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Rehabilitating the Reader? Cajetan Iheka's Naturalizing Africa

Cajetan Iheka's *Naturalizing Africa: Ecological Violence, Agency, and Postcolonial Resistance in African Literature*¹ invites readers to entertain an "aesthetics of proximity"² between the human and the non-human world. Iheka's study is wide-ranging, taking in primary texts from East Africa (Maathai, Farah), Southern Africa (Head, Mda, Coetzee), and Central and West Africa (Nganang, Ojaide, Okara, Okpewho, Tutuola, Okri). Aesthetic proximity, Iheka correctly asserts, is highly visible in a range of African literary texts. Such texts compel us to think through at least three dimensions of human and environmental proximity: "multispecies presence, interspecies relationship, and distributed agency".³ Distributed agency, Iheka contends, is "hinged on indistinction," meaning that "clear lines of demarcations"⁴ between species begin to blur. He demonstrates to readers that our received knowledges of African Literature open themselves to new perspectives once the agential qualities of the environment are recognized, along with human co-implication in the worlds of the non-human. Iheka begins his study with a consideration of the dog narrator, Mboudjak, alongside the narrative relationship of Mda's *The Whale Caller* with his cetacean companion. A highlight of this discussion is that the idea of narrative agency has to be reconsidered the moment we widen our characterological analysis beyond human principals. The environment, Iheka argues, has a stake in narrative outcomes and influences these outcomes the moment we accommodate its agency within our readings. Iheka moves on, in

¹ Cajetan Iheka, *Naturalizing Africa: Ecological Violence, Agency, and Postcolonial Resistance in African Literature* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2017).

² *Ibid.*, 22.

³ *Ibid.*, 50.

⁴ *Ibid.*, 50.

Chapter 2, to consider the effects of war upon the human and non-human “characters” in Nurrudin Farah’s oeuvre. The triumph of this chapter is to read animal life, especially lions and elephants, for a “moral conscience”⁵ born of and resistant to the ecological impacts of war. Thus, in *Secrets*, the killing of Fidow by an elephant is readable not only as revenge for the animal-catcher’s “indiscriminate killing,” but also as the animal’s acting out of species trauma.⁶ The logical conclusion of this line of argument is that agency in Farah’s texts might be considered to be distributed, applied on the basis of the chaotic impacts of human violence upon humans, but also on the basis of violence’s collateral damage on environmental actors. War itself becomes visible as an ecology in this moment. In Chapter 3, Iheka focuses on the despoliation of the Niger Delta, consequent upon oil prospecting and extraction. Here, he identifies a paradox which amounts to a fault-line in postcolonial approaches. The communities and activists who oppose environmental wreckage use strategies – oil-bunkering and the bombing of oil installations⁷ – that are themselves harmful to the environment. In this sense, the resistant postcolonial subject may be complicit with the destructive neocolonial order she seeks to oppose. Chapter 4 provides a corrective to this paradox of polluting “environmental resistance.” Iheka draws on a non-fiction text, Wangari Maathai’s memoir, *Unbowed*, to show how her reverence for plant life and her activism were forged through indigenous knowledge systems acquired from her mother⁸ before and during the Mau Mau insurgency – when she and other girls sheltered in forests during Mau Mau raids.⁹ Here, the entanglement of a climate of resistance and the formation of an ecological consciousness culminate in Maathai’s later guerrilla tree-planting activities and her Green Belt Movement’s

⁵ Ibid., 66.

⁶ Ibid., 75.

⁷ Ibid., 85.

⁸ Ibid., 127.

⁹ Ibid., 130.

mobilisation of communities in re-forestation initiatives. The notion of gardening is played out further by considering oppositional practices linked to the landscape: Bessie Head's cooperative agriculture in *When Rain Clouds Gather*, and Coetzee's Michael K.'s planting of seeds to reclaim his own history.¹⁰ Iheka ends his book with an epilogue calling upon readers for a rehabilitation of the human, by which he means "decentering the human while elevating nonhumans to a level where their agency and needs are not subordinated to those of human beings."¹¹

While Iheka makes a number of timely and astute interventions which amount to a landmark contribution to African environmental theory, his monograph also invites us to move beyond its own foundations and key terms. I think that the most radical implication of African Environmental Humanities research, and indeed Iheka's call to rehabilitate the human, is that we need to rethink the premises upon which our own species thinks itself and acts in its perceived interests. "Rehabilitating the human," in Iheka's suggestive phrase, might require us to undertake acts of progressive self-undoing. These acts are vital, given that we are hard-wired to consume and pollute.¹² These acts of acquisition and waste are built into our earliest ideas of how we constellate ourselves out of the object world from which we first distinguish our subjecthood. In a signal passage on the formation of introjective and projective fantasies, Melanie Klein sets out the early psychic mechanisms that will proceed to become the basis for our mature identifications:

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 146.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 159.

¹² See Brendon Nicholls, 'An Environmental Unconscious? Nigerian Oil Politics, Autonomous Partial Objects and Ken Saro-Wiwa's *Sozaboy*,' *Research in African Literatures* 48.4 Special issue on Ken Saro-Wiwa (2018): 56-77.

Also, the attacks on the mother's breast develop into attacks of a similar nature on her body, which comes to be felt as it were as an extension of the breast, even before the mother is conceived as a complete person. The phantasied onslaughts on the mother follow two main lines: one is the predominantly oral impulse to suck dry, bite up, scoop out and rob the mother's body of its good contents. [. . .] The other line of attack derives from the anal and urethral impulses and implies expelling dangerous substances (excrements) out of the self and into the mother. Together with these harmful excrements, expelled in hatred, split-off parts of the ego are also projected on to the mother or, as I would rather call it, into the mother.¹³

The mother is the child's first landscape – a template for its later environmental relations. Introjection is founded upon nutritional acquisition through extraction. Projection is founded upon excretive waste. The problem is that both modes (expulsive, incorporative) are self-invested. In introjection, we associate sustenance with the good (occasionally whole) self. In projection, we associate waste with fragments of the self that we do not want, that we wish to repudiate. Our own psychic self-constitution is inseparable from these environmentally unfriendly infantile modes. We never escape these infantile modes. They persist in our mature identifications and repudiations; most overtly, for instance, in the projective

¹³ Melanie Klein, *Envy and Gratitude and Other Works 1946-1963* (New York: Vintage, 1997), 9.

repudiations of the racist or the sexist.¹⁴ The difficulty in rehabilitating the human is that it would require either an undoing of our identificatory paleo-forms, or it would require the institution of a new psychic mode that works beyond their foundational mechanisms.

To an extent, Iheka suggests a route out of this bind when he argues that Homi Bhabha's work might be used to challenge the fixity of human identity and to work "against the notion of human exceptionalism" (50). Ambivalence, so important in Bhabha's identificatory lexicon, is also a Kleinian term in which the schizoid position (comprised of the extremes of introjection and projection) may be surmounted. Ambivalence, for Klein, is accompanied by acts of reparation to the mother¹⁵ and the sustaining of mixed dispositions towards her and ourselves. Moreover, in the "depressive position" that succeeds Klein's schizoid position, the infant apprehends the mother as a whole, as more than the sum of her part-objects. Taken further, such ambivalence might become a viable project for the environmental subject, co-implicated at every turn in the impacts of its self-placement upon its world.

Iheka does not undertake an environmental critique of Literature as an institution, reading as a practice, nor literary narrative as a basis for environmental theory. I want to offer something like the beginnings of such a critique, inspired by Iheka's fruitful approach. The trouble with the Humanities is that they presume the human at their foundations. Literary study is no exception. Too often, we read for honorarily human protagonists in the inert realms of the

¹⁴ For projection as the basis of racist discourse, see Joel Kovel, *White Racism: A Psychohistory* (New York: Columbia UP, 1984).

¹⁵ For Kleinian reparation as an environmentally-obliged activity, see Donna Landry and Gerald MacLean, eds, *The Spivak Reader* (New York: Routledge, 1996), 299.

book (paper, after all, is dead wood). Cajetan Iheka's great skill lies in persuading us to read for the nonhuman too. He insists upon considering narrative in terms of all of its nonhuman presences, including an "ash storm."¹⁶ Perhaps the primary nonhuman presence in literary scholarship is the book itself, that inert object that so many well-intentioned readers imbue with honorary (human) life. If the project of literary reading is to animate the inert, this too might serve as a kind of short-hand for the challenge confronting our species as it relates to its global environment. Ecologically-attentive readers might attune their thought to the book's constant, inert accompaniment of their practice. From this might flow a consideration of the co-implication of reading subject and its textual object. Reading, in sum, models the challenge to bring a dying planet back to its life, and not our own.

Another route out of the identificatory bind is suggested in Iheka's reading of Amos Tutuola's fiction. Tutuola's therianthropic protagonists exemplify what Iheka calls "indistinction," so that "when abuse is meted out to a human/cow or a human/horse, the text forces us to bridge the distance between these bodies, and to imagine the impact of such punishment upon our human bodies by way of appreciating the abuse often suffered by nonhuman life forms."¹⁷ The stakes of "indistinction" are astutely judged in this passage, but it seems a pity that Iheka does not source similar theories of indistinction from their widespread occurrence within African vernacular philosophical traditions. In such vernacular philosophies, the human exists in a radically mutable form. The human readily transforms into other selves, whether they are animal, plant, or monstrous. While such extra-human transformations might at first seem politically disabling for Africans who have habitually

¹⁶ Iheka, *Naturalizing Africa* 49.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 53.

fought colonialism's legacies for a recognition of their humanity (as Iheka wisely insists),¹⁸ they also provide a basis for the fuller humanity of both the newly decolonized and the erstwhile oppressor, who might jointly aspire to become more than, simply, human.

¹⁸ Ibid., 163.