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Creaturely Mimesis: Life After Necropolitics in Chris Abani's Song for Night.[1]

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> The calculus governing cultural and political practices no longer has as its goal the subjection of individuals so much as the seizure of power over life itself. Its function is to abolish any idea of ancestry and thus any debt with regard to the past. (Achille Mbembe, "African Modes of Self-Writing" 269)

> [The sacred lake] is the repository of human souls who are yet to enter into the world: a source of great power for any dibia who enters there. Legend says that the fish in the lake guard the souls, swallowed deep in their bellies. (Chris Abani, Song for Night 65)

> Incidentally, Kafka is not the only writer for whom animals are the receptacles of the forgotten. (Walter Benjamin, "Franz Kafka," Selected Writings 810)

ABSTRACT

The current tendency to read African literature as a representation of necropolitics reinforces the very image of Africa as the heart of darkness that Achille Mbembe's work seeks to dismantle, obscuring his emphasis on the creative "languages of life" that exceed the necropolitical. Animism is one such language of life and in so far as African literature draws on animistic impulses, I argue that it has the capacity to resist the necropolitical drive to annihilate ancestry. Animist literature moves beyond the secular task of representation in

order to reconstitute itself as a surrogate rite of re-ancestralisation, as the articulation of a radically expanded, transhuman spirit of ancestry. Chris Abani's 2007 novel Song for Night is an exemplary allegorisation of this expansive process of re-ancestralisation in that its narrator, blown apart by a landmine, must reinvent his Igbo grandfather's forgotten song of connectedness in order to re-join the world of the ancestors. In so far as his lyrical song for night transposes the improvised sign-language of his platoon of muted mine-sweepers, the narrative mimes their creative resistance to the instrumentalisation of human life. However, this creativity does not constitute a recovery of the human so much as a spirited affirmation of corporeal similarity, or what I term creaturely mimesis.

INTRODUCTION

Taken together, my epigraphs are designed to suggest my central thesis: that the possibility of life beyond necropolitics depends upon our ability to acknowledge an expanded idea of ancestry or filiation. There is an occult sympathy between the work of Franz Kafka and Chris Abani, a sympathy which has to do with their shared intuition that hope lies in our forgotten connection to (other) animals, in our creaturely relation to those who, in these profoundly de-animating times, have undertaken to guard our souls. Hopes lies, in other words, in the rediscovery of our relatedness, in the recognition that other bodies may be the dispersed repositories, or receptacles, of our own ancestral spirits.

This is one way of reading Kafka's enigmatic reply to Max Brod that there is "an infinite amount of hope—but not for us" (qtd in Hanssen 142). There is no hope for us as mere humans; the trajectory of human history offers us, as Thomas Hardy famously complained, "so little cause for carolings," nothing to justify the darkling thrush's "ecstatic sound" (Hardy, "The Darkling Thrush"). Without wishing to impute a consciously "animist"

poetics to such canonical figures of modernism, it is clear that that for Kafka and Hardy, just as much as for Abani, redemption lies beyond the narrative of the human, in that dynamic relatedness which Walter Benjamin refers to as the mimetic impulse to become-similar and which this essay will rephrase as creaturely mimesis.

This is not simply to preach an ecological message whereby our continued existence lies in an enhanced respect for the "more-than-human" world (Abram). Rather, it is too assert that life depends on its mimetic, or morphological, capacity, its capacity to embrace similarity rather than difference (uniqueness) or indeed identity (sameness). As Roger Caillois argued in his extraordinary 1934 essay, "Mimicry and Legendary Psychasthenia." this drive towards similarity is not simply a biological defensive mimesis in which an organism changes shape in order to avoid destruction, but a more profound impulse towards self-relinquishment, towards the relinquishment of the illusion of individual integrity or sovereignty.

NECROPOLITICS AND CREATIVITY

To start by gesturing towards a post-sovereign world is, of course, to get ahead of myself and the "necropolitical" conditions of existence that pertain in what Achille Mbembe has dubbed the "postcolony." The postcolony is a space in which the post-independence horizon of democracy has disappeared, where the autonomy of both the state and the individual has been negated. Such a condition of powerlessness has long proved amenable to Foucaudian biopolitical analysis, but Mbembe ramped up the stakes with his 2003 coinage of the term "necropolitics." Necropolitics is an extreme form of biopower, less interested in subject formation and control than it is in the annihilation of entire populations. This was always an aspect of biopower and the willingness of modern regimes to "visit holocausts on their own populations" but Foucault presented this genocidal urge as the counterpart of a power that exerts a positive influence on life, that endeavors to administer, optimize and multiply it,

subjecting it to precise controls and comprehensive regulations" (Foucault 137). Necropolitics lacks this positive dimension. Drawing on Bataille, Mbembe presents necropolitics as part of a regime of "absolute expenditure," a non-rational "anti-economy" of death ("Necropolitics" 15). While necropolitics has a grim history in colonialism, the transatlantic slave trade and the Holocaust, Mbembe's chief focus is on the "deathworlds" of contemporary Africa states, on the terrifying conditions that obtain not only under many of Africa's dictatorships, but also in those seemingly anarchic conflict zones in which power is exercised at increasingly local levels.

However, a central problem with criticism that seeks to 'apply' Mbembe's work to African literature is that it usually takes the literary text to be a descriptive, and thus relatively passive, representation of the necropolitical conditions of the postcolony. [2] This has the effect of accentuating the accusation that is often levelled at Mbembe's work of "Afropessimism." [3] To see African literature as a straightforward representation of a necropolitical world risks succumbing to nihilism, to Conrad's vision of Africa as the Heart of Darkness, the very narrative that Mbembe explicitly sets out to dismantle in On the Postcolony. Taking as his epigraph Marlow's famous "suspicion of [Africans] not being inhuman," Mbembe complains that "Africa is almost always deployed in the framework of a meta-text about the . . . beast" (1). Mbembe does not always make it clear exactly how Africa is to avoid this framing. Insisting on Africans as humans leads into various discourses of humanism and humanitarianism that, amongst other pitfalls, perpetuate the dualistic hierarchy of the human over the animal, the spiritual over the bestial. My emphasis on the creaturely as the very sign of the soul, or of ensoulment, is designed to suggest a way out of this loop. To affirm creaturely mimesis is to suggest not that all creatures are part of God's creation, but that all creatures are fundamentally creative, and even, morphologically speaking, their own creators.

Mbembe himself often emphasises the creativity of the African subject but in a rather enigmatic fashion. “African Modes of Self-Writing,” for instance, devotes all but a few paragraphs to critiquing modes of self-writing of which he emphatically disapproves. This means that critics seeking to confirm his necropolitical diagnosis of the postcolony remain caught within a rational representational logic which Mbembe at least partially seeks to displace. Representation can, of course, also imply critique, but this critique only breaks with Afropessimism if it has a utopian dimension, if it can show how the literary text contains within it an intimation of how things—repressive regimes, civil conflicts, global structures of oppression—might be otherwise. Reading African literature as direct confirmation of necropolitical realities ignores Mbembe’s own sense of the potentiality of particular African cultural practices as resources for fashioning a new African subjectivity (“African Modes of Self-Writing” 242), as one of the “languages of life” that continually resist the necropolitical drive towards annihilation. (On the Postcolony 15).

Mbembe’s affirmation of African “languages of life” emerges from his critique of the two dominant modes of writing about Africa, namely “Afro-radicalism” and “nativism”. While Afro-radicalism is overly indebted to a progressive European teleology, albeit in a Marxist guise, nativism denies the ways in which African life is irrevocably entangled within the history of modernity. Mbembe’s critique of both these modes is intended to make way for a different mode of self-writing and a different way of writing about Africa. His own writing suggests how difficult such a project might be.

The barbed opening sentence of On the Postcolony reads “Speaking rationally about Africa is not something that has ever come naturally” (1). We might read this sentence as aligning Mbembe with those political scientists who do indeed endeavour to speak rationally about Africa, but this would be to miss the weight of the term “naturally”: rationality, as an Enlightenment discourse that seeks to distance itself from nature, can only ever ensnare

Africa within developmental discourses that inscribe Africa within the telos of European modernity. Mbembe's project is thus to develop a mode of speaking that de-naturalises the rationality of political science and clears a space for the alternative rationalities and temporalities that are imbedded within the everyday experience of African modernity.

Indeed, Mbembe might be read as calling for a mode of African spirit-writing, or at least as the attempt to materialise a certain spirit:

> I started from the idea that there is a loose relationship between subjectivity and temporality--that in some way one can envisage subjectivity itself as temporality. The intuition behind this idea was that, for each age and each time, there existed something distinctive or particular--or, to use the term, a "spirit" (Zeitgeist). These distinctive and particular things are constituted by a set of material things, signs, figures, superstitions, images, and fictions that, because they are available to individual's imaginations and intelligence and actually experienced, form what might be called "languages of life." (On the Postcolony 15)

Like the Frankfurt School, Mbembe seeks to reverse the Hegelian dialectic of history: rather than being a transcendental, world historical universal, spirit inheres at the level of the particular, at the level of material practice. And rather than being the sign of history's supra-rational telos, spirit manifests itself in the "signs, figures, superstitions, images and fictions" through which Africans experience their being in the world. This is the force of Mbembe's notion of entanglement: the African experience of modernity is mediated not through some world-historical process of enlightenment but through the alternative temporalities and belief systems that the colonial project never entirely displaced.

ANIMSIM AND MIMESIS

Mbembe's desire to harness the force of those languages which modernity has cast as non-rational has its counterpart in the Frankfurt School's emphasis on the mimetic power of language, a power which is diminished by the rationalising drive of modernity but which nevertheless retains a latent redemptive force. Their redefinition of mimesis breaks with the rigid logic of representation that limits so much bio- and necropolitical analysis by seeing the mimetic impulse of art not as the desire to produce a realistic representation of the world but as a shamanistic desire to identify with the world.

The mainstream understanding of mimesis as re-presentation, as realism, is, as Matthew Potolosky argues, peculiarly Western:

> [W]hen placed in a global and historical context, the Western devotion to realism is an exception rather than the rule. […] Few cultures outside the West have regarded realism as an important goal. […] Many traditional cultures do not make the sharp distinction between art and reality that Western theory has inherited from Plato. Art in these cultures is closely intertwined with ritual or daily life, much as it seems to have been in archaic Greek culture before Plato's intervention. (93-94)

As Gebauer and Wulf underline, Plato's intervention was coeval with the birth of writing in the West, with the warding off of unruly passions and irrational spirits. Art is banished from Plato's Republic because it can only provide inadequate, corrupting images of reality. Plato's hostile definition of art as impoverished imitation casts a long shadow: even those who defend art's capacity to objectively represent reality—however that reality is conceived—are caught within Plato's assumption that art's primary function is to represent the world, an assumption that disavows the origins of both "Western" and "non-Western" art in the affective, spiritual power of ritual.

It should come as no surprise that the modernist break with realism is accompanied by a fascination with those non-Western cultures in which art and ritual remain intertwined. However, to describe experimental, modernist or postmodernist art as anti-mimetic is to remain under the sway of Plato's understanding of what art is for. The task is rather to redefine mimesis, to recover an alternative sense of art's purposiveness. This is precisely the force of the intervention effected by Benjamin and Adorno, who sought to recover a pre-modern, anti-Platonic sense of mimesis as a dynamic, transformatory engagement with the world, rather than a static attempt to capture the world. If the Platonic understanding of art turns the world into an object of study, something apart from the artist, the anti-Platonic tradition attempts to bridge this divide, to render us proximate to the world. Instead of imitating objects in the world (natura naturata), mimesis becomes the imitation of the creative process by which worlds are formed (natura naturans).[4]

This redefinition lifts mimesis out of the anthropocentric sphere of aesthetics and reinserts it into the much broader field of creative life itself. As Caillois notes, animals and plants are also adept at producing similarities and even becoming-similar, and not always in the interests of self-preservation. This "de-anthropocentrisation" of art returns us to those indigenous cultures that have steadfastly refused to draw a distinction between human and non-human creativity. However, for modernist theorists such as Benjamin, Adorno, Caillois and, of course, Freud, such cultures are misleadingly presented as pre-modern or primitive. Benjamin describes mimesis "as a weak rudiment of the once powerful compulsion to become similar and to behave mimetically" ("Doctrine of the Similar" Selected Writings 698). Casting aside this monotemporal (and implicitly racist) understanding of human development, it becomes clear that this "weak rudiment" has remained a more powerful compulsion in cultures which are still familiar, for instance, with ideas of spirit possession, as more recent anthropologists such as Michael Taussig and Paul Stoller have demonstrated.

But how is it that African literature draws on this "trans-corporeal" process of creaturely mimesis?[5] In so far as African literature is irrevocably bound up with modernity, with the global structures of print capitalism, it can only perform the transformational process of becoming-similar while also marking the non-identity of postcolonial African experience, the rupture between ancestral traditions and global modernities. African literature—in so far it activates itself as creaturely mimesis—is thus engaged in a process of "auto-ancestralisation": in a necropolitical world bent on erasing not only life but the very idea of ancestry, African literature must learn how to inherit itself. The peculiar, residual "autonomy" of African literature does not consist in the recovery of a lost cultural tradition, as critics once claimed of novels such as Things Fall Apart, but rather in the invention of tradition, in a mimesis not of "how things were" but of the very process of "existential repair" (Eze 26). Only this dynamic understanding of mimesis can enable African literature to constitute itself as a process of "self-writing", as one of the "languages of life" that Mbembe sees as vital to the ongoing project of African self-fashioning (On the Postcolony 15).

Emmanuel Eze usefully outlines this paradoxical process of inheriting a broken tradition.

> On one level, the traditions which one writes about, or out of, are experienced by the [African] writer as alive. On another level, the writer knows that the tradition in question has been "damaged" and transformed in an irreversible manner. In fact the act of writing is itself both a mark of the time of deconstruction, transformation and renewal. (Emmanuel Eze 26)

To stress the act of writing is to move beyond models in which writing is merely a passive reflection or representation of historical reality towards an idea of writing as a process of

enactment, a performative remaking of the world. Such a writing cannot recover or make whole cultural traditions which have been irrevocably damaged by colonialism and modernity, but it can offer itself as a mimesis of tradition, a mimesis of the very process of passing on.

In this sense, contemporary African literature can only lay claim to the same "weak messianic power" that Benjamin claimed for historical materialism. In strikingly Benjaminian terms, Mbembe suggests that necropolitics is aimed not only at the living but also at the dead: to return to my first epigraph, "necropolitics seeks to abolish any idea of ancestry and any debt with regard to the past.". Without underestimating the astonishing bravery of exiled, imprisoned and executed African writers, literature is relatively powerless to resist the murderous, even genocidal, force of global, national and local regimes of necropower. However, literature has a role to play in resisting the attempt to abolish "the idea of ancestry."[6] To argue that African literature keeps alive an idea of ancestry is not to lapse into idealism, whereby the material conditions of the postcolony are somehow "overcome" or "redeemed" by the literary affirmation of a spiritual plane of existence. Spirits, too, in Africa, are material, and the worlds of the living and the dead, matter and spirit, interpenetrate one another. To keep alive the idea of ancestry might thus be rephrased as keeping alive the spirit of ancestry, keeping open that passage between the living and the dead which makes it possible for a culture to inherit itself. The "materiality" of African literature would thus consist not in its ability to represent the necropolitical conditions of the postcolony but in its capacity to provide a means of resisting cultural annihilation by maintaining a spirit-passage or lifeline between the past, the present and the future, a passage that depends upon a radically expanded notion of ancestry, on a passage between the human and those more-than-human beings that have taken our souls into safekeeping. This essay thus argues for a

reading of African literature not simply as a memorialisation of history, but as the keeping alive of the very possibility of inheritance.

To speak of the spirit of ancestry risks a tautology: ancestry is always already a matter of spirits. But this self-reflexive doubling, or doubled-up-ness, is precisely the contortion that contemporary African literature must perform if it is to survive the ravages of necropolitical power. In the face of the attempt to abolish the very mechanisms by which cultures and peoples remember themselves, African literature presents itself as a rite of inheritance, as a surrogate mode of ancestralisation. The secular paradigm that informs most biopolitical analysis leaves little room for registering the spiritual dimensions of African existence, and how these dimensions continue to inflect African literature. Part of my essay will be concerned to show how Chris Abani learns to inherit his literary forefather, Chinua Achebe, as a spiritual ancestor, a spirit-writer, alongside a broader, transcultural array of spirit-writers. My use of the term spirit-writer is intended to imply an animist potentiality that is always latent within African literature, a potentiality that is critically resistant to the secularisation thesis that drives global modernity. Adorno and Horkheimer famously argued that "animism had endowed things with souls. Industrialism makes souls into things" (21). The force of this essay will be to suggest that the earlier part of this pronouncement need not be uttered solely in the past tense, that animism, broadly understood as the recognition of a spirit energy which animates and interconnects all life forms, remains a crucial antidote to the annihilating amnesia of the necropolitical.[7]

However, I need to temper this redefinition of African literature as sacred rite rather than secular representation. Part of its "weak messianic power" is that such a literature only circulates amongst a transnational elite and is thus dependent on the same necropolitical forces of global capitalism it protests. In this sense, auto-ancestralisation signals a process of cultural attenuation: unlike Benjamin's storyteller, the modern novelist cannot receive and

pass on the wisdom of a culture that is present to itself; modern African literature cannot ancestralise anything by (or but) itself and remains an allegory of an ancestral process that awaits its own completion. I am tempted to say that it is the reader that completes or at least activates this process, but such an activation would be confined to the elite, transnational readership of contemporary African literature, and reading, like writing, is a process marked by an irreducible loneliness, even as it conjures a certain spirit of community. In this sense, we must engage in magical thinking in order to grant literature its ancestral power. And this, as we shall see, is precisely what Abani's novel asks us to do: as we read, we help speed its blown-up narrator along his journey to rejoin his ancestors. Literature has always relied on a certain sympathetic magic; its requirement to suspend disbelief means that it never was a wholly secularised technology of modernity.

NEW ANIMISMS

Magical thinking has been making something of a comeback. While animism remains an umbrella term that refers to a vast range of local practices in which non-human matter is invested with spirit, our growing--if continually disavowed--awareness of ecological crisis means that what Graham Harvey has described as the "new animism" has an insistently environmental bearing (3). A special issue of e-flux was devoted to the subject in 2012, inspired by an international art exhibition . The range of contributors to this issue, from literary theorists and art historians through to anthropologists, archaeologists and philosophers of science, suggest that animism is no longer confined to the annals of colonial history but is, as Isabelle Stengers argues, a vital part of a truly cosmopolitical approach to all life forms.

The colonial discourse on animism, as constructed by anthropologists such as E.B. Tylor and James Frazer in the late nineteenth century, presented animism as a primitive belief

in magic that was superseded first by religion and then by science. But what Mbembe describes as the "entangled" nature of postcolonial modernity suggests that rationalism has not fully superseded either religious or magical thinking, and that the distinctions between all three are much less clear than colonial anthropology imagined. Reversing the teleology of the colonial gaze, Wole Soyinka argued in Myth, Literature and the African World (1976) that animistic beliefs accommodate modernity within their own continually evolving world view. Caroline Rooney's seminal study African Literature, Animism and Politics (2000) breaks down the opposition between the rationality of Western science and the supposed primitivism of animist accounts of the world, showing how both systems of thought are attempts to account for the energy of matter, or what she dubs its "spiritedness". More recently, Christopher Bracken's study Magical Criticism: The Recourse of Savage Philosophy shows how the magical thinking that we associate with "savage philosophy" is also at the heart of both capitalism and its critics, such as Marx and Benjamin. Crucially, the point is not to dispel such magical thinking but to embrace it, to release the spirit that has become reified in the commodity. Marx himself did not simply denounce commodity fetishism but in fact sought to "substitut[e] one form of soul migration for another" (162).[8]

Harry Garuba's "Explorations in Animist Materialism" (2003) is the most central reference point for this essay, not least for his coinage of the term "animist materialism." Garuba understands animist materialism as a "continual re-enchantment of the world" (266) that works to undo the process of disenchantment that Max Weber famously associated with modernity. While I am in wholehearted agreement with his understanding of animist materialism as a "practice of everyday life [that] has often provided avenues of agency for the dispossessed in colonial and postcolonial Africa" (285), I seek to move beyond his conception of how animism inflects literary production. Garuba argues that "animist materialism subspeciates into the representational techniques of animist realism, which may

once again further subspeciate into the genre of magical realism" (275). I do not take particular issue with his desire to distinguish between animist and magical realism, but I want to question the representational framework within which he is working. There is something problematic about turning animism into an epithet that qualifies a Western, ultimately Platonic, conception of what art does. If literature is really to be part of a movement to reenchant the world, it surely has to do more than represent it. This is precisely why I argue that we must turn to Benjamin and Adorno and their attempt to recover an alternative account of mimesis, one that explicitly draws on an animist understanding of art as a transformational rite, as an identification with, rather than representation of, the world.

As I have suggested, such an approach also moves us beyond the idea of art as an exclusively human activity, and indeed towards an understanding of art as the renunciation of human sovereignty and the affirmation of our creaturely connections. In this sense the contemporary return to animism seeks to overcome not only the colonial bias of nineteenth century anthropology but anthropocentrism tout court. My reading of animism as creaturely mimesis is broadly in line with ecologically-inflected work that looks to indigenous, broadly animist practices in order to theorise a post-sovereign, or "planetary" consciousness. Jennifer Wenzel's recent argument that we need to think the planet against the globe echoes Gayatri Spivak's argument that we need to "reconstellat[e] the responsibility-thinking of precapitalist societies into the abstractions of the democratic structures of civil society, to use the planetary—if such a thing can be used!—to control globalization interruptively" (348). Spivak's use of the idea of reconstellation hints at a tacit affinity between her sense of the interruptive power of an aesthetic education and Benjamin's emphasis on the reconstellatory force of historical materialism, a force that itself works mimetically by grasping "the constellation into which his own era has entered, along with a very specific earlier one ("On the Concept of History" 400). My larger project is thus to (re)constellate historical and

animist materialism, to show how Benjamin's doctrine of similarity draws not only on the "responsibility-thinking of pre-capitalist societies" but also on their aesthetic sensibility, their sense of the spirited nature of all matter.

CREATURELY SPIRITS

Another way of articulating my project would be to say that the biopolitical turn in postcolonial studies has been blind not simply to the spiritual dimensions of both the literature it sets out to read and the thinkers to which it returns but also to the creaturely dimensions of biopolitical thought. The creature is not only the sign of bare life, of the human being stripped of all cultural and spiritual pretentions, but also, at least for dialectical thinkers such as Benjamin, the sign of a post-sovereign and post-human form of redemption. The creature marks the moment at which human alienation tips over into forms of transspecies relationality, into an awareness of our common creatureliness. By this I mean on the one hand what Judith Butler (without reference to non-human life) describes as our "common corporeal vulnerability" (42) and on the other what Caroline Rooney describes as our co-spiritedness, the ways in which, from an animist perspective, all life forms are animated and therefore sacred. If all creatures are also spirits, then spirit-writing might also be called creaturely mimesis, a mode of creativity that insistently affirms the similarity, the relatedness, of all creatures.

While the biopolitical turn to the creaturely sometimes returns to Benjamin's work on the Kreatur--and in particular to his work on Kafka--it does so in isolation from Benjamin's work on the mimetic faculty as a creative capacity common to all life. Eric Santner's influential study, Creaturely Life, defines creatureliness as a state of extreme subjection to the capricious "jouissance" of the sovereign, a state of "deanimation" that, he argues, is unique to

humans in so far as they are uniquely exposed to the realm of the political. Beatrice Hanssen, in a much more careful reading of Benjamin, brings out the ways in which dehumanisation is not necessarily deanimating but can rather serve as a potentially animating route out of human exceptionalism. For Benjamin, Kafka's estranged animal-humans (such as Gregor Samsa) do not simply emblematise the thingification of the human, but "ultimately express an ethico-political call to de-limit the category of the creaturely, and to divest it of its last humanistic overtones" (Hanssen 153). Kafka's animal-humans are not in themselves sacred or redemptive figures, but they teach us to expand our attentiveness:

> Even if Kafka did not pray—and this we do not know—he still possessed in the highest degree what Malebranche called 'the natural prayer of the soul': attentiveness. And in this attentiveness he included all living creatures [alle Kreatur], as saints include them in their prayers. (Benjamin, "Franz Kafka" 812)

This last analogy characteristically mimes at the level of form precisely what the saints perform in their prayers: the affirmation of similarity. Such forms of attentiveness point the way out of a modernity in which humans have sought to disavow nature, to disavow their relatedness.

In The Open, Agamben returns to the ancient forefathers of the Church in order to recover a therianthropic image in which the redeemed have animal heads and "man himself" will finally become "reconciled to his animal nature" (3). He has to reach so far back in order to circumvent the dualist tradition whereby the animal is figured as beast, as profane matter rather than transcendent spirit. But had thinkers such as Agamben been less thoroughly immersed in Judaeo-Christian traditions, and more versed in, say, African traditions of spirituality, they would have found that for many cultures the animal world has never ceased

to be a sign of spirit, a "repository," as Abani puts it in my second epigraph, for the human soul.

NARRATIVE ENCHANTMENT

My reading of Song for Night, will accordingly focus on how the necropolitical attempt to reduce the human to bare life nevertheless generates a spirited affirmation of creaturely co-existence; it is this affirmation of the co-existence or connectedness of all beings, all matter, that is the fundamental sign of creaturely mimesis. The novel takes as its point of departure the reduction of its protagonist, My Luck, to a human mine-sweeper whose vocal cords have been severed lest his death-cries disturb the work of his comrades. The narrative contains historical references to the Biafran war of 1967-70, of which the young Abani and his family were survivors. However, the references to designer goods, Lexus cars and satellite phones suggest more recent West African civil wars in, for instance, Liberia and Sierra Leone. This temporal and spatial elasticity suggests that Abani's primary purpose is not to document or historicise the necropolitical conditions of a particular deathworld. As its title suggests, the novel is an enactment of the process by which a mute, creaturely existence is nevertheless capable of generating its own song, its own enchantment. Blown apart by a landmine before his narrative even begins, My Luck posthumously enacts a mode of spirit-writing explicitly plotted as a movement into the spirit world, as a mode of auto-ancestralisation. "You aren't dreaming, My Luck, my love," his dead lover Ijeoma explains. "Before we can move from here, we have to relive and release our darkness" (96). In confronting the moral darkness of his life as a child-soldier, My Luck is able to re-associate himself with a life from which he has become radically disassociated, and thereby reassociate himself with the sacred nature of life. In so doing, My Luck is able to regain that sense of a "debt with regard to the past" that Mbembe cites as the very principle of ancestry.

This retrospective structure has led critics such as Hamish Dalley and Daria Tunca to identify Song for Night as a variant of the child-soldier trauma narrative. It is hard to deny the interpretive seductions of trauma studies, especially as the field comes to align itself with the burgeoning field of human rights literature. The latter field invariably returns us to the realist understanding of art in which child soldier narratives are first and foremost documents of human rights abuses. Trauma studies, as Stef Craps points out, has habitually been more sympathetic to "experimental" or modernist forms of literature (4). However, we should be sceptical of Craps' accusation that this predilection for modernism is necessarily evidence of the Eurocentrism of trauma studies. On the contrary, as Potolsky points out above, it is the realist tradition that is peculiarly Western. What draws me--and writers such as Abani--to so called modernist, or indeed postmodernist, forms is not so much an aesthetics of fragmentation, but rather an insistence on interconnection. It is only from the perspective of a tradition in which subjectivity is individuated and monotemporal that such an aesthetics appears fragmented. Echoing a certain defence of modernism, trauma studies tacitly remains within the shadow of Platonic mimesis when it seeks to argue that the trauma narrative represents not reality but the shattered reality of the trauma survivor. This shift from the representation of reality itself to the individual's perception of reality still seeks to legitimate itself according to arguments about verisimilitude. The subjectivisation of the artwork can leave us ever more firmly isolated within our respective perspectives.[9] By contrast, the work of writers such as Abani returns us to the world by insisting on the porosity of subjectivity. Their narratives do not seek to repair the borders of the psyche, to reconstruct the protective shield that Freud famously pictures as being breached by trauma, but to overcome the subject's isolation from the world:[10] the mimesis at work in Song for Night has as its fundamental goal its narrator's re-absorption into the (spirit-)world.

The spirit-trajectory of Song for Night also complicates any desire to read the novel in terms of individual rehabilitation or the recovery of the child soldier's humanity, a term which inevitably casts My Luck's existence as a child solider as a fall into bestiality.[11] In fact, My Luck's spiritual survival is indebted to what we might call his creaturely connections, most notably the dolphin who swallowed his soul for safekeeping while he was fishing with his grandfather on the River Cross before the war. I will return to Abani's conception of the creaturely as "the repository of human souls" and its relation to Benjamin's conception of the creaturely as the "receptacle of the forgotten" in due course. For now I want simply to note that My Luck's experience of war causes him to forget the magical song for night that his grandfather taught him that night (66). The task of his posthumous narration thus becomes to improvise a new song for night, and thereby chant his—and, by extension, our—way back into the creaturely world of the ancestors.

FROM GRACELAND TO SONG FOR NIGHT: LEARNING HOW TO INHERIT SPIRITS

Chris Abani was born in Afikpo, Nigeria, a village which provides the early childhood setting for the protagonist of his second and perhaps most famous novel, GraceLand (2004). His father was Nigerian and his mother English, and it was thanks to his mother's bravery in securing her children's passage out of Biafra to England (partially recounted in the narrative poem *Daphne's Lot* (2003)) that Abani survived the Nigerian Civil War (1967-70). He was imprisoned and tortured during the military juntas of the 1980s, an experience described in his first collection of poetry, Kalakuta Republic (2000). After his imprisonment he finally settled in the US. He has published six novels and seven volumes of poetry to date, as well as screenplays and numerous essays. I have no space to consider his development as a poet in this essay, but in this section I want to focus on what one might call the lyricisation of his

novelistic practice, from the publication of GraceLand in 2004 through to the publication of Song for Night in 2007. In this extraordinarily fertile period, Abani also published Becoming Abigail (2006) and The Virgin of Flames (2007), to which I will also briefly refer. The lyricisation of Abani's prose is, I want to suggest, an exemplary passage from a secular to a sacred understanding of his novelistic vocation, from the more or less realistic representation of a disenchanted, necropolitical world in GraceLand to its ritualised reenchantment in Song for Night.

Garuba distinguishes animist realism from magical realism in so far as the latter is characterised by an "urban, cosmopolitan aspect . . . and an ironizing attitude which are not necessarily elements of the animistic narrative or its writers" (274). Although this distinction may not be entirely watertight, it is clear that that some forms of irony operate against the animist impulse to reenchant the world. Graceland (2004) and The Virgin of Flames (2007) cannot be described as fully animist novels precisely because they ironise (even while they sympathise with) their protagonists' spiritual ambitions. Elvis' whiteface imitation of Presley's dance routine is a transcultural imitation of an art that is itself an imitation of a black cultural tradition.[12] It would be possible to (mis)read his transcultural mimesis as redemptive or genuinely transformative, but only by ignoring the heavily ironised mode of Bildungsroman in which this stalled act of becoming-similar takes place. The necropolitical conditions of his existence in a Lagos slum slated for demolition, immediately prior to the military coup of December 1983, negate all possibilities for Elvis' development, and the novel ends with him fleeing Nigeria on a false passport for an America that he realises will not be any more hospitable to his development as an artist. The Virgin of Flames follows the trajectory of Elvis' uncertain development, in so far as it depicts a suicidal muralist in Los Angeles unable to overcome the shame of his desire for a drag-artist. The multiple references to virgins, angels and shamans signal Abani's desire to explore the artistic possibility of a

transcultural "political spirituality" (41), but the novel remains within a Rushdie-esque version of magical realism: as in The Satanic Verses, we are never sure if Black's visions of the Angel Gabriel are hallucinations or genuine visitations, and the novel ends with Black's accidental self-immolation dressed in a wedding dress atop his suspended spaceship.[13] For the crowd below, he may have realised his miraculous destiny as the Virgin of Flames, but for the reader his slapstick apotheosis is a tragi-comic symptom of his inability to come to terms with his sexuality.

There are, however, moments in both novels which suggest Abani's desire to move beyond irony towards a more animist, and indeed more creaturely, form of mimesis. In GraceLand, Elvis's supine father is urged by "the totem of [his] forefathers", a leopard, to resist the destruction of his slum (206). Elvis later finds a policeman with his throat ripped out, which tacitly suggests that his father may, on the point of death, have finally realised his spiritual/creatural destiny. In The Virgin of Flames, Black takes time out from his painting to pass on the spirits of dogs that have been used as target practice by gangs in the city's wastelands (182-4). Black is thus the antecedent of the shaman in Song for Night who My Luck will encounter using the same smoking herbs as Black uses to pass on the souls of dead soldiers (103). [14] One might argue, reading back from the example of Song for Night, that Black's self-immolation is a mode of passing himself on, but the lack of any sense of an actual spirit-world, amidst the various new-age spiritualisms of Los Angeles, means that we cannot seriously read the novel as an act of auto-ancestralisation. Like GraceLand, it remains a novel about an artist with politico-spiritual ambitions, rather than a fully realised act of re-enchantment.

Becoming Abigail might be described as Abani's transitional, proto-lyrical novel in so far as it is 'more compressed and interior [than his earlier novels], a poetic treatment of terror and loneliness" (Lipsyte, para 1). However, in so far as the novella remains a third person

narrative about a sex-slave trafficked to the UK whose abandonment is so complete that her only remaining form of agency is suicide, the novel remains cut off from the auto-ancestralising power of Song for Night.

Song for Night, then, marks a form of spiritual homecoming. Lest we get distracted by arguments about authenticity, I should note straight away that this homecoming is immediately distinguishable from Afro-nativism by the novel's epigraphs (to which I will return), which signal a transcultural indebtedness to the spiritual wisdom of a French playwright and an Amerindian shaman. These transcultural references emphasise the gap between Abani's inheritance of Igbo spiritual traditions and that of Chinua Achebe. Earlier I suggested that Abani learns to inherit Achebe as one of his literary-spiritual ancestors but this was not a straightforward process for a writer who initially sought to define himself in opposition to Achebe. In a tribute to Achebe after his death, Abani writes:

> As a writer I have fought with Achebe. Railed against the anthropological bent of some of his work. Struggled with his complicated positioning of gender. Chaffed against his statements that were often presented as unassailable truths. Tried to push Things Fall Apart out of the sun a little so that other writers from Eddie Iroh, Festus Iyayi, [Isidore] Okphewo to the more recent ones can also grasp and command the world's imagination . . . such that we do not remain a people caught in the beautiful yet anachronistic moment of Things Fall Apart. And yet in the end, I have to admit that I did not only admire him, at some level, as a literary son, I loved him. Everything that I have described is the complicated struggle between father and son. And in the same way as it is with fathers and sons, I realize only after his death just how much I loved him. (Abani, "Chinua Achebe" para 3)

Abani's fiction, like Achebe's, is full of such Oedipal struggles between fathers and sons, but his belated tribute is particularly pertinent for the ways in which he wants to inherit Achebe as an "elder" who has been able to translate "the ever-evolving" nature of Igbo wisdom, Omenala, and "give it a life outside its own immediate culture, reaching out to a larger wider world" (para. 1). What he rails against is the Afro-nativist appropriation of Things Fall Apart as the realist representation of an authentic Igbo culture, the ways in which it is read as capturing "an unassailable truth" about a people, rather than a specific moment, the ways in which it seems to deny the ever-evolving nature of Igbo wisdom.[15]

Abani's initial distance from Achebe can be measured by the disjunctive passages about the kola nut ceremony which head each chapter of GraceLand, passages written in the "irritating . . . voice of an ethnographer, who believes that if you can figure out this one ritual, you can understand the Igbo, the way that anthropologists do" (Aycock 4). These epigraphs mark the impossibility of vertical, diachronic inheritance in 1980s Lagos.[16] Elvis knows nothing of the kola nut ceremonies so central to the world of Things Fall Apart, just as he has no use for his mother's notebooks full of authentic Nigerian recipes. Elvis keeps the notebook on his person as a kind of protective fetish object, much as the Russian Harlequin in Heart of Darkness carries An Enquiry into Some Points of Seamanship, as a guide to a world that he has long since left behind. The caesura between the predominantly maternal, nurturing world of Elvis" rural childhood, and the violent necropolitical world of his urban adolescence, a caesura brought about by his mother's death from breast cancer and his father's ill-fated pursuit of political representation, could not be more absolute.

Song for Night marks the moment at which a diachronic inheritance once more seems to become possible, not because the necropolitical situation it describes is any less violently amnesiac, but because a decisive shift seems to have taken place in Abani's understanding of the novel form. To call Song for Night a lyric novel is to mark the shift from an exterior third

person narration to an interior first person narration, the moment in which the performative, ritualistic modality of his lyric poetry passes over into his prose writing[17]. The shift to a first person narrative means that Song for Night enacts, rather than simply depicts, the spiritual vocation of his previous characters, and it is no coincidence that this is the first of his novels in which this spiritual vocation is unambiguously realised. Not only is My Luck reunited with his mother as he makes it to the other side of the river in the final pages of the novel, but the novel itself turns out to be "the song that sings [Abani's own] mother across to the other side." Daphne died while being read the novel's manuscript, reassured by the knowledge that My Luck finally "makes his peace with death" (Abani, "Ethics and Narrative", n.p.).

It should be clear by now that Abani has found his own way of redefining mimesis, leaving behind the rational tradition in which art is a more or less corrupt representation of reality and embracing the more spiritual understanding of art as transformative rite.[18] In Benjaminian terms, we might say that Abani has finally broken the assumed link between the novel and historicism--that misguided attempt to "tell the past as it really was" which transforms history into "homogenous empty time"--and moved into the redemptive lyric mode that Benjamin christens the "time of the now" ("On the Concept of History" 391-5). As a stalled Bildungsroman, GraceLand can only move horizontally within a pseudo-developmental temporality that merely serves to reveal the illusion of progress and the impossibility of inheritance: redemption comes only in the form of a false passport and a sideways movement towards a US that no longer represents what Matthew Omelsky usefully describes as the "euphoria-of-the-outside" (85). In Song for Night, by contrast, there is not even the illusion of progress: "Time is standing still--literally. My watch, an old Timex inherited from my father, is fucked (43).[19] But this suspension of time is paradoxically the condition for radical spiritual renewal, in so far as it allows My Luck the time to inherit himself.

IMPROVISING ANCESTRAL RITES

My Luck inherits himself through an improvised, mimetic approximation of the spiritual practices of his forebears. This aspect of improvisation and invention suggests that the movement from GraceLand to Song for Night is not quite a shift from synchrony to diachrony, from a transcultural horizontal inheritance to an Afro-nativist vertical inheritance. As I argued earlier, there can be no direct recovery of spiritual traditions, not least because these traditions are, for My Luck, irrevocably tangled: late in the novel he comes to realise that "nothing I know of the world comes from my Catholic mother or my Muslim father. All I know comes from the stories Grandfather told me" (102). His grandfather's Igbo teachings prove of more practical relevance precisely because they are presented as paradoxical stories, or "tall tales" (65) rather than rigid belief-structures. My Luck's belief structures have not survived a war in which he has inadvertently shot a girl called Faith (31) with the same bullet that liberates his platoon from their commanding officer, Major Essien, nicknamed John Wayne. America here figures less as the "euphoria-of-the-outside" than as the necropolitical rationality of a survival manual drawn from military academies of West Point and Sandhurst. It is this internalised survival manual which My Luck must disremember if he is to accept his biological death and begin his life as a spirit. He must learn that his narrative journey is powered not by the need to rejoin his platoon, as he himself assumes, but by the need to gather together his fragmented spiritual body.[20]

Although his grandfather's teachings will prove of most use in this process of reassociation, the residues of his parents' respective faiths are also part of the spiritual tradition which My Luck must piece together. This is made clear in an early scene in which he undertakes to bury a skeleton he finds drifting in a canoe.

> Leaving [the canoe] for a while, I dig a shallow grave in the shifting sand, knowing it will be washed away in next year's flood. But that is unimportant. What is important is that this person be buried, be mourned. Be remembered. Even for a minute. Before I take the skeleton out of the canoe, I reach in and pull the cobweb gently free. I drape it over my own head like a cap and then lift the skeleton with ease, careful not to shake any bones loose. To come back complete, it is important that one leave complete. (68-69)

There are several ironies in play here, but they are ironies that serve to underline, rather than undercut, the spiritual nature of My Luck's task. My Luck is performing for another precisely the task that we might wish someone would do for him, had his own skeleton not been blown apart by a landmine. The passage silently raises the question of how My Luck himself might "come back complete." And the answer lies in My Luck's own act of creaturely mimesis: in draping the cobweb over his head, he turns himself into a semblance of his Imam father, borrowing the cultural authority of Islam in order to pass on the soldier's spirit. But in so doing, he also renders Islam animist or creaturely: the doily prayer cap is here spun by a spider, thus tacitly invoking the aid of Anansi, the god of all stories, that West African spirit who so powerfully accompanied slaves on their passage to the New World. As if to underline the transculturality of all passages between the living and the dead, once My Luck has completed the burial, he "says a soft prayer and play[s] taps on [his] harmonica" (69). This improvised mimesis of diverse burial rites thus serves as an image of what Abani's own narrative must accomplish.

ACCOMPANIMENT

My Luck's own breath, expelled in prayer and music, is returned by that of the spirit he has passed on: "I feel the grateful blessing of the spirit in the wind on my cheek" (69) and it is this blessing which licences him to take the dead soldier's canoe. Auto-ancestralisation is not quite the lonely process that it may at first appear; in an animistic universe, in which subjectivity is dispersed, one is never simply paddling one's own canoe. [21]

This principle of accompaniment is underlined by the novel's two epigraphs. The first, "We die only once and for such a long time", is from Molière and suggests that Abani's narrative will be a performative exploration of death's duration, a spacing of time that elongates the moment of death.[22] The second, "on any path that may have heart, there I travel", is from Carlos Castaneda's controversial account of shamanism. If GraceLand ironises anthropological realism for the way in which it seeks to authenticate a foreign culture and indeed the very notion of cultural difference, Song for Night aligns itself with an experimental anthropology for the ways in which it explores similitude.[23] Castaneda's The Teachings of Don Juan: A Yaqui Way of Knowledge, is an account of a Peruvian American's attempt to become a shaman, carried out as anthropological field work in California. His Amerindian teacher, Don Juan, may be in fact be fictional, and this blurring of reality and illusion is no doubt part of the text's attraction for Abani, as Daria Tunca suggests. But I also want to note the ways in which the allusion to Castaneda's book deepens the dialectic I am developing between the seemingly contrary ideas of auto-ancestralisation and accompaniment: Don Juan can introduce Casteneda to the ways of the herb-spirit, Mescalito, but Casteneda must travel his own path. Like My Luck's grandfather's teachings, Don Juan's principal teaching is that he must learn for himself: "He asked me to remember the time that I had tried to find my own spot, and how I wanted to find it without doing any work because I had expected him to hand out all the information. If he had done so, he said, I would never have learned" (54). This is important in understanding Abani's own relation to My Luck, as a

spirit he imaginatively possesses/ is possessed by, but who must ultimately find his own spiritual path, his own spirit. And the creaturely dimensions of this journey are also significant: when Castaneda encounters his own spirit, it takes the form of a "medium-size black dog . . . whose most impish act was to make me scratch my head with my foot while I sat" (43). This miming of his own creaturely spirit causes him to forget that "I was a man" (44): travelling one's own path turns out to be a process not of self-discovery but of leaving one's self behind, of discovering one's own likeness.

Creaturely accompaniment is at the heart of Abani's own understanding of empathy and what he describes as "narrative ethics". In his essay "Ethics and Narrative: The Human and the Other," he turns to one of his adopted literary ancestors, James Baldwin.

> Baldwin said . . . that suffering means something only in so much as someone else can attach his or her suffering to yours. … We feel things for others only in so much as those things fall within the realm of our understanding. This relational model, while laudable, is also, sadly, delusional. (9).

This statement radically distances Abani from the kinds of empathy that the human rights model of the child soldier narrative are often understood to generate. Abani may have suffered much, both as a refugee and as a survivor of torture, but he was never a child soldier, and it would be "delusional" to think that a child soldier's experience could fall within the realm of Abani's understanding. Instead, the novel is pitched as operating precisely beyond the realm of understanding: not as one imaginative subject's identification with another's experience, but as an impossible identification with a fictional subject who himself remains cut off from his own experience. The novel must follow the path of My Luck's re-association with his own life as a human mine sweeper.

This refusal of "the relational model" is important for the ways in which it refuses the sentimental portrayal of the child soldier as innocent victim and the reader as empathic and ultimately redemptive witness. This form of horizontal transculturality, or more precisely of cultural transcendence, would actually be complicit in the necropolitical erasure of African culture. Such a process of identification cannot possibly enable My Luck to recover, to recall Mbembe's phrasing, "any idea of ancestry and thus any debt with regard to the past." In interview, Mbembe speaks of the need to abandon African victim narratives, narratives in which "we root our identities in injury alone" (7). Instead he speaks of the need to "open avenues for memorial practices that foster the work of remembrance . . . as part of the work of freedom." Abani would seem to concur. In "Witness", he too speaks of the need to avoid sentimentality and he redefines compassion as "the choice to be open to seeing the world as it is, or can be" (10). For the work of remembrance to constitute the work of freedom it is not enough to feel another's suffering as one own (the illusion of becoming the victim). On the one hand, one must acknowledge the non-identity of another's suffering (and thus the impossibility of total identification), and on the other, the fact of one's implication in the suffering of others (and thus the ethical importance of mimetic association, or becoming-similar). For My Luck to re-associate himself with (his) life, he must take responsibility for all the deaths he has caused.

Abani's essay begins with precisely this moment of creaturely association, as he recounts the grisly tale of being asked to slit the throat of a goat, a goat whose eyes are all too human and whose "cry is so human that the Greeks named catharsis after it" (2).[24] He only accomplishes his initiation into manhood with the aid of Emmanuel, a school friend and former boy soldier who covers the goat's eyes and closes its mouth, thus breaking the creaturely bonds between boy and kid. Emmanuel then offers his counsel to the sobbing Abani: "It will always be hard to kill. But if you cry like this every time you will die of

heartbreak. Sometimes it is enough to know it will be hard" (4). It is not quite clear how we are to take Emmanuel's counsel: is disassociation, a refusal to meet the gaze of the creature that looks back at you, necessary for (carnivorous) living, for not dying of heart-break? If so, then we are all (or at least we meat-eaters) engaged in acts of disassociation, as Elizabeth Costello argues in Coetzee's The Lives of Animals. [25]

SENSUOUS CORRESPONDENCE: TELLING THE LANGUAGES OF LIFE

I would suggest that the emphasis lies, for Abani, not on the veiling of the creaturely gaze but on the acknowledgement of implication, on the "knowing it will be hard." As a soldier, My Luck, much to his own shame, sometimes found himself enjoying killing. In order to combat this creeping sense of disassociation, he turns his arms into "his own personal cemetery," carving crosses on his left arm "for every loved one lost in the war", and on his right for "each person I enjoyed killing" (28). These acts of self-harm are ways of remaining embodied:

> To ground myself, I run my fingers meditatively over the small crosses cut into my left forearm. The tiny bumps, more like a rash than anything, help me calm myself, center my breathing, return me to my body. In a strange way they are like a map of my consciousness, something that bring me back from the brink of war madness. My grandfather, a fisherman and storyteller, had a long rosary with bones, cowries, pieces of metal, feathers, pebbles, and twigs tied into it that he used to remember our genealogy. Mnemonic devices, he called things like this. These crosses are mine. (16)

For My Luck's grandfather, "telling" his animist rosary repeatedly invests his seemingly random collection of fragments with a spiritual significance that produces an intimate

mimetic relation to his own genealogy. For My Luck, rubbing the bumps on his arm has a similar effect, combatting the de-realising effect of war by fingering his losses, by literally staying in touch with the dead.

And this is how both My Luck and his readers "tell" the fragmented chapters of Song for Night. Not as a fragmented representation of My Luck's life, but as a mnemonic device for re-establishing bodily connection. This sense of the chapters as mnemonic devices is highlighted by the way in which their titles index the sign language used by the muted mine-sweepers. The first title, "Silence is a Steady Hand, Palm Flat," might suggest that this sign language is utilitarian, fashioned in line with Major Essien's military manual simply to augment their chances of survival, but it quickly becomes clear that matters are more complicated. After describing the sign for silence, My Luck goes on to tell us that "The word silencio, which we also like, involves the addition of wiggling fingers, and although this seems like a playful touch, it actually means a deeper silence, or danger, and, as in any language, context is everything" (10). Why have a different sign for the Spanish word for silence? Technically both English and Spanish words can be used either as a descriptor or as an imperative, but the imaginative switch into Spanish imparts a dramatic, even performative, sense of urgency.[26] While My Luck denies that the wiggling fingers are a "playful touch" (his choice of words continually bring us back to the body), their sign language is undeniably evidence of creaturely mimesis: on the one hand each sign testifies to their muteness, their violent subjugation to necropower, while on the other, they are irrepressible affirmations of the creativity that Mbembe describes as the "languages of life" (On the Postcolony 15).

Indeed the chapter titles increasingly lose their instrumental, referential function and become lyrical testaments to the soldiers' inner lives: "Dreaming is Hands Held in Prayer over the Nose." Even references to their outer worlds are also acts of bodily mimesis: "Dawn is Two Hands Parting before the Face." While Major Essien's manual is concerned with the

survival of bare life (zoe), and its destruction in the form of the enemy, their sign-language gestures towards a life that exceeds the bare life to which the mine-sweepers have been reduced. But this excessive bodily language is not merely bios, that life which, according to Agamben, constitutes the cultural life of the polis (Homo Sacer 1). Their sign language is instead closer to the traces of that mimetic language which Walter Benjamin imagined as expressive of our originary correspondence with the world. For Benjamin, the arbitrary or "alienated" relation between sign and referent means that the language we use today only contains traces of "non-sensuous correspondence", but he posits the idea of a non-alienated language in which there would have been a mimetic or sensuous correspondence between sign and referent. The violent mutilation of the mine-sweepers thus returns them to this creaturely world, to this forgotten correspondence between language and the body.[27]

"THE SOUL HAS NO SIGN": BEYOND INTERIORITY

My Luck playfully draws our attention to the ironies of his felix culpa or lucky fall:

> There is a lot to be said for silence, especially when it comes to you young. [. . .] [T]here is something about the mind's interiority . . . that opens up your view of the world. It is a curious place to live and makes you deep beyond your years and familiar with death. I am not a genius, though I would like to be, I am just better versed at the interior monologue that is really the measure of age, of the passage of time. [. . .] Of course if you are hearing any of this at all it's because you have gained access to my head. You would also know that my inner-speech is not English . . . you are in fact hearing my inner thoughts in Igbo. But we shan't waste time in trying to figure all that out because, as I said before, time is precious. (11)

My Luck self-consciously draws attention to the impossibility of narrative transmission, taking us back to my early discussion of modernism. As Marlow laments in Heart of Darkness: “It is impossible to convey the life-sensation of any given epoch of one’s existence. We live, as we dream, alone” (27). But the modernist invention of the interior monologue both emphasises our subjective isolation and provides a magical way out of that isolation, a magical return of presence. Marlow continues: “of course in this you fellows see more than I could then. You see me, whom you know.” Despite the fact that “it had become so pitch dark that we listeners could hardly see one another” let alone Marlow, we are nevertheless pulled back into the magical circle, back into Marlow’s nightmarish dream narrative. For all the emphasis on the self-presence of the soldiers’ mute sign language, My Luck’s narration still depends upon this magical circle. Indeed, the minesweepers’ violent immersion into interiority not only “opens up their view of the world” but also seems to render them telepathic, technically rendering their hand-signals redundant, pure play.

The same dialectic between presence and absence is at work in Benjamin’s essay “The Storyteller”. With specific but not exclusive reference to those who have returned from the first world war, Benjamin writes: “It is as if something that seemed inalienable to us, the securest among our possessions, were taken from us: the ability to exchange experiences” (428). The transition from the wisdom of the traditional storyteller to the isolation of the modern novelist is another version of the fall away from presence that Benjamin plots in his idea of language as non-sensuous correspondence. But--and this is where Benjaminian nostalgia becomes redemptive--the novelist contains within himself the memory of the storyteller, just as My Luck contains within himself the forgotten memory of his grandfather and his song for night.

It is fitting, then, that this forgotten memory is contained within a chapter entitled “The Soul has no Sign.” In an animistic version of Proust’s memoire involontaire, My Luck

roasts a fish that he has caught and the taste and smell remind him of "home." Indeed, "every time I eat fish, I remember Grandfather's story of the lake in the middle of the world and the fish that live there" (61). However the fish are not simply madeleine; as my second epigraph suggests, they are memory traces of the fish in the sacred lake in the middle of the world, "the repository of human souls who are yet to gain access into the world . . . . Legend says that the fish in the lake guard the souls, swallowed deep in their bellies" (65). Listening to his grandfather's "tall tales" as they fish on the River Cross, My Luck falls asleep, "leaving his fingers trawling the waters for wisdom:"

> I woke to the dry rasp of a tongue on my fingers. Startled and unsure what creature it was, I drew my fingers back with a yelp. A dolphin clicked at me in laughter, dousing me with salty water as though in benediction, and vanished in a white spray for the ocean.
>
> "Lucky boy. What a blessing," Grandfather said. That dolphin has just taken your soul for safekeeping—always"
>
> "Does that mean that I will never die?"
>
> "Maybe." (64)

The benediction is a confirmation of the name his mother gave him, a creaturely baptism that places his soul in nature's safekeeping. What might be read in Western psychoanalytic theory as displacement or disassociation is in fact an act of subjective dispersal, an animistic refusal of the distinction between interior and exterior. Indeed his grandfather later tells him that "the lake is at the centre of you, because you are the world" and teaches him a song that will enable My Luck to find his way back:

> He taught me a song. We sang it over and over, together, for the rest of the night until I couldn't tell where his voice ended and mine began, and where mine ended and the river began and where the river ended and my blood began.
>
> But I have forgotten that song. I wish I hadn't because I think it would bring me much comfort to sing it. Oh well, I think, eating the last of the fish, wondering whose soul I can taste smoking down to my stomach, and if anyone has eaten mine yet. (66)

The caesura that we saw in GraceLand is still present: My Luck has forgotten the song that might have seen him through the darkness, and there is wry, semi-sceptical comedy in his musings on "whose soul he can taste smoking down to his stomach".

"RECEPTACLES OF THE FORGOTTEN"

In this respect My Luck inhabits the same fallen world as Kafka, whose enigmatic stories contain an ancient, forgotten wisdom that refuses to be unlocked. As Beatrice Hanssen explains, Benjamin reads Kafka's stories as remnant of the mystical Haggadah, "the name the Jews use for the stories and anecdotes of the Talmud, the ones that serve to explain the doctrine, the Halakah" (Benjamin qtd. in Hanssen 139). The stories have become severed from their doctrine, and thus cannot provide the counsel that they once did. But their redemptive potential is encrypted or incorporated within the bodies of Kafka's animals, or more precisely:

> What has been forgotten … is never something purely individual. Everything forgotten mingles with what has been forgotten of the prehistoric world. […] To Kafka, the world of his ancestors was as unfathomable as the world of realities was

> important, and we may be sure that, like the totem poles of primitive peoples, the world of the ancestors took him down to the animals. Incidentally, Kafka is not the only writer for whom animals are the receptacles of the forgotten (Benjamin, "Franz Kafka" 810)

Contrary to popular readings, historical materialism is not a simple process of remembering the forgotten, but also involves a reversal of the very process of remembrance: "Instead of chronicling the history of progressive recollection (Erinnerung) of a world spirit coming back to itself, Kafka's world ironically depicted the process of an ongoing forgetting" (Hanssen 146). This "ongoing forgetting" is an undoing of modernity and the processes that have estranged us from our bodies, our creaturely origins. To be estranged from the world of the human is to enter a world where nothing is "purely individual," a world where, as during that night on the River Cross, one cannot tell where one voice or body ends and another begins.[28]

That redemption comes through forgetting is clear in a novel such as Coetzee's Disgrace, in which David Lurie must unlearn his learning and become "stupid, daft, wrong-headed" if he is finally to experience the kind of attentiveness that brings him into relation with the lives of (other) animals (Disgrace, 146). But does the same hold true for My Luck and those cultures in which animals have remained—despite the rationalisations of modernity—the repositories of spirit, and not merely the receptacles of a forgotten world of creaturely relation? It is significant that My Luck fumbles his way towards redemption—i.e., spiritual reintegration with the world of the ancestors—in ignorance of the fact that he is himself one of the lost spirits that he encounters in a field of phantom soldiers:

> Here we believe that when a person dies in a sudden and hard way, their spirit wanders confused looking for its body. Confused because they don't realize they are

> dead. I know this. Traditionally a shaman would ease such a spirit across to the other world. Now, well, the land is crowded with confused spirits and the shamans are all soldiers. (101)

The caesura between Abani's protagonists and Igbo culture still remains: My Luck believes he inhabits a fallen world in which the "shamans are all soldiers." However, soon after his vision of confused soldier-spirits, My Luck will encounter a "real" shaman, albeit one who identifies himself as a catechist named Peter (103). The biblical Peter, was, of course, a fisherman turned by Christ into a fisher of men. Like My Luck's grandfather, the catechist knows both how to fish for souls and that fish are themselves a repository for souls. My Luck has this knowledge within him too, but in so far as he has forgotten his grandfather's song, he has no access to this knowledge, no access to the lake inside of himself. Another way of saying this is that My Luck's experience of war makes him incorrigibly sceptical: drawing lines in the dirt, Peter unequivocally demonstrates that My Luck is himself one of these confused spirits, but My Luck refuses to take the hint: "Just the power of suggestion, I say to myself, that's what faith is, right? In my head I realize that I am talking to the imam" (104). Although My Luck opposes his scepticism to his father's religious belief, his grandfather's Igbo teachings pre-empt and incorporate his scepticism: the sacred lake is "real because it is a tall tale" (65).

These tall tales are part of an oral tradition rather than a written one, a tradition which has never ossified into dogma but remains "written" into nature. My Luck knows he has "committed sins too big for even God to forgive" and thus that in Christian terms there is no hope for him as a discrete, human soul (71). However, he is still able to apprehend the stars as forming a "wonderful song for night" (71), as, to use Benjamin's term, a redemptive constellation. The stars, like the dolphin, are also repositories of soul: "Every star, he says, is

a soul, and every soul is a destiny meant to be lived out" (71). There may be no hope for My Luck as a discrete human soul, but there remains an infinite amount of hope for him as a transcorporeal, post-sovereign assemblage. As he nears his final resting place, the "display of dazzling whiteness" put on by some egrets is another version of this creaturely song for night, "a song from my childhood, the song Grandfather taught me, coming back" (116). Unlike monotheism's exclusivist demand for conceptual hegemony, Abani stresses that Igbo cosmology is a mode of apprehension that remains open to the world ("Chinua Achebe" n.p.), capable of accommodating modernity within its sense of the sacred, scepticism within wisdom, the novelist within the storyteller.

Abani's open or transcultural take on Igbo wisdom also releases him from another problem inherent in Achebe's attempt to recover an historical Igbo culture, namely the conservative gender roles which many take to be inherent to Igbo cosmology rather than to a particular moment in the development of Igbo culture. Abani reaches much further back than the late 19th Century setting of Things Fall Apart. Achebe's novel, for all its emphasis on "balance", leaves us with the alienated, uninheritable corpse of the hyper-masculine Okonkwo, with the non-solution of a violence that has finally turned in upon itself. By contrast, Song for Night ends with My Luck's return to his mother, a return that also redeems her in so far as he is also her luck: the name that she gave him turns out to mean not that he must make his own luck but that they constitute each other's luck. After finally crossing the river in a spinning coffin reminiscent of many West African funeral practices, he falls into the embrace of a young woman who can't be, but is, his mother: "'Mother,' I say, and my voice has returned." (158). As we have seen, My Luck's severed vocal cords expel him from the alienated world of the human and deliver him into a world of creaturely affinities. Hanssen argues that Benjamin's Kafka essay "stages a confrontation between patriarchal law and the subversive forces of a deeper lying matriarchy that displaced the reign of the father" (144).

My Luck's return to the world of the ancestors is also, I would suggest, a return to this deeper-lying maternal world of presence and connection, thereby reversing the violent severances of the patriarchal deathworlds to which My Luck has been exposed.

CONCLUSION: ENCHANTMENT AND DISENCHANTMENT

The three terms that I have deployed throughout this essay—spirit-writing, auto-ancestralisation and creaturely mimesis—sketch out the possibilities of life beyond necropolitics by drawing on the redemptive resources of both animist and historical materialism. They underline the ways in which animist literature, as a practice of inheritance, association and reanimation, counters modernity and the necropolitical drive towards oblivion, disassociation, and deanimation. To describe such literature as spirit-writing is to emphasise that no act of writing is singular, that creativity is always a matter of making connections, of affirming our co-existence. Auto-ancestralisation primarily concerns the vertical, diachronic dimension of this co-existence, the ties that continue to bind both the living and the dead to the future even when the specific spiritual traditions that underwrite the connection with the ancestors are under erasure. In the face of this erasure of specific spiritual traditions, spirit-writing must improvise rites of connection, borrowing, as Abani's unabashedly transcultural, post-nativist writing does, from both African and extra-African spiritual resources. Auto-ancestralisation thus turns out to involve making horizontal, synchronic connections between different cultures and thus shades into my third term, creaturely mimesis, which operates primarily as a sign of our horizontal similarities, our common creatureliness. Creaturely mimesis acknowledges the ways in which we are all creatures of a global modernity that systematically deprives the individual subject of sovereignty, of self-determination, but simultaneously turns this stripping down of the human

into the condition for new, trans-species forms of relatedness, for post-sovereign affirmations of similarity.

I have read Song for Night as an exemplary instance of spirit-writing, one that reancestralises the world through multiple acts of association or accompaniment. As we have seen, Abani imaginatively accompanies his narrator on his journey to rejoin his platoon, a journey that in fact works to reassociate My Luck with his past life, with those he killed, and ultimately with his mother and with the spirit world of his ancestors. Given Abani's own self-understanding as a humanitarian, we might be tempted to describe the novel as a process of rehumanisation. However, I have shown how Abani's novel moves beyond the exclusionary bounds of the human and into the realms of the creaturely: it is not simply that non-human animals have souls too, but that they might have our souls. Not that we all have identical souls, but that, as My Luck discovers afloat on the River Cross, we cannot say where "our" souls end and "theirs" begin. Our soulfulness, our resistance to the deanimating forces of necropolitical modernity, depends upon the remembrance of our relationality, our crossing, or what Herman Melville once termed our "mortal inter-indebtedness" (482). While My Luck's forgotten totem is a dolphin, Ishmael's, thanks to Queequeg's intercession, turns out to be the white whale. We may not know in advance by whom we have been blessed.

In this sense, all relations are potentially totemic. If, as Benjamin says of Kafka, "the world of the ancestors took him down to the animals" the reverse is also true: the world of animals takes us back to the ancestors. Creaturely mimesis is one way of naming this fundamental relatedness. In a TED talk entitled "On Humanity," Abani approvingly cites the African humanist philosophy of Ubuntu. Song for Night, and indeed his childhood encounter with the goat, suggest an expanded conception of this ontology: not "I am a person through other people" but "I am a creature through other creatures": my "humanity" depends precisely on dissolving the exceptionality of human being.

This essay has drawn on two anthropological relations to African literature and two understandings of mimesis. One reads literature as an anthropological account of culture, as realistic, quasi-empirical data. The second reads African literature as its own cultural act, as an allegory of approximation. The former inscribes our cultural differences within a broadly humanist framework, while the latter explores our similitude within a creaturely framework. However, Adorno's stress on non-identity, on the limits of our capacity to become-similar, is no less important for understanding the relationship between Abani and his narrator and the processes of spirit-writing and auto-ancestralisation that I have outlined. Eschewing total identification, Abani does not "become" a child-soldier but simply accompanies him on his journey; he is the medium through which My Luck writes his own passage and finds a way of ancestralising himself.

My Luck's auto-ancestralisation is enabled by the kind of accompaniment that animist literature can offer, what we might call its residual autonomy in the face of necropolitical power. My concept of auto-ancestralisation might be thought of as an animist countersigning of Joseph Slaughter's description of Nervous Conditions as self-sponsoring Bildungsroman.

> The first-person Bildungsroman takes the form of international law itself; the technology of narrative self-sponsorship becomes a literary device that labours to realize, at least formally, the promised reconciliation of citizen and subject in the singular figure of the narrator-protagonist--to make the uncertain sovereignty of the human personality appear certain." (227)

Slaughter reads literature as mythic only in the sense that it propagates mythic illusions about sovereignty and agency. For him, literature and human rights are "mutually enabling fictions" which prop up each other's ultimately illusory claims. Slaughter's materialism thus remains

within the secular role of ideology critique. Nervous Conditions exposes the fallacy of the Bildungsroman: Tambu cannot really sponsor her own claim to citizenship. I do not disagree with this reading, not least as a demythologising of the humanitarian claims that have been made on behalf of aesthetics. But demystification is only part of the story; certain kinds of magical thinking remain vital to the lives of those so forcibly conscripted into modernity and cannot simply be dismissed as illusory. Indeed, this essay has suggested that we betray African literature, that we betray ourselves, if we do not engage in magical thinking: that a wholly secular or anti-mythic criticism is in fact complicit with the Weberian process of disenchantment.[29]

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[2] For recent biopolitical analyses of the postcolonial see Michael Griffiths' collection Biopolitics and Memory in Postcolonial Literature and Culture. The essays do not uniformly understand literature as a transparent representation of biopolitical reality, but the overall stress on memory as a regime of governmentality that coercively constitutes its subjects leaves open the question of literature as a counter-memorialising force. My essay is broadly aligned with the critique of biopolitics offered by Varadharajan and Wyman-McCarthy in the same volume: "The [literary] works of our choice, however, suggest that the discourse of biopolitics misses a whole dimension of both postcolonial resistance as well as its aftermaths. What is the after? The after is full of emotions, affects, and modes of being not credited in the analytics of power, violence, biopolitics, and devastation. From the perspective of the colonized, one cannot afford to stop hoping or believing" (115).

[3] See, for instance, Jules-Rosette 603. In a withering aside to The Postcolonial Unconscious, Neil Lazarus deplores Mbembe's "adulatory welcome in postcolonial studies [. . .] I do not find Mbembe's work either convincing or congenial. Much of it strikes me, indeed, as incoherent" (232, n.145).

[4] This same distinction is at stake in Emmanuel Eze's distinction between history, which "separates current time and past time, the living and the dead, inaugurating the work of objectivation" and fiction, which joins present and past, the living and the dead, and thus begins the work of resubjectification or "mending a broken tradition, a tradition in ruin."

[5] Stacy Alaimo defines transcorporeality as "the way in which the human is always intermeshed with the more-than-human world"

[6] Mbembe's locution is reminiscent of the work of J.M. Coetzee: Michael K keeps alive "the idea of gardening" in Life and Times (109), Mrs Curren "the idea of parents" in Age of Iron (46) and David Lurie "his idea of the world" in Disgrace (146). All of these ideas are forms of commitment to the labour of inheritance.

[7] My approach diverges from the so called "new materialism" in so far as such 'object-orientated ontologies" tend to bracket the question of subjectivity, whereas animism implies the extension of subjectivity. Jane Bennett, for instance, admits that 'the otherwise important topic of subjectivity gets short shrift" in her study Vibrant Matter (1)

[8] See also my discussion of Jarvis in the conclusion to this essay.

[9] Of course, one might differentiate between modernist writing that seems to stress isolation (e.g. T.S.Eliot's monologue "The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock"), and writing that seeks to overcome it (polyphonic novels such as Virginia Woolf's The Waves, which proved so inspirational for Abani's contemporary, the Zimbabwean novelist Yvonne Vera). For an analogous exploration of Vera's animistic inheritances, see Topper.

[10] See Durrant, "Undoing Sovereignty."

[11] Maureen Moynagh insightfully grapples with the problem of reading child soldier narratives in terms of human rights. Her suggestion that we read them less as Bildungsromane than within a more anarchic picaresque tradition has its attractions, although my reading suggest that Song for Night retains the integrative impulse of the Bildungsroman while radically expanding the idea of what moral or spiritual integration might mean.

[12] Matthew Omelsky describes Elvis as "queering … the Presley aesthetic" but the consequences of this queering are not clear, precisely because Elvis lacks cultural agency or traction.

[13] The references to David Bowie are perhaps inescapable, although Bowie presented his 'space-age" sexual identity as liberation rather than agonistic confusion.

[14] Black's shamanism also recalls Lurie's dog-psychopomping in Disgrace, an act that, despite Lurie's coruscating irony, retains a certain spiritual weight. The relation between Coetzee's creaturely writing and that of more explicitly animist spirit-writing is part of an ongoing larger project tentatively entitled Creaturely Mimesis in Contemporary African Fiction.

[15] In my own essay on Things Fall Apart, I have suggested that the novel can be read not as a realist recovery of African cultural authenticity but as a ritual designed to inherit the alienated spirit of Okonkwo (whose suicide means that he cannot join the world of his ancestors), as an image of postcolonial Nigeria's own alienation from its precolonial past.

[16] Sophie Harrison's irritated description of the epigraphs as 'orphaned pieces of anthropological data" (my italics) is more apt than she realises. 'Jailhouse Rock" New York Times Feb 22nd 2004. http://www.nytimes.com/2004/02/22/books/jailhouse-rock.html?_r=0 accessed 04/03/2016.

[17] There is no space here to consider Abani's poetry, but the lack of irony in the title of his 2010 collection, Sanctificum, makes a clear contrast with the Elvis-inspired title of GraceLand.

[18] From a Western perspective one could plot this as a move 'beyond" postmodern scepticism 'back" towards modernism's belief in the sacred and the mythic, a belief that of course frequently 'borrowed" from African cultures. See Rooney on the sacred or 'spirited" ontologies at work in both European and African literature and the complex interplay between early Western anthropology and contemporary African philosophy.

[19] One might say that My Luck's 'fucked" Timex tells 'the time of the now" in much the same way as the clock towers that were 'shot at independently and simultaneously in several places" during the early days of the French Revolution (Benjamin, 'On the Concept of History", 395).

[20] What an animist-Lacanian might refer to as his esprit de corps morcelé. I shall return to My Luck's ignorance of his own condition later in my analysis.

[21] I am indebted to discussions with my colleague Brendon Nicholls, who also describes the distributed subject of animism in a working manuscript entitled "Africas of the Mind."
[22] Daria Tunca notes that the English translation brings in a crucial ambiguity: in French the phrase simply means that death, rather than the process of death, is eternal.
[23] Casteneda's maverick anthropology can be linked directly to the more recent work of Taussig and Stoller, which renders the link between mimesis and spirit possession more explicit.
[24] In fact it is not catharsis but the Greek term for tragedy (τραγῳδία) that can be traced back to the goat (τράγος). Many thanks to my colleague, Paul Hammond, for pointing this out.
[25] There is a dialogue here between Abani and Coetzee's alter-ego Elisabeth Costello that I do not have the space to tease out. Suffice to say that we should not take at face-value Costello's assertion that 'there are no limits to the sympathetic imagination". See Durrant, "The Limits of the Sympathetic Imagination". Both Abani and Coetzee perform embodied, anti-transcendent modes of sympathy that render one proximate to the bodily suffering of other creatures without presuming access to their interior lives.
[26] Spanish is obviously not widely spoken in West Africa but may feature in the Westerns the soldiers have been exposed to.
[27] Something similar happens at the end of Coetzee's Foe, in which the corpse of the mutilated Friday floats in an underwater world in which "bodies are their own signs" (157).
[28] This apprehension of our borderless, creaturely origins is, of course, traumatic for a Western figure such as Conrad's Marlow: 'that was the worst of it . . . the thought of your remote kinship with this wild and passionate uproar" (36).
[29] As the Adorno scholar, Simon Jarvis, has argued, Marxism is radically impoverished if it is reduced to myth-busting ideology-critique; historical materialism recovers Marxism as an ongoing dialectic between disenchantment and re-enchantment. In his reading of that other animist, William Wordsworth, Jarvis speaks of "the open wound between the desire for efficacious magic and the disenchanting steady look" (26): attentiveness is not only to be found in the latter.