of "lost" suggests an erasure of both presences, an absence caused by a third absent force: the traffic sounds lost, it has lost direction, because its passengers have severed its contact with the spiritual and traditional past; the village, in turn, has lost out to industrialism, itself a result of colonialism. The third force, and Godfrey's primary target in the essay, is that of neo-colonialism and its various manifestations both within Ghana (in the form of a greedy and powerful elite) and from without (as a foreign, communist ideology).

Elsewhere in the essay Godfrey describes these absences as fictions:

> There are two current myths about Africa. One, eternal, older, sees the African as a Shakian force; dark, mysterious, primitive, rapacious. You always felt this in American newspaper reports of the Congo. The other, internal, newer, defensive, sees the African community as some ideal, communal, sinless society destroyed, divided or uprooted by the vile vipers of imperialism; but still remaining an ideal for the newly free countries. (195)

Godfrey rejects both perceptions, seeing instead a dynamic energy fuelled by "an almost incredible feeling of advancement" towards "a somewhat bawdy heaven-on-earth" (189):

> The overwhelming impression is of modernity, sometimes naive in both assumption and aim and often trailing survival from a complex past, but determined and flourishing. The society has been impinged upon by new ideals and goals, and new strands have been added, but the old have been transformed, not uprooted.
>
> (193-4)

Despite this syncretist view of a society adapting the old to the new, and despite Godfrey's desire to avoid simplistic generalization, he finally concedes, and agrees with Time's description of Ghana as a "dictatorship" (197).

The myths of Africa which Godfrey debunks (though, one feels, with a sense of loss) are replaced by a pragmatic analysis and rejection of communism, a pronouncement which also upsets Godfrey's radical liberalism. The events taking place as he writes threaten, in turn, his perception of a dynamic society much different from the myths and also indifferent to Nkrumah's socialist intentions. Repeatedly he reminds us of the subversiveness of his essay. If it were found, "I'd be on the next plane out" (196); his aim is to "describe different strands that are present in the society, using generalization and observations specific enough to preserve my anonymity and that of my sources"

(197). Registering his protest over the referendum, Godfrey accompanies others as they plant NO signs near a ministry building: "We would have been deported if caught; a Ghanaian with us would have been jailed or detained" (210). Godfrey's letter records a movement from idealism to disillusionment: "If you come expecting paradise on earth, be prepared to search elsewhere, for Ghana has found civilization as imperfect as the rest of us" (213), he advises his friend. The New Ancestors is a transformation of this pessimism into fiction, but this time the expatriate, Michael Burdener, is deported for his subversive activities.

The oppositions which Godfrey summons and then rejects in his "Letter to an American Negro" appear in multiple forms in The New Ancestors. Godfrey's oxymoronic title stresses the contradictory, unstable structure of the novel, itself a depiction of a society fragmented and cut off from traditional sources of sustenance. The multiple strands of the novel are held together by a blood-bond which begins with the marriage of Delicacy's mother to a Canadian sailor in 1896, and leads to Ama, her daughter, marrying the Englishman, Michael Burdener, after two of her own marriages break up. The reference to the Canadian sailor (suggesting, perhaps, Canada's unspoken role in the history of colonialism, a perception which underscores the difficulties in attempting to discuss Canadian literature in a common

postcolonial context) indicates one process by which the ancestors have been forgotten, while also associating the "new" ancestors with European or North American values. Contradictions abound, not the least being the portrayal by a "European" writer of an African country torn apart by its colonial past and neo-colonial present.

Godfrey's name for the country--Lost Coast--acknowledges this complicity. A coast can be reached from the sea or the interior; it is by definition the margin or border of the land next to the sea. Historically, explorers, missionaries, military powers, and merchants penetrated inland from the coast which, in being given definition, was lost to the original inhabitants. Writing from across the water, Godfrey repeats this invasion, inventing a fictional country whose geographical appearance (drawn, out of context, before the prologue) and demographics are practically identical to the actual country of Ghana.

A second map depicting the area in which another section of the novel places its action includes actual surrounding countries, except Lost Coast, which, it seems, has been purposely cut out, relegated to the margins, or "lost." Ironically, that part of the narrative set in the fictional Lost Coast, though at times confusing, describes a world of recognizable characters, some of whom are actual historical figures, while the Fifth City section, set in

Mali, evokes a foreign region governed by delirium. Colonialism's denial of subjectivity to the people inhabiting its territory extends into the postcolonial period as the country remains a collection of fragmented fictions, with any unifying reality lost. Paradoxically, though, the very chaotic structure and language of the Lost Coast sections aid in preventing a repetition of past colonialist appropriation, forming a screen which will partly block the reader's gaze, thereby resisting the movement towards "ontological imperialism."

The novel's external efforts to control the story parallel the anarchic forces working to disrupt the ruling party of Lost Coast, while also structurally commenting on the country's system of government. For Lost Coast is a one-party state, where power radiates from the centre, unwilling to tolerate any opposition and denying individuals the right to be heard. Textual resistance appears in the polyvocal design which affords multiple points of view and disrupts orderly chronology. Godfrey, then, targets two forces: the perhaps complacent readership which expects the novel to offer certain recognizable conventions, which can only repeat and reinforce a stereotypical view of Africa, and a repressive political practice based on a self-serving ideology of power.

Both are subverted by the apparent absence of any central author(ity), figured in the absence of father-

figures, the absence of ancestors, the break-up of families, and the recurring theme of madness. But this same absence means that neither the characters of Lost Coast nor the reader from a different cultural background has a guide: a Western reader, faced with Godfrey's refusal to translate many of the cultural referents, is left largely "at sea," while an African reader, whether living inland or along the coast, may feel equally lost.[23] Whereas in "Letter to an American Negro" Godfrey times his essay to correspond with the coming referendum so that the historical event validates the individual writing and offers a conclusion for the letter, in The New Ancestors closure remains deferred, not only for the novel as a whole, but also within many of the scenes. Burdener's departure in the prologue echoes Godfrey's recognition of his own status as outsider, and his own complicity in the creation of a Lost Coast.

Much of the Prologue takes the point of view of Geoffrey Firebank and delineates many of the novel's major concerns in a fairly traditional manner. Firebank's bland avoidance of Ghanaian life effectively cuts him off from the various dramas around him, meaning that the reader also only receives surface impressions of the country. In this sense the epigraph is both apt and provocative: "Dullness, after all, is the garment of nightmare" (1). Through Firebank the

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[23] To my knowledge, no African journal has published any reviews or articles on the novel.

reader learns about some of the problems afflicting Lost Coast, such as food shortages, a decaying infrastructure, poverty, and a xenophobic government. But his main attitude is closer to that of a grudging tourist. Arriving in Agada from his office in Silla, he reminds himself that he must sometime record the local colour: "Each time he arrived in Agada he promised himself that the next time he came he would bring in a camera and spend all day at it. Get it down on film" (5). The conventional camera records the surface of reality and allows the operator to observe yet remain detached from the subject, while all the time obscuring his natural vision, and therefore acts as a comment on Firebank's reluctance to get involved and his concern for his personal and political safety.

The nightmare, or that which lies beneath the dull cloak of Firebank's perception, remains obscured as events are distanced from the reader in a number of ways, but a feeling of subterfuge and intrigue persists. The key events --Burdener's departure, Gamaliel's murder, and the death of First Samuels--remain blurred by a "jumble of gossip and fact" (3). The novel's oblique, multivocal style figures here in the three versions of the murder offered by the local papers, whose articles contribute to and seemingly derive from gossip and rumour. While one states that a fight over a girl led to Gamaliel's death, The Black Evening Star, the paper in which Gamaliel had published his tirades

against forces critical of Kruman, implicates him in a CIA plot to sabotage the Kruba Dam. The third paper avoids sensationalism to offer a reasoned analysis of the country's problems, all but ignoring the actual event. By the time Firebank's assistant, Hastings Ayitteh, offers his conjecture the irony is offered openly: "To Mr. Hastings Ayitteh, who understood the murder fully because of his close personal knowledge of both participants, it was a clear case of wild justice, of revenge inescapable" (10). The warning is clear: the interpretation of events depends entirely on personal and ideological prejudices; in a way analogous to photography, the subject is framed within the writer's cultural field of vision.

Intersecting with the multiple perspectives on Gamaliel's murder, Burdener's departure and the reasons for his arrest remain obscure. Like Isobel in Blown Figures, Burdener is "tropenkollered," or as Firebank describes him, "a touch mad," (4), a "sunmad Englishman" (9). Though his name is mentioned in connection with Gamaliel and First Samuels, even Firebank knows little about Burdener's activities. Local authorities control the forced departure while Firebank and his superior, Bewsher, watch from behind a fence. Casting around, possibly hoping for some form of intervention, Burdener does not notice them "behind the screen" (9).

Besides the background information on various social, political, and economic aspects of Lost Coast, the Prologue constructs a string of uncertainties, only some of which will be clarified in ensuing chapters. The emphasis on observation and interpretation indicates first the unwillingness or inability for one to fully understand another person, even as it parodies the individual's confident understanding of events. The equivalent to Firebank's always forgotten camera is the fence which screens him from Burdener's view. Even if Firebank did remember his camera and managed to "get it all down," the photographs would only be his selective version of Lost Coast, suggesting that experience cannot attain complete objectivity, that to attempt to have it do so is to live behind a screen of passivity.

Godfrey, then, alerts the reader to how reality is a construct of individual or collective desires while, paradoxically, he also implicitly condemns objectivity as an escape from engagement. But the screen is also a physical emblem of the former colonists' loss of power and their inability to influence or manipulate. They are reduced to the role of impotent observers--and as the whole atmosphere of the airport bar suggests, even spies--just as Burdener himself is physically thrust out of the country, and the readers, too, are forced into a marginal position.

The major concern, then, is much the same as that of Margaret Laurence in her African fiction: the West's imposition upon Africa. Again, as with Laurence, such a conflict prepares the way for other dualities, which inevitably appear in texts on Africa:

> This axis in turn provides the central feature of the colonialist cognitive framework and colonialist literary representation: the manichean allegory--a field of diverse yet interchangeable oppositions between white and black, good and evil, superiority and inferiority, civilization and savagery...self and Other, subject and object. The power relations underlying this model set in motion such strong currents that even a writer who is reluctant to acknowledge it and who may indeed be highly critical of imperialist exploitation is drawn into its vortex.[24]

Abdul JanMohamed suggests that Fanon's manichean oppositions occur during what he calls the "dominant" phase of colonialism, covering that period up to independence, and the "hegemonic" or neocolonialist phase, though his essay focuses on the former category.

Godfrey's novel, which clearly concerns itself with the hegemonic phase, consciously plunges into the vortex in an attempt to expose and dismantle its machinery. He, therefore, participates in a tradition of European

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[24] Abdul JanMohamed, "The Economy of Manichean Allegory: The Function of Racial Difference in Colonialist Literature," in "Race," Writing, and Difference, 82.

resistance which spans the period from between the wars, and acknowledges and supports such figures as Frantz Fanon and Aimé Césaire. His dedicatory page includes both real and fictional names (as does Audrey Thomas's in Blown Figures); Frantz Fanon's name is listed, and one of the counterrevolutionary characters in the novel is named Fanon. Fanon himself, in Black Skin White Masks heads his introductory chapter with an epigraph taken from Césaire's Discourse on Colonialism and he quotes Césaire often.[25]

Especially in the "Freedom Peoples' Party" section, but also in many other parts of The New Ancestors, Fanon's influence can be felt as Godfrey's actual observations of neo-colonialism which he records in "Letter to an American Negro" resemble those which Fanon describes in The Wretched of the Earth. Godfrey takes seriously Fanon's dictum, "decolonisation is always a violent phenomenon," and that,

> In decolonisation, there is the need of a complete calling in question of the colonial situation. If we wish to describe it precisely, we might find it in the well-known words: 'The last shall be first and the first last.'[26]

It is perhaps no coincidence that a major character, a disillusioned Party member and counter-revolutionary, goes

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[25] Frantz Fanon, Black Skin White Masks, trans. Charles Lam Markmann (London: MacGibbon and Kee, 1968), 9.

[26] Fanon, The Wretched of the Earth, trans. Constance Farrington (London: McGibbon and Kee, 1965), 29-30.

by the name of First Samuels, a name which, in light of Fanon's words, proves doubly ironic. Both the manichean oppositions and resulting violence which Fanon perceives as constituting the colonial situation are presented in the form and content of The New Ancestors. The surrealist technique noted by many critics is an active agent in the depiction of this violence, which seeks both to enact the violent dualities of colonialism and to draw the reader into the vortex.

For a writer like Césaire, surrealism was a "liberating fact" or a "process of disalienation" because it allowed him to "summon up these unconscious forces."[27] For Godfrey, surrealism offers the chance to undergo a similar process, as he says in an interview concerning the character of Michael Burdener: "...I think he was a purgation of many things that were inside me that I didn't know--sort of a shadow figure. I was afraid I might go that way and I wrote him out."[28] The alienation which Fanon articulates in his books and which Césaire attacks in his writings works in reverse for Godfrey. He attempts to create a sense of disaffection in the reader by dismantling and reconfiguring images of the other, forcing the reader to turn inward to face his or her own Other.

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[27] Aimé Césaire, Discourse on Colonialism, trans. Joan Pinkam (New York: Monthly Review Press, 1972), 68.

[28] Caroline Bayard and Nick Power, "Interview with Dave Godfrey," Open Letter Third Series, 3 (Late Fall 1975), 85.

James Clifford's observations on ethnographic surrealism, mentioned in the previous chapter, apply equally well to Godfrey's novel. Godfrey includes fewer artifacts than Audrey Thomas, but presents a series of fragments which upset the reader's desire for order, much like the effect of "surrealist objects":

> What is a surrealist object? One might say roughly that it is any alienated object, one out of its habitual context, used for purposes different from those for which it was intended, or whose purpose is unknown.[29]

As a catalyst for the unconscious, surrealism distorts and disfigures the objective world, demanding a violent questioning of reality, as it disinvests society of cultural assumptions.

Godfrey, however, goes beyond surrealism to include techniques drawn from the **nouveau roman**. In the list of dedications, Godfrey also includes Michel Butor, a major presence amidst the loosely knit **nouveau roman** group of writers, and at one point Michael Burdener (is his name meant to echo Butor's?) describes a sensation that openly alludes to Robbe-Grillet's La Jalousie:

> Walking away it was as though the heat and the blood in my eyes and the possible danger

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[29] Maurice Nadeau, The History of Surrealism, trans. Richard Howard (New York: MacMillan, 1965), 185.

> and the shame in my heart had combined to form a **jalousie**, a screen through which I should have been able to see nothing, but which strangely enough, and I am sure now there must be a scientific law for this phenomenon..., this flow of mosquito netting permitted one to see and record everything about me, as though I were a human Leica, turning and snapping, zooming and focusing, although in actual fact I did not turn my head once, all things appeared in front of me, as though my world had become this **jalousie.** (56-7)

Burdener's hyperacuity is surrealist in its subsequent list of decontextualized objects, and in this overt textual reference Godfrey parodies the **nouveau roman's** excessive attempts to objectify reality by presenting objects as things in themselves, devoid of meaning, as he highlights science and the technology of the camera.

The major opposition between subject and object embedded within the dialectic of colonizer and colonized is upheld by the empiricism of science, by the camera's screen which imposes a distance between the observer and the observed. Paradoxically, the camera's potential as objective recorder depends on its operator, who **chooses** the subject. Similarly, the **nouveau roman's** insistence on objective description hinges on the writer's choice of what to portray and therefore must take into account its own subjectivity. Like photography, writing too fixes its subject, pinning it down in a static composition framed by the author. Godfrey repeatedly draws our attention to such

artifice by referring to photography, and, in making use of **nouveau roman** techniques, he draws attention to the writing process and, therefore, the act of reading in an unsuccessful effort to break the manichean oppositions.

ii. The Question of Authority

A good part of Geoffrey Firebank's assumed detachment in the Prologue derives from his yearning for the glorious days of Empire. Born too late, he finds himself powerless, existing on the fringes of a country governed now by what he calls "one of history's maddest regimes" (3). The weak British presence in Lost Coast reflects a sense of decline within the centre itself, best illustrated by the asylum in which Burdener's father was kept. Through a number of evasive reveries, Burdener gradually describes the former estate of Lord Coldwater, the name itself complementing Firebank's. Burdener finds there a fantasy version of Sherwood Forest:

> Because at the end of our half-mile walk out from the Coldwater station, there is that herd of deer, that always missing true element of midsummer pageants, that moving target for Little John's bow.... Gentle, tame, meek. And miniature. (45)

This domestic vision of an English country estate recalling an idealized pastoral existence masks the mighty empire during the peak of the Crusades behind the fairytale

generosity of Robin Hood. The riches used to build the house in the 1760's were taken from the poor, had probably been gained through "tobacco money or Jamaica sugar money or Lost Coast slaves or just some Rajah's jewels" (46), the list of conjectures encompassing much of the history of British colonialism. When Burdener does build up the courage to cross the grounds he finds only the remnants of a mansion whose front has been converted into a museum, and whose back is an asylum. Coldwater represents a sterile, frigid country exhibiting its past glory, while hiding its degeneration: the line of descent from the great-great-grandmother of the late Lord Coldwater ended with his insane son, Albert.

It is only fitting, then, that when Burdener does gather the courage to face his father the ravaged figure he sees cannot greet him: "The mouth contorts as though from the stomach, with no 'ell' in the word at all, so that it shakes from the aspirate to the vowel with nothing between but a trench of insensate tragedy..." (84). His father's wasted body and mind, aged unnaturally, it is implied, by his war experience, is yet another sign of Europe's degeneration and loss of power. Worn down and diseased, he no longer has the ability to communicate, to pass on any meaningful words.

Burdener's visit with his father somehow effects a release, but it means a freedom without any anchor or

refuge, as he believes he can turn his back on the decay of his country:

> I am a seafarer who lacks a sea. And so I will return to Africa, because there is something there I can say yes to, something beyond the sand beaches, something beyond the womblike humidity, something beyond the rythms [sic] that suffuse all life so patently there. And I need to say yes to something at this moment.
>
> (85)

Ironically, such a vision sounds much like the contemporary transnational migration of immigrants and refugees which is gradually changing the configurations of countries in the West, and rerouting established literary currents. But within it also runs an early Canadian example of Robert Young's more general observation on postmodernism: "Postmodernism can best be defined as European culture's awareness that it is no longer the unquestioned and dominant centre of the world."[30]

Godfrey's technique involves a kind of textual decentering, as he suggests in an interview:

> In The New Ancestors in a sense, like Ulysses, I was doing a parody all the way through of the traditional novel....the fifth city chapter in a sense is a parody of the 'nouveau roman'....[31]

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[30] Young, 19.

[31] Donald Cameron, ed. Conversations with Canadian Novelists (Toronto: MacMillan, 1973), 83.

Joyce's version of the heroic quest parodies Homer's earlier narrative, but his vision remains firmly fixed on Europe; Godfrey takes the parody a stage further by suggesting that, like Burdener's father, the grand narratives cannot speak to the son, who, despite his sense of freedom and orphaned condition, still remains burdened by his cultural inheritance, unable, finally, to find a new home.

Near the beginning of "The London Notebook" Burdener explains,

> Every time I am deported, or asked to resign, or find my contract is not going to be renewed, I come back to Glencairn and start this process. The village librarian lays out the TES, as she will do tomorrow morning, not even expecting that this time I shall confront her and enquire after the chain of gossip that brought her the information. (18)

In an ironic reversal of the contemporary influx to the metropole by immigrants, Godfrey pictures in Burdener the eternal expatriate, unable to live within his own country's system, scanning the Times Education Supplement for positions out at the frontier where he can rail against his country, and endlessly repeating the process with each rejection from a former colony. It is perhaps fitting that this seafarer who lacks a sea should find himself deported from Lost Coast.

Godfrey's subversion of the archetypal quest is extended through Burdener's obsessive behaviour, as well as

his name. Godfrey modernizes the myth of the white man's burden (the colonists' rationalization that it was their moral duty to civilize the native) through Burdener's obsessive desire to educate Lost Coast students to question Western values. Burdener, however, as the central European character, also takes on the burden of the Western reader's expectations: he is "Pharmakos" (16) in that he acts as a scapegoat for the collective guilt of the West. The double-edged reversal suggested by Burdener's name conflates time, bringing more immediacy to the violence of the past.

In his lectures, Burdener's sarcastic denunciation of imperialism bears some similarities to the acidic irony which Césaire brings to his exposure of the hypocrisy of colonialism. Part of Césaire's challenge to the writer, Roger Caillois, begins with a summary of Caillois' argument:

> That the West invented science. That the West alone know how to think; that at the borders of the Western world there begins the shadowy realm of primitive thinking, which dominated by the notion of participation, incapable of logic, is the very model of faulty thinking.[32]

Césaire then quotes part of Levy-Bruhl's repudiation of his own theory:

> he had become convinced that "these minds do not differ from ours at all from the point of view of

[32] Césaire, 51.

> logic.... Therefore, [that they] cannot tolerate a formal contradiction any more than we can.... Therefore, [that they] reject as we do, by a kind of mental reflex, that which is logically impossible."[33]

To this Césaire finds Caillois impervious, believing, as Césaire cuttingly remarks, "the true Levy-Bruhl can only be the Levy-Bruhl who says that primitive man talks raving nonsense."[34] Césaire uses Caillois to support his argument that French ethnography bolstered colonialism by providing philosophical and intellectual arguments on racial superiority.

Césaire's essay implicates the West, almost as a homogenous whole, in the often brutal suppression of blacks everywhere, and it is this guilt which confronts the liberal humanist. Godfrey also opposes logic to "primitive thinking" throughout The New Ancestors, but the latter becomes a force which exposes logic's inadequacies. Levy-Bruhl's retraction is perhaps an over-correction on the side of an equally weighted pronouncement. But it does serve as a reminder that such mythical evocations as "In the Fifth City" do not necessarily present the experience as one describing a primitive culture.

Godfrey, in addressing his essay on Ghana to a black American, signals his awareness of the racial inequalities

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[33] Césaire, 52

[34] Césaire, 52.

in the United States, and a more general disillusionment and revolt in many parts of the world. Alisdair MacDonald notes that "some essential background dimensions to the novel are those of Black Power in the States..., student agitation in North America and Europe, rebellion in Rhodesia, and war in Vietnam."[35] Césaire's négritude, Senghor's version of the same neologism, and Kwame Nkrumah's Pan-Africanism were not only reactions against oppression, but also proud affirmations of the unique difference of blacks which united them in a common identity. During approximately the same time, Louis and Mary Leakey's discoveries at Olduvai Gorge in Tanzania offered scientific evidence to buttress the sense of a shared humanity.[36]

Godfrey's distrust of imperialist powers and sympathy for Africa's apparently emerging solidarity is clear in both the essay and his novel. His character, Michael Burdener, feeling himself to be an orphan, turns to the "cradle of mankind," following an idealistic vision of unity and equality. The forces at work in Lost Coast, though, repudiate the notion of a shared humanity because of the damage done through the violence of the colonial past. In much of the novel the text enacts a resistance to those who wish to take on the burden of the past, but offers no promise of a future fulfilment of the desire for

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[35] MacDonald, 708-9.

[36] "Louis Leakey," World Book, Vol. 12, 161.

universality because it is too fractured and lost to itself. Behind The New Ancestors is the rage of Césaire coupled with Fanon's biting irony.

iii. The Proverb and the Law

Early in "The London Notebook" Burdener records a conversation with his brother-in-law in which he had the uncomfortable duty of telling Gamaliel of his son's intransigence at school. In response to one of Gamaliel's more philosophical points, Burdener says, "Such phrases are meaningless to me. Mysterious. Like a new formula. Suggestive of some African illumination which has escaped me" (22). The similes here are telling in their combination of science and ritual. As a novel of resistance The New Ancestors makes explicit the clash between Africa and the West through repeated juxtapositions of the rational with the ritualistic which is at times taken to such parodic lengths that each loses meaning. While science and its rules or laws are perceived as an artificial escape from subjectivity, registering a hypothetical world divorced from emotional health or ethical instruction, ritual, especially in the form of proverbs, is often left either untranslated or unexplained, effectively shutting the Western reader out and acting as a mysterious African "illumination" which refuses to reveal itself. The proverbs are remnants from a

pre-literate order where word was law, but are violently wrenched from a proper context, and hover over the text, adding to the debris of other fragments begun and then seemingly forgotten, always deferring the moment of closure.

Burdener's notebook entries careen from extreme subjective response to a scientific rationalism which demands a system of vigorous objectivity. This duality also appears in one of the most traumatic experiences of Burdener's childhood: the rape of Sister Marcella, a nun who befriended him while he lived at the orphanage. As with the repeated attempts to visit his father, this episode also is elliptical. Burdener describes the rapists in terms of geometrical "cubist shapes" (25), and dates his preference for science from this event: "I began to excel in mathematics, to ask few questions, few questions, but scientific ones" (26), and he becomes a science teacher. His suppression and denial are maintained by a series of laws or rules which he arbitrarily formulates in response to different situations, and which act as frail substitutes for the missing authority of a father, the nurturing of a mother, and his own wilful rejection of his country. Combined with the many other rules which appear, though, Burdener's rules act as a parody of authority itself as it imposes its presence through the law, while, paradoxically, he seems to regret the very instability these parodies create. Burdener's rules range from "Let the Yanks climb

high" (16) to "Life states her cruelty through ironies" (45), and "Knowledge is necessary for directed evil..." (68).

Burdener's habit of condensing experience into pithy aphorisms signals a desire to impose order on events. Other characters also formulate rules or laws. First Samuels, in trying to enlist members into the inner circle of his counter-revolutionary group, visits influential government officials who were recommended by a former lawyer, Pobee-Biney, now also plotting to bring down Kruman. Eban, the Minister of Roads and Energy, explains, "I make it a rule in my ministry...no relatives. And no tribesmen" (256), while Dr. Assimeh, broken after being detained for four years, tells First Samuels, "Any evil act has evil consequences; that is Assimeh's law" (218). Pobee-Biney himself has pages of rules:

> Socialism approaches love at that point where authority is replaced by constant giving.... True freedom consists of controlling desire.... Do not be afraid of the tribe for beyond the revolution the tribe too will fulfil its purposes.
>
> (198)

Such didactic abstractions underscore the hollowness of language, even as it reaches toward some ideal purity beyond the corruption of Kruman's regime.

Biney's slogans are in direct opposition to those delivered by First Samuels in a scene where he bulldozes a

Ewe fishing village. The scene draws equally from an Orwellian vision of a world of technological thought control and from the political electioneering in Achebe's A Man of the People as, above the sounds of the village's destruction the "Truth Van" blares such recordings as "TOMORROW IS THE ENEMY, TODAY MUST BE UNITY" (168); over this First Samuels harangues the crowd with his own empty rhetoric while the small crowd of students shouts its protest as it holds a banner on which is printed "End Tribalism Now" (178). Political diatribe from all sides marks the debasement of language as words become a hubbub of sound in the service of a neo-colonial power represented by the technology of the tape recorder and bulldozer.

For his part, Pobee-Biney's own aphorisms are undercut by those of his inner circle, of people such as Eban and Dr. Assimeh. With Cudjoe, yet another member of this circle, Godfrey's parody of political ideology is based on a fusion of the traditional and the technological. Even as Cudjoe has First Samuels watch a silent film of the sacrifice of a bull in the market to purge Biney after his release from a British prison, he speaks "words, words which bore some mysterious, connected significance to him. Students. Revitalization. Struggle. Ediction" (239). Cudjoe believes that "The progress of science in the past few generations has been towards condensation, micronization, multi-functionalism. We must not ignore this trend, we in

Africa. I have done my part" (240). Cudjoe's "part" is a concoction distilled through pipes and tubes which he calls his "intensifier" (241), and which he believes will give the drinker powers necessary to overthrow Kruman. While the ritual sacrifice of purification is recorded on film, the purifying drink is developed by science. The power of the bull sacrifice can only be imagined by someone who had actually been present; technology captures the images, but the ululations--"YIEEEE..." (238)-- graphically represented on the page, are absent from the screen.

Words are used by Burdener and the others as a form of deception even as they attempt to clothe the untruths with logic and emotion. The very emptiness of language is underscored by the medium. Technology acts as a barrier to truth and a form of distancing which deflects the threat of facing one's subjectivity: Burdener turns to science to avoid his own guilt, and to replace the breach left by the crumbling of the master narratives; the politicians of Lost Coast turn to foreign ideologies and empty rhetoric to construct a new reality to replace their lost cultural identity.

Opposing the logic of laws and rules and the language of propaganda, the untranslated Akan proverbs, one of which appears at the head of each chapter of "Freedom Peoples' Party," measure the extent to which society has deviated from its past. The proverbs act as the ghosts of ancestors,

hovering over the chaos and corruption of the present, a reminder of an ethical code which sought to teach self-knowledge and which has degenerated into the new proverbs of self-interest and domination. They function much like the proverbs used by Achebe in Things Fall Apart and Arrow of God. As Robert Margeson summarizes, "the proverbs speak mostly of god, of the king, and of such ethical notions as shame, beneficence, excellence and the good life. They also speak, however, of violence, anger and death."[37] In their immutable presence they are the true version of the "law of constant constants" (88), yet another law, this one a parody of scientific rules, invented by the old school friend of Burdener's emotionally scarred wife, Ama. Ama's own loss of her autonomous selfhood is also tied to her break with traditional wisdom: in his overbearing egotism Burdener "made her memorize thousands of proverbs so that now she could never keep his straight from her own" (88).

In an article which examines Achebe's use of proverbs and the way they function as a means to direct us to see a particular social situation in terms of a clearly defined ethical position reflective of the values of that society, Bernth Lindfors contends that

> ...Achebe's proverbs can serve as keys to an understanding of his novels because he uses them not merely to add touches of local colour but to

[37] Margeson, 108.

> sound and reiterate themes, to sharpen characterization, to clarify conflict, and to focus on the values of the society he is portraying. Proverbs thus provide, as M.J. Herskovits has said, 'grammar of values' by which the deeds of the hero can be measured and evaluated.[38]

In The New Ancestors, by contrast, the purpose of proverbs is to instil a sense of unease because we cannot "see" the relationship. The easy, perhaps self-complacent, laughter and disapprobation called forth by Godfrey's satirical use of the many self-serving laws in the novel give way to puzzlement and frustration when confronted with the foreign words. In an article which links the appearance of untranslated languages in a number of Canadian texts to a search for "the transcendent word," Sylvia Söderlind argues that such passages serve a "cryptic" function which resists interpretation, but offers sudden illumination.[39] Söderlind also reports that Margeson's study "shows that these proverbs are 'translated' in the text in such a way as to literalize, and consequently parody, their metaphoricity."[40] Replete with scenes of political corruption and the manipulation of language, the chapters do

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[38] Bernth Lindfors, "The Palm Oil with which Achebe's Words are Eaten," African Literature Today 1-4, ed. Eldred D. Jones (London: Heinemann Educational Books, 1972), 6.

[39] Sylvia Söderlind, "Canadian Cryptic: The Sacred, the Profane, and the Translatable, Ariel, 22:3 (July 1991), 88-9.

[40] Söderlind, 94.

make a mockery of the proverbs, but in doing so they expose their own degradation and loss; in parodying the Akan proverbs the chapters themselves become objects of parody.

Söderlind's essay examines "the simultaneous and paradoxical coexistence of a postmodern consciousness of the entrapment in language and its nostalgia for a lost transcendence, and the particular search for a language appropriate to the postcolonial self-definition."[41] She examines Godfrey's novel, and others, from the perspective of Canada as a settler colony:

> Settler colonies often lack the indigenous cultural and linguistic material which may serve to anchor a new culture, and the problem is exacerbated when, as was the case in Canada at the time of arrival of postmodernism, the struggle for cultural definition is carried out in the shadow of an already established culture with which the newcomer shares a language.[42]

If Godfrey's use of untranslated words and passages is meant to be a part of that search for a unique language, then such a performance becomes a form of re-enactment of the very colonialism he criticizes. The very foreignness of the language to Western anglophone readers is meant to be an act of resistance through exclusion: after all, the saving words of the proverbs are lost to Godfrey's fictional country because of colonialism and its traces. In creating

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[41] Soderlind, p. 88.

[42] Söderlind, 88.

a character who rejects Europe's master narratives, and by parodying and subverting the established narrative form, Godfrey sets up the postcolonial situation in such a way that no solutions can be discerned on the horizon except, perhaps, those which may be glimpsed in the process of writing and responding.

Perhaps the closest one can get to any optimistic view that the Lost Coast will eventually redefine itself is in the very refusal to translate the proverbs. Scattered like fragments, they nevertheless belong in this fragmented society and its vehicle of expression--this fragmented novel. And, like the novel, the proverbs resist systematized forms of knowledge, but refuse to compromise themselves or disappear:

> Consider the form of popular sayings, proverbs, and maxims: they are like little splinters of potential narratives, or molds of old ones, which have continued to circulate on certain levels of the contemporary social edifice. In their prosody can be recognized the mark of that strange temporalization that jars the golden rule of our knowledge: "never forget."[43]

The disdain for narrative statements by science, which Lyotard identifies as a characteristic of the postmodern condition, is parodied in The New Ancestors in the form of

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[43] Jean-Francois Lyotard, The Postmodern Condition: A Report on Knowledge, trans. Geoff Bennington and Brian Massumi (Minneapolis: University of Mineapolis Press, 1984), 22.

the scientific equations and the "laws" spread throughout the novel. The scientist classifies narratives as "belonging to a different mentality":

> savage, primitive, underdeveloped, backward, alienated, composed of opinions, customs, authority, prejudice, ignorance, ideology. Narratives are fables, myths, legends, fit only for women and children. At best, attempts are made to throw some rays of light into this obscurantism, to civilize, educate, develop.
>
> This unequal relationship is an intrinsic effect of the rules specific to each game. We all know its symptoms. It is the entire history of cultural imperialism from the dawn of Western civilization.[44]

Science's privileging of itself holds similarities to Young's "ontological imperialism;" Lyotard's assertion may by analogy be applied to a Western reader conditioned by master narratives of the literary canon (as well as by such tributaries of Africanist discourse as popular fiction on Africa) who opens a book with certain expectations, which, in the case of The New Ancestors, are shattered.

Imperialism's assimilation of the Other is sharply parodied through language in the cricket field scenes, where the incongruous presence of a Chinese official, Ling Huo, and the American ambassador, Clarence Hathaway, compete for the minds of those gathered at the function. Typically, reason holds sway in yet another saying, this one delivered

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[44] Lyotard, 27.

by the Chinese official: "the mind, Emperor of the body" (42). But its emphasis on logic and association with imperialism are subverted as Huo disfigures linguistic codes in the delivery of his moral tale:

> Participles dangle between his legs, tenses roam from Algeria to Burundi searching for agreement, vowels slide four stories upward in memory for tonal ancestors, cartloads of aaahhs are dropped between each word and its neighbour. Even the smallboys have caught the mistakes and sit close to scorn.
> We am.
> We am?
> We am jam-jam. (42)

The linguistic corruption, analogous to colonialism's destruction of the indigenous past, implied in the loss of "tonal ancestors," evokes again the break visually represented by the Akan proverbs and the rationalized sayings noted earlier. But Godfrey draws our attention to this parallel in particular with Hathaway's speech. Hathaway begins with a Senegalese proverb which he then translates, stressing the dual meaning of "quarrel" and "war" held with the word "**kele**." His translation is an act of violation which somehow disinvests the proverb of its significance and enlists it into the service of his own intent. The brief incident comments on the possibility of the utter loss of power of the Akan proverbs through the act of translation, and acts as a validation for Godfrey's decision to include them in the original language.

Godfrey places the American ambassador's speech several sections after Ling Huo's as if to textually emphasize the gulf between political ideologies. At the same time, though, their common purpose reveals itself in their use of sayings. Ling Huo's linguistic ineptitude, about which we are only told, parallels Hathaway's "riddle," which spins chaotically and interminably out of control in a surrealistic fragmentation of images which emphasize acts of destruction by both nature and technology. Godfrey employs a surrealist technique here as a means to expose the violence of American imperialism and describe the undescribable: the experience of the colonized throughout history. It is significant that Burdener, presumably recording Hathaway's riddles in his notebook, pauses to ask himself, "Or is that what I think of his riddles?" (54). With the final riddle, Burdener writes, "The following may be illustrative, but is definitely not the correct answer" (56), and he gives an account of what sounds very much like his father's war-time experience, linking American aggression with British conquest: "All that firepower just sitting there in the middle of the sea with the coast barely visible and then the first one comes out and unfolds its wings" (57). The destructive beauty of modern warfare merges with the historical conquest of Lost Coast.

The disorientating, delirious effect of this section arises from a continual shift from Hathaway's surrea

riddles and the fluid regroupings of individuals on the cricket field. Surveillance reports clash with Burdener's observations and covert glances at the disorganized formation of a group of rag-tag protestors who eventually reveal a sign--copied in fine old English--"Mr. Yankee Free First Thyself" (57). The multiple registers of language competing with each other visually and aurally subvert the primacy and stability of official English.

In a further undermining of the authority of English, Burdener watches one of the runners "fleeing from the incredible chaos of his school, St. Aquinas" (54), and part way through one of the riddles notes, "And Ulysses Oppong reaches a port" (55). Godfrey thus parodies the archetypal journey, creating a hybrid name and implying a rejection and breakup of Western rationalism with his reference to the chaos at the school named after a major advocate of reason. The utter confusion of this section reflects the distrust and displacement of master narratives: it is here that Godfrey openly alludes in a parodic fashion to Robbe-Grillet's "jalousie," creating a double-edged vision of the **nouveau roman's** challenge to traditional narrative forms and a sense of panic at their loss. In the last paragraph of the section Burdener says, "The jalousie began to fade. Someone in authority had to be found" (57). Burdener resolves to return home and send his servant for food and "one ally": "certainly he would have less trouble than was

going to be my lot once he tried to find someone in authority" (57).

Burdener's predetermined lack of success reflects Godfrey's refusal to act as an authority, even as he displaces stable narrative conventions and traditions. We are left with a hybridized narrative clamouring with different cultural markers, none of which is sufficiently loud enough to dominate. While Burdener seems at first to be the central character, the novel's structure denies him that place, as his notebook is replaced and overwhelmed by the personal suffering of Ama in "A Child of Delicacy," political intrigue in "Freedom People's Party," and the disorientating effect created in "In the Fifth City." Within the novel Burdener is repeatedly neglected or abused: He is physically attacked by the Denongo women; Ama's mother verbally abuses him; he is used by First Samuels, and beaten on the steps of a church by a mob of Catholic followers who are listening to the Bishop; despite his revolutionary fervour, he does not actively take part in the attempted sabotage of the Kruba Dam; and, of course, he is deported. Even within his own "London Notebook" Burdener's personal narrative is disrupted and almost overshadowed by Delicacy's transcript.

The denial of authority and juxtaposition of science with ritual, prose with poetry, are closely linked in the form of a transcript of Delicacy's visits to a psychiatrist,

Dr. Champs. The transcript details Ama's mother's personal history, her symptoms, and records Champ's observations from a series of interviews. Also included are three of her "prayers," which speak of colonialism, women, the land, and a deep personal fear. The factual record mirrors the prayers in the way it regresses, beginning with a lengthy history and analysis of symptoms, but lapsing into terse notes. The first prayer consists of long lines of almost prose-like description, but they are shorter in the second, and the clipped, sharp lines of the third prayer reflect the intensity of Delicacy's madness. In contrast to the authority of Dr. Champs' distanced objective observations, the prayers reach inward to expose a subjective reality in crisis, an inner experience which cannot be adequately translated into a discourse of reason.

The juxtaposition of analysis and prayer suggests a parallel with the untranslated proverbs which lock in their meaning, refusing to be violated. Burdener had stolen Delicacy's file after his humiliation by Gamaliel. Bitterly denouncing a woman who had taunted and insulted him, Burdener only discovers after his tirade is over that the woman is Gamaliel's mother--his mother-in-law. He formulates a new rule: "knowledge is necessary for directed evil" (68). But Dr. Champs' file is simply another version of science's attempt to unveil mystery, and the inevitable

inversion of the observer's role into that of the observed, parodied by the many references to spying and intrigue:

> We but peep with cancerspattered eyes at our closest known ancestors. So this is the grandmother of the children I have, the woman Ama has always kept hidden from me. As you have hidden her in your careful records. Which of your own fantasies are recorded in this process, which of your own needs and fears? My rational man. (78)

Even with the stolen file Burdener knows little more about Ama's mother than the fact of her madness; like so many other moments in the novel, the file remains open, the incident is not pursued, and the "knowledge" gained remains empty of meaning.

Delicacy's initial appearance occurs prior to Burdener's theft of the file, where the dry objectivity of scientific records gives way to the energy of ritual performance. In a scene similar to that in which Isobel makes final attempts to purge herself of her madness in Blown Figures, Godfrey describes Burdener as he watches the purification ceremony. In Blown Figures Isobel participates in the **abisa** ritual as a penitent, and finds that she can decipher the language of the drums. Their message, however, fails to console Isobel because her madness has progressed too far, and she retreats into the forest. As already noted, Thomas punctuates the scene with factual reports of local rituals, emphasizing the disparity between objective

and subjective experiences. As his character stands aside watching the ceremony, Godfrey recreates the sense of alienation for the reader by including many Akan words. Unlike the Akan proverbs, these words can be understood through their context, but we are forced to read slowly and attentively to fully appreciate the roles of the participants and the significance of their actions. We are placed in the same position as Burdener, who looks to Gamaliel for an interpretation: "But to me he does not speak. I either understand or I do not" (63). Any attempt at analyzing the significance of the ceremony as it relates to Delicacy's experience would be to rob it of its spiritual value. As a foreigner witnessing the ritual, Burdener is violently reproached by Delicacy, who accuses him of being "babaso," or infected with syphilis (64).

iv. Impermeable Man, Penetrated Woman

The repeated gap between the language of poetry--represented in particular by the Akan proverbs and Delicacy's prayers and given physical expression through ritual--and the prosaic languages of science, technology, and politics, is paradoxically emphasized by the unifying image of impermeable man in the section, "A Child of Delicacy." The transparent plastic model which Burdener uses in his biology classes at Workmen's University College

functions as a paragon of a lost common humanity, an ideal which is undercut by its associations: it is a model constructed by technology to further the needs of science.

Godfrey switches to Ama's point of view to again question science through the poetic mode of stream of consciousness, while expanding the colonizer/colonized dialectic to include gender relations. The untranslated Akan song, used as an epigraph for this section, forms an identification between Ama and the Akan proverbs in the "Freedom Peoples' Party" section, and creates a connection between the personal and the political. Sylvia Söderlind says the song "sings of slavery and ancestor worship, embodying the heritage of her culture."[45] The association intensifies Ama's irredeemable loss, emphasized by the remark that Burdener had smothered her proverbs with his own, mentioned earlier: as an individual and as a woman she is doubly colonized.

Using the plastic model as a point of departure, Burdener casts back into prehistory to prove the theory of a common origin and challenge Western assumptions of racial superiority based upon evolutionary Darwinism:

> "If the queen had an inch of honesty she would shove herself right back to the Olduvai Gorge instead of conveniently stopping in her backward tracking at the Jewish king David. And that is what the Redeemer should do also; right back to

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[45] Söderlind, 94.

> the Gorge. Mali was yesterday; the English admit they go back to two or three days before yesterday; but we all go back months, maybe even years and we all go back to those Gorges, through those Gorges even." (133)

In his characteristically ironic mode, Burdener emphasizes the features of this "non-racial model," with "each organ a different bright colour, the flesh colour clean as glass..." (130). But his lecture betrays the very impulse towards dominance which he lashes out at, advocating a new kind of Darwinian battle based on science and technology.

Even as his model suggests the possibility of a shared humanity, Burdener envisions time as a linear, forward-moving concept as he preaches division and a new world order created by using the West's weapons of logic and reason against itself. But impermeable man acts as an ironic comment on Western epistemology and its faith in reason. Both temporality and order are subverted as the form of Ama's recollection slides back and forth in time, while her own role as a slave in the fantasies of both the Redeemer and Burdener underscore a seemingly universal male desire for dominance. Ama sees the recreation of the plastic model in Kruman's bronze statue and in the sterility of science which dehumanizes the individual. Ama's decision to enslave herself to Kruman, while motivated by a desire to protect her father's safety, is triggered by Burdener's lecture, in which he "made time appear small" (133) and abstracted her

sense of individual uniqueness, diminishing her selfhood. Kruman's obsession with absolute control becomes associated with Burdener's rechanneled need to dominate, and his suppression of his own subjectivity by embracing science.

The conventional association of orality with a purer, more stable, and innocent past becomes meaningless in this section, since it remains inaccessible or untranslated, like the songs, or Akan proverbs. Traditional observations on primitive experience with its interpenetration of time and space and the seamlessness of the word and the thing named are marked by their absence. Ama experiences time as an interminable period of waiting--for her visitor, for her husband--and dwells on the past only to explore her present state of fragmentation and her anxieties about her future. She is cut off from the continuity and link with the past provided by the ancestors because of her mother's unorthodox life: "Delicacy was time. Delicacy was a long, high, thick wall against time" (137). But Ama is also a modern, well-educated woman. Like Burdener, she records her thoughts: "Trees held you sane. That would be her phrase for this terrible knowing. She must put it into her day book. Finding her phrase would help her out somehow" (104).[46]

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[46] Söderlind dissents with this view: "Embodying Africa, Ama--wife and mother--represents love and orality. She talks and sings but, unlike her husband, does not write." ("Canadian Cryptic," 94).

The primitive culture which so attracts Burdener to Mali repulses Ama, who wonders

> how can I leap back and identify myself with Mohamadu Bella, with strange tribes fleeing from the Egyptians thirty centuries ago.... I remember lorries and field hockey games and my first mirror and attempting to live in some peace with my mother, and exams, and schoolbooks.... (145)

The songs of the epigraph represent a partial loss, a wrenching apart of the word from the world, which Godfrey also expands from the local to the universal. The outsider's expectation of some kind of illumination, if only the words of the foreign language could be deciphered, is transformed into science's compulsion to categorize reality, with the corollary being the male's domination through his denial of woman's most profound experience. Ama bitterly reflects,

> He has no respect for you; that's what leaves you without defenses. He watched your mind and memory rot with his children's coming and carefully explained what was happening and why. But he took his respect away from you too. Better a man who sees it as a mystery and superstitiously, gives you powers because of it. Calls you **yaa**. Michael explained childbirth and then took away what little respect he has to give, what little he can spare from building up that kingman he pretends his beard does not hide. (145)

Godfrey creates an identification between Ama and Freud's dark continent of woman, much as Thomas does in Mrs Blood.

Ama too struggles with a split self, figured in one of her dreams where she is cleaved in two, and doubled in the form of her mother's schizophrenia. But Ama's painful probing of "the strange hollows beneath" (130) suggests that she may find the strength to rebuild her life. Her intensely personal experience, though penetrated in so many ways by political avarice and male desire, suggests a strength of character that will survive. The utopian vision which she achieves in a dream where she finds herself in a valley full of light and moves into "a circle of women and of children" (126) is one of the only hopeful images in the novel: even the dreams of the other characters betray a desire for power in its many manifestations.

v. Camera Obscura

Throughout the novel incidents arise, then evaporate inconclusively, or begin part way through an event, the novel's form mirroring the fragmented political, social, and individual upheavals it portrays. Ama's expected visitor, her schoolgirl friend, Mercredi, does not arrive. Instead, she hears Hastings Awotchwi, her father, knocking at the door. She awaits a husband who will not return, a friend who does not arrive. The news of Burdener's deportation remains permanently deferred, and Ama all but disappears, is all but lost to the novel.

Early in the novel Burdener describes a disconnected incident where he is being driven away by the mad women of Denongo. Why he is really there and who these women really are remains obscure. Burdener proclaims at the beginning that the scene is significant for being one of those "encounters that at once predict the future by their events and influence it by the introduction of novel forces" (32). As a "novel force," or an agent of the novel's plot, Kry Kanarem, the businessman who rescues him, contributes little. If anything, the madwomen prepare us for Delicacy's madness and her rejection of Burdener, but even in that chapter the transcript which Burdener steals is put to no use; instead, its function appears to be solely for the reader of the novel who, in turn, cannot properly place it within an orderly chronology. While this latter chapter complements the atmosphere of intrigue, Godfrey refuses to describe the consequences of the theft. In effect, Burdener's action remains empty of meaning, and Delicacy remains inviolate, like the fragments of proverbs hanging in isolation over the chapters in "Freedom Peoples' Party." His action is left incomplete, just as at the end of the novel his reminder to himself, "DO: Finish this analysis" (387), fades away.

One scene which has troubled critics actually encapsulates Godfrey's use of fragmentation. In it a Peace Corps volunteer named Ricky Goldman is set up and framed in

the company of a prostitute. From the careful choice of the character's name to the mimicking of his blustering, privileged innocence, Godfrey's intentions are clear. The scene parodies stereotypes of the sexual fecundity of African women even as it more seriously evokes the damage done behind the stereotypical screen, an invasion so devastating that present Lost Coast society finds itself repeating it through prostitution. As he waits for the girl, Goldman fantasizes:

> He wanted it dark, dark and soft. The ineluctable modality of the visible world. A pulling off of black bosom breathlessly in the dark night, the revelation of lightless flesh whose juggling was unperceivable except by the glow that freedom brought to his pale, conquistadorial hands. Jug, jug, jug. O Jesis. (37)

The perhaps too forced parallel with the rape of Africa nevertheless underscores how the country was perceived as a blank patch of darkness ready to be illuminated by the West. The parody is possible because Ricky Goldman's anticipated conquest re-enacts the historical past in a personal manifestation of imperialism which is reversed as the exploiter becomes the exploited.

At the same time, Godfrey addresses the exploitation of women, as "The Man" (37) offers first one girl and then another, both introduced as Rose: individual female identity becomes a blank space onto which male desire

projects itself, much as Ama's individuality was shattered by first Kruman's and then Burdener's compulsion to dominate. Goldman is literally framed, as First Samuels photographs him with "Rose." Godfrey's parody probably means to include a play on blackmail, but the episode is dropped and, like other fragmented incidents, is not referred to again. The negatives are not processed and the specific moment of Goldman's exposure remains deferred. Instead, the novel as a whole exposes more generally past colonial domination and present imperialist exploitation while, paradoxically, implicating the camera and its way of seeing with Western hegemony.

Godfrey uses camera imagery to draw attention to the limitations of language to describe reality, just as Burdener, writing in his notebooks, reflects the writer's struggle to record experience. For Burdener writing is a "process" (18) which he repeats with each deportation, always beginning with the same moment.

One merges with the other in the **jalousie** scene as Burdener's eyes become a screen on which every detail of his surroundings is recorded; the problem of representation is accentuated with the recognition that for every detail recorded there will be something "other" than that detail which is excluded. The writer's personal perceptions will be shaded by a cultural conditioning no matter how objective the gaze: realism becomes a simulacrum, a complicit

understanding between writer and reader based on shared conventions.

Godfrey attempts to break down the passivity suggested in Coleridge's suspension of disbelief (he quotes Coleridge elsewhere in a different context) by directly addressing the reader in a mocking tone and signalling a refusal to clarify so that the reader can order the text. In the Denongo-women scene Burdener pauses in his description of their attack:

> You don't **know** they aren't just pineapple sellers? O no! Far, far from it! They're all mad. At least **mad** in Lost Coast terms. I haven't done much work on it myself of course, but my good friend, Dr. Champs, is the recognized expert. (34)

Burdener then parodies science by giving a list of some of the manifestations of schizophrenia, even as he warns that madness is relative, depending on the culture: "Dr. Champs is **okomfo** as well as **obosomfo**. You didn't know that? Pity" (34). At this point in the novel few Western readers would understand these references; we are locked out while being made intensely aware of cultural difference.

But even as we are refused easy access to the meaning behind Burdener's words, Burdener, as writer, notes his frustration at not knowing another's subjective experience. After describing First Samuels' thoughts in the cricket-field scene, Burdener interrupts himself: "Is that right?

How impossible it is, you see, to get inside of a man; as the psychologist, and the novelist, and even the reporters, the news analysts, now pretend to do" (43). As the writer's omniscience is challenged, the reader's participation in the fiction accordingly becomes more tenuous: the text resists our efforts to control it even as the narrator recognizes his inability to penetrate the subjectivity of the individual he observes.

Photography and the writing process are linked as the distance between the operator of the camera and its subject parallels the distancing effect of irony used by the writer. In each case the subject is fixed in a static representation. Through the tropes of irony and parody, though, Godfrey draws attention to the problems of representation even as he employs camera imagery, and his association of the camera with technology accentuates and denies the reader's desire for order. Godfrey draws attention to his artifice with his careful attention to the word, "witness:" "Witness? An impossibility. Since to witness you would have to observe the agony I am observing.... So do not witness; pretend" (59). The immediacy and the responsibility engendered in the word comes to bear in Godfrey's use of the second person-pronoun as the comfort of "pretending" is constantly disrupted by the self-consciousness of the writing.

Photographic language signals the inadequacy and even danger of representation, and the complexity of subject/object relations. Susan Sontag writes,

> Through being photographed, something becomes part of a system of information, fitted into schemes of classification and storage.... Photographs do more than redefine the stuff of ordinary experience...and add vast amounts of material that we never see at all. Reality as such is redefined --as an item for exhibition, as a record for scrutiny, as a target for surveillance.[47]

Sontag also observes the effects of technology on our perceptions of reality:

> But the true modern primitivism is not to regard the image as a real thing; photographic images are hardly real. Instead, reality has come to seem more and more like what we are shown by cameras.[48]

The substitution of an image for the reality, to the extent that the image becomes the measure for the real, is the same perceptual process which creates stereotypes. This is the process which leads E.K. Jonsson, a character in Audrey Thomas' story, "Omo," to feel disorientated until he finds some aspects of Africa fit the image created by Bogart movies.

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[47] Susan Sontag, On Photography (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1977), 156.

[48] Sontag, 167.

Jean-Francois Lyotard would seem to concur with Sontag's view of photography as a means of controlling reality:

> Industrial photography and cinema will be superior to painting and the novel whenever the objective is to stabilize the referent, to arrange it according to a point of view which endows it with a recognizable meaning, to reproduce the syntax and vocabulary which enable the addressee to decipher images and sequences quickly, and so to arrive easily at the consciousness of his own identity as well as the approval which he thereby receives from others--since such structures of images and sequences constitute a communication code among all of them.[49]

Photography's ability to stabilize and arrange the referent comes close to being another form of ontological imperialism. Lyotard's emphasis is on quick, easy access and an avoidance of the ambiguity of language. In a similar manner Godfrey foregrounds the central image of the camera, linking it with technology and science through its precision, its assumed ability to "Get it down on film" (5), as Firebank intends in the Prologue.

The effect, however, is the opposite of the expected clarity of the photographic image, especially in the section called "In the Fifth City." The Fifth City chapter describes a journey down the Niger to Timbuctou by Effez, El Amaliel, and Sir Peter Burr, otherwise known as Pierre Burd.

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[49] Lyotard, 74.

As Margeson has noted, each name seems to be a variation of the major characters, First Samuels (often called FS) Gamaliel, and Michael Burdener.[50] Their quest for a particular metal is interspersed with descriptions of the mysterious American, Rodney Rusk, undergoing several deaths. Somehow, also, a fetish called **kambu** is involved, its twisted strands or cords acting as an appropriate metaphor for the complex, surreal knot of images and events. A narrator, observing and at times participating, offering and sometimes withholding information, is very present, often directly addressing the reader, drawing us in only to sever the cord which binds us to him.

Godfrey playfully exaggerates many stereotypes associated with Africa and the desert--the voyage up the river, the desert woman, corrupt officials, the foreign legion, and nomadic tribesman--suggesting that the actual place--Mali--has become distorted to the point where its reality must be measured by the extent to which it conforms to its own popular image. Godfrey turns the controlling vision of photography against itself, distorting it in a surrealist resistance to the equally violent subjugation of Africa as an "item for exhibition, as a record for scrutiny, as a target for surveillance."

James Clifford's observations on the possibilities inherent in anthropology perceiving its subject as a

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[50] Margeson, 99-100.

"contested reality" are equally relevant to the Fifth City section of Godfrey's novel:

> ...anthropological humanism begins with the different and renders it--through naming, classifying, describing, interpreting--comprehensible. It familiarizes. An ethnographic surrealist practice, by contrast, attacks the familiar, provoking the irruption of otherness--the unexpected. The two attitudes presuppose each other; both are elements within a complex process that generates cultural meanings, definitions of self and other. This process--a permanent ironic play of similarity and difference, the familiar and the strange, the here and the elsewhere--is, as I have argued, characteristic of global modernity.[51]

The items for exhibition in The New Ancestors shake up the reader in their surrealist chaos, much as they do in Thomas' Blown Figures. Paradoxically, the camera attacks the familiar, exposes the stereotypes which deny otherness, even as it is seen as an instrument used by technology to capture and disarm the other.

Jane Leney, observing a movement in the novel towards an African perspective which takes over in this section, writes: "A contrast is established between the European mind seeking absolute answers, and the African mind accepting diverse answers simultaneously."[52] Leney's

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[51] James Clifford, The Predicament of Culture: Twentieth Century Ethnography, Literature, and Art (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1988), 145-6.

[52] Leney, 73.

intention is to differentiate between two ontological systems of thought. She states that "The shifting perspective in 'In the Fifth City' is meant to represent African thought patterns as opposed to European."[53] Instead, though, Godfrey's emphasis on cameras suggests a fragmentation of Western vision, a collapse into chaotic disorder with the breakdown of its controlling master narratives. Significantly, the character most closely associated with Michael Burdener in this section has his camera smashed by two Malian policemen.

Rather than attempting to mirror a mythical, achronological African time, Godfrey draws a lattice-like screen over the chapter, creating a visually disruptive series of fragmented scenes, like a contact print. The effect undermines science's valorization of objectivity by parodically re-enacting a Western epistemology which, in its search for absolutes, fixes that which is other than itself in a system of representations. Lieutenant Chelmiak, an army officer, says to Burr, "If you do not have scientific Marxism, at least you have science. Progress without humanity, but at least progress" (331). The part of the novel which comes closest to the disorientating surrealist

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[53] Leney, 73. Leney's argument, like Eleanor Wachtel's cited earlier in Chapter 2, again illustrates the pervasiveness of Africanist discourse in its assumption that the African is radically different from the European. It is hard to imagine <u>any</u> relatively well-adjusted individual consciously perceiving the world from the tilted perspective of Godfrey's chapter.

effects of this chapter is the American ambassador's lengthy riddle: science, imperialism, colonialism coalesce in a vocabulary of images which resist control. The objectivity and logic implicit in the photographic image is undermined by a surrealism which turns the reader inwards.

The tension between objective and subjective experience, between self and other, and more diverse oppositions whirling about in the manichean vortex is also caught in the Fifth City section through Godfrey's use of **nouveau roman** techniques. As suggested earlier, Godfrey makes use of the technique to force the reader to struggle with the text, with the act of reading, in a process of defamiliarization. At the same time, he uses the objective clarity of the photographic image to strip the subject of all meaning, as in the description of a leper:

> There are, in this instant, five flies on the left-hand stub, three of them stationary, two of them moving slowly toward the soaked bandages. The photograph shows seven flies on the left eye, all of them in minor motion; four on the right eye, all but one in minor motion; three about the mouth. (372)

And so on. While **nouveau romanesque** techniques provide yet another means to disrupt the reader's desire for a smooth entry into the text, Godfrey parodies the possibility of attaining such a neutral precision in which the object can be described without attaching any value or meaning to it.

Descriptions are always re-presentations, even the most rigorous scientific ones: "Once the observer becomes a part of the system which he observes, his every measurement distorts that system slightly and renders his data invalid for a second point of time, a second determination of energy and mass" (320).

This law is suggestive of the crisis of representation within ethnographic writing. It also underscores the many permutations arising from the observer/observed opposition and acts as an analogue for the relation between writer and subject and reader and text. The pointed warning, with its tone of scientific precision, ironizes the confident omniscient narratorial intrusions even as these asides are repudiated in the very surreal form of the chapter, which has the effect of distancing Godfrey from his narrative and the reader from the content. Moreover, as a description of the way in which Africa has evolved into a myth, the law acts as a warning to the reader: Godfrey's refusal to participate in the conventional representation of Africa means that we too will have to work at new ways of seeing.

Throughout the novel conflicting references to Mali obscure its significance. While Burdener is drawn to its remoteness, Ama, as we have seen, feels nothing for the country. Mali is also associated with Kruman. Gamaliel considers Kruman a saint who, before taking on the burden of leadership, was "approaching the true knowledge of the

soul...the knowledge of never-ending time" (282), but whose spiritual health has been endangered by the mundane affairs of state. If Kruman is deposed, Gamaliel believes "he will go to Mali and the path of purification will be open to him once again" (284).

With Gamaliel's complaint that "Job 600"--the Kruba Dam project--trivializes his Redeemer's real purpose, the opposition between technology and spiritualism ironically echoes the gulf between reason and ritual. The epigraph to this chapter, with its emphasis on personal and spiritual oneness, consequently acts as an ironic comment as the chapter spins out into numerous oppositions and multiple points of view, and repeatedly describes a place of suspicion and violence. Indirectly, the epigraph exposes the inherent tension between Kruman's unifying "vision of the single Africa" (281) and what Job 600 represents: "The power reservoir. The reservoir of power" (293). In his identification with technology, Kruman becomes associated with a vision similar to that of the West.

Kruman's "reservoir of power" also, as Sylvia Söderlind notes, involves a play on "voir" and "to see," which links vision with power.[54] But the complex layering of the chapter, in which images are unexpectedly superimposed, disrupts any attempt at visual certainty much like the

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[54] Sylvia Söderlind, Margin/Alias: Language and Colonization in Canadian and Quebecois Fiction (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1991), 135.

effects of surrealist art. Godfrey's method turns the reader inward even as the chapter itself suggests an inner, spiritual vision, and the title reinforces this other-worldly dimension. As the "Fifth City," Timbuktu was once a holy place and a renowned centre of learning, but almost from the time of its founding in the eleventh century it was plundered repeatedly. In many ways it holds similarities to Jerusalem, another holy city which suffered multiple invasions. The layering effect which the chapter presents mirrors the repeated destruction and rebuilding of Timbuktu. The number five also encourages associations with Jerusalem, whose official seal in ancient times was the pentagram.[55] The five-pointed star was eventually replaced by the hexagram, which is also the sign for the quintessence, or fifth, celestial element.[56] Ironically, however, the pentagram was also the traditional shape for fortresses and is closely associated with one of the seats of world power, the Pentagon. Its mysterious significance is suggested in the cricket-field scene when Burdener cryptically observes, "For what I desire and fear is forming. The pentagon" (54),

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[55] Carl G. Liungman, Dictionary of Symbols (California: ABC-CLIO, 1991), 298.

[56] Liungman, 301. As well, Söderlind, in her illuminating chapter on The New Ancestors, argues that Burdener at one point "metaphorically becomes...a Jew" (121). Coincidentally, Söderlind heads one section of her chapter on Godfrey, "Quinta Essentia," and argues that the fifth city section "contains the **quinta essentia** of the novel, both literally and metaphorically" (123).

while its associations with power are mentioned early in the Fifth City chapter with the "Pentagon colonels" (305) who, the narrator speculates, may be spying on Rusk, whose full name--at least in one place in this chapter--is given as "Aloysius Washington Rusk" (320).

Whatever spiritual prominence Timbuktu may have held has been decimated, as its layered ruins become a symbol for the repeated conquests enacted by colonialism. Godfrey underscores the destruction by divesting Mali of its historical reality as it is transformed into a site of desire in which motives are questioned through a parody of the archetypal quest pattern: the spiritual quest, like the crusades in the Holy Land, is exposed as something motivated by greed and corruption. As well, the conflicting associations of Mali with both the spiritual and the violent link up with Kruman, whose powerful political reality clashes with his praise name, "the Redeemer."

The archetypal river journey taken by the three men who may be versions of Burdener, Gamaliel, and First Samuels leads only to speculation and uncertainty as the chapter ends with the journey's beginning: like the voyagers, we arrive only to discover that we haven't even begun. Godfrey's repeated use of qualifications and conditionals such as "yet," "but if," "or else," and "perhaps" signals his refusal to become a part of the system he observes: the equally numerous allusions to colonialism and imperialism--

there is a veritable united nations of observers mentioned: Czech, Hungarian, Portuguese, Polish, Chinese, Swiss, French, American--suggest a refusal to allow the reader to play the role of yet another colonizer.

During one of the several versions of Rusk's death the narrator writes, "We have already seen the scratchy, shadowy rather incomplete movie made by the bartender for the Chinese..." (337). At another point we are told, "This photograph is blurred. If you have become a wish to assimilate this battered and sand-based world, there will be little in it for you" (327). The impulse to assimilate and order becomes associated with violence as the camera is transformed into a weapon: "I am not interested in adjusting your gunsights. The eyes you were born with are clouded by sand" (341). The narrator's arrogance alienates the reader even as we recognize that our desire for knowledge is like that of a voyeur, or predator.

By blurring the images Godfrey frustrates our desire for complicity, even as he widens the angle to include violent acts of colonialism not in some far removed desert frontier, but in North America, and firmly turns the reader's curiosity back on ourselves:

> But what of the basic, continuing validity of Jackson's statement: "Destruction will attend a failure to comply." Is that what you ask now? I am not responsible for that. Truly he did ask the Creeks for 23,000,000 acres, more than half of which came from those who fought **with** him. Do you

> want me to tell you what Big Warrior and Shelokta replied to him? Of that are you also ignorant? No, I can carry only so much with my narrative. You too must educate yourself, whorewomen and lepers. You too must prepare your secular scriptures. I insist, **I** am responsible for nothing more than the moment.... (372)

Writing from across the water, Godfrey emphasizes the necessity for the reader to go beyond the relative passivity of reading about, or looking at, to the necessity of listening to, or actively discovering for oneself.

Throughout this chapter a fetish called **kambu** opposes the camera imagery, but while certain aspects of the ritual surrounding it are described, its function goes unexplained:

> ...but more important are the words that are spoken as the smith attaches the four cords, the words that Burr speaks as he drives the two spears through the arms of his father to spreadeagle him in the burning sun, the daily chanting of the **fatiha** morning and evening as the kambu is fed with chewed kola, the final words which are spoken as the living force is drawn from the cavity of the decayed victim. Look closely. You will see where we have hidden these words. If your desires are truly one with ours you will have no difficulty in deciphering them. This is not it:
>
> $$X = \frac{\underline{K}t}{2m} + at + b$$
>
> (361-2)

Godfrey's technique here is similar to his warning preceding the chapter describing the **abisa** ritual. There, he parodies the convoluted prose of Coleridge to accentuate the West's tradition of empiricism, and to suggest that "to such a mind

I would as courteously as possible convey the hint that for him the next chapter was not written" (58-9).

The ambivalence of the quest is especially evident in the goal of Burdener's search. He and the others are said to be searching for uranium at one moment and for the **kambu** at another. The opposition is captured in the word "ore," which suggests the conditional nature of the search.[57] The **kambu's** mysterious function, made more acute by the narrator's unwillingness to relay information, is similar to that of the Akan proverbs in "Freedom Peoples' Party," (and even the mystery of childbirth which Burdener had taken from Ama). Both remain outside of the Western reader's frame of reference; as laws and rituals they deflect our gaze.

In his ethnographic study of the **kambu** and other charms, Horace Miner writes, "Some of the mysteries of the **kambu** are not secret but a sorcerer will not divulge this knowledge to a white man for fear of imprisonment."[58] Despite the narrator's impetuous posturing, he does not hide his inability to record all experience. Miner's explanation suggests how a white man may be excluded, not because of the sacred nature of an object, but out of fear of persecution. The West is deprived of the quintessence which the **kambu** and Timbuktu represents, and is unable to decipher the hidden

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[57] Söderlind notes this pun in her Margin/Alias, 124.

[58] Horace Miner, The Primitive City of Timbuctoo (New York: Doubleday, 1965), 109.

words because of its imperialist history. Finally, if we are to attempt to understand the exotic world which draws us in, we must accept his admonition: "No, I can carry only so much with my narrative. You too must educate yourself...." Paradoxically, to do so means to turn to that very logic which the novel so often ridicules.

Godfrey's use of parody and fragmentation in this chapter and in the others is, according to Helen Tiffin, a discursive practice common to postcolonialism:

> Pastiche and parody...offer a key to destabilization and deconstruction of a repressive European archive. Far from endlessly deferring or denying meaning, these same tropes function as potential decolonizing strategies which invest (or reinvest) devalued "peripheries" with meaning.[59]

While Godfrey makes use of both these tropes to accentuate Fanon's manichean worldview, and provides a surreal inscape in order to preserve the subject from further appropriation, both of which are "decolonizing strategies" aimed at violently assaulting Western logic, his narrative is unable to offer hope for a future reintegration of Lost Coast, or for any inter-subjective relation between self and Other. Lost Coast remains lost to itself and to the reader; until the margin which is the coast becomes recognized as

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[59] Ian Adam and Helen Tiffin, eds., Past the Last Post: Theororizing Post-Colonialism and Post-Modernism (Calgary: University of Alberta Press, 1990), x.

something more substantial than a strip of land viewed from across the sea, the author's notes Godfrey had promised to provide as a glossary or guide to the perplexed will remain missing.[60]

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[60] See Margeson, 96. My point differs from that of Linda Hutcheon, who writes, "The African words symbolically remain in African; the glossary is permanently missing. Our 'natural' (that is, humanist) tendency to want to resolve difference into unity or to absorb the margin into the centre is here frustrated" (11). "Introduction," The Canadian Postmodern.

Conclusion

Many travel accounts, articles, and book-length studies of the European presence in Africa (or Africa's presence in their fiction) arrive at a similar conclusion: in Africa the foreigner comes face to face with himself or herself. This is as true for a psychologist like C.J. Jung as it is for a novelist such as Graham Greene, and Hammond and Jablow conclude that "Four centuries of writing about Africa have produced a literature which describes not Africa but the British response to it."[1] Philip Curtin had earlier concluded in his book that "The image of Africa was largely created in Europe to suit European needs...."[2] In his preface Curtin argued that the Africa which he examines up to the 1850's "was to change slowly in later years, but the later image of Africa was very largely drawn from Europe's first impressions, taken during the earlier and formative decades" (vi-vii). Furthermore, this image has remained fairly static to the present as writer after writer repeats material already furnished by someone who may have created a version of Africa taken from an archive of "official" responses to the continent.

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[1] Dorothy Hammond and Alto Jablow, The Africa That Never Was: Four Centuries of British Writing About Africa (New York: Twayne, 1970), 197.

[2] Philip Curtin, The Image of Africa (London: MacMillan, 1965), 480.

The result becomes so obvious that, for example, the characteristics of Africans as they have generally been portrayed can be listed, as Sarah L. Milbury-Steen indicates after having surveyed literature on Africa in this century:

> **physically**, as ugly, monkey-like, all look alike; bad-smelling; sensually acute.
> **mentally**, deficient, incompetent, ignorant, unlettered, uncultured; unable to think abstractly; imitative (partially educated African is the worst).
> **morally**, as superstitious, heathen, primitive, savage; demonic, evil, cruel, unpitying, cannibalistic; large children, happy-go-lucky, undependable, lacking in sense of duty and foresight, cowardly, always late, lazy; deceitful, covetous, liars and thieves; vain, ungrateful; oversexed, animalistic, copulate but do not make love; good (faithful) servants and soldiers.
> **emotionally**, as unable to show emotion; impulsive, unstable, ruled by passions and moods; good dancers and singers.
> African **men**, as unambitious, let women do all the work; endowed with large sexual organs; desirous of raping white women; disrespectful of black women because of polygamy; wife buying and selling.
> African **women**, as drudges, beasts of burden; sex objects; unresponsible, poor lovers.
> 'Mulattoes', as impure, unnatural, undesirable, scorned, rejected by either race; cunning, crafty.[3]

These two impulses--the vision of Africa as a mirror reflecting back onto a character in search of some lost

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[3] Sarah L. Milbury-Steen, European and African Stereotypes in Twentieth Century Fiction (London, 1980), 35-6. Quoted in Kenneth Parker, "The revelation of Caliban: 'the black presence' in the classroom," in The Black Presence in English Literature, ed. David Dabydeen (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1985), 188-9.

self, and the vision of Africa as a textual construct--actually complement one another. For, in order to free the writer to represent Africa in a way which reflects on some universal experience, Africa and its people must be fixed in a mould which conveniently satisfies the readers' expectations, thereby allowing them to focus on the matters at hand. Such a focus in turn reveals a problem within the traditional universalist claim: universalism has more often meant ethnocentrism. Arun P. Mukherjee writes,

> "Universalism" is a highly approbatory term in the arsenal of the Western critic. It performs the magic trick of eradicating whatever may be troublesomely other. It creates a homogenous world of brotherhood, but at the critic's own terms. Whatever he suffers from, he ascribes the same symptoms to us. The term, thus, is a convenient shorthand for a person who does not want to come to terms with the multiplicity and diversity of cultural modes as well as differences of race and class.[4]

Universalism in this sense acts as a kind of colonization, as it denies the particular experiences of individuals whose personal and cultural beliefs are subsumed by a dominant ideology which claims authority over the collective experience of humankind.

Margaret Laurence, Audrey Thomas, and Dave Godfrey also seek to universalize experience, but without sacrificing the

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[4] Arun P. Mukherjee, "The Poetry of Michael Ondaatje and Cyril Dabydeen: Two Responses to Otherness," Journal of Commonwealth Literature, 20 (1985), 55.

particular difference of their subject, and this tension informs their works. In writing about the Other these writers explore their characters' own sense of otherness, of dislocation, while avoiding the traditional representation of Africa. All three of these writers recompose their subject by underscoring indicators of Africanist discourse and attempting to write around these fixed versions, or by radically questioning and subverting conventional assumptions at the heart of the narrative tradition, such as the linear movement of the quest story or the easy complicity between narrator and reader.

If this were all they did, then their self-consciousness, their parodies of master narratives, their fracturing of traditional, linear forms would be part of the postmodern aesthetic. Instead, they participate in a postcolonial literature--writing from a country which historically was a settler colony about countries which had recently been invaded colonies--which recognizes the hegemony of the word (as well as its indeterminacy) and of the eye. Their writings are as intensely political as they are personal, and consequently challenge the reader to see other than the expected image.

Though the least experimental of the three writers, Margaret Laurence does create her own collage of Africa by presenting it in such diverse forms as the novel, short stories, a travel memoir, and a book of translated poetry

and tales. Together these forms testify to an individual who was profoundly affected by her own African experience and by the Africa with which she came into contact. Laurence's empathy for the people she came to know and identification with the characters she created was such that she strove to collapse any distinction between self and other, as the narrator's perhaps's ironic comment suggests in This Side Jordan when Johnnie Kestoe suddenly recognizes the humanity of the young prostitute, Emerald: "She was herself and no other" (233). Throughout her writings, however, mediatory figures appear, their presence indicating a gulf which Laurence attempts to bridge. Reflecting this sense of oscillation is Laurence's own use of Mannoni to gain further insight into a world whose meaning evades her. In both cases, her attempts to reach a kind of homogenous uniformity of vision, a synchronic union of discrepant worlds, remain unresolved.

Metaphor, too, relies heavily on internal associations supposedly common to a global readership in order to break through the restraints of language to a kind of transcendental signified. But a writer like Aimé Césaire challenges such a presumption when he associates values like purity and goodness with the colour black rather than the traditional colour, white. Such a radical subversion shocks the reader into a revaluation of conventional associations, acting in a fashion similar to surrealist art and poetry.

Audrey Thomas appropriates or rejects conventional metaphors created largely by a Western male discourse in order to articulate the experience of women everywhere. The West's oppression of women, and women's struggle to break out of traditional roles in some ways parallels Africa's colonial past and its struggle to be heard, despite important differences. In particular, her use of texts such as Heart of Darkness brings to the foreground how Africa has been perceived while also sharpening and intensifying the association of conquest and imperialism with the exploitation and domination of women.[5]

Thomas's approach means that Africa remains a trope, but her surreal technique twists and blurs conventional images of Africa. Those of her female characters who are paralysed by their own fear project that fear onto Africa in much the same way as Africa has always been a screen onto which desire has been projected. Thomas self-consciously brings such representations to the foreground to expose how Africa has been depicted, her use of surrealism highlighting the actual moment of creation of such self-referring images in the very process of writing. The refrain, "Is this the real Africa?", echoing throughout her fiction forces a questioning of past "authoritative" representations even as

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[5] Conrad's book continues to be alluded to in subtle ways, such as the choice of title for the **Witness** documentary on Rwanda aired on CBC TV on 12 July, 1994: Journey into Darkness.

it cautions the reader that Thomas's own use of Africa is dictated by her own position as a foreigner.

Dave Godfrey's main character in The New Ancestors, Michael Burdener, is also a foreigner, an outsider who rejects his original country only to be rejected by his adopted home. Godfrey uses the character of Burdener and his state of homelessness and dislocation to challenge the Western reader's complacency and force a new entry into the continent which is not based upon superior or preconceived notions shaped by a colonial archive of writings on Africa. But Godfrey's attempt to resist past representations and to create a different pattern of "universal" images true to the experience of Africa by adopting surrealist techniques and refusing to translate African words may actually reinforce the Western perception of Africa as a savage, untamed continent which is incomprehensible and full of horrors.

All three of these writers have been strongly influenced by the universal as a major criteria for what is literary. At the same time, however, such a value is often eroded, seemingly against the writers' own will. It is as though, in their struggle to articulate the experience of others, Laurence, Thomas, and Godfrey come to realize that the universalism flowing from the masterpieces of Western literature is inadequate, yet their own cultural background remains a force from which they cannot break free. The achievement of Laurence, Thomas, and Godfrey is that in the

creation of their own postcolonial texts they enact the very struggle of trying to free perceptions from the distortions of Empire through the process of writing; they have glimpsed or fully realized that "'universalism' has become a word beyond definition," and they have sought to impress this upon the reader.[6] And with this realization these writers wrestle with the dilemma of creating fictions while confining themselves to the periphery of the text, with finding a means to speak without denying a voice to "others."

Laurence, Thomas, and Godfrey all signal not only a willingness for the Other to be heard, but also a desire that we adjust our sight, that we make the very real effort to go beyond our cultural compounds and attempt to acquire inter-subjective knowledge. The Africa envisioned as the fictional country of LeoAfrica in Hugh Hood's You Can't Get There from Here, with its comic tone reminiscent of Saul Bellow's Henderson the Rain King; the Canadian volunteers valiantly attempting to be of some use amidst the violence in the Congo where Ralph Allen sets his Ask the Name of the Lion; the naive expatriate undergoing a process of maturation triggered by the sex and violence of Africa--all these visions of Africa conform to and perpetuate an image

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[6] Michael Thorpe, "The Uses of Diversity: The Internationalization of English-Canadian Literature," Ariel 23:2 (April 1992), 122.

which Laurence, Thomas, and Godfrey strive to resist.[7] And their efforts may be partially responsible for the sensitively created Africa which can be found in recent fiction like the African short stories collected in Rosemary Nixon's The Cock's Egg, or the novel, Fadimatu, whose author, Jennifer Mitton, writes from the inside, as it were, imaginatively depicting the experiences of a young Nigerian woman.[8]

Jennifer Mitton's novel, like those of Laurence and Godfrey, brings to the foreground the whole question of voice and of representation. In Canada a debate recently flared up with the controversy surrounding the Writing Thru "Race" conference, which held closed sessions open only to visible minority writers. A $22,500.00 grant was cancelled following complaints from the Reform Party and from some writers.[9] Commentators in The Globe and Mail such as Michael Valpy and Robert Fulford were critical of the conference, as was the paper itself in its editorial.[10] The charged emotions point to a highly ambivalent feeling

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[7] Ralph Allen, Ask the Name of the Lion (New York: Doubleday, 1962); Hugh Hood, You Can't Get There From Here (Ottawa: Oberon , 1972); Saul Bellow, Henderson the Rain King (New York: Viking, 1959).

[8] Jennifer Mitton Fadimatu (Fredericton: Goose Lane, 1992); Rosemary Nixon, The Cock's Egg (Edmonton: NeWest, 1994).

[9] See The Globe and Mail, Saturday, July 2, 1994.

[10] See The Globe and Mail, Wednesday, 30 March, 8 April, and 19 April.

among Canadians with regard to the country's diverse ethnic makeup.

Such tensions are also found in the interviews of Canadian writers collected in Other Solitudes. For instance, when asked about his feelings about speaking for the Other, Rudy Wiebe replies,

> You can't steal anything from anyone when you tell their story; you make them live.... It would be the death of story-telling, the death of the imagination, if you could not try to imagine the 'Other,' as you put it. Whom am I allowed to imagine? Only myself?... A writer who cannot imagine 'Other' is no writer at all.[11]

By contrast, Dionne Brand responds in another interview that whites "should not and cannot" write about native life, and she claims that there have been far too many distortions already:

> If anything, white writers should ponder what in their collective psyche makes them want to write about native life. Why do they need the power to do this? Why do they remain in the past of white conquest and appropriation? Why are they bent on perpetuating stereotypes, instead of breaking with that history? Now, that would make some good reading, but it would take a little more work and thinking.[12]

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[11] Linda Hutcheon and Marion Richmond, eds., Other Solitudes: Canadian Multicultural Fictions (Toronto: Oxford University Press, 1990), 85.

[12] Hutcheon and Richmond, 277.

Wiebe's emphasis on story masks the political reality which concerns Brand, just as her perspective ignores the complexities of the creative imagination. But The Temptations of Big Bear is a rare achievement in its attempt to challenge the official version and bring to life the subjective experience of its hero.[13] Collections of multicultural fiction such as Other Solitudes are important in providing a space for often marginalized voices to be heard. Such a gesture, however, would be of limited value if readers opened the book only as a means to confirm already held views.

What Margaret Laurence, Audrey Thomas, and Dave Godfrey have done is to attempt to imagine "Other," and in the process have proven that they indeed are writers. At the same time, much of their African fiction does "take a little more work and thinking" by the reader because they are bent on breaking with past representations. Despite the necessity for others to speak among themselves and to claim their own diverse and unique experiences, these three writers prove that while perfect inter-subjective knowledge may not be attainable, silence need not be the only solution: the struggle to dismantle preconceptions, evident

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[13] Wiebe is somewhat disingenuous in his comments here, considering the controversy he initiated when he criticized W.P. Kinsella's depiction of natives in his fiction. In particular, Wiebe objected to Kinsella's use of real-life names for his characters, saying he was "ripping off" the Ermineskin Indians and advising them to sue.

throughout their works in the very writing process, in the effort to decolonize themselves, places Laurence, Thomas, and Godfrey in a larger postcolonial movement which seeks to alter traditional structures of power and make possible other ways of seeing and telling in Africa, and in Canada.

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