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## **Cosmopolitan Christians: Religious Subjectivity and Political Agency in Equiano's Interesting Narrative and Achebe's African Trilogy**

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Gichingiri Ndigirigi, Major Professor

We have read this thesis and recommend its acceptance:

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(Original signatures are on file with official student records.)

Cosmopolitan Christians: Religious Subjectivity and  
Political Agency in Equiano's *Interesting Narrative* and  
Achebe's *African Trilogy*

A Thesis Presented for the  
Master of Arts  
Degree  
The University of Tennessee, Knoxville

Joel David Cox  
May 2013

## ABSTRACT

The primary texts featured in this study—the *Interesting Narrative* of Olaudah Equiano and two novels of Chinua Achebe’s so-called *African Trilogy*—each constitute responses to a sly and exploitive Christian modernity, responses which, borrowing from theories of intersubjectivity articulated by Kwame Anthony Appiah and others, might be called two cosmopolitanisms: for Equiano, a *Christian cosmopolitanism*, which works within available theological structures to revise Enlightenment-era notions of shared humanity; and for Achebe, a *contaminated cosmopolitanism*, which ironically celebrates the modern inevitability of cultural admixture. Despite their separation by time, space, and even genre, and even more than their common Igbo heritage, the two authors share a common set of discursive strategies by which they portray a resilient agency among African “converts,” whose cosmopolitan Christianities allow for and even invigorate political and cultural resistance. For the enslaved and colonized Africans who come to profess the religion of their oppressors, the final result is not utter subjection but the genesis of new, even powerfully radical subjectivities; that is, it is no longer a religion of oppression, but a new faith entirely. Ultimately, the discursive traps laid by colonial Christianity cannot restrain the new Christian cosmopolitans who emerge from these texts to meet the harrowing rhetorical demands of two pivotal, and in many ways quite similar, moments in modern history.

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## CHAPTER I: COSMOPOLITAN CHRISTIANS

The natives of Central Africa are very desirous of trading, but their only traffic is at present in slaves, of which the poorer people have an unmitigated horror: it is therefore most desirable to encourage the former principle, and thus open a way for the consumption of free productions, and the introduction of Christianity and commerce. By encouraging the native propensity for trade, the advantages that might be derived in a commercial point of view are incalculable; nor should we lose sight of the inestimable blessings it is in our power to bestow upon the unenlightened African, by giving him the light of Christianity. Those two pioneers of civilization—Christianity and commerce—should ever be inseparable.

--David Livingstone, lecture delivered at Cambridge, April 4<sup>th</sup> 1857 (21)

I had a vision of him on the stretcher, opening his mouth voraciously, as if to devour all the earth with all its mankind. He lived then before me; he lived as much as he had ever lived—a shadow insatiable of splendid appearances, of frightful realities; a shadow darker than the shadow of the night, and draped nobly in the folds of a generous eloquence.

--Marlow, *Heart of Darkness* (Conrad 73)

### Voices of Christian Modernity

With more than a century and a half of political history separating us from David Livingstone's famous articulation of the "Three C's" of Civilization, Christianity, and Commerce, it is perhaps difficult to accept that he believed with perfect naiveté in the seamless union of those "pioneers" of progress, much less their "inestimable blessing" to an "unenlightened" Africa. Cecil Northcott, one of Livingstone's sharpest twentieth-century critics, doubts whether the doctor's motives were quite so disinterestedly philanthropic: "Livingstone was a colonialist and was not ashamed of it. He was in Africa to offer the benefits of the white man's civilization, and no latter day beliefs in the black man's freedom, liberation and independence may be read into his actions" (Northcott 74). Surely, however, one of the enduring lessons of our "latter day" wisdom is that modernity's discourse of progress has been productive of precisely the sort of double-

think that would allow Livingstone to believe all at once in both “the black man's freedom, liberation and independence” and the black man’s fundamental inability to accomplish these by his own means. Certainly, what makes the double-speak of colonial discourse so insidious is its ability to persuade both the colonizing speaker and, with more limited success, his colonized addressee.

Livingstone’s indomitable optimism secured his faith in a kind of Christian cosmopolitanism, for that is what the kingdom of God amounted to for many modern Europeans: a vision of a world united not by brute conquest but by an emerging brotherhood among men, mediated by a modern trinity, the Three C’s, and administered by the first-born of Europe on behalf of the “junior brethren” of Africa.<sup>1</sup> But fifty years after the Cambridge Lectures, Joseph Conrad would give a voice—“A voice!”—to the pernicious lie brooding beneath the surface of this vision. The Christian cosmopolitan spirit, whatever its lofty purposes, found a diabolical incarnation in Mr. Kurtz, who had started out like so many others, “an emissary of light, something like a lower sort of apostle” (12). His “immense plans” (65), not only for personal gain but for the enlightenment of a benighted continent, are brutally transmogrified by a rapacious ambition that has been lurking within him all along, and his global vision becomes a “voracious mouth,” gaping “as if to devour all the earth with all its mankind.” Driving it all is this monstrous eloquence, which conquers the primitive hearts of both natives and vacuous imperial agents before rebounding to captivate the speaker himself.

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<sup>1</sup>Chinua Achebe quotes the missionary Albert Schweitzer: “The African is indeed my brother but my junior brother” (“Image” 8).

It behooves us to recognize both of these figures—the Emissary of Light and the Prince of Darkness—as caricatures of colonial and pre-colonial European modernity. For one thing, Livingstone’s vision for a burgeoning modern Africa achieved by righteous, decent means notwithstanding, the historical partnership of religion and aggressive imperialism has become a received fact in postcolonial studies, and for good reason. As the cultural adhesive holding the Three C’s together, Christianity is justly implicated as an accomplice to much of the violence of the colonial era; and in addition to bodily violence and material disinheritance, it is culpable as the vanguard of European cultural imperialism, in Africa and elsewhere. It is in this capacity that Christian modernity takes on the character of the hegemon in its own right. A strategic intolerance of competing worldviews marks it as a paradigmatic example of a totalizing discourse that works tirelessly to maintain “flexible positional superiority” (Said “Orientalism” 7) in relation to indigenous structures of belief and cultural practice. Despite their various inflections among European imperial powers—from the ruthless candor of Spanish conquistadors to the syncretism of French Jesuits to the hydra-headed British approach embodied in the Three C’s—these imperialist ambitions constitute a large part of the legacy of Christianity among the enslaved and colonized.

But neither does Conrad’s Kurtz represent the *complete* legacy of imperialism in Africa, nor of Christianity for that matter. A perspective that sees imperial culture as totally hegemonic thinks too little of the capacity for, and indeed the *inevitability* of, resilient cultural agency among Africans in spite of more complete—but still not total—material subjugation. The most brazen lie of *Heart of Darkness*, and certainly the most dangerous, is the Africans’ abject submission to the “generous eloquence” of the imperial



voice. Of course, Kurtz is as much a “convert” as any of his African subjects, but “the horror!” to which he surrenders is not “African culture”—a notion seemingly inconceivable in the novel. His “contamination,” to use Marlow’s word (49), is traced to a germ of barbaric recidivism which is the only common condition of humanity. That is a bleak sort of cosmopolitanism, indeed.

The primary texts featured in this study—the *Interesting Narrative* of Olaudah Equiano and two novels of Chinua Achebe’s so-called *African Trilogy*—each constitute responses to a Janus-faced Christian modernity, which, according to principles articulated most notably by Homi Bhabha, deploys a discourse about “mimicry” in order to imprison colonized others on a closed loop between near-complete similarity and near-complete otherness. Those dynamics might be grafted productively onto the two cosmopolitanisms I’ve sketched above: a *Christian cosmopolitanism*, which appeals to the spiritual brotherhood of all mankind while maintaining Enlightenment-era hierarchies, and a *contaminated cosmopolitanism*, which singles out the modern inevitability of cultural admixture as an object of fear and loathing.<sup>2</sup> Despite their separation by time, space, and even genre, Equiano and Achebe both engage the legacy of Christian modernity by recourse to their own notions of cosmopolitanism. Even more than their common Igbo heritage, the two authors share a common set of discursive strategies by which they portray a resilient agency among African “converts,” whose cosmopolitan Christianities allow for and even invigorate political and cultural resistance. For the enslaved and

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<sup>2</sup> As I will discuss below, the notion of “contamination” acquires an ironic inflection among some present-day theorists of cosmopolitanism, particularly Kwame Anthony Appiah, for whom intercultural contact and influence is not only a given of modern life but also a potential basis for an efficacious cosmopolitan ethics.

colonized Africans who come to profess the religion of their oppressors, the final result is not utter subjection but the genesis of new, even powerfully radical subjectivities; that is, it is no longer a religion of oppression, but a new faith entirely. Ultimately, the discursive traps laid by colonial Christianity cannot restrain the new Christian cosmopolitans who emerge from these texts to meet the harrowing rhetorical demands of two pivotal, and in many ways quite similar, moments in modern history.

Lest my tone become too triumphalist here, I should clarify that religion manifests in both authors as a central *problem*. Despite what I believe to be their ultimate success in meaningfully reconstituting and rearticulating their hybrid religious heritages, Equiano and Achebe have each been read with decidedly less optimism. Equiano's constant avowals of devotion to what often looks like a transplanted British Methodism struck even some early readers as tiresome, and as the collected focus of black writing shifted from the (ostensibly) ameliorationist goals of Equiano and his late-18<sup>th</sup> century contemporaries to a generally more exceptionalist tone by the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, representations of black Christianity likewise acquired an attitude of political dissent perhaps more recognizable to contemporary readers. Recent discussions of Equiano's faith have been productively complicated by the introduction of materialist, poststructuralist, and postcolonial lenses, with some of the most contentious debate centering around the extent to which *Interesting Narrative* is a straightforwardly "Christian" text in the first place, especially where a direct correlation is assumed between its political efficacy and its distance from hegemonic, "white" cultural forms. Achebe's work, by contrast, particularly his first three novels, seems to treat colonial religion in the opposite manner. *Things Fall Apart* is in large part an indictment of British

missionaries, whose advancement into the Nigerian interior precipitates the unraveling of flawed yet stable indigenous communities. The novel's immediate success in Africa and abroad, not to mention Achebe's commentary in subsequent essays and lectures, affirmed a central rhetorical purpose—to reclaim for Africans, corporately conceived, a sense of a dignified, pre-European (and thus pre-Christian) cultural heritage. Much like Equiano, Achebe's legacy as a custodian of ennobling cultural knowledge remains an open question.

The purpose of my entry into these conversations is to suggest subtle yet significant revisions in our approach to religious subjectivity in these texts. But before outlining this argument further I should pause to explain my use of the term “cosmopolitan,” which as I have suggested acts as my primary lens.

### **Defining Cosmopolitanism**

In his 2006 book, *Cosmopolitanism: Ethics in a World of Strangers*, Kwame Anthony Appiah uses two terms that are especially valuable for describing the rhetorical purposes served by both Equiano and Achebe in their deployment of religion. The first term is his titular subject: “cosmopolitanism.” Despite its roots in schools of thought that spurned local obligations in favor of the ideal—and usually the *mere* idea—of becoming a liberated, sophisticated “citizen of the world,” the cosmopolitanism Appiah envisions offers a sort of middle ground between “the nationalist who abandons all foreigners” and “the hard-core cosmopolitan who regards her friends and fellow citizens with icy impartiality” (“Cosmopolitanism” xvii). The value to strive for, he claims, is “a partial cosmopolitanism,” a commitment to abiding in the tension between local “pockets of

homogeneity” and the threatening heterogeneity that results from the inevitable traffic between and among localities. Rather than reflexively insulating these pockets from change in the interest of cultural continuity, Appiah suggests that we acknowledge a sort of serial homogeneity: “Cultures are made of continuities *and* changes, and the identity of a society can survive through these changes... We do not need, have never needed, settled community, a homogenous system of values, to have a home” (*Cosmopolitanism* 107; 113). He has elsewhere called this value a “rooted” cosmopolitanism, which affirms “the cosmopolitan ideal—you take your roots with you”—without forgetting that ours is “a world in which everyone is...*rooted*...attached to a home of his or her own, with its own cultural particularities” (“Patriots” 95; 92).

Appiah opposes his view to that of “well-meaning intellectuals” (he calls them “cultural imperialists”) who have insisted upon the sanctity of cultural difference; and though cultural differences are “real enough,” and to an extent worth protecting, “it’s just that we’ve been encouraged...to exaggerate their significance by an order of magnitude” (“Cosmopolitanism” xxi). He goes on to explain:

Talk of cultural imperialism structuring the consciousness of those in the periphery treats [local cultures] as *tabula rasae* on which global capitalism’s moving finger writes its message, leaving behind another homogenized consumer as it moves on. It is deeply condescending. And it isn’t true... When people speak for an ideal of cultural purity...I find myself drawn to *contamination* as the name for a counter-ideal. (“Cosmopolitanism” 111, emphasis in original)

“Contamination” is the second key term, though Appiah’s ironic usage jettisons Marlow’s anxiety. To be contaminated in this new sense means to come into contact with and even be changed by the forces of heterogeneity that have shaped cultures even before the intensified globalization of the modern era, but without a paralyzing fear of cultural

disinheritance. Indeed, contends Appiah, only among Western (and Westernized) intellectuals, for whom the preservation of “authentic” cultural artifacts is tantamount to the preservation of a people, does contamination evoke the same breathless terror that Marlow feels. Rather, there is a “mass culture” in Africa comprised of people who

have been influenced, often powerfully, by the transition of African societies through colonialism, but they are not all in the relevant sense postcolonial...[they] are not...concerned with transcending, with going beyond, coloniality...What is called "syncretism" here is a consequence of the international exchange of commodities, but not of a space-clearing gesture [that is, the anxiety about epistemological autonomy that informs the “posts” of both postmodernity and postcoloniality].” (“Postmodernism” 348)

Appiah is, of course, differentiating between “colonial modernity” as an all-encompassing cultural matrix and “modernization” as a material consequence of colonialism that nevertheless allows cultures to undergo practical evolutions without damaging or displacing cultural “essences,” though his implication is that essentialism is a philosophical mistake—and political dead end—in the first place.<sup>3</sup>

However, as a basis for a practical ethics or politics, a term like “contamination” can be a red herring: “No doubt,” Appiah concedes, “there can be an easy and spurious utopianism of ‘mixture,’ as there is of ‘purity’” (113). This is a tension explored by Bruce Robbins and Pheng Cheah in their *Cosmopolitics* of 1998, in which they reconsider the theories of subjectivity that have long informed how culture is deployed by scholars of postcoloniality and globalization. The resistance among many of these scholars to

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<sup>3</sup> Simon Gikandi has called this interstitial state a “decolonized modernity,” although for him this is an idealized, aspirational state imagined in response to “a destabilizing epistemological juncture: [the imperial subjects’] past identities could not disappear entirely, nor could they remain central to their lives—hence the paradoxical claim that colonialism barely scratched the surface of African cultures but radically altered their socioeconomic institutions...It was in their attempt to mediate this unstable epistemological position that cultural nationalists in the colonial world came to rewrite the history of African (or Indian) identities as a self-willed return to a precolonial past, now read as a first step toward a decolonized modernity” (37).

cosmopolitanism as a paradigm for addressing the injustices endemic to the new global order is the idea's historic dependence on the same normative criteria propping up the illiberal modern nation-state—rationality, authority, nature, exteriority, etc. But neither can a postcolonial politics align with what Appiah calls “[anti-]cultural imperialism”—that is, the belief in absolute cultural particularity that merely displaces the “given” of the nation with the “given” of culture. As Scott Malcomson explains in his contribution to the *Cosmopolitics* project, the renewed interest in cosmopolitanism is due to its offering a “normative edge...to the inclusiveness and diversity of multiculturalism—[it is] an attempt to name a necessary and difficult normativeness” (260). Faced with the unenviable task of articulating a non-normative normativity, postcolonial studies has turned to a discourse of hybridity, of more or less strategic “rootlessness.” Hybridity theorists, as Cheah names them, have (like Kurtz?) “kicked themselves loose of the earth” (Conrad 66), digressing into a realm of pure theory that bears no resemblance to material geo-political realities: “[A] simplistic analogy between the contingency of signification and the contingency of socio-cultural formations repeats the axiom that reality is discursively constructed. But what exactly is the political purpose in postcolonial studies of the commonplace assertion that discourse produces the real?” (294) It has been standard practice in postcolonial studies since Edward Said, Cheah reminds us, to engage politics as discourse, but a celebration of subversive hybridity (and, mapped onto the globe, subversive mobility, transience, migrancy, etc.) risks forgetting that culture is composed of both discursive and material formations; indeed, Cheah argues that the blindly anti-nationalist sentiment of hybridity theorists—he engages Bhabha and James Clifford directly—leads them to disavow the only viable socio-

cultural structure—the nation-state—with enough muscle to shift the global balance of power on behalf of *real* displaced populations.

Inevitably, “cosmopolitanism” as I will use it connotes a productive tension in the work of Equiano and Achebe rather than a tidy solution. There is much to be said for Salman Rushdie’s description of the writer who ventures “outside the whale,” bound by all the contingencies of experience, yet wresting from that outer chaos an imaginative vision of a more liberating politics (qtd. in Said “Culture” 27). And I think it’s true that both Equiano and Achebe, in their own historically available ways, face a similar challenge: to resist the normative discourses of race, nation, geography, and even humanity that inform Christian modernity without reinscribing those normativities in a narrative that merely inverts the “givens” of the colonizer’s faith. What’s more, considering the political/rhetorical tasks they’ve appointed for themselves, both men must find a way to glimpse the world from the outside while keeping both feet planted firmly on the ground. Cosmopolitanism, as I understand it, is a name for this labor, and contamination is its fruit.

Still, my talk of “new subjectivities” and “new faiths” demands an awareness of the pitfalls of a purely speculative politics. As with all products of culture, *The Interesting Narrative* and *The African Trilogy* are at once discursive and material phenomena, with causes and resonances in both domains, many if not most of which are practically irretrievable for scholars. While I will offer a few narrow, focused narratives regarding major discursive trends, immediate historical contexts, intertextual legacies, and even biographical factors, my goal is not to confirm the translation of the “new subjectivities” or “new faiths” from the domain of discourse into the domain of practical

political action, although those translations very well may have taken place. Rather, I have set out to demonstrate how both authors find new ways of thinking about enslaved and colonized African subjects in relation to both imperial and indigenous cultures by bringing a distinctly cosmopolitan perspective to bear on the matter of Christian modernity.

### **Equiano's *Interesting Narrative*: A Radical (Cosmopolitan) Logocentrism**

In suggesting a union between Europe's commercial and religious interests in Africa, Livingstone was not blazing a new trail. In fact, the strategic cooperation of Civilization, Christianity, Commerce had been encouraged seventy years before by a man of African descent, Olaudah Equiano, who was in turn reappropriating a well-versed line of argument. In the final pages of his 1789 memoir, *The Interesting Narrative of the Life of Olaudah Equiano, or Gustavus Vassa, the African. Written by Himself*, the African slave turned enterprising maritime merchant turned best-selling author and political activist expresses a fervent hope in the eventual success of something very like a Three C's approach to the abolition of the slave trade:

May Heaven make the British senators the dispersers of light, liberty and science, to the uttermost parts of the earth: then will be...Glory, honour, peace, &c. to every soul of man that worketh good; to the Britons first, (because to them the Gospel is preached), and also to the nations...As the inhuman traffic of slavery is now taken into the consideration of the British legislature, I doubt not, if a system of commerce was established in Africa, the demand for manufactures would most rapidly augment, as the native inhabitants would insensibly adopt the British fashions, manners, customs, &c. In proportion to the civilization, so will be the consumption for British manufacturers. (233)

As an alternative to the Atlantic slave trade, "commercial intercourse with Africa" appeals to "motives of interest as well as humanity" (234). Africa's tremendous natural



wealth in abundant and productive land, not to mention the potential for a huge, untapped market for British goods, is being squandered, Equiano insists, by a trading practice that is as economically inefficient as it is morally bankrupt.

Taken in isolation, this passage affirms a Christian cosmopolitanism in which Britons take the lead as “emissaries of light,” bringing their junior African brethren into a state of civilization and liberating them from the horrors of the slave trade without sacrificing their wealth; indeed, the potential for increase is immeasurable! However, as Vincent Carretta demonstrates in his 2005 biography of Equiano, a gradualist, politic approach was the preferred tactic of the burgeoning British abolitionist movement, into which Equiano was becoming initiated by the late 1780s. Carretta observes that *The Interesting Narrative* makes “two strategic decisions” gleaned from the experience of established abolitionists: to join an economic argument with a moral one, and to target the slave trade without expressly attacking the institution of slavery itself (251). Carretta explains: there was general agreement that the abolitionist cause “should not let the pursuit of the excellent—the eradication of slavery—diminish the chances of achieving the good—abolition of the slave trade” (252); moreover, it was widely agreed that abolishing the trade would eventually bring about emancipation anyway.<sup>4</sup> So, if it seems that *The Interesting Narrative* is ameliorationist, there is good reason to view this as a political calculation rather than a disappointing failure of belief.

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<sup>4</sup> Carretta connects Equiano’s abolitionist rhetoric to, among others, the founding members of the Society for Effecting the Abolition of the Slave Trade (SEAST), who renounced slavery as both “impolitick and unjust” and named as their object “the abolition of the slave trade, and not of the slavery which sprang from it”; this despite the fact that two of its more influential members, William Wilberforce and Granville Sharp, were on the record in opposition to both (251-52).

While Equiano's gradual economic emancipation is a prominent subplot throughout *The Interesting Narrative*, the privilege of place granted to the economic argument of the final chapter belies the book's more radical agenda to intervene in Christian modernity's pursuit of normative criteria for defining the human. As many have since recognized, Equiano understood that the slave trade was built on an ideological foundation of which Christianity was an integral part. The notion of the immanent Word of God in nature, the divine *logos*, adapted by the Gospel of John from the Greek Stoics, found expression in a secularized, scientific Christian modernity as the Cartesian *cogito*, the germ of divinely appointed humanity. Reason displaced the *logos* as the mark of authority, but in many ways it operated no less theologically; and the Word, once manifest primarily in the revelation of Nature, was given a different materiality with the emergence of literacy as the sign of a new humanity. Henry Louis Gates, Jr. has famously brought this history to bear on the first generation of African autobiographers:

After Descartes, reason was privileged or valorized, over all other human characteristics. Writing, especially after the printing press became so widespread, was taken to be the visible sign of reason...Blacks were reasonable, and hence "men," if—and only if—they demonstrated mastery of "the arts and sciences," the eighteenth century's formula for writing. So, while the Enlightenment is famous for establishing its existence upon man's ability to reason, it simultaneously used the absence and presence of reason to delimit and circumscribe the very humanity of the cultures and people of color which Europeans had been "discovering" since the Renaissance. (130)

"Through the act of writing alone," he goes on to insist, "Equiano announces and preserves his newly found status as a subject."

The placement of "coming into being" through literacy at the heart of a reading of *The Interesting Narrative* runs the risk of collapsing back into the very assumptions of Western modernity that Gates aims to discredit. Granted, it is undeniable that much of the

rhetorical power of Equiano's biography for its contemporary readership was accomplished by the addendum to the title, "Written By Himself." As was the case with Phillis Wheatley, the mere existence of a book of *some* literary value (to state the minimum, which both Wheatley and Equiano certainly exceed), or even aspiration to such value, written by "an uncultivated Barbarian from *Africa*" was a powerful argument against the overweening stereotypes of Africans as emotional rather than intellectual and thus less than human (Wheatley "To the Publick" 8). Of course, even this seemingly universalizing standard for human recognition is undermined by a strident refusal on the part of the Enlightenment intellectual to recognize any merit whatsoever in African literature. Consider the famous generosity Wheatley's most prominent detractor, Thomas Jefferson, who "never yet could...find that a black had uttered a thought above the level of plain narration" (139). Jefferson's dismissal of Equiano (as Gustavus Vassa) was even more strident: "If I were even to allow some share of merit to Gustavus Vasa, [contemporary African autobiographer] Ignatius Sancho, &c. it would not prove equality more, than a pig having been taught to fetch a card, letters, &c. would show it not to be a pig, but some other animal" (qtd. in Carretta 268). This is why we should not conflate the rhetorical mission articulated in the front matter of *The Interesting Narrative* with the argument of the text at large. Whatever affected mortifications Equiano performs in his opening dedication—apologizing for "a work so wholly devoid of literary merit...as the production of an unlettered African" (7)—his text demonstrates an understanding that the Jeffersons of the world will not concede the common ground of humanity easily. Gates's reading suggests that the objective fact of having written a book satisfies *The Interesting*

*Narrative*'s rhetorical ambitions, whereas it actually aims, as it must, at a *transcendent* literacy beyond the judgment of the strategically subjective criterion of "literary merit."

Still, Gates is the touchstone for a whole tradition of Equiano scholarship that reads his politics from an oversimplified sense of the role played by literacy. If he is read as having reinscribed the normative criteria of Cartesian literate humanity, Equiano's more radical politics is limited to "latent readings of the 'true' nature of Western culture" (158) and other discreet subversive tactics, each of which involves the "naming" of the *logocentric* conceits of Christian modernity. This kind of politics is burdened by a daunting rhetorical double-bind: he must simultaneously project African subjectivities that are assimilable within modernity's paradigm for normative humanity while also refusing the very normative logic that constitutes the paradigm in the first place. Or to put it another way, if normative literacy inexorably casts Equiano as subaltern, his ability to speak is only conceivable as somehow radically and abstractly "hybrid" or "rootless," after the fashion of Cheah's hybridity theorists.

I will suggest, by contrast, that *The Interesting Narrative* engages in rather than deconstructs a *radical logocentrism*, and it accomplishes this by recourse to a new take on "Christian cosmopolitanism." Equiano recovers the Johannine inflection of the *logos* as the immanent Word of God in nature. This theology is not only democratizing, establishing a new normative literacy accessible to all mankind regardless of race, but it also privileges Equiano as the bearer of a special revelation. Throughout *The Interesting Narrative*, and by various means, Equiano argues that he is not just "potentially" part of the human community but is in fact more in tune with the immanent Word of God in nature than those Britons who claim to be God's foreordained "emissaries of light."

Therefore, his politics are more overtly radical than they might appear, *precisely because* they are anchored in a theology held sacred (at least ostensibly) by his target audience.

### **Achebe's *Things Fall Apart* and *Arrow of God*: A "Rooted" Cosmopolitanism**

As I've said, Chinua Achebe has faced a rhetorical challenge comparable to Equiano's. But where Equiano must find ways to differentiate a privileged African Christianity while working within an assimilationist frame, Achebe's appeals to a sort of "rooted cosmopolitanism" must negotiate a late- and postcolonial political atmosphere in which African writers are being called upon to assert their *absolute* difference, often despite writing in colonial languages and literary forms. Indeed, since the publication of *Things Fall Apart* in 1958, critics have fixated upon *authenticity* as the measure of the novel's success, albeit with often radically different inflections of the term. Writing the year after the novel's first printing, a reviewer for the *New York Herald Tribune* remarked, with a Jeffersonian sort of generosity, that the book was an "authentic native document, guileless and unsophisticated...[devoid of any] sense of plot or development...This is plain and unvarnished storytelling in the best primitive tradition" (qtd. in Nelson 28). Faithful reportage, unassuming presentation: this, it seems, was the most a precocious young Nigerian should aspire to when taking the "primitive" as his subject. Of course, given the manifest virtuosity of the novel—the rich subtlety of its style, the power of its narrative, its remarkable timeliness—such cranky anachronisms as the *Herald Tribune* review were quickly consigned to archival obscurity. Still, even as *Things Fall Apart* garnered significant local attention as a watershed moment in the development of a national (and ultimately continental) literature—and certainly because of "the

decolonizing, nationalist ethos of those years...[which] permeated the criticism that emerged with it”—the questions of African authenticity and cultural autonomy “became the overarching problematic[s] to which critical responses in one way or another addressed themselves” (Garuba 245). If cultural reclamation and self-definition was a basic concern of this first era of Anglophone African literature, it was in no small part to the direct efforts of Achebe himself to articulate it: “I would be quite satisfied,” he has famously explained, “if my novels (especially the ones I set in the past) did no more than to teach my readers that their past—with all its imperfections—was not one long night of savagery from which the first Europeans acting on God’s behalf delivered them” (“Novelist” 72).

Abdul JanMohamed has characterized this original scene of African fiction in English as expressing a “double bind” seemingly the inverse of Equiano’s: the Anglophone African writer feels compelled to protect the dignity of his culture against the denigrations of Europeans, whose Manichean standards find African artists wanting by virtue of their difference. So the African writer feels he must choose between being true to a native tradition rendered stagnant by colonial interference and becoming alienated from his own culture by taking up the cultural forms of the colonizer (5). The burden is so severe as to be pathological, as Frantz Fanon famously argued. But Achebe has not only accepted the role, JanMohamed contends, he has embraced it: “In short, Achebe wishes the African writer to undertake the awesome task of alleviating the problems of historical petrification [stagnation] and catalepsy [alienation]” (155). Filtered through our cosmopolitan lens, the double bind takes shape as competing normative pressures—to grant the premises of colonial culture or to appropriate “native” culture for

the construction of a distinctly African normativity. The dilemma is further complicated by Achebe's location at the interstices of both cultural forces, the son of native African missionaries, educated in a British colonial school, but driven to the reclamation project by his disillusionment with colonial prejudice and the fear of cultural loss. It is at least partly because of his Christian missionary parents, no doubt, that his novels stage this central preoccupation with clashing cultures on a spiritual plane.

The most persistent criticism of Achebe has, in turn, centered on his response to the double bind. In fact, his early novels serve as one of Appiah's primary examples of the "cultural imperialist" sensibility. A first stage of African writers, Appiah contends, were still caught up in a misguided battle over the cultural legacy of Africa, so much so that they failed to recognize—and in fact helped to produce—the ultra-nationalist regimes of the early post-colonial days, which turned out to be "kleptocracies":

The novels of this first stage are thus realist legitimations of nationalism: they authorize a "return to traditions" while at the same time recognizing the demands of a Weberian rationalized modernity. From the later sixties on, such celebratory novels become rare. For example, Achebe moves from the creation of a usable past in *Things Fall Apart* to a cynical indictment of politics in the modern sphere in *A Man of the People*. ("Postmodernism 349)

Just a year after *Things Fall Apart*, Frantz Fanon levies a similar complaint about those Western-educated African intellectuals for whom "the demand for a national culture and the affirmation of the existence of such a culture represent a special battlefield" (209), only Fanon is arguing from the perspective that the search for national cultures actually *detracts* from the important business of nation-building:

The native intellectual nevertheless sooner or later will realize that you do not show proof of your nation from its culture but that you substantiate its existence in the fight which the people wage against the forces of occupation. No colonial system draws its justification from the fact that the territories it dominates are

culturally non-existent. You will never make colonialism blush for shame by spreading out our little known cultural treasures under its eyes. (223)

“The native intellectual who wishes to create an *authentic* work of art,” he continues, “must realize that the truths of a nation are in the first place its realities” (225, my emphasis), not its erased cultural pasts. Achebe is not named by Fanon, but he is certainly implicated in the sweeping rebuke of the investment of political value in cultural reclamation.

My reading of Achebe’s early novels is somewhat different. In order to read *Things Fall Apart* as a narrative of nationalist legitimation or an exercise in cultural essentialism one must efface certain deep ambiguities in Achebe’s representation of various modalities of African experience, particularly of Igbo sacred space. It is my contention that these ambiguities combine to produce, among other things, a vision of the “rooted cosmopolitanism” described by Appiah himself and many of the contributors to *Cosmopolitics*. This model for postcolonial subjectivity is the most useful paradigm available for reading the dynamics of belief, conversion, and agency in *Things Fall Apart* and *Arrow of God*. My reading doesn’t suggest that Achebe represents this ideal with perfect fidelity, nor that the novels can be read as manuals for a new emancipatory politics. Rather, it is my claim that Achebe’s two most celebrated novels, despite having been written in the earliest days of African literature as we have come to know it, express an epistemological maturity that theories of postcoloniality have only recently advanced enough in turn to appreciate.

Specifically, I will argue that the novels evince a notional “contamination” that can be meaningfully opposed to the kind of contamination stigmatized by Marlow in



*Heart of Darkness*. Of course, Achebe's denunciation of *Heart of Darkness* in a 1975 lecture was a seminal moment in the development of postcolonial thought as such. Here he is taking Conrad to task for his manifest fear of "contamination":

Conrad's liberalism would not take him quite as far as Schweitzer's, though. He would not use the word brother however qualified; the farthest he would go was kinship. When Marlow's African helmsman falls down with a spear in his heart, he gives his white master one final disquieting look.

And the intimate profundity of that look he gave me when he re-ceived his hurt remains to this day in my memory-like a claim of distant kinship affirmed in a supreme moment. (p. 124)

It is important to note that Conrad, careful as ever with his words, is not talking so much about distant kinship as about someone laying a claim on it. The black man lays a claim on the white man which is well-nigh intolerable. It is the laying of this claim which frightens and at the same time fascinates Conrad, "the thought of their humanity-like yours . . . Ugly." The point of my observations should be quite clear by now, namely that Conrad was a bloody racist. ("Image" 8-9)

It might be easy to imagine because of this vitriol that Achebe simply inverts Marlow's disgust with the prospect of contamination—European racism is a corruptive foreign agent that destroys native culture, which must reassert its primacy in order for Africans to regain a proper and effective sense of themselves and their past. Borrowing a phrase from Sartre, Achebe has characterized this kind of inversion as "an anti-racist racism, to announce not just that we are as good as the next man but that we are much better" ("Novelist" 72). Aimé Césaire takes up this position more earnestly in his *Discourse on Colonialism* (1972): wherever European colonization spreads,

a universal regression takes place, a gangrene sets in, a center of infection begins to spread...at the end of all the racial pride that has been encouraged, all the boastfulness that has been displayed, a poison has been distilled into the veins of Europe and, slowly but surely, the continent proceeds towards *savagery*. (13, original emphasis)

Césaire's metaphor literalizes the counter-response Achebe refers to. If Western man has denigrated African culture as barbaric, he warns, it is only by neglecting the "crowning barbarism" of the West: Nazism (14). "It would be worthwhile," he goes on, "to reveal to the very distinguished, very humanistic, very Christian bourgeois of the twentieth century that without his being aware of it, he has a Hitler inside him, that Hitler *inhabits* him, that Hitler is his *demon*" (14). Césaire does not object to intercultural contact in principle, he is quick to add. But under the spectre of Nazism, the monstrous offspring of Christian modernity, which "oozes, seeps and trickles from every crack" (14), it is more important than ever to assert the basic dignity of African traditional society, which is communal, democratic, and staunchly anti-(and "ante-")capitalist (23).

Achebe bucks this contemporary trend toward radical African particularity. While he has taken up the banner of indigenous cultural heritage consistently in his prose, his fiction (as well as more subtle threads in his essays and lectures) has the bark of essentialism but not the bite. To be a modern(ized) African, Achebe's oeuvre argues, is to be contaminated; and anticipating current notions of cosmopolitanism by thirty years, his work sets about exploring the tension between a native home and cosmopolitan exile without the radical particularism that will eventually produce theories of impossible hybridity:

Poor me, you might think, what kind of life can result from the interplay of such an array of forces? Does the more homely circle of Igbo ethnicity, for example, exert a stronger impact on the self than the wider African identity? Is the poor fellow stretched by competing claims on a painful rack of rival antagonistic identities? I regret I cannot report any intolerable stress or excitement. Perhaps it is my Igbo inheritance which comes to my aid by upholding so consistently the notion of plurality. Where something stands, something else will stand beside it. Perhaps it all goes back to the Igbo relationship to the pantheon of their gods and goddesses. ("Country" 15)

This speaks to the core of Achebe's deployment of the Igbo sacred as a sign of cultural pluralism. When Christian missionaries arrive in Igboland intent on displacing Igbo ritual practices, the Igbo draw on wisdom more fundamental than religion; or rather, they draw on the proverbial wisdom which, taking various forms, *constitutes* their religion and thus the true Igbo essence: "Where something stands, something else will stand beside it."

### **The Problem of Religion**

As I have said, religion is the source of the most problematic moments in both *The Interesting Narrative* and Achebe's early novels, and debates over Equiano's Christianity have been particularly contentious. Adam Potkay and Srinivas Aravamudan, to take a notable example, have tussled over the role of Christian hermeneutics in reading *The Interesting Narrative*. Potkay laments what he sees as "postcolonial theory's efforts at refashioning Equiano in its own image" ("History" 611) by reading into his narrative ahistorical or rhetorically inappropriate motives, particularly ascribing to him a subversive attitude toward the Christian frame in which he writes: "Postcolonial critics are apt to read back into the language of those colonized or displaced by empire signs of creolization, parodic subversion, or 'talking back'—in Equiano's case, however, those signs are faint and all too easily exaggerated by those who, programmatically, seek them out" (602). Potkay suggests that the only legitimate lens for reading the religious dynamics in *The Interesting Narrative* is the one Equiano himself provides—not surprisingly, that paradigm is presumed to be an unequivocally Christian one. For Aravamudan, on the other hand, Potkay's "new twist on academic anti-intellectualism" elides the landmark contributions of critics like Houston Baker and Henry Louis Gates

toward an appreciation of the “rhetorical and religious slipperiness of the text” (“Lite” 617). Far from disqualifying Equiano’s faith as a fruitful domain of study, Aravamudan says his aim is to parse out “the multiple and complex ways in which religious fetishism and readerly agency inhabit the text and jostle for characterization and narrativization as ‘Christian,’ ‘African,’ and ‘literate’” (“Lite” 616).

Rightly, I think, Aravamudan dismisses “vacuous reaffirmations” of Equiano’s Christianity as “a privatized evangelical vision with little theological and political content” (“Lite” 616). However, it bears pointing out that Aravamudan projects onto the narrative a privileged poststructuralist hermeneutics that may not be historically appropriate. *The Interesting Narrative*, as he reads it in his *Tropicopolitans* of 1999, calls attention to its own constructedness, revealing the structure of spiritual autobiography to be a mere “shell,” which “crumbles to reveal a political manifesto” (“Tropicopolitans” 244). With good reason, Aravamudan reacts against those critics who “construct a ‘Christian self’” for Equiano “as something *present*,” which “makes for an Enlightenment narrative that subsumes more interesting contradictions” and his “*performance* of Christianity for an English audience” (n. 392-3, original emphasis); the critical impulse to distrust the ostensible “sincerity” or “artlessness” of autobiography is an indispensable asset in reading Equiano’s *Narrative* as a reconstruction of his past for an intended audience and with a rhetorical purpose that very likely does supersede verisimilitude or narrative “honesty” narrowly conceived. But the arbitrary distance imposed between “belief” and “practice” needs to be acknowledged as a contemporary scholarly construction. Aravamudan’s seeming emphasis on an at least semiconscious constructivist agency on the part of an author who offers a latent code for his text’s

deconstruction does indeed risk being disingenuous about Equiano's deployment of faith in *The Interesting Narrative*.

Beyond the now-commonplace antagonism between the "liberal academic left" and the "evangelical right" for which this spat no doubt acts as a proxy, what seem to be at issue are conflicting ideas about what it means for literature to be religious. As Jordan Stein and Justine Murison point out in their 2010 introduction to a special issue of *Early American Literature* on religion, discussions of religion in literature tend to assume a naïvely descriptive posture, when in fact "religion" is *constructed* by scholarship according to various assumptions about what religion is, how it operates, and why (or why not) it matters. Stein and Murison suggest instead an approach that treats religion "as a critical problem" (1). Potkay's working definition of religion suggests a "total social system," which is itself fully coherent and which Equiano not only draws upon for rhetorical strategies but also believes in with fully coherent *belief*, with something like ideal theological orthodoxy.<sup>5</sup> Readings of Equiano's religion and its rhetorical uses that do not take for granted a direct correspondence between *The Interesting Narrative's* theology and institutionally available, biographically verifiable, and historically generalizable forms of Christianity are dismissed as misguided, or worse, disingenuous.

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<sup>5</sup>Stein and Murison identify "'Religion' as a social framework" as one term in "a taxonomy of some of the various meanings of religion that have emerged within the field" of early American literary studies (1). Although I differ from them somewhat in the particulars of my application of the term to Potkay, the basic idea of the author's total absorption within "a fundamentally coherent body of thought" (5)—which can be reconstructed by meticulous scholarship—remains intact. The other three predominant scholarly conceptions accounted for in the taxonomy are: religion as a "rhetorical construction," as "ideology," and as "a category of experience."

Aravamudan takes a more skeptical approach, blending, it would seem, elements of Stein and Murison's categories of religion as rhetorical construction—"a problem embedded in the nature of language" ("Lite" 10)—and as ideology—"a normative system...a name for the summation of [social and rhetorical] components in an overarching theory of the machinations of power" (10-11).

Ultimately, I am less interested in the *sincerity* of Equiano's belief (which I do not doubt) than I am in his mobilization of a spiritual subjectivity that both invigorates and delimits the potential of his *Interesting Narrative* for powerful resistance. Nor will I be particularly concerned with the distinction between *mobilization* and *belief*, weighed down as it is with contemporary anxieties. That said, my reading does construe *The Interesting Narrative* as a spiritual autobiography primarily, and I engage explicitly theological concepts en route to an account of the narrative's political valences. But these terms need not be imposed on the text by an imperious critic-zealot; rather, they are the terms suggested by the text itself, and they merit not credulous cataloguing under "traditional" religious categories but thoughtful exposition and creative application to the interests of contemporary readers. What we need is not a potentially naïve commitment "to read Equiano as he asks to be read" (Potkay "Equiano" 677). Instead, I would join Eileen Elrod in a commitment to "take seriously both the religious rhetoric and religious questions" posed by Equiano's autobiography "and to contextualize these questions in their historical and literary moments," as opposed to merely taking Equiano's piety at its face value (17).

Achebe's portrayal of Christianity does not prompt comparable scholarly disagreement, largely because of the assumption that the realist novel effaces the

authorial self, whereas the autobiography, as has been well established, is by its nature a performance of identity (and often *multiple* identities) under the sign of the unified self or the self *becoming* fully realized. Thus the autobiography invites speculation as to the sincerity of the speaker, and the realist novel presumes the authority of the narrative voice. But in Achebe's late-colonial context, where indigenous structures of consciousness must be defended against the aggressive delegitimizing efforts of colonial Christianity, to be "realist" in the conventional (European) sense means to adorn the trappings and the suits of modern epistemology—rigid empiricism and detached objectivity. Therefore, the problem of religion in Achebe's early novels arises from the tension between the reader's expectation of a "real" African sacred—that is, of a sort of "magical realism" wherein the "supernatural" is folded into the "possible" under the supervision of a credulous narrator—and Achebe's actual insistence, especially in *Things Fall Apart*, on a detached, anthropological narration that calls direct attention to the *artifice* of Igbo sacred ritual. If Equiano asks the reader to believe *with* him, problematizing modern theological assumptions en route to a *truer* belief, Achebe, remarkably, seems to problematize belief itself by foreclosing our willing suspension of *disbelief*, without lapsing into a postmodern cynicism about the role of the sacred in stabilizing a community, or even as a source of legitimate self-actualization.

In Achebe's novels, then, we arrive at an arena of performed religious identity—at a sacred stage—by a different route. But his portrayal does not discredit or debunk the Igbo sacred. Rather, he is radically challenging the normative category of *belief* in the first place. Bruno Latour, noted critic of the modern social sciences, offers a useful lens for Achebe's activity here, his "ceasing to believe in belief" (2): "Belief is not a state of

mind but a set of relationships among people... The visitor knows; the person visited believes" (2). *Belief* is not a native state, in any sense of the word; belief is constructed, not by those who are called "believers," but by "the visitor" for whom belief is the subordinate term in an opposition between truth and falsehood, knowledge and ignorance. Latour continues:

Let us apply this principle to the case of the Moderns. Wherever they drop anchor, they soon set up fetishes: that is, they see all the peoples they encounter as worshippers of meaningless objects. Since the Moderns naturally have to come up with an explanation for the strangeness of a form of worship that cannot be justified objectively, they attribute to the savages a mental state that has internal rather than external references. As the wave of colonization advances, the world fills up with believers. A Modern is someone who believes that others believe. An agnostic, conversely, does not wonder whether it is necessary to believe or not, but why the Moderns so desperately need belief in order to strike up a relationship with others. (2)

If the reader is troubled by the anthropological tone of Achebe's narrator, it is owing to the expectation that his avowed rhetorical mission entails a defense of the validity of native beliefs. His novels are a powerful argument to the contrary—they reject the category of belief itself, recognizing in it the will to power that poisons cultures and ultimately destroys them. His Igbo do not "believe" in their gods and goddesses; they take for granted that what Christian modernity insists on calling belief is really "a set of relationships among people." Nor are eventual mass conversions of Igbo to Christianity a matter of changing one "belief" for another, at least not for most. Religious conversion is an expression and a consequence of shifting relationships among and between communities. This is the essence of cosmopolitan contamination and "Where something stands, something else will stand beside it": a culture's defining characteristic is its degree of willingness to subordinate arbitrary cultural structures to the present realities of



human relationship—that is, to instrumentalize the *forms* of sacred practice in order to realize the most effective *functions* of the sacred in general.

I will end with Bhabha's famous scene of Christian "conversion," where "Anund Messeh, one of the earliest Indian catechists, made a hurried and excited journey from his mission in Meerut to a grove of trees just outside Delhi" (1876). Messeh finds in the grove a group of 500 people engrossed in reading and discussing the Christian Gospel, translated into Hindi by a Hurdwar missionary. He is frustrated by the corruption of the Gospel in their untutored practice. The Hurdwar converts continue to practice caste, they wear white in lieu of baptismal rites, and they refuse the Sacrament: "because the Europeans eat cow's flesh, and this will never do for us" (1876). Their challenges, Bhabha concludes at length, expose the contingency of Biblical (as colonial) authority on unstable relationships of difference rather than on the supposedly firm ground of pure "Englishness." "After our experience of the native interrogation," he says,

it is difficult to agree entirely with Fanon that the psychic choice is 'to turn white or disappear.' There is the more ambivalent, third choice: camouflage, mimicry, black skins/white masks...When the words of the master become the site of hybridity...then we may not only read between the lines but even seek to change the often coercive reality that they so lucidly contain. (1889)

I must draw a final distinction between the discourse of hybridity articulated here and the value of contaminated and/or Christian cosmopolitanism. Returning to the categories of Stein and Murison, we can see that Bhabha, like Aravamudan, reads religion as a metonym for ideology and discourse (or ideology *as* discourse), and so to be "converted" is to be co-opted and overwritten. Resistance, on the other hand, is located in acts of reading between the lines, in the ambivalence of a "psychic choice" for "camouflage" and "hybridity," and it is left to the imagination how these might become

manifest in material resistance. This is precisely what the texts of Equiano and Achebe reject—Equiano because would-be hegemonic religious ideologies can be revised and rearticulated by a politics grounded in a *common* theological vocabulary, Achebe because specific cultural knowledges are arbitrary and subordinate to the bedrock reality of human interconnectedness. The item from the Stein/Murison taxonomy that seems most appropriate to describe my working definition of religion is “religion as a category of experience,” defined by one scholar as “not so much... ‘doctrinal convictions, or...specific ecclesiological practices, but the fund of basic attitudes by which [“believers”] confron[t] and transfor[m] reality’” (15). For both of these authors, separated by gulfs of time, geography, and genre, cosmopolitanism becomes a concrete way of expressing hope that forces of modernity, shrinking the globe as they expand, might be harnessed to make brothers out of estranged men.

## CHAPTER 2: RADICAL LOGOCENTRISM AND CHRISTIAN COSMOPOLITANISM IN EQUIANO'S *INTERESTING NARRATIVE*

One night, when his work was done, his boss came into his cabin and saw him with a book in his hand. He threatened to give him five hundred lashes if he caught him again with a book, and he said he hadn't enough work to do...He said it just harassed him; it just set him on fire. He thought there must be something good in that book if the white man didn't want him to learn...Here was the key to forbidden knowledge...He got the sounds of the letters by heart, then cut off the bark of a tree, carved the letters on the smooth inside, and learned them...He made the beach of the river his copy-book, and thus he learned to write.

-- Francis Ellen Watkins Harper, *Iola Leroy* (35-6)

Eighteenth century readers were invited to chuckle good-naturedly when Olaudah Equiano recalled his earliest encounters with the miracle of reading: seeing his boyhood master and a white footman "talking to books," the young slave felt a *mélange* of astonishment and envy when, as though by magic, the books seemed to talk back. And perhaps readers felt they could sense a barely-suppressed grin on the face of the older, wiser narrator as he admitted, in a book of his own, "I have often taken up a book, and I have talked to it, and then put my ears to it, when alone, in hopes it would answer me; and I have been very much concerned when I found it remained silent" (68). But the self-deprecating charm of the anecdote belies a startling reality—that the child is in fact *correct*, that a book *can* speak. Not only that, it also chooses to whom it will speak according to a principle of election not beholden to the pernicious politics that would keep a young slave of the black Atlantic from learning to read or write in the first place. Many scholars follow Henry Louis Gates in a reading of the talking book episode that essentially amounts to a Derridean critique of Western logocentrism—that is, Equiano positions himself ironically in relation to a Western fetish of "presence" within the book and other catachrestic objects, although the strategic exclusions of the "white" literacy he

is compelled to engage foreclose all but the most oblique expressions of an authentic “black” literate subject.

However, few have given adequate attention to a second instance of the talking book trope, a transformative encounter with the Bible late in Equiano’s quest for some source of ontological and material security. The episode brings into focus Equiano’s dramatization of the acquisition of literacy as an *engagement in* rather than a critique of a radically logocentric hermeneutics; by recourse to this theology, presented as a kind of special revelation, Equiano can not only anchor his subjectivity in the recognition he receives from the divine *logos* via the written word, but he can even establish a privileged position from which to call to account the wayward “Christian” nations engaged in the Atlantic slave trade. So, far from being subsumed within a hegemonic Christianity modernity and its sanctioned discursive forms, *The Interesting Narrative* reappropriates and reinvigorates artifacts of Western theology in a vision of empowering, transcendent literacy that would remain active in African diasporic literature throughout the 19<sup>th</sup> century. Cosmopolitanism is one model for describing Equiano’s strategies for speaking out from an interstitial yet indexable position in the margins of Christian modernity and implicating himself in its construction of normative categories for describing the human. *The Interesting Narrative* invokes the divine Word as a counter-sign to the Cartesian *cogito*, hoping to render diffuse the tremendous normative potential of a logocentric theology. Radical logocentrism also holds promise for Equiano as a democratizing, universalizing corrective to a Christian modernity that has distorted the *logos* into a site and sign of human difference, grafting a twisted logocentrism onto emerging racial

ontologies, all in the interest of protecting an immense economic interest in the illicit trafficking of expendable human labor.

At its most basic, *The Interesting Narrative* is about the quest for freedom. However, it is a testament to the complexity of the text that it remains an open question whether Equiano is indeed “free” by the book’s end. Indeed, the greater part of critical work on Equiano since his resurgence of popularity in the last forty years has taken up this problem to some extent. With this in mind, Cathy N. Davidson offers the useful reminder that a text as “indeterminate” as *The Interesting Narrative* “can simultaneously be polemically powerful and unresolved” (22). In describing the political valences, both productive and restrictive, of Equiano’s work with religious subjectivity I am not implying that Christian theology offers a special code for unraveling the stubborn complexity of *The Interesting Narrative*, nor certainly that it is sound policy to ignore the secular modes of Equiano’s protean narrative self. What I contend is that *The Interesting Narrative* deploys the rhetoric of the *logos* to support Equiano’s vision of a virtual polity of the enslaved and oppressed, not only existing but speaking out from a theologically indexed position in the discursive margins and intervening on behalf of what might be called the cause of a Christian cosmopolitanism.

Published one hundred years after Equiano’s narrative, Francis E. W. Harper’s *Iola Leroy* (see Epigraph) powerfully distills the attitudes toward literacy and special agency inaugurated by *The Interesting Narrative*. By the time Leroy’s Tom Anderson makes nature his “copy-book,” he is rehearsing a drama of self-empowerment and even self-realization through literacy that has been reenacted by countless authors of the African diaspora, and he enters into a trans-historical conversation with Equiano and

other early black writers who were likewise “set on fire” for the recovery of a stolen birthright. Gates’s argument that the early black writer’s primary rhetorical aim was “to demonstrate his or her own membership in the human community” is incomplete (128). When Tom *carves* his transgressive letters into clandestine manuscripts of tree bark and sand, he signals a desire for knowledge that does not passively receive but actively shapes. And when, like all prophets, he has learned what he needs in the wilderness, the letters will become a voice speaking from the margins of the boss’s world, but a voice of authority and judgment, not that of an outcast merely seeking to belong. Harper explains a few pages earlier that “slavery had cast such a glamour over the Nation, and so warped the consciences of men, that they failed to read aright the legible transcript of Divine retribution which was written upon the shuddering earth, where the blood of God’s poor children had been as water freely spilled” (12). For Tom, as for Equiano a century before, the question is not whether by learning to read and write he will become more like his white masters, but rather how, for all their talk of God, they could have so badly misread the Word He has written “upon the shuddering earth.”

### **The Book Talks Back**

After undergoing what Vincent Carretta calls “a spiritual crisis” upon his return to London from an eventful Arctic expedition (161), Equiano experiences a religious awakening in the tenth chapter that forms the core of my reading of *The Interesting Narrative*. While anchored in the port of Cadiz, he begins to feel premonitions of “something supernatural. I had a secret impulse on my mind of something that was to

take place” (189). Later that evening, while meditating over Acts 4:12,<sup>6</sup> his premonition is validated by the return of the phenomenon of the talking book, related this time with a tone of reverent exuberance suitable to one who has experienced a genuine miracle:

I began to think I had lived a moral life, and that I had a proper ground to believe I had an interest in divine favour; but still meditating on the subject, not knowing whether salvation was to be had partly for our own good deeds, or solely as a sovereign gift of God:—in this deep consternation the Lord was pleased to break in upon my soul with his bright beams of heavenly light; and in an instant, as it were, removing the veil, and letting light into a dark place, Isa. xxv. 7. I saw clearly, with the eye of faith, the crucified Saviour bleeding on the cross on Mount Calvary: the scriptures became an unsealed book, I saw myself a condemned criminal under the law... I then clearly perceived, that by deed of the law no living flesh could be justified. I was then convinced, that by the first Adam sin came, and by the second Adam (the Lord Jesus Christ) all that are saved must be made alive... I was sensible of the invisible hand of God, which guided and protected me, when in truth I knew it not: still the Lord pursued me although I slighted and disregarded it; this mercy melted me down. Sure I was that the Spirit which indicted the word opened my heart to receive the truth of it as it is in Jesus—that the same Spirit enabled me to act with faith upon the promises which were precious to me, and enabled me to believe the salvation of my soul. (189-91)

Were this scene the work of one of Equiano’s free, white contemporaries, it would be unremarkable, even hackneyed<sup>7</sup>; coming from Equiano, it is revolutionary. Through the first nine chapters, every avenue he has taken in pursuit of equal recognition—under the law, through entrepreneurial ingenuity, by extraordinary acts of courage on behalf of both slaves and their masters, and even through baptism and uncommon fidelity to the commands of scripture—has been a dead end. But in this passage, Equiano calls attention to the need for an ontological center that stands outside of the contingent world and by

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<sup>6</sup> “Neither is there salvation in any other [but Christ]: for there is none other name under heaven given among men, whereby we must be saved.”

<sup>7</sup> The genre of the conversion narrative was well-worn enough that Mary Wollstonecraft, for example, who famously panned *The Interesting Narrative* in her 1789 review, found “[t]he long account of his religious sentiments and conversion to methodism... rather tiresome,” despite her obvious sympathy with his cause (qtd. in Carretta 332).

virtue of whose recognition he can re-triangulate his relationship to other men, free and enslaved. That center is also the means by which recognition might become irrevocable, since “the Spirit” which speaks out of the written word is the *logos* of the Gospel of John, the enduring Word that is both the sign and the substance of God’s presence immanent in creation, and thus is not really contingent upon literacy in any “literal” sense. One of the basic conceits of this study is that what Equiano presents as an ontological center is at the same time, of course, a rhetorical center. In fact, an effective summary of my approach to theology in this text is that I do not attribute to its author quite so complete a separation between the rhetorical and the ontological as have many recent critics. So when I claim that this revelatory moment constitutes a conversion<sup>8</sup> to a “transcendent literacy” through which Equiano constructs a privileged yet critical position within Christian modernity, I am allowing for an interpenetration of “belief” and “practice” that need not be compulsively parsed in order to appreciate the polemical power of the text.<sup>9</sup>

Gates has famously anchored his interpretation of Equiano in the first appearance of the so-called “Trope of the Talking Book,” related in the narrative’s third chapter:

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<sup>8</sup> I will refer to this scene below as “the conversion moment,” or else some recognizable variation.

<sup>9</sup> In *Equiano, The African: Biography of a Self-Made Man*, Carretta ably demonstrates Equiano’s penchant for self-promotion, but does not conclude that Equiano’s personal and even pecuniary interest in his book’s success undermines its rhetorical power. Regarding Carretta’s famous disclosure (now over a decade ago) of birth records suggesting Equiano may have been born in South Carolina rather than Africa as he claims, I do not think this is cause enough to split Equiano’s theology cleanly into the “genuine” and the “performative.” For one, I agree with Davidson that “people fudge the facts for any number of reasons” (37) and that “decades of excellent work” on the “social ideologies...imbedded in the form” of archives “should have made us far more circumspect about how to read documents” (35); moreover, I share Jonathan Elmer’s view that “the challenge of Equiano’s text...is to resist a division between rhetoric and facts, the literary and the historical” (n77) in favor of a more nuanced impression of Equiano’s rhetorical investment in “refashion[ing] himself as *the African*” (Carretta 367) and in the various means by which he uses his transfiguration as a *representative* of Africans to reimagine for them a more empowering position vi-a-vis God and men.



I had often seen my master Dick employed in reading; and I had a great curiosity to talk to the books, as I thought they did, and so to learn how all things had a beginning: for that purpose I have often taken up a book, and have talked to it, and then put my ears to it, when alone, in hopes it would answer me; and I have been very much concerned when I found it remained silent. (68).

Gates traces the trope back to the earliest black autobiographers, three of whom—James Gronniosaw, John Marrant, and Ottobah Cuguano—write before the publication of *The Interesting Narrative*. For Gates, the primary dynamic of the talking book trope is one of silence and absence, with the foundational example being Gronniosaw, who deduces that the book fails to speak to him as it does to his white master because “every body and everything despised me because I was black” (qtd. in Gates 136). The act of creating one’s own book, by writing or dictation, is tantamount to coming into being as a modern reasoning subject by “speak[ing] [oneself] into existence among the authors and texts of the Western tradition” (138). Unlike Gronniosaw, however, Equiano uses the trope in an act of signifyin(g), “a fiction about the making of the fiction” (158). Gates yokes the talking book scene in *The Interesting Narrative* to a moment earlier in the same chapter when young Equiano encounters two other strange Western objects, a gold watch and a painted portrait, which he likewise “endows...with his master’s subjectivity” (155). Gates shrewdly observes that the young slave’s fascination with each of these items is both a charming rhetorical turn—“see here how funny I was to think such a thing,” as Ronald A. T. Judy paraphrases (86)—and a remarkably apropos “naming” of Western commodity fetishes. By reflecting on the incident through the performed naïveté of the young Equiano, the author is able to foreground the absurd yet devastating process by which the Atlantic slave trade makes commodities out of human beings as though they were objects

(158). For Gates, this moment is Equiano's fullest realization of his ascendance from mere object or commodity to full, speaking subjectivity:

“By revising the Trope of the Talking Book, and by shifting from the present to past and back to present [his curious switch to the present perfect in the passage excerpted above] Equiano the author is able to read these objects at both levels [the “manifest” level of the child’s naïve understanding and the adult’s appreciation of the “latent” implications of the objects for questions of subject-/objectivity] and to demonstrate his true mastery of the text of Western letters and the text of his verbal representation of his past and present selves” (157).

As I have suggested, though, the conversion moment and not his learning to *merely* read should be read as a commentary on the chapters that come before; taking what he sees as a more transcendent hermeneutical activity as its subject, Equiano makes the conversion a referendum on Equiano's previous aspirations to full subjectivity in the realm of literacy. Most join Gates in reading Equiano's shift in tense in the talking book scene from the past perfect (“I had often seen...”) to the present perfect (“I have often taken up a book...”) as a means of narrative distancing that situates Equiano the autobiographer in a position of wry superiority and ironic judgment over Equiano the illiterate child. This element is certainly present (at the “manifest” level, as Gates says), but the present perfect may also indicate an *incomplete* literacy that continues to develop beyond Equiano's technical mastery of the written word.

To substantiate this argument I follow Gates' trail of the Trope of the Talking Book to its “erasure” (166) in John Jea's *The Life, History, and Unparalleled Sufferings of John Jea*, where “[the] figure has become decadent in the repetition” (132). Whereas Equiano deploys the trope self-consciously, Gates says that Jea literalizes it to the point of rendering it “unrepresentable” to future black autobiographers, hence its erasure. Jea's episode with the talking book unfolds similarly as in the texts of Gronniosaw and

Equiano, with white readers performing a conversation with the book (the Bible, as is most often the case) as a demonstration of power. Particularly despondent after the book refuses to speak to him, Jea begs God to “give me the knowledge of his word, that I might be...able to speak it in the Dutch and English languages, that I might convince my master that he and his sons had not spoken to me as they ought, when I was their slave” (qtd. in Gates 160). He continues:

The Lord heard my groans and cries at the end of six weeks, and sent the blessed angel of the covenant to my heart and soul, to release me from all my distress and troubles, and delivered me from all mine enemies, which were ready to destroy me; thus the Lord was pleased in his infinite mercy, to send an angel, in a vision, in shining raiment, and his countenance shining as the sun, with a large Bible in his hands, and brought it unto me, and said, “I am come to bless thee, and to grant thee thy request,” as you read in the Scriptures. Thus my eyes were opened at the end of six weeks, while I was praying, in the place where I slept; although the place was as dark as a dungeon, I awoke, as the scripture saith, and found it illuminated with the light of the glory of God, and the angel standing by me, with the large book open, which was the Holy Bible, and said unto me, “Thou has desired to read and understand this book, and to speak the language of it both in English and in Dutch; I will therefore teach thee, and now read”; and then he taught me to read the first chapter of the gospel according to St. John; and when I had read the whole chapter, the angel and the book were both gone in the twinkling of an eye, which astonished me very much, for the place was dark immediately... (161).

Gates, of course, does not overlook the import of the text Jea reads (or rather speaks):

John 1:1, the Word becoming flesh and dwelling among men, the fullest expression of the divine *logos*. “Only God,” Gates acknowledges, “epitome and keeper of the Word, can satisfy the illiterate slave’s desire to know the Word...because all human agencies are closed off to him by slavery” (164). Jea repeats this miracle in the presence of the minister, then in front of the magistrates, who determine that such a man could only be “taught of God” (163). And the miracle is compounded when Jea reveals to close the

scene that he remains functionally illiterate, only able to “read” the Word of God that emanates from the sacred book.

At this point, Gates’ archaeology of the trope comes quite close to striking at the heart of its mobilization in Equiano’s text. But by characterizing Jea’s literalizing revision as a “decadent” departure, a *reductio ad absurdum*, he fails to see that Jea is actually rendering at the “manifest” level the relationship to the Word that also operates at the “latent” level of Equiano’s *Narrative*. That is, Gates misses that Jea’s text *fulfills* Equiano’s rather than revises it: as an illiterate man, Jea is able to dramatize a kind of direct communion with the divine *logos* that Equiano cannot possibly represent within the economy of *literal* literacy. But it is nonetheless crucial that Equiano reads “with the eye of faith” rather than abstract reason, that “the Lord...break[s] in upon [his] soul with his bright beams of heavenly light”; and that it is only the Spirit which frees him “to act with faith upon the promises” which have been vulnerable to foreclosure in every other agency Equiano has attempted to acquire, whether legal, economic, or literate/literary. The irony manifest in the talking book passage is not merely that the reader (by definition) “knows” that books do not “talk,” nor that Equiano is “naming” an unconscious commodity fetish of a Western modernity that defines itself as directly opposed to fetishism. The ironic distancing of the narrative voice in that moment also signals that the child has been right all along, and that the “presence” the book demands is not the presence of “whiteness” (and the ironic voice invites us again to chuckle at the naïveté of the young Equiano who, mere paragraphs after encountering the book, tries in vain to rub the blackness off of his face to imitate the “rosy” complexion of his playmate), but the presence of an ordained

soul who belongs to the elect of God and *recognizes itself* as having been selected to partake in a transcendent subjectivity that cannot be as easily revoked.

### **Radical Logocentrism: A “quiet revolution”?**

The intervening decades notwithstanding, Gates’s position continues to set the tone for much Equiano scholarship, at least as a general theoretical frame.<sup>10</sup> What preserves Equiano’s political agency is the ironic inflection of his self-actualization through writing, though this means entry into the murky territory of politics by pure subversion. Susan M. Marren follows Gates in describing Equiano’s “transgressive self, whose existence, ironically, challenges his readers to scrutinize the very social structures that their preoccupation with racial difference had sought to mask” (94). Beyond becoming a literate subject, Marren argues, Equiano goes on to fulfill virtually all of the Enlightenment prerequisites for recognition as a full subject: by “[a]sserting himself as an Englishman, he manages to lull readers into a sense that he is both in and of English society and thus that his protests against elements of that social order are the protests of one whose differences with it are fully resolvable within the existing structure” (104). Likewise, Gate’s ur-trope of “Signifyin(g)” becomes politically charged as a double articulation, a transgressive mimicry speaking back the content of Christian modernity,

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<sup>10</sup> Matthew J. Pethers notes that, “[f]or all the promises of [Gates’s] insights” into the origins of the Trope and Equiano’s use of it, “the critical response to them has been strangely cursory” (111). As I’ve suggested, my own impression is that Gates initiates an enduring and prominent line of critique taken up by other Equiano scholars; indeed, it is with Gates and his critical protégés (at least in terms of certain aspects of their scholarship) that I am engaging now. If, however, Pethers is referring to the general acceptance of Gates’s archaeology of the “Trope of the Talking Book” as a given with often limited scrutiny, then we’re in agreement on that point.

but with a subversive difference. “Signifyin(g)” is something more—that is, something *louder*—than the “quiet revolution” suggested by Marren (95). Certainly, if we grant Gates his premise, “Signifyin(g)” resonates within the African literary tradition as a shared poetic heritage and political tactic. Still, mere “ironic doubling” seems a markedly less polemic discourse of resistance than that envisioned by an author whose professed objective is “to inspire [members of British Parliament] with peculiar benevolence on that important day when the question of Abolition is to be discussed, when thousands, in consequence of your determination, are to look for Happiness or Misery!” (Equiano 8). Indeed, if Equiano’s interaction with the talking book signals only absence, Gates concedes that “we are justified in wondering aloud if the sort of subjectivity that [he] seek[s] can be realized through a process that is so very ironic from the outset” (169). Marren, for her part, explains that Equiano is burdened by the double-bind described in the introductory chapter: in order to challenge the normative categories of Christian, Cartesian modernity without becoming unintelligible to that very governing paradigm, he must find a way to be “marginal,” “ambiguous,” “heterogeneous,” “fluid,” and “fleeting” all at once (Marren 95).

What Equiano is performing according to these readings amounts to a deconstruction of fetishes of “presence” within Western discourse; that is, he is laying bare its logocentric conceits. In “making [his] text speak with a black voice” (Gates 131), Equiano pulls back the curtain on a discourse that deploys a racialized notion of the *logos* in a grand scheme to perpetuate the immensely lucrative exploitation of African slave labor. The dynamics of selective “presence” that regulate and restrict modernity’s humanizing literacy indicate a correspondingly selective metaphysics, which in turn

produces (and is produced by) the phenomenon of the slave trade. Before taking these dynamics for granted in Equiano's text, however, it behooves us to examine their theoretical pedigree, particularly Gates's special debt to Jacques Derrida. In her preface to Derrida's *Of Grammatology*, Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak provides this gloss on Derrida's definition of logocentrism, which quite naturally mirrors Gates's history of literacy within the Cartesian frame: logocentrism is "the belief that the first and last things are the Logos, the Word, the Divine Mind, the infinite understanding of God, an infinitely creative subjectivity, and, closer to our time, the self-presence of full selfconsciousness" (lxviii). She continues:

It is this longing for a center, an authorizing pressure, that spawns hierarchized oppositions. The superior term belongs to presence and the logos; the inferior serves to define its status and mark a fall. The oppositions between intelligible and sensible, soul and body seem to have lasted out "the history of Western philosophy," bequeathing their burden to modern linguistics' opposition between meaning and word. (lxix)

Moreover, Derrida extends the privileging of the logos metonymically to describe any kind of "centrism," any "human desire to posit a 'central' presence at beginning and end" (Spivak lxviii). It is in this spirit, too, that Gates links the Western desire for selective "presence" within the book to an equivalent desire directed at other "white" commodities. In doing so, Gates places Equiano in diametric opposition to a logocentric Western metaphysics; he cannot participate in it because it specifically precludes the possibility of his speech:

When Equiano, the object, attempts to speak to the book, there follows only the deafening silence that obtains between two lifeless objects. Only a subject can speak. Two mirrors can only reflect each other, in an endless pattern of voided repetition. But they cannot speak to each other, at least not in the language of the master. (156)

Gates is attempting to rescue Equiano from a fate worse than silence: cooptation of the black voice by “the language of the master.” For Gates (for reasons that seem virtually axiomatic), to reinscribe the form of a discourse is to reinscribe the ideologies that undergird it, and inversely to demonstrate the “authentic” blackness of Equiano’s form is to liberate his ideology as well by locating it within “a saving marginality.”<sup>11</sup>

I am contending instead that certain aspects of a logocentric metaphysics, particularly as it manifests in his Christianity, become politically efficacious for Equiano, far more so in fact—not least because they are more accessible—than an indirect, “quiet revolution” in which his text offers a latent code for its own deconstruction. This is not to say that *The Interesting Narrative* cannot do that, too. But as part of an effort to take Equiano’s religion seriously, we should register the extent to which young Equiano’s aspirations toward an *assimilating* technical literacy are subsumed within mature narrator-Equiano’s realization of transcendent literacy, and thus his *authorization* to read aloud, in a *bold* voice, a litany of sins committed against the divine order by a “Christian” modernity in the name of a false *logos*, perversely distorted by bigotry and greed.

William L. Andrews offers a helpful description of the balance I am trying to strike between these two “literacies”:

In the slave narrative the quest is toward freedom from physical bondage and the enlightenment that literacy can offer to the restricted self- and social consciousness of the slave. Both the fugitive slave narrator and the black spiritual autobiographer trace their freedom back to an awakening of their awareness of

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<sup>11</sup> This is what Joseph Fichtelberg has called this commonly conceived emancipatory space among Gates’s contemporaries (he is critiquing Houston Baker’s “blues matrix”): “If ideology, viewed from “within”—surely the vantage point of autobiography—demands closure, subversion becomes impossible, and the writer’s enslavement is absolute. How, then, can one assess subversive texts?” (140).



their fundamental identity with and rightful participation in logos, whether understood as reason and its expression or as divine spirit. The climax of the quests of both kinds of autobiographer usually comes when they seize the opportunity to proclaim what are clearly complimentary gospels of freedom. Before the fugitive slave narrator could have success in restoring political and economic freedom to Afro-Americans, the black spiritual autobiographer had to lay the necessary intellectual groundwork by proving that black people were as much chosen by God for eternal salvation as whites. Without the black spiritual autobiographer's reclamation of the Afro-American spiritual birthright, the fugitive slave narrative [of the mid-19<sup>th</sup> century] could not have made such a cogent case for black civil rights. (7)

Andrews affirms something Gates precludes—that the form of the spiritual autobiography can be a source of political empowerment without resorting to regimens of ideological “subversion,” at least in the contemporary sense of the term. What hinders Gates from recognizing Jea's text as a fulfillment of Equiano's, for example, is his assumption that to be theologically earnest about “the master's religion” is to become politically compromised. It is certainly revealing that the “erasure” of the talking book trope in Jea is attributed by Gates to a turn to the “supernatural,” which is more or less tantamount to absurd reduction. He explains:

Because [Frederick] Douglass and his black contemporaries wish to write their way to a freedom epitomized by the abolition movement, they cannot afford Jea's luxury of appealing, in his representation of his signal scene of instruction, primarily to the Christian converted. Douglass and his associates long for a secular freedom now. They can ill afford to represent even their previous selves—the earlier self that is transformed, as we read their texts, into the speaking subjects who obviously warrant full equality with white people—as so naive as to believe that books speak when their masters speak to them. Instead, the post-Jea narrators refigure the trope of the Talking Book by the secular equation of the mastery of slavery through the “simple” mastery of letters. Their dream of freedom, figured primarily in tropes of writing rather than speaking, constitutes a displacement of the eighteenth-century trope of the Talking Book, wherein the presence of the human voice in the text is only implied by its absence... (167-68)

There are some assumptions at work here that risk being disingenuous about the function of scripture and the “supernatural” (or what we might less prejudicially term the *theological*) in Jea's text, and thus also Equiano's. First, Gates assumes that, in directing

their texts “primarily to the Christian converted,” early black autobiographers are primarily pursuing an agenda of *identification*, aspiring to equal standing with Britons before God. But as *The Interesting Narrative* is at pains to demonstrate, Equiano is not only *as good* a Christian as the white men with whom he associates, he is quite often *better*, especially after his transformative encounter with the *logos* in the conversion moment. Indeed, as I will argue below, *The Interesting Narrative* as a whole is infused with the kind of righteous indignation that comes from having been elected to stand apart from “Christian” society as a prophet of God’s righteous wrath. Also implicit here is an assumption that Gates states explicitly elsewhere—that the Bible is “the white man’s holy text” (150), which the African biographer either credulously desires (as in the case of Jea) or signifies upon with an ironizing, deconstructing “black voice” (ala Equiano). Both perspectives must ignore the ways that Equiano’s encounter with the *second* talking book in the conversion scene directly refutes the notion that the Bible is a respecter of race, or indeed must dismiss Jea’s literalizing as absurdist theatre.

Secondly, Gates’s secularization theory ignores a radically logocentric theology that continued to obtain for black writers into the eighteenth century. Indeed, a fuller investigation of the deployment of the *logos* in eighteenth century autobiographies—especially *The Interesting Narrative*—suggests the inauguration of an eschatological voice in black writing that persists at least through the nineteenth century, as *Iola Leroy* demonstrates. Once again, Gates conflates the “literal” or “supernatural” representation of communion with the *logos* with the full range of possible logocentric onto-theologies. As he does retroactively with Equiano, he effaces the theological underpinnings of later

emancipatory rhetoric in order to reclaim its “authenticity” separate and apart from “contamination” by a hegemonic discourse such as “white” Christianity.

One might also consider Vincent Carretta’s account of Equiano’s turn to the Methodism of Whitefield and Wesley during his “spiritual crisis” as some circumstantial evidence of his access to a more liberal *logos* theology in an institutional context (161-75). While Equiano’s theology seems to be a blend of the strict Calvinism of Whitefield and the more liberal Arminianism of Wesley (Carretta 166), we can nonetheless locate him fairly reliably within a faith that views one’s relationship to the Word of God as outside of human control, and thus, at least theoretically, beyond the equivocating normativities of Christian modernity. Carretta also usefully reminds us of Equiano’s later conversation with the Roman Catholic priest Father Vincent, who gently rebukes Equiano for his belief that the individual can access the immanent Word in scripture without the mediation of a priest (Equiano 200), another validation of Equiano’s choice of a “dissident” Methodist doctrine. Moreover, as Carretta (165), Eileen Elrod (3-7), and Joanna Brooks (22) relate, the “Revivalism” led by Whitefield and Wesley often entailed an expansion of the spaces in which religious expression could take place, spilling out from (or often a result of expulsion from) church buildings as such into public outdoor spaces and even into wilder nature. This proximity to the physical world—along with the universalizing, democratizing implications of a predestinarian theology in which divine election disregards worldly circumstances—creates an opportunity for transcendent communion with the *logos* that makes Equiano’s conversion scene more than yet another “tiresome” religious anecdote or yet another occasion for mere (uninspired) reading.

Brooks's description of the movement in America clarifies the attraction felt by those who, like Equiano, were seeking a retributive voice despite their social marginality:

Its itinerant operations, its disorderly "wandering," its transgression of established priestly domains, its disregard for standing ministers, its discounting of conventional clerical training, and most fearsomely, its agitation of common persons to prophetic speech: these characteristics of the "Spirit" and the American evangelical movement were perceived not only as a threat to established churches but also to the established social order they sustained. (22)

*The Interesting Narrative* itself provides the most useful doctrinal context for

Equiano's strategic logocentrism. In the months leading up to the conversion moment, Equiano has been living in London for the first extended period of time since his manumission. He is determined that the rare opportunity to put down roots among the religious of the British capital will provide every resource he has lacked while at sea "to work out my own salvation, and in so doing, procure a title to heaven" (178). His initial search for illumination, mostly in Anglican churches, proves demoralizing, and he must resort to "reading my bible at home," resigned to the sobering wisdom found therein, that "there is nothing new under the sun" (181).<sup>12</sup> But eventually, in a turn of fortune Equiano attributes to divine intervention, he has a chance encounter with a "Dissenting Minister," who invites him to attend "a love feast at his chapel that evening" (183). Equiano's experience with this group of dissident believers sets the tone for the imminent conversion moment:

I was much astonished to see the place filled with people, and no signs of eating and drinking. There were many ministers in the company. At last they began by giving out hymns, and between the singing, the ministers engaged in prayer: in short, I knew not what to make of the sight, having never seen any thing of the

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<sup>12</sup> Ecclesiastes 1:9. London is so disappointing at first, not only as a base for spiritual security but also for occupational security and freedom from abuse, that Equiano resolves to set off for Turkey, whose inhabitants, though religious infidels, "were in a safer way of salvation than my [Christian] neighbors" (179).

kind in my life before now. Some of the guests began to speak their experience, agreeable to what I read in the Scriptures: much was said by every speaker of the providence of God, and his unspeakable mercies to each of them... Their language and singing, &c. did well harmonize; I was entirely overcome, and wished to live and die thus. Lastly some persons produced some neat baskets full of buns, which they distributed about; and each person communicated with his neighbor, and sipped water out of different mugs, which they handed about to all who were present. This kind of Christian fellowship I had never seen, nor ever thought of seeing on earth; it fully reminded me of what I read in the Holy Scriptures of the primitive Christians, who loved each other and broke bread, in partaking of it, even from house to house... It was the first soul-feast I was ever present at. (184)

I quote the episode at length because it is chock-full with imagery that presages

Equiano's eventual vision for a cosmopolitan Christian world that will operate according to the same principles. To begin with, Equiano is contrasting the democratic spirit of Protestant worship with the much more rigidly hierarchized structure of the Anglicanism of his previous experience. The chapel is "filled with people," both "ministers" and "guests," none of which have special authority over the procedures, emblems, or content of worship. The harmony of the singing, individual voices in felicitous cooperation, extends metaphorically to the "love feast," where members drink the same water from different cups, mirroring the sharing of edifying conversation. There is also a subtle yet significant recurrence of the ironic distancing between the two Equianos. He is puzzled by the absence of "eating and drinking" at a gathering purported to be a "feast," but like the child who generates a literal explanation—the book "speaks"—to explain an unfamiliar sign system, the uninitiated Equiano has mistakenly literalized the activity of a privileged semiotic system, substituting a literal meal for the symbolic reenactment of Christ's Last Supper. By the time the meal becomes a literal one, Equiano has already gleaned its symbolic significance, but he suspends the dramatic irony of narrative self-distancing until the narrated self recedes and the narrator self can offer a definitive

summary of the experience—it was a “soul-feast” all along. This is, in microcosm, the same development of the trope of the talking book between its first and second iterations—a contingent experience is revised by a deeper, spiritualized “truth,” but the revelation is forestalled so that the reader may witness the productive process by which Equiano gradually realizes it. It is the movement from the word to the *logos*.

Noting the “dissident” tone of the ceremony is an ideal segue into the next phase of this discussion. It is significant, of course, that Equiano foregrounds his marginality within both Christianity and the British polity by aligning himself with a reformist movement. Not only is the doctrinal content of revivalist Methodism suggestive of the cosmopolitan character of Equiano’s logocentric theology, but dissident Protestantism also occupies the same rhetorical position athwart Anglicanism that Equiano will take up in relation to Christian Britain, placing himself *in* but not *of* it.

### **“Almost an Englishman”**

As I have said, I am approaching Equiano’s logocentric theology as a rhetorical vehicle, but without a felt need to differentiate between the faith he professes and the faith in which he “really believes.” To construct a self does not require that one operate from an explicitly constructivist point of view. My argument is that [1] Equiano did not need to conceive of his narrative as radically subversive in form or ideology in order to make it sufficiently polemical; and that [2] he actually discerns a radical potential within many of the dominant discourses of British Christian modernity, especially when an opportunity arises for “pressing directly on the fault line of its [exclusionary] mythology” (Doyle 197). *The Interesting Narrative* resists an all-or-nothing view of modernity’s

would-be hegemonic discourses that in turn generates voiceless subalterns and subversive mimics. Equiano is not, as Gates suggests, stuck between silence and sly subversion. He also makes the book speak “with a black voice” by adopting a recognizably modern theological idiom and by recourse to concrete, persuasive *content*, remaining intelligible to a mostly white British audience thanks to a deliberate and often ingenious rhetorical strategy. Rather than undermining the Scriptures, Equiano is writing new scripture.

This is not the same as arguing that he writes from an unequivocal ideological center. In fact, what makes Equiano’s logocentrism radical is that it positions him, as one who “reads aright” a special revelation that Western Christendom at large has ignored, in a social margin that is at once alienating and privileged. Eileen Elrod’s “straightforward” evaluation of the scriptures referenced in the frontispiece of *The Interesting Narrative*’s third edition is useful for mapping the under-documented phenomenon of a marginal authority. She argues that a reading of “his religious perspective as an earnest expression of his self” leads “to an appreciation of the complexities of the text, specifically, to the way piety informs, empowers, and limits his social criticism” (63).<sup>13</sup> The scriptures are taken from Acts and Isaiah and clearly announce, Elrod claims, an intention “to evangelize his readers” (68). Indeed, as Elrod goes on to illustrate, Equiano persistently evokes either the apostolic fathers or the Old Testament prophets throughout *The Narrative*. The *eschatological* tone that results is “the voice of one crying in the

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<sup>13</sup> Acts 4:12: “Neither is there salvation in any other: for there is none other name under heaven given among men, whereby we must be saved.” Isaiah 12: 2 and 4: “Behold, God is my salvation; I will trust, and not be afraid, for the Lord Jehovah is my strength and my song; he also is become my salvation...And in that day shall ye say, Praise the Lord, call upon his name, declare his doings among the people.” Elrod is not advocating a credulous reading, only that “sidestepping the religious meaning and its purpose—central for the autobiographer himself, a source of discomfort for some critics—causes one to overlook some of the intriguing conflicts in the text” (65).

wilderness” (Mark 1:3; cf. Isaiah 40:3), a voice that critiques society from its margins as a divinely sanctioned authority rather than an outcast. Equiano’s cultivated nostalgia for the metropole<sup>14</sup> is not shameless pandering to ethnocentric Britons: it recalls the prophets of the Old Testament by expressing God’s longing for the restoration of a *righteous* Britain and the abandonment of the false gods of mastery and mammon. The authority of the “unlearned and ignorant” apostles who awed the religious authorities with their eloquence (Elrod 71)—and of those great oral prophets—interfaces with *The Interesting Narrative*’s disclaimer as “a work so wholly devoid of literary merit...as the production of an unlettered African” (7), so that Equiano is not affecting a ridiculous genuflection of feigned humility, but is rather ascribing to himself the ethos of those servants of God who have been given the burdensome gift of transcendent literacy. In his apocalyptic cry, “Oh! you nominal Christians!” (61), Equiano is speaking with the voice of a prophet, and like a prophet or apostle—indeed, like Christ himself—the spiritual security of the *logos* only intensifies his alienation from a once-righteous society now terribly fallen.

Many have observed that Equiano frequently portrays himself as superior in faith to the Englishmen he has long wished (or so he claims) to be counted among. Several episodes of *The Interesting Narrative* are designed to reinforce an exceptional Equiano—“a *particular favorite of Heaven*” (Equiano 31, original emphasis)—and thus to authorize the more direct condemnations epitomized by “Oh! you nominal Christians!” Indeed, this rhetorical staging begins in the opening chapter with Equiano’s account of “[t]hat part of

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<sup>14</sup> His “heart has always been” (147) in England, he endures frequent bouts of nostalgia for “Old England” (138) while serving on the Atlantic, and he observes that after only a few years at sea as a young man, he was “almost an Englishman” (77).



Africa, known by the name of Guinea,” from which he was abducted as a child (32). Carretta has demonstrated that Equiano relies on contemporary ethnographies in addition to that which he attributes to memory; perhaps the most remarkable of these is his citation of various contemporary authorities in support of “what has long struck me very forcibly, namely, the strong analogy which...appears to prevail in the manners and customs of my countrymen, and those of the Jews, before they reached the Land of Promise, and particularly the patriarchs, while they were yet in that pastoral state which is described in Genesis” (43). One obvious implication of this analogy is that it places Equiano and his countrymen on the same theological spectrum as the rest of humanity. But given the state of depravity into which Britain as a modern “Christian” nation has fallen due to the corruptive evil of the slave trade, the “pastoral state” of the patriarchs is also inflected as a state of nature far more in tune with divine justice. Certainly, Equiano’s concession to the “advantages [of]...a refined people” in Europe over “rude and uncultivated” Africans (45) is undercut by the foregoing description of the modest, decent “Eboans Africans” chastened by the rule of law. That this is the “law of retaliation” as practiced by “the Israelites in their primitive state” (44) makes the rhetorical subtlety of this “strong analogy” all the more impressive: in a move he will repeat throughout *The Interesting Narrative*, Equiano couches within a gesture of modesty an illustration of the moral degeneration of Europe, where the institution of slavery does violence to even the most rudimentary forms of justice.

These reversals persist even after Equiano has been captured and made to walk “among the uncircumcised” (51). From his boyhood fear that he will “be eaten by those white men” aboard the slave ship who “looked and acted...in so savage a manner” (55-

56) to his heroics when Mr. King's ship is wrecked at the Bahama Banks and "not one of the white men did anything to preserve their lives...as if not possessed of the least spark of reason" (151), Equiano progressively intensifies a strategic dialectic between his *similarity* on the one hand and his *superiority* on the other. "In idealizing England and the English," George Boulukos explains, "Equiano does not merely play to his metropolitan audience" (186) but also shows that "racial difference is merely a shallow cover for economic exploitation" (199). Indeed, it is most often *in spite* of white "Christians" that Equiano is able to discern the will of God and put it into practice, particularly after his conversion. This distinct if rhetorically subtle privilege is described most succinctly by the "Indian prince" whom Equiano meets en route to Jamaica only six months after his own conversion. Finding the young Miskito in a state of "mock Christianity" not unlike his barely-former self, Equiano resolves "to instruct [the prince] in the doctrines of Christianity, of which he was entirely ignorant; and, to my great joy, he was quite attentive, and received with gladness the truths that the Lord had enabled me to set forth to him" (203). But Equiano's efforts are ultimately fruitless: "seeing this poor heathen much advanced in piety" (203), some of the prince's attendants begin to mock him, and "some of the true sons of Belial"—whether these interlocutors are Indians or Europeans is left instructively ambiguous—persuade him that there is nothing to fear from Satan or sin (204). When Equiano finally elicits an explanation for the prince's abandonment of his religious education, the young man asks almost rhetorically, "How comes it that all the white men on board, who can read and write, observe the son, and know all things, yet swear, lie, and get drunk, only excepting yourself?" (204) Marren has observed that the prince's question syntactically aligns Equiano with the white men on board, as well as

with “white” knowledge—literacy, celestial navigation, indeed with knowledge of “all things.” What ultimately sets Equiano apart, and to his credit, is his “exceptional” piety.

If, according to Homi Bhabha, colonial discourse interpolates the colonized subject between near-total similarity (a reassuring mimicry) and near-total difference (a menacing alterity), Equiano’s reversals reinscribe these dynamics but also redistribute the key values: to be “almost an Englishman” comes to mean mastering normativizing white knowledge while remaining immune to the menace of white moral depravity qua the universally corruptive influence of the slave trade. The interstitial discursive space Equiano occupies is neither a voiceless vacuum nor an absolutely ambivalent matrix where identities combine and explode in chaotic free play—it is the indexable location of a concrete rhetorical opportunity to assume the ethos of a “white” cultural insider without forfeiting the tint of exceptional *blackness* that entitles him to a special revelation.

### **The Word Rematerializes: Equiano among the Miskito**

Returning to Davidson’s comment on the indeterminacy of *The Interesting Narrative*, if my argument to this point has focused on the “polemically powerful” implications of Equiano’s sense of special election, it is also necessary to acknowledge aspects of his radically logocentric theology that render the narrative “unresolved.” Not only does Equiano’s autobiography *not end* with the moment of conversion, but also the remainder of the plot also calls into question the depth and finality of the “revolution” he initiates. In the second deployment of the talking book trope, the conversion, Equiano unexpectedly confirms his youthful premonition of a discriminating “presence” in the book, choosing to directly invert the racial hierarchies attached to literacy as a signifier of

the human. However, in yet a third (and final) iteration of the talking book scene, the trope seems to regress again, or perhaps to undermine a credulous reading of Equiano's spiritual "progress" according to the conventions of spiritual autobiography. The scene occurs after his arrival in Jamaica, whereupon Equiano sees "all kinds of people, almost from the church door for the space of half a mile down to the water-side, buying and selling all kinds of commodities" (205). After explaining the scene to the prince, "who was much astonished" (205), he disembarks with his employer and boards a slave ship newly arrived from Guinea "to purchase some slaves to carry with us, and cultivate a plantation" on the Miskito Coast (205). The framing of the scene—guiding the eye from the door of the church through the bustling impromptu market and finally up the gangplank onto an Atlantic slaver—seems to drastically qualify whatever "progress" Equiano might have made through the first ten chapters, especially after the frustration of his failed first effort at proselytism with the Miskito prince. Having spent the better part of his life moving from abject slavery through a liminal mercantile space finally to achieve, one might have thought, the zenith of subject-validation in being recognized by God as a chosen messenger, he completes the reverse journey in the space of a moment, only this time he does it as a (nominally) free man. Douglas Anderson captures well a typical response to this disturbing recidivism:

To the dismay of many of his readers, [Equiano] finds himself able to trade in 'human cargo,' as a commercial agent for his West Indian and English employers, even after his religious conversion; to fuse the values of economic self-interest and abolitionism; to inhabit, without apparent discomfort, a profoundly impure world. (224)

"These unstable ethical mixtures," Anderson concludes, demonstrate "the capacity of Equiano's story to lose its simplicity" (224) in a morass of seemingly irreconcilable

motivations and ideologies; and perhaps the “dismay” results in part from modern readers ceasing to recognize or respect the politics of a text in which they have expected to find unequivocal condemnation of all the trappings of oppression.

The ethical complexity of a former slave finding employment in the slave trade is compounded even further by the cul-de-sac of narrative logic in Equiano’s final deployment of the talking book. Crossing from Jamaica to a plantation on the mainland coast, Equiano finds himself among the Miskito Indians, beside whom his metaphorical “whiteness” becomes troublingly conspicuous; especially when a quarrel between local Miskito villages threatens to throw a peaceful social gathering into disorder, and Equiano takes it upon himself to intervene:

Recollecting a passage I had read in the life of Columbus...I went in the midst of them, and taking hold of the governor, I pointed up to the heavens, I menaced him and the rest: I told them God lived there, and that he was angry with them, and they must not quarrel so...I would take the book (pointing to the bible), read, and *tell* God to make them dead. This was something like magic. The clamor immediately ceased, and I gave them some rum and a few other things. (205)

To the contemporary reader, for whom Columbus epitomizes the violent legacy of imperial Europe’s exploitation of indigenous peoples, Equiano’s rehearsal of a manipulative, coercive book-as-fetish threatens to undermine his credibility as a genuine convert to either a transcendent literacy or the divine justice it is meant to read. And for many literary scholars, this third talking book episode has signaled Equiano’s ostensible return, after a brief religious sabbatical in “Old England,” to the “impure” mercantile and racial economies of the black Atlantic. Elrod puzzles over Equiano’s apparently unselfconscious participation “in the same cultural game that resulted in his long enslavement” (80), exposing “the limits and contradictions of his identity as it is

constructed by those around him” (81). Emily Donaldson Field considers the various ways in which Equiano uses Native Americans to “triangulate” racially binarized modern identities, serving ends ranging from the substitution of the Indian for the African as “placeholders of the primitive” (19) to a defense of Indians as full of the same potential as himself for intellectual and spiritual sophistication (19) to the “usurpation of whiteness” by the African in order to ironize the civilizing mission (17). Among the few to consider implications for a discussion of literacy, Srinivas Aravamudan reads in the final talking book scene “a veritable metaliteracy, where the subject’s entry into the technology of print is understood as ironic and instrumental, self-empowering and ultimately self-critical” (271). From this perspective, the episode indicates Equiano’s realization of literacy as a fungible sign rather than a means of “transparent revelation” (280).

The radical *logos* of the Gospel of John and implicit in the Methodist Revival has the quality of something like an immaterial force—like the “bright beams of heavenly light” that serve as Equiano’s metaphor for revelatory literacy in the conversion moment. Does the third talking book scene, then, constitute a rematerializing of the Word, a sort of reverse transubstantiation from the secure ontology of the *logos* into the contingent materiality of the written sign? In a sense, yes, of course. The episode among the Miskito demonstrates indisputably that Equiano is capable of strategically transfiguring the Word to suit his rhetorical circumstances. This is also part and parcel of my argument—the root of Equiano’s narrative agency is his ability to locate advantageous positions within and between forms, subject positions and even ideologies without being wholly subsumed by them. Reciprocally, Christian logocentrism as an onto-theology “works” for Equiano

precisely because, like all metaphysics, it can be “made to speak” with a particular individual inflection, even with the voice of a subject it has yet to explicitly imagine, without necessarily losing the “necessary normativeness” (Malcomson 260) that is the cosmopolitan basis of persuasion and consensus in a period when globalization is already well under way.

Regarding the rhetorical and political implications of the final talking book episode from that perspective, it appears that the entire chapter is structured by uneven distributions of knowledge-as-power, with Equiano coming out on top in every resulting hierarchy. This is true whether his rhetorical motives are more palatable to modern readers—like continuing the string of ironic reversals in which white Europeans are shown to be the only real “savages”—or less so—repurposing racialized hierarchies in order to deflect insidious white prejudices onto Native Americans as a new class of subalterns, for example. In any case, there is certainly enough ambivalence in these episodes to justify a cautious all-of-the-above approach, including reading real sincerity into his intermittent praise of the honesty and basic decency of the Miskito. But even where Equiano’s motives are less ambiguously imperialist, it is important to consider, without rushing to vindicate his disappointing moments, that the measure of an effective politics may be its strategic imbrication with, rather than “pure” independence from, established ideologies. So, while it may be appropriate to censure Equiano for this particular deployment of his empowering knowledge, it does not follow that every other deployment in his text is invalidated. “Saving margins” may be attractively exculpatory, but as identifiable, intelligible rhetorical spaces, they are also chimerical.

Understandably, though, the trained impulse—conditioned in part by real historical trauma and exploitation—to reify ideology and overdetermine cultural hegemony has engendered in many readers who view *The Interesting Narrative*'s troublesome eleventh chapter as a referendum on the whole the “dismay” Anderson describes so well. Faced with the prospect of an Equiano thus “contaminated” by the dark side (or really, the “white” side) of Christian modernity, many seek the safely indeterminate ground of notional hybridity, though perhaps at the expense of effacing available positions from which enslaved and manumitted-yet-restricted subjects can articulate meaningful politics.

### **A Christian Cosmopolitanism**

Houston Baker's now-classical encouragement to view Equiano's pursuit of freedom within the paradigm of “the economics of slavery,” a materialist heuristic for approaching the politics, and ultimately the aesthetics, of black writing at large (26), rather than with a naïve catalogue of religious icons, is well-remembered. According to this model, Equiano is able to secure his manumission because he comes to understand the fundamental principles at the heart of a slave-driven economy (27). In this way Baker is able to shift the locus of agency and creativity in black writing away from the white, Puritan, New England-centered conventions of spiritual autobiography, typology, and the pursuit of a “New Jerusalem” toward a distinct, essentially black aesthetic “matrix” (19). Like those of Gates, Baker's insights have generated an entire domain of inquiry within Equiano studies and have become themes upon which subsequent generations of Equiano critics are producing variations. David Kazanjian, for example, endorses Baker's reading



of *The Narrative* as “not simply...a narrative of religious or existential self-discovery and personal development, but rather as a text about the dynamic and historically specific relationship between race and capital” (47), but he also qualifies Baker’s triumphalism by noting his failure to account for “the interdependent emergence of nation and race” with the rise of mercantile capitalism in the Atlantic (48); thus, he argues, Baker overlooks “the colonizing trick” of a system that promises subjective equality in a grand vision of a lucrative, democratizing American Atlantic mercantile economy, but which, with a racial bias “systematic and constitutive of the logic of formal and abstract equality” as it takes shape in Enlightenment philosophy, marginalizes and eventually totally displaces what had once been a robust black presence in the Atlantic economy (59).

By ending *The Interesting Narrative* with an economic manifesto, Equiano, too, seems at fault for failing to recognize how a gradual shift from a slave economy to one of mutual interest would not alter the underlying imbalance of power endemic in imperial modernity; indeed, he did not anticipate how his economic solution would presage the legitimating logic of the next, colonial phase of imperial Christian modernity, epitomized by Livingstone’s Three C’s of Christianity, Commerce, and Civilization. But Equiano’s larger text does indeed call to account the false promises of material success conceived as tantamount to emancipation, as his countless swindlings at the hands of unscrupulous white merchants testify, not to mention the ultimate toothlessness of his purchased manumission. And in a subtle yet powerful gesture to the infusion of a spiritual mode of subjectivity into a materialist one—that is, in a *spiritualization* of the economic manifesto—he appropriates the language of labor and capital to describe his eventual mastery of a second economy, a spiritual economy. The center of the “spiritual crisis” that

precipitates the conversion moment has been “whether salvation was to be had partly for our own good deeds, or solely as the sovereign gift of God” (189-90), just as his initial self-justification is having faithfully kept eight of the ten commandments. He has up to this point been pursuing the favor of God according to the same mercantile principles which eventually earned him formal manumission. But, he relates, his fixation on the imperfection of his practice of faith, intensified no doubt by his experience of the severe limits of material success to effect personal liberty, leaves him in constant, agonizing doubt as to the state of his eternal soul. His moment of revelation occurs only when he realizes that, in a spiritual economy, as it were, “Self was obnoxious, and good works he had none; for it is God that worketh in us both to will and do” (190).

Recalling Equiano’s experience at the “soul-feast,” where he experiences a “Christian fellowship I had never seen, nor ever thought of seeing on earth” (184), we can see how the spiritual economy argued by the whole text is superimposed on the discrete economic argument of the final chapter. It is an economy of mutual interest, eschewing both explicit hierarchies and the subtler patronage of stewardship. It is an economy of strategic cooperation, in which parties sip the same water “out of different mugs,” and “each person communicate[s] with his neighbor” (184). Equiano’s cosmopolitanism imagines a renewed “Christian fellowship” based on a common communion with the immanent Word of God, which engenders the democratizing, harmonizing ethos of “the primitive Christians” (184). If the prodigal British nation would attend to the Word of justice manifest in nature and voiced by its own marginal prophets, these mirrored economies would unite as a total system. Equiano awaits this fellowship as an initiated member of a dissident faith *in* but not *of* Christian modernity.

The horror of the slave trade, the most brutal uprooter of people in modern history, impoverishes facile abstractions of freedom like strategic rootlessness and discursive hybridity, just as they would the pure abstraction of a radical logocentrism. Certainly, Appiah's assurance that "we do not need, have never needed, settled community, a homogenous system of values, to have a home" (*Cosmopolitanism* 113) was not intended to address the phenomena of human trafficking and forced migration. But Equiano nonetheless writes *The Interesting Narrative* as a portrait of an *anchored* subject, bringing together multiple loyalties and obligations—to an African heritage, to British citizenship, to a just God, and above all to the slaves remaining in chains—in a performance of global citizenship. Recognizing modern Christianity as the discursive basis of a global economic system badly in need of change, and finding its narrative of common humanity twisted by greed from its primitive form, he offers his own narrative, speaking as one who has "read aright" the manifest will of a righteous and vengeful God.

### CHAPTER 3: UNMASKING THE IGBO SACRED: “ROOTED COSMOPOLITANISM” IN ACHEBE’S *THINGS FALL APART* AND *ARROW OF GOD*

Western literature played a central role in promoting the ideal of individual autonomy...It promoted the view of society and of culture as a prison-house from which the individual must escape in order to find space and fulfillment.

But fulfillment is not, as people often think, uncluttered space or an absence of controls, obligations, painstaking exertion. No! It is actually a presence - powerful demanding presence limiting the space in which the self can roam uninhibited; it is an aspiration by the self to achieve spiritual congruence with the other...

--Chinua Achebe (“The Writer and His Community” 51)

Broadly speaking, if Equiano’s *Interesting Narrative* deploys a radically inflected Christian theology without distinguishing between its ontological and rhetorical properties, then Chinua Achebe’s representation of the sacred in the bookends of his so-called “African Trilogy”—*Things Fall Apart* and *Arrow of God*—does the opposite.

These two novels actively worry the opposition between “belief” and “practice,” deciding ultimately that they have no use for such distinctions, that in fact belief as an experience separate from practice is a colonial fetish. It is not, for example, a distinction that obtained for Achebe’s parents, missionaries who were “sometimes uncompromising in their Christian beliefs...but not fanatical,” and whose “lives were ruled...as much by reason as by faith” (“Home Under Fire” 10). That opposition between *reason* and *faith*, if stated a bit simplistically here, is intended to evoke something very different from the antagonism that develops between the two terms in the Western schism of “science” and “religion” or what have you. *Instrumentalism* is what he means—the union of belief and practice, or rather, thinking back to Bruno Latour’s description of the “agnostic,” an incuriosity as to “whether it is necessary to believe or not” (2). Achebe’s parents come to exemplify the distinctly anti-modern “reluctance” among the Igbo “to foist [their] own

religious beliefs and practices on a neighbor across the road, even when,” as was sometimes the case, “[they were] invited to do so” (“Home Under Fire” 12). He goes on:

Surely such a people cannot have any notion of the psychology of religious imperialism. And that innocence would have placed them at a great disadvantage later when they came to deal with European evangelism. Perhaps the sheer audacity of a stranger wandering thousands of miles from his home to tell them they were worshipping false gods may have left them open-mouthed in amazement—and actually aided their rapid conversion! If so, they were stunned into conversion only, but luckily not all the way to the self-righteousness and zealotry that went with the stranger’s audacity. The level-headedness of my parents would seem to be a result of that good fortune. (“Home Under Fire” 12)

Achebe's historical novels—those which take place in colonial and pre-colonial settings—take the experience of “religious imperialism” as a ground-zero, conceiving of the colonial encounter as occurring on a spiritual plane, pitting the Christian “belief” of enterprising British missionaries against a richly illustrated world of indigenous praxis. The subsumption of the entire colonial phenomenon within sacred space, a distinguishing feature of these early novels, is both historical and metonymic—historical because of the widely-received fact of the strategic alliance between colonial-era Christianity and abusive imperial power and material exploitation; and metonymic because colonial Christianity stands in for an entire program of *cultural* warfare, against which Achebe has always taken particular umbrage. But “faith” for Achebe is not an ontological mode but a rhetorical one; it is significant in his novels not as the sign of a culturally particular “state of being” but as a dynamic system of relationships among people. The Igbo sacred, therefore, performs a fascinating double-articulation, filling the felt rhetorical need for an “African cultural essence” as dictated by the political climate of late- and post-colonial Anglophone African literary culture, but offering in the place of reified cultural

ontologies a doctrine of “serial homogeneity”<sup>15</sup> that ultimately privileges human relationships over the preservation of continuity with pre-colonial sacred forms. This is a pained, equivocal gesture, and both *Things Fall Apart* and *Arrow of God* mourn for the loss of those forms and rail against the cultural arrogance of aggressive Christian modernity, even as they celebrate the capacity for embracing “contamination” that sets the Igbo apart among the actors of the colonial drama. The novels realize an ideal of “rooted cosmopolitanism”—“a world in which everyone is...*rooted*...attached to a home of his or her own, with its own cultural particularities” (Appiah “Patriots” 92)—by begrudgingly accepting the contingency of identities wherever the self encounters the other.

*Things Fall Apart* and *Arrow of God* arrive at this conclusion by different routes. *Things Fall Apart* is a solidly realist novel, and its basic narrative activity is a demystification of a pre-colonial African space. The uninitiated reader is given an insider’s tour of nine Igbo villages known collectively as Umuofia, particularly Igbo sacred spaces. The narrative voice is positioned at some distance from the Umuofians, at times affecting the birds-eye view of an oral storyteller, but often focusing the reader’s gaze upon the village’s most sacred artifacts, spaces, and rituals and inviting them to observe what appears to be a rift between the religious experience of the village and the manifest constructedness of the ritual. By foregrounding the contingency of indigenous sacred experience, the narrator introduces an opposition between belief and practice that

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<sup>15</sup> Cf. the introductory chapter, “Defining Cosmopolitanism,” and Appiah’s observation that “Cultures are made of continuities *and* changes, and the identity of a society can survive through these changes” (*Cosmopolitanism* 107).

disappoints the expectation of an absolutized African sacred to contest the totalizing claims of a fast-encroaching Christian modernity. Achebe “unmasks” the Igbo sacred, one might say, by foregrounding its nearly self-conscious, perpetual self-creation. But far from paralyzing the novel’s cultural agenda, this unmasking reveals the basic strategies for Igbo cultural resilience in the face of threatening disinheritance. Rather than perceiving colonial contact as a zero-sum game, Achebe’s Igbo instrumentalize colonial Christianity, assimilating useful forms while resisting the deep structural reforms imposed by colonial discourse. The tragedy of Okonkwo, then, is doubly inflected: on the one hand, his insistence upon cultural absolutism rather than the culturally available wisdom of pluralism implicates him somewhat in his own alienation and death, but on the other hand the novel castigates colonial Christianity for its instrumental role in destroying him.

Achebe’s insistence on the contingency of the sacred is also deployed in *Things Fall Apart* as a critique of colonial Christianity, whose locus of authority resides in its self-professed ontological primacy. In acts of ritual desecration, Christian converts attempt an unmasking of the Igbo sacred—that is, they “expose” Igbo deities as mere social constructs and sites of inappropriate “false belief.” However, while colonial religion celebrates subsequent defections to the Christian god as victories of Christian “truth,” the new Igbo converts retain the deep structure of religious pragmatism and pluralism, and conversion becomes an ironic victory for Igbo instrumentalism, while colonial Christianity, itself a system of “belief,” masquerades as ontologically absolute.

*Arrow of God* partakes in many of the same demystifying gestures as *Things Fall Apart*. But while the novel remains identifiably realist, Achebe introduces certain

contingencies into the form, enabling a different sort of immersion within an Igbo perspective. If *Things Fall Apart* introduces the belief/practice schism, sharpens it, and encourages its application to both Igbo and Christian sacred space, *Arrow of God* blurs the distinction in order to introduce indeterminacy at the level of representation. The resulting *remystification* of Igbo sacred space performs the psychic experience of the Igbo sacred, which is governed by forces that distort and fracture reality rather than offer the clarity of a single, authorized vision. Ezeulu's gradual cooptation by the cultural opposite of this pluralism—the iconoclastic monism behind the “psychology of religious imperialism”—acts as a cautionary tale against nativizing absolutisms that merely reverse the dynamics of coercive power introduced by colonial Christianity, thereby squandering culturally available resources for resilience. The destabilization of the belief/practice binary constitutes an ingenious response to the rhetorical demand in the postcolonial era for an African rebuttal to colonial cultural hegemony that imagines an essential “African” character in response. By foregrounding the image of the “dancing mask”—a sacred essence that disavows essentialism—as the sign of Igbo identity, Achebe creates a virtually Derridean term, a solution to the belief/practice opposition that is itself contingent, diffuse. In other words, Achebe “unmasks” the Igbo sacred to reveal yet another mask, the always already Igbo essence, the signifier that dances in step with an ever-shifting signified.

### ***Things Fall Apart: “Iconoclash” Writ Large***

Like virtually every aspect of Achebe's work, the sacred in his novels has been the site of fundamental questions about authenticity, cultural continuity, and realism. Harry



Garuba remarks that one of the most common answers to these questions among critics has been a “positivist” approach, which merely “provides a checklist of the...cultural elements in texts and explains their significance” (248). “Adopted by a host of critics,” he continues, positivism is specious because it “relies on an unproblematized mimeticism” and because it “was adopted to facilitate understanding by foreign (European and American) audiences” (248). A good example is Emmanuel Meziemadu Okoye's *Traditional Religion and its Encounter with Christianity in Achebe's Novels*, an extensive project cross-checking the representations of traditional ritual throughout Achebe's work against ethnographic data, ultimately confirming thereby that the novels provide “an authentic picture of Igbo traditional religion” and are thus suitable for use as “ethnographic or historical sources” (2). Wole Soyinka, on the other hand, once famously took Achebe to task for failing to live up to a higher standard of verisimilitude, expressing disappointment in the failure of Achebe's fiction to affect “the awe and reverence due to the autochthonous” (89). Achebe's “assertive secular vision,” Soyinka laments, follows the then-emerging trend to “seek ideological solutions that are truly divorced” from the spiritual foundations of “African” life (87). Mark Mathuray explains that Soyinka's rebuke has produced some sense of a choice that must be made “between Achebe and Soyinka, between realism and mythopoesis” (2). And yet, as Mathuray understands, Achebe's colonial novels are very much invested in producing a “sense of totality—and idea of the interconnectedness of the African world” (1).

Much of the difficulty with pinpointing Achebe's perspective on the sacred is the apparent contrast between his avowed investment in the Igbo spiritual experience and what many critics have called an ethnographic or anthropological voice in *Things Fall*

*Apart*, a distant, often ironic narrative idiom most distinct in descriptions of sacred ritual. An oft-cited example is the reader's first encounter with the *egwugwu*, "the most powerful and the most secret cult in the clan" (*Trilogy* 63), who appear before the clan to resolve a domestic dispute. When the masked spirits emerge from their heavily guarded house, where they have been chanting in voices "guttural and awesome" (62), "[the] women and children sent up a great shout and took to their heels. It was instinctive. A woman fled as soon as an *egwugwu* came in sight. And when, as on that day, nine of the greatest masked spirits in the clan came out together it was a terrifying spectacle" (63). Excepting one moment of particular descriptive richness—"guttural and awesome" voices—the narrator proceeds with characteristically clipped, journalistic efficiency. The reader is invited to observe, not to participate. And the seemingly superfluous explanatory note—"It was instinctive"—provides a motivation for an action that seems self-evident, given that the women accept the *egwugwu* as powerful and very possibly antagonistic emissaries from the spiritual world. Is the "instinct" being obeyed an appropriate or a performed fear? Is the narrator suggesting that the women run merely out of habit? When the intimidation ritual is complete, the spirits convene with the village, now reassembled:

Okonkwo's wives, and perhaps other women as well, might have noticed that the second *egwugwu* had the springy walk of Okonkwo [and that] Okonkwo was not among the titled men and elders who sat behind the row of *egwugwu*. But if they thought these things they kept them within themselves. The *egwugwu* with the springy walk was one of the dead fathers of the clan. He looked terrible with the smoked raffia body, a huge wooden face painted white except for the round hollow eyes and the charred teeth that were as big as a man's fingers. On his head were two powerful horns. (64)

Here again the reader is invited to gaze directly at the ritual, unimpeded and unmediated. We are even prompted to consider the thinness of the barrier between Okonkwo's double identity and thus the ritual's dependence on the (seemingly willful) suspension of belief on the part of initiated observers. In fact, that is the primary distinction that the narrator chooses to erase—between those initiated into the secret of the ritual and those left in the dark. If the power of the sacred is derived from its incommensurability with the mundane, then the deliberate hint of dramatic irony—that readers, newcomers to the ritual, might know more than the initiates, and certainly know as much—along with a refusal to provide the reader with the descriptive resources needed to share the sense of awe felt by the community, empties the rite of any esoteric power.

Thus, later in the novel, and with the stakes much higher, the reader's shock is tempered when the recent Christian convert Enoch rips the mask off an *egwugwu* mid-ceremony (131). Readers are asked rather politely to share in the horror of the community as we are informed, again with a sort of journalistic distance, that to unmask an *egwugwu* is to murder an ancestral spirit; but there is no sense on what one might call the *phenomenological* level of a world being shattered, because Achebe himself has already, with a constant, steady hand, “unmasked” the Igbo sacred. This is, of course, precisely the sort of disposition toward the sacred that Soyinka identifies as “secularizing” and, ultimately, ideologically Western. He relegates Achebe to the ranks of “iconoclasts” who embody the traditional role of carving new ritual masks to replace the old: this “school of iconoclasm”

adopts the simple method of secularizing the old deities. In African literature this is an organic step; the gods themselves, unlike the gods of Islam and Christianity are already prone to secularism; they cannot escape their history. The writer does

little more than stretch that history into tangible and affective reality at whatever point of history he chooses to bring alive. (87)

Soyinka sees Achebe as a “bridge” between the traditional relationship with the sacred—a relationship that Soyinka acknowledges is constructed, or at the least historically situated and contingent—and the modern relationship, which is in effect no relationship at all, but rather a wholesale conversion to secular ideologies not specifically named. The ultimate effect is that, “without [the priesthood], the god is reduced to an empty shell” (96).

However, this is being too simplistic about what Achebe has exposed behind the ritual mask. As he explains in “*Chi in Igbo Cosmology*”:

The masked spirits who often grace human rituals and ceremonies with their presence are representative visitors from this underworld and are said to emerge from their subterranean home through ant holes. At least that is the story as told to the uninitiated. To those who know, however, the masked "spirits" are only symbolic ancestors. But this knowledge does not in any way diminish their validity or the awesomeness of their presence. (162-63)

The people of Umuofia understand that the *egwugwu* are not, in fact, creatures of the supernatural realm. But even my wording here is participating in the conceit Achebe is attacking: to describe the *egwugwu* as “in fact” this or that is to efface their fictive rather than factual nature. My definition of “fictive” here is taken from Donna Haraway, who has described fiction as a “shaping...a present act of fashioning” rather than simple falsity, and fact as “a descendent of a past participle, a word which *masks* the generative deed or performance” (4, my emphasis). The “fact,” from the Latin *factum*, is the illusion of a thing done, finished, stable; as a critic of the modern sciences, particularly modern science’s construction of race and gender as stable categories, Haraway recognizes that facts are established as such in order to conceal their fictiveness, their contingency as

creations of discourse. It is possible to read the ethnographic voice in *Things Fall Apart* as a tacit acknowledgment—and at times a deliberate emphasis—that indigenous religion did not partake any more in an ontological divine “reality” than did the religion of the colonizers. But the *fictive* is not merely the domain of the “non-factual.” It is also, as Achebe demonstrates in these two novels, a state of perpetual self-creation, a generative epistemology, if you will. It is a willingness to accept the human complicity in defining the sacred. What is “unmasked” in the scene between the women and the *egwugwu* is the readers’ predisposition to fact/fiction binaries that seek to efface the interpenetration of sacred space with the social realities that produce it.

Bruno Latour addresses this phenomenon as well. The “critical mind” of modernity, he says, “is one that shows the hands of humans at work everywhere, so as to slaughter the sanctity of religion, the belief in fetishes, the worship of transcendent heaven-sent icons” (71). But that destructive urge also produces a counter-urge to recuperate fictive artifacts once an understanding has been reached that

the more humans there are, the more human-work is shown: the better is their grasp of reality, of sanctity, of worship. The more images, mediations, intermediaries, and icons are multiplied and overtly fabricated—explicitly and publicly constructed—the more respect we have for their capacities to welcome, gather, and recollect truth and sanctity. (71-72).

Finally, Latour offers the “*iconoclash*” as a neologism for describing “that which happens when there is uncertainty about the exact role of the hand at work in the production of a mediator” (72). I suggest there are two senses in which *Things Fall Apart* dramatizes an *iconoclash*. First, in a series of events in the plot, Christian missionaries combat what they perceive to be heathen fetishes among the Igbo. Operating with the pathological “critical mind” of modernity, the missionaries attempt to unmask to Igbo sacred in order

to reveal its contingency upon social constructs rather than ontological absolutes. That is, they wish to expose Igbo ritual as dependent on “false belief” (fetish) and thus *mere* “practice.” The Igbo, on the other hand, tacitly recognize the “human hand” in their rituals and yet are at a loss to understand why the missionaries should find this cause for abandoning their native sacred practices. The total effect is a literal “clash” over the truth-value of “icons.”

Secondly, the manner of Achebe’s presentation marks him as an iconoclash in the sense Latour means, as the demi-urge of the Igbo sacred, “the hand at work in the production of a mediator.” By strategically inviting the reader to engage with questions of “belief,” and particularly by insinuating the reader in a challenge to the oppositions of belief and practice, fact and fiction, Achebe makes *Things Fall Apart* into a virtual icon whose purpose and provenance is problematic to the reader. In inviting speculation about his motives, Achebe foregrounds the *ways of thinking about* attitudes towards cultural difference that constitute the entire field of the sacred in the first place, as far as he is concerned.

In Enoch’s desecration is located the first instance of the iconoclash of the plot, and also a second act of narrative “unmasking.” Enoch himself is presented as a natural *iconoclast*, the son of the snake-priest who was believed to have killed and eaten the sacred python” (131). His penchant for religious warfare is predicated, it seems, on an already antagonistic personality: “Such was the excessive energy bottled up in Enoch’s small body that it was always erupting into quarrels and fights. On Sundays he always imagined that the sermon was preached for the benefit of his enemies” (131). Under the influence of an equally aggressive missionary, Mr. Smith, who succeeds the much more

patient, even syncretic Mr. Brown as Umuofia's white Christian representative, Enoch turns his aggression into the desecration of the *egwugwu* and thus the murder of an ancestral spirit. The agent of Christian modernity on whose behalf he acts differentiates true faith against the heathen fetishism of the Native (attempts to unmask, both literally and figuratively, the Igbo sacred), but does not, cannot realize his own contingency upon unquestioned fetishes (Achebe unmasks Christian constructedness, as it were). Indeed, the truth claims of colonial Christianity ironically depend on two particular fetishes of their own: the fact/fiction binary itself, and a tautology of power in which truth is defined as Christian (not-heathen) and falsity as heathen (not-Christian). Thus, when in their interactions with the Igbo the Christian missionaries are asked to face the aporetic gaps in their own theology, they respond with meaningless tautologies or non-discursive demonstrations of power (physical violence). In an early encounter with the missionaries, for example, Okonkwo challenges the new religion on the grounds that it is self-contradictory:

After the singing the interpreter spoke about the Son of God whose name was Jesu Kristi. Okonkwo, who only stayed in the hope that it might come to chasing the men out of the village or whipping them, now said:

"You told us with your own mouth that there was only one god. Now you talk about his son. He must have a wife, then." The crowd agreed.

"I did not say he had a wife," said the interpreter, somewhat lamely.

"Your buttocks [mocking epithet for the interpreter] said he had a son," said the joker. "So he must have a wife and all of them must have buttocks."

The missionary ignored him and went on to talk about the Holy Trinity. At the end of it Okonkwo was fully convinced that the man was mad. He shrugged his shoulders and went away to tap his afternoon palm-wine. (103)

Again, the missionaries are unmasked, as the arbitrariness and contingency of their theology is made plain, though they themselves cannot see it. When they denounce Igbo

gods—"Your gods are not alive and cannot do you any harm" (103)—they do not realize that their own theology rests upon an irrational notion of "life" as something separated from the cycle of birth and the obligations of society. That the Christian God might be "alive" in any empirical sense outside some structure for begetting and being begotten is a discrepancy the missionaries cannot address except by recourse to a discursive construction—the doctrine of the Trinity, which disguises its irrationality behind an impenetrable syllogism.

In contrast to the unthinking fetishism of colonial Christianity and even Okonkwo, Igbo sacred practice in general is represented in *Things Fall Apart* as self-consciously fictive, in Haraway's sense of generative epistemology. When Mr. Brown, the first missionary to Umuofia, sits down to a good-natured theological debate with Akunna, a respected Umuofian elder, he vehemently insists on a strict and crucial distinction between fact and fetish: "'Chukwu is the only God and all others are false. You carve a piece of wood...and you call it a god. But it is still a piece of wood'" (127). But for Akunna, the *figurative* "presence" of the fetish is both manifest and unproblematic. "'Yes', said Akunna, 'It is indeed a piece of wood. The tree from which it came was made by Chukwu, as indeed all minor gods were. But He made them for His messengers so that we could approach Him through them. It is like yourself. You are the head of your church'" (127). Not only is Akunna untroubled by Brown's attempt to unmask the fiction of the fetish, but he also responds with an attempt at meaningful mutual identification. But for Brown, a fetishistic fixation on the brute "fact" of the *ikenga* as object is allowed to obscure the fact that Akunna has said something he very likely believes himself. Instead, when Akunna makes the "factual" mistake of conflating



the divine with the human (and this is the modern definition of fetishism), Brown objects, “You should not think of Him as a person” (127). The missionary, of course, is blind to the irony of his admonition—he insists that anthropomorphism is the source of primitive folly, yet his own refutation of the personhood of God cannot transcend Christianity’s indispensable metaphor of God as “Him.” Brown’s religion is based on a flexible tautology of power relations between Christian and heathen, modern and primitive, only sustained by an unquestioned Christian fetish of unquestioned (and unquestionable) ontological truth. His syncretism—he has substituted Chukwu for God, an inexact fit as it turns out—is a farce, whereas Akunna’s is a real attempt to find common ground.

Akunna’s ability to invest sacred power in the *ikenga* without anxiety over its manifest constructedness is exemplary of what Latour has named a “factish”: that is, “the robust certainty which allows action to pass into practice without the practitioner ever believing in the difference between construction and reality, immanence and transcendence” (22). The factish essentially names the strategy for Igbo cultural resilience represented in Achebe’s work. Indeed, as I’ve said, the complicity of the Igbo in their own cultural disinheritance is accounted for by those characters who abandon the efficacious and culturally available factish of the mutually constructed ritual, in favor of an epistemological dogmatism that bears more resemblance to the religion of the colonizer than to the wisdom of Achebe’s definitive proverb: “Where something stands, something else will stand beside it.”

The novel also suggests that if, as Soyinka complains, Achebe does in fact relocate the nexus of sacred power from the deity to the priest, elder, or object, he is actually acting on the impulse which Soyinka has ascribed to the writer's social function:

“to stretch that history into tangible and affective reality” in the form of human agents, who are for Achebe much more durable vessels of a “living” sacred tradition than a more numinous “culture.” In fact, the social realities of a culture are for Achebe more or less the substance of the culture itself. This is what Mathuray means when he says Achebe does indeed attempt to represent something of the “totality” of the Igbo sacred world, despite his typical “realist” label in contradistinction to the “mythic” means of Soyinka, who as we have seen is more committed to the esoteric. In his investigation of the sacred domain in Achebe’s work, Mathuray explains persuasively that Igbo sacred space is represented by Achebe as society’s sanctioned arena for a dialectic between the ambitions of the individual and the needs of the community. He points us back to Achebe’s essay on “*Chi* and Igbo Cosmology,” where Achebe describes this conflict:

The idea of individualism is sometimes traced to the Christian principle that God created all men and consequently every one of them is presumed to be worthy in his sight. The Igbo do better than that. They postulate the concept of every man as both a unique creation and the work of a unique creator [his *chi*]. Which is as far as uniqueness and individualism can possibly go! And we should naturally expect such a cosmogony to have far-reaching consequences in the psychology and institutions of the people...But we should at least note in passing the fierce egalitarianism...which was the marked feature of Igbo political organization and may justifiably speculate on its possible derivation from this concept of every man’s original and absolute uniqueness. (168)

This powerful individualism must contend with an equal and opposite value:

All this might lead one to think that among the Igbo the individual would be supreme, totally free, and existentially alone. But the Igbo are unlikely to concede to the individual an absolutism they deny even to *chi*. The obvious curtailment of a man’s power to walk alone is provided by another potent force—the will of his community. For wherever Something stands, no matter what, Something Else will stand beside it. (168)

Mathuray follows this opposition to an investigation of “the conceptual underpinnings of the symbolic order of the world created by the text [*Arrow of God*]” (22), ultimately

making the persuasive argument that the sacred functions as a domain of terror as well as reverence, and that it provides a semiotics for stigmatizing certain powerful individuals as dangerous to the stability of the community. Thus the sacred is homologous with the taboo: these alienated individuals, who embody a deep cultural value, are sacrifices made as part of a grand bargain with the forces of alienation at large that, if left unchecked, would sunder the community.

Through this cosmology, Achebe makes a more—dare I say—down to earth point about the function of the sacred: it exists to serve the needs of the community and chastise, without relish, those who do not. Okonkwo is of course the definitive figure for the social function of the sacred in *Things Fall Apart*. As a legendary wrestler, prodigious farmer, and self-made man of title, he is an apotheosis of the cultural value of the strong-willed individual. Moreover, the events that precipitate his demise seem arbitrary or unjust. He is exiled when his gun discharges randomly during funeral rites for Ezeudu, killing the dead man's sixteen-year-old son. And though his death is obviously at his own hand, *Things Fall Apart* is unabashed in its condemnation of the colonial interference that precipitated it. In this sense, Okonkwo does indeed have the feel of a Greek tragic hero, whose fall is due as much to the caprice of the gods as to his own arrogance, though the two factors cooperate. It is useful to an extent to read Okonkwo as a character marked by his *chi* for destruction, and thus doomed—it is a thought he entertains himself, (*Trilogy* 108) as well as the narrative that follows him into death as the legend of the man who fought his chi, “a wiry little spirit who seized him with one arm and smashed him to the stony earth” (315). But Achebe also offers ethical cues that clarify Okonkwo's concrete, if not capital, crime—consistently placing his ambition ahead of the good of the

community. He beats his wife during a Week of Peace devoted to Ezeani, the earth goddess, an evil that “can ruin the whole clan,” a priest tells him (24); he agitates for retribution against the Christians for the unmasking of the *egwugwu*, an action which leads to the arrest of himself and other village leaders. And when, in the most poignant of these moments of defiance, he kills Ikemefuna by his own hand against the explicit warnings of an elder: “Umuofia has decided to kill him,” Ezeudu says, tellingly speaking on behalf of the village. “But I want you to have nothing to do with it. He calls you father” (42). But Okonkwo, “afraid of being thought weak” (45), does not comply.

It also becomes apparent that Okonkwo does not embody the values of pluralism that to Achebe are vital to the survival of a culture. He is hostile to the Christians from the moment of their arrival, even when most of the village regards them as a mere nuisance. If Okonkwo is proven right, it is at least in part because his challenges to the authority of the church provide opportunities for the fledgling institution to legitimize itself. “None of [the missionary’s] converts was a man whose word was heeded in the assembly of the people,” we are told by the narrator when the Christians first arrive. “None of them was a man of title. They were mostly the kind of people that were called *efulefu*, worthless, empty men” (101). When he learns that his son Nwoye has been seen among the Christians, his uncontrollable wrath drives Nwoye further into a foreign faith, which will eventually give him a new name—Isaac. Okonkwo has forgotten the proverbial wisdom given my Nwakibie, the man of high title who gives Okonkwo the starter loan of yams from which he would build his prosperous farm. Performing the ritual kola nut ceremony, Nwakibie says, “Let the kite perch and let the eagle perch too. If one says no to the other, let his wing break” (16). This is one of many proverbs

expressing a similar sentiment as “Where something stands, something else will stand beside it,” and it, too, indicates the balance implied in the Igbo grand bargain with the forces of alienation that populate the sacred domain: the ambitions of the self must be productively balanced against a consideration for the other. We recognize that Okonkwo's challenge to the missionaries in Mbanta to explain why the Christian God has no wife, while a just criticism of an arbitrary alien ideology, is just as epistemologically aggressive and disingenuous as the missionaries' rhetoric: there is no real interest in identification with the other, only a sly agenda to discredit.

There are important nuances to note here. First, though Nwoye and most of the other early Christian converts are driven to the church by the negligence or even outright hostility of the Igbo community, there are some moments of more complex motivation. Nwoye has felt alienated from his father since the murder of Ikemefuna, and when he hears the Christians sing a hymn “about brothers who sat in darkness and in fear [it] seemed to answer a vague and persistent question that haunted his young soul” (104). He is drawn to “the poetry of the new religion, something felt in the marrow” (104), as well as to a memory of suffering that transcends the particulars of a given culture—the longing for a restored family is certainly universal. But what Nwoye/Isaac's situation also demonstrates is that those Igbo who do “convert” are demonstrating a deeper fidelity to the social realities of the village. Nwoye's conversion is a response to Okonkwo's breach of faith in killing an adopted son, a breach acknowledged by the community at large, and a betrayal that breeds a just return when he “loses” another son to another vengeful god. Furthermore, the most zealous converts are social outcasts like the two *osu*—“a person dedicated to god, a thing set apart—a taboo” (110)—who become “the strongest

adherents of the new faith” (111). One of these new zealots, we are informed, is Enoch, who not only reprises his original social marginality, from outcast to iconoclast, but also his sacred function as a lightning rod for absorbing evil energy, a function he literally reenacts by consuming the sacred python (126). Most convincing are the direct references to instrumentalist behavior. “The white man had indeed brought a lunatic religion,” the narrator informs us, describing the attitudes of many less hostile than Okonkwo, “but he had also built a trading store and for the first time palm oil and kernel became things of great price, and much money flowed into Umuofia” (126). By this time, Mr. Brown has abandoned his “frontal attack” and built a school and a hospital in the village, providing literacy training and medicine (110). Only then does the church begin to grow “from strength to strength” rather than between those already designated by the indigenous social order for sacred ostracism (110). Olakunle George summarizes this well:

Achebe’s evocation of the incursion of modernity into Igbo society points up to its irreducible specificity [and] black Africa’s modernity turns out to be forced secularization complicated by forcible Christianization. In *Things Fall Apart*, in the matter of what to worship, the indigenes of Umuofia are simply asked to trade a pagan fetish for the Holy Trinity. (178)

George evokes Appiah’s postulation of colonized but not *postcolonial* “mass culture” who “have been influenced, often powerfully, by the transition of African societies through colonialism, but they are not all in the relevant sense postcolonial... What is called “syncretism” here is a consequence of the international exchange of commodities, but not of a space-clearing gesture” (“Postmodernism” 348). My qualification would be to Olakunle’s notion that the Umuofians have merely traded one “fetish” for another. *Things Fall Apart* argues that the Igbo sacred world is not populated with “fetishes,” which are produced by colonial modernity’s imposition of the *modern* fetishes of

fact/fiction and belief/practice for exploitive purposes. The Igbo sacred at large, not in part but in its entire function, is represented as a factish, a set of practices “explicitly and publically constructed” for the precise purpose of maintaining stable relationships among the community against the unpredictable incursions of aggressive alienation from the world “beyond.” The more we understand this dynamic as it is expressed by the Igbo in Achebe’s colonial novels, to recall Latour, “the more respect we have for their capacities to welcome, gather, and recollect truth and sanctity.” “Recollect” is a productively slippery word, since it could signal either the agenda of retrieving cultural memory so often attributed to Achebe or the re-collections, the perpetual reconstitutions, of a generative epistemology.

### ***Arrow of God: Remystifying the Sacred***

*Arrow of God* takes place after the events of *Things Fall Apart*. The amount of time that has elapsed is not specified, but it is clear that in *Arrow of God* the “iconoclasm” of *Things Fall Apart*, both at the level of the plot and as a function of the narration, has intensified significantly. For one, the colonial encounter has already taken place, and far enough in the past that the book the District Commissioner is planning to write as Okonkwo hangs from a tree in front of him—*The Pacification of the Primitive Tribes of the Lower Niger*, a Kurtzian title—has been published long enough to end up second-hand in the possession of Tony Clarke, Assistant D.O. to Captain Winterbottom. But it is in Igbo cultural space where enduring legacy of modern Europe’s encroachment is most acutely felt. Achebe anticipates Aimée Césaire’s evocation of an “infection” spreading from Europe, a disease of “racial pride” and “boastfulness” oozing, gangrenous, from the

home of a “very distinguished, very humanistic, very Christian bourgeois” (Césaire 14). It is a disease of ideology; or, for Achebe, the disease that *is* ideology. Given a foothold, an absolutist perspective on culture and cultural difference has begun to displace the core Igbo values of pluralism and social accountability. Recalling the early days of Christianity in the village of Umuaro, Ezeulu, chief priest of Umuaro’s patron deity, regrets his early complicity with the religion, as “now he was becoming afraid that the new religion was like a leper. Allow him a handshake and he wants to embrace” (330).

Achebe is at pains in *Things Fall Apart* to demonstrate that Igbo society operates with a flawed functionality. He does not omit the ugly details: newborn twins thrown into the Evil Forest, women beaten and subordinated, and various others marginalized by an often arbitrary regimen of sacred taboos. But there is evidence from the beginning of *Arrow of God* of distinctly foreign frailties worming their way into Igbo social life, particularly the infusion of colonial power dynamics into the indigenous sacred sphere. In the opening chapter, as Ezeulu goes about the ritual attached to naming the day for the New Yam feast, a vital ritual for community stability and the primary duty of his sacred office, he demonstrates a disturbing solipsism:

Whenever Ezeulu considered the immensity of his power over the year and the crops, and, therefore, over the people he wondered if it was real...He was merely a watchman. His power was no more than the power of a child over a goat that was said to be his...No! the Chief Priest of Ulu was more than that, had to be more than that. If he should refuse to name the day there would be no festival—no planting and no reaping. (293)

Sacred power in Igbo society, Achebe informs us in “*Chi* in Igbo Cosmology,” operates differently. Absolute power “is abhorrent to the Igbo imagination” (164). The purpose of *chi*, for example, is to structure and explain the ongoing Igbo dialectic between individual



ambition and the will of the community. It is natural, even expected for a man to struggle against his *chi*, but what Ezeulu is contemplating here is power for its own sake, power divorced from specific ambition, and most of all, power as a question of individual autonomy in isolation from the community.

*Arrow of God* also participates in some of the demystifying strategies of *Things Fall Apart*. In considering what constitutes “real” power, Ezeulu invites explicit speculation on the nature and locus of sacred power, especially because he inchoately recognizes the implications of the manipulation of that power by a priest. Can power be *real* that is so contingent on the “human-work” described by Latour as the hobgoblin of the “critical mind”? The second chapter opens with an appearance of the human hand that is more explicit about socially constructed sacred space than any moment in *Things Fall Apart*. We are informed that the alliance of the six villages “in the very distant past” was brought about in response to chronic slave raids. A team of medicine men was organized to “install” Ulu as a joint deity, after which “they were never again beaten by an enemy” (304). This episode distills the signal characteristics of factish faith: the village leaders do not interrogate “belief,” they do not consider the “power” of the deity as something to be grasped, and they deployed the deity according to the needs of the community.

However, the process of demystification is qualified and even reversed in *Arrow of God* as, by various means, Achebe introduces indeterminacies that *remystify* the experience of the sacred, both for the reader and for the characters. A fitting example immediately follows the description of Ulu’s installation, when a meeting of village leadership discusses the history of the deity as an open question. Speaking out against a proposed war against neighboring Okperi on the grounds that it was Okperi who donated

both the land *and* the deity to the six villages in the first place, Ezeulu is shouted down by his perpetual adversary, Nwaka. Nwaka concedes that Ezeulu is right to invoke the historical knowledge of his father as he does, but “he speaks about events which are older than Umuaro itself. I shall not be afraid to say that neither Ezeulu nor any other in this village can tell us about these events” (305). He then offers *his* father’s version all the same, claiming that “Okperi people were wanderers” and reframing the war around a question of Umuaran manly courage (306). One assumes, first of all, that disputes over cultural memory are not unheard of, nor necessarily is the strategic reconstruction of memory around present interests. This follows what Walter Ong calls the “homeostatic” property of oral cultures, whereby common history beyond living memory is revised or even derived from circumstances in the present according to the needs of the community (3). What *is* noteworthy is the departure in Achebe’s storytelling: community history in *Things Fall Apart* is a given for the community and never explicitly problematized. *Arrow of God* foregrounds the contingency of community memory not only for the benefit of the reader but as a specific concern of the characters. And again, questions of memory are imbricated with questions of power, as with Ezeulu’s contemplation of his agency in naming the day for the New Yam Festival: “Could he refuse? No Chief Priest had ever refused. So it could not be done.”

Foucault describes the symbiosis of power and desire in the first volume of *The History of Sexuality*: “Where there is desire, the power relation is already present: an illusion, then, to denounce this relation for a repression exerted after the event; but vanity as well, to go questing after a desire that is beyond the reach of power” (81-82). Throughout *Arrow of God*, Ezeulu evinces a desire for history and for sacred authority

that is immediately denounced even as it reasserts itself in the renunciation. Denying his agency in relation to Ulu is the very substance of his desire for a sacred power, which, given his role within a socially constructed sacred, is a desire for control over the community. But considering how this second desire is more candidly expressed, it may be most accurate to say that the desire to control the community is the displacement of a desire to control the god. Fittingly, as his hostility to his community increases and his struggle for power over the community becomes more naked, his abdication of agency in relation to Ulu intensifies until he imagines that he is “no more than an arrow in the bow of his god” (476). Quite to the contrary, the reader understands this as the moment when Ezeulu and Ulu become one in the same.

The ongoing feud between Ezeulu and Nwaka is fought as a proxy battle between their respective deities, Ulu and Idemili, the sacred python respectively. And given the instrumentalist nature of the Igbo sacred according to Achebe, and considering the dynamics of power and desire that reduce man and god to the same thing, the human feud is at the same time a proxy for the war between the gods. Not surprisingly, with this near-complete identification of the sacred being with the autonomy of the individual, the dispute becomes a total ideological war with a zero-sum outcome—there can be no victory but for the destruction of the other. Nwaka takes up this strategy fairly early on: “It was his friendship with Ezidemili [priest of Idemili] which gradually turned him into Ezeulu’s mortal enemy. One of the ways Ezidemili accomplished this was to constantly assert that in the days before Ulu the true leaders of each village had been men of high title like Nwaka” (331). The goal of material and/or social power inevitably involves a corresponding metaphysical investment in ontological primacy: “Every boy from

Umuaro knows that Ulu was made by our fathers long ago,” Ezidemili confides in Nwaka. “But Idemili was at the beginning of things. Nobody made it” (331). This is directly antithetical to fundamental Igbo wisdom of “Where something stands, something else will stand beside it,” as well as to the purpose of the sacred itself. Achebe reminds us of “the central place in Igbo thought of the notion of duality...*I am the truth, the way, and the life* would be called blasphemous or simply absurd” (161, original emphasis). Thus Achebe emphasizes that metaphysics of Christianity are fundamentally different from those of Igbo; and moreover, duality is what safeguards the “fierce egalitarianism” that acts as a counter-weight to the individualist impulse and stabilizes the community. The Christian combination of rugged, unchecked individualism with theological monism—one God for all mankind rather than a dedicated *chi* for every Igbo person—is what undergirds the entire enterprise of colonial Christianity. When the sacred becomes coterminous with the individual soul, the two speak with the same voice and take with the same hands.

Considering that Ezidemili (via Nwaka) and Ezeulu join Enoch of *Things Fall Apart* replicating the aggressive iconoclasm of colonial Christianity, it is appropriate that Captain Winterbottom is the first to spell out the etymology of priestly names, first in passing in the third chapter (“Only one man—a kind of priest-king in Umuaro—witnessed against his own people” [326]), then in more detail in the tenth, when he informs Clarke of his decision to name Ezeulu “Paramount Chief for Umuaro”: “I’ve gone through the records...and found that the man’s title is Eze Ulu. The prefix *eze* in Igbo means king. So the man is a kind of priest-king” (394). This is ironic in two ways. First, Ezeulu is manifestly not the king of Umuaro, as he is consistently overruled by a

more eloquent and politically savvy Nwaka. There also seems to be something to Nwaka's claims, even taken with the necessary grain of salt, that "the man who carries a deity is not a king" (316), and that "it was jealousy among the big villages that made them give the priesthood to the weakest" (317). Winterbottom's mistakenness (or oversimplification—unlike *Things Fall Apart*, of course, *Arrow of God* is not published with "A Glossary of Igbo Words and Phrases") is at once an indictment of his own cultural ignorance and an ironic naming of Ezeulu's cultural betrayal. Winterbottom has selected Ezeulu to be "Paramount Chief" because of a misnaming and a miscalculation. He does not understand that Ezeulu's cooperation with him in the matter of the Okperi land dispute, when Ezeulu tells him the "truth" of Okperi's prior claim, has made him unpopular among the people he would rule, nor does he anticipate that Ezeulu's intransigence on the matter of the Okperi land is a symptom of the epistemological stubbornness that will render Ezeulu equally intractable when Winterbottom offers him the official post. Then again, Ezeulu's public defiance in refusing it will catapult the priest to the height of his power, so in a sense Winterbottom has named him accurately, revealing the pretense to kingship that Ezeulu at once desires and renounces. In short, Winterbottom is the most ironic possible vessel for the revelation that "Ezeulu" is the definitive Igbo sign, a consolidation of two distinct signs (Eze Ulu) that enacts a desire for autonomous, monistic power yet disavows that desire by nominally preserving the original duality (EzeUlu). "Ezeulu" names the dialectic between the individual and the community that constitutes the Igbo sacred itself.

I will conclude with a third sense in which Eze Ulu is properly described as a priest-king, but some exposition is necessary. Between the publication of *Things Fall*

*Apart* in 1958 and *Arrow of God* in 1964, Nigeria gained its independence, in 1960. As an abstraction imposed on a geographical region encompassing a diversity of ethnic groups—groups which were themselves consolidations of discrete communities—“Nigeria” struggled to cohere, and persistent internecine conflict eventually led to a full-blown civil war in 1967. Conventional wisdom in postcolonial African scholarship has it that, with growing disillusionment with cultural nationalism, the idiom of much African writing shifted from what Biyodun Jeyifo has called a “normative” orientation—“in which the writer or critic speaks to, for, or in the name of the post-independence nation-state” or other community—to an “interstitial or liminal” status, “an ambivalent mode of self-fashioning of the writer or critic which is neither First World nor Third World, neither securely and snugly metropolitan, nor assertively and combatively Third Worldist” (494-95). And whereas a realist aesthetic is said to subtend cultural nationalism, reflecting a basic faith in the direct correspondence between literary representations and bedrock cultural realities, the move away from nationalism corresponds to a parallel shift to an aesthetics of the “diasporic, exilic, hybrid, in-between, cosmopolitan” (Jeyifo 495). Appiah has referred to this aesthetic as the “postrealist”:

[The postrealist novel] identifies the realist novel as part of the tactic of nationalist legitimation...Realism naturalizes: the originary “African novel,” such as Achebe's *Things Fall Apart* and Laye's *L'Enfant noir*, is “realist.” Therefore, [postrealism] is against it; [it] rejects, indeed assaults, the conventions of realism. [It] seeks to delegitimize the forms of the realist African novel, in part, surely, because what it sought to naturalize was a nationalism that...had plainly failed. (“Postmodernism” 349)

As we have seen, the realism of *Things Fall Apart* is not inextricably bound to a “naturalizing” or “originary” agenda. In fact, it uses the anthropological voice to preempt

the reader's expectations of a realist text, then to interrogate the assumptions about religious "truth" that, left unquestioned, would engender distortions in the uninitiated reader's understanding of the particularities of the Igbo sacred. It also enables a critique of the metaphysical assumptions that undergird colonial Christianity and an affirmation of the resilience of Igbo culture through their fundamental value of pluralism. However, as I have suggested, *Arrow of God* takes its questions about cultural contingency all the way down to the level of representation. Most notably, as Nicholas Brown has observed, *Arrow of God* effects a "rigorous suppression of the ethnographic voice" (87). The problem Achebe is addressing in the novel's aesthetic, Brown goes on to explain, is related to Soyinka's objections: how to balance the preservation of the "mystery" of the ritual (and thus, presumably, its cultural integrity) against the need to interpret narrative events either unfamiliar to the uninitiated or otherwise important to Achebe's broad archaeological project. Brown is correct to note that the narrative indeterminacy places the reader "at sea in this world" (88), transferring the novelist's aesthetic problem to Ezeulu as an existential problem: how to protect the truth claims of the Umuaran deity against the challenges of other cults, of the python and of Christ, who strategically challenge his legitimacy.

*Arrow of God* opens with a moment of sincere doubt, as Ezeulu must suppress an unwelcome suspicion of the arbitrariness of his position vis-à-vis his god and his community. But Achebe also goes further, attributing this nagging doubt to the vicissitudes and uncertainties of perception itself. As the chief priest awaits the arrival of the new moon, Achebe emphasizes the contingencies of his "reading" of the moon:

His *obi* was built differently from other men's huts. There was the usual, long threshold in front but also a shorter one on the right as you entered. The eaves on this additional entrance were cut back so that sitting on the floor Ezeulu could watch that part of the sky where the moon had its door. It was getting darker and he constantly blinked to clear his eyes of the water that formed from gazing so intently.

Ezeulu did not like to think that his sight was no longer as good as it used to be and that some day he would have to rely on someone else's eyes as his grandfather had done when his sight failed. (291)

Just as the structure of Ezeulu's *obi* both privileges and delimits his line of vision, so to does his relationship to the sacred put him in a precarious position between the insight and blindness of communion with the divine. This insecurity is of course exacerbated by certain shortcomings of personality—he shares with Okonkwo an overweening, anxious pride, for one. But to an extent unprecedented in *Things Fall Apart*, insecurity becomes constitutive of perception itself, especially among those who bear the burden of *apperception*—that is, those who engage directly with the sacred. The moon is a sign that is never static, and *Arrow of God* constantly foregrounds the difficult necessity of reading shifting signs. If the governing proverb of *The African Trilogy* is “where something stands, something else will stand beside it,” *Arrow of God* is structured around a reformulation: “The world is like a Mask dancing. If you want to see it well you do not stand in one place” (333-34).

Now to the final irony of Winterbottom's “priest-king” misnomer: near the end of the novel, Ezeulu has become completely implacable in his resolve to delay calling the Yam Feast in a demonstration of the absolute primacy of his deity. A group of leaders of the six villages, anxious to avoid the disastrous consequences of a cancelled yam season, present Ezeulu with “numerous examples of customs that had been altered in the past



when they began to work hardship on the people” (493). Among these changes, it turns out, was the elimination of a fifth noble title, the highest yet—“the title of king. But the conditions for its attainment had been so severe that no man had ever taken it, one of the conditions being that the man aspiring to be king must first pay the debts of every man and every woman in Umuaro. Ezeulu said nothing throughout this discussion (493). An additional layer of irony is added to the novel’s ambivalence about Ezeulu’s function in the community. How can we reconcile what seem to be contradictory narrative attitudes towards Ezeulu? Is he a priest or a king? Is he a hero or a scape-goat? Is he a tyrant or a liberator? And does he embody the values of his people, or has he been coopted by the dynamics of desire and power imported from modern Europe like a plague? A final time, we turn to “*Chi* in Igbo Cosmology.” Achebe mentions as a fitting illustration of the role of *chi* in Igbo political organization “[a]n American anthropologist who studied an Igbo community in Onitsha...[and] called his book *A King in Every Man*” (168). If “Ezeulu” represents the whirlwind dialectical relationship in “every [Igbo] man” between allegiance to self and obligation to the community, and if the Igbo imagination demands that society accommodate these agonistic impulses in a “fierce egalitarianism,” then Ezeulu’s meteoric rise to the kingship, and especially his precipitous fall into madness, is a symbolic release of the corporate tensions of an entire community at war with its *chi*. In a religious system where the most sacred ideas are the most feared, Ezeulu becomes what is anathema—an absolute authority—so that he can be offered up in atonement for the transgressions of the group.

The deep ambivalence in Achebe's novels arises from a profound sense of sacrifice on the part of the guardians of culture. As he says of Ezeulu in the "Preface to the Second Edition" of *Arrow of God*:

We should be ready at the very least to salute those who stand fast, the spiritual descendants of that magnificent man, Ezeulu, in the hope that they will forgive us. For had he been spared, Ezeulu might have come to see his fate as perfectly consistent with his high historic destiny as victim, consecrating by his agony—thus raising to the stature of a ritual passage—the defection of his people. And he would gladly have forgiven them. (*African Trilogy* 289)

This is a more equivocal veneration than it might seem, once the sacred dynamics at work throughout the *Trilogy* are properly accounted for. Ezeulu bears the stigma of defilement by the original Igbo sin, which, unlike its Christian correlative, is simultaneously celebrated as a chief virtue. His agony is a "ritual passage" insofar as it suggests the symbolic economy of his people—and furthermore, insofar as Achebe extends his ritual role as a metonym for Igbo resilience in colonial era. As Mathuray has aptly observed, *Arrow of God* is itself "a ritual writ large" (35).

### **Rooted Cosmopolitanism**

It may be necessary to distinguish the *sacred* from the *religious*, for they are not coextensive in the *Trilogy*. Throughout *Arrow of God*, for example, Christianity is described as "the new religion," even among its Igbo converts, and it becomes clear that "religion" is a phenomenon that exists within the encompassing matrix of the "sacred." That is to say, the "new religion" displaces older indigenous religions, but does not and cannot contend with the *a priori* sacred imagination in which religions live, move, and have their being. Therefore, the Christianized Igbo subject has not been subsumed within the colonial religion; rather, the religion contours to the form of the

sacred structure already in place. In the fourth chapter of *Arrow of God*, there are two scenes that distill these similarities.

The first is the conflict among the young Christian church in Umuaro over whether to kill the sacred python as a gesture of Christian supremacy over the native sacred powers. The majority who object are led by Moses Unachukwu, “a carpenter” who apprentices himself to a missionary as a boy after he witnesses the violence of a colonial “reprisal for the killing of a white man” (335). He realizes “that the white man was not a thing of fun” (335), but Achebe does not offer us a privileged view of Unachukwu’s motives. Confronting the missionary Goodcountry, Unachukwu validates his authority as an arbiter of the emerging Igbo Christianity: “I have been to the fountainhead of this new religion and seen with my own eyes the people who brought it. So I want to tell you now I will not be led astray by outsiders who choose to weep louder than the owners of the corpse” (337). Tellingly, Unachukwu is the only Igbo person to have understood immediately what role Christianity would play in the subjugation of his people: “The white man, the new religion, the soldiers, the new road—they are all part of the same thing” (372). His quiet zeal bespeaks an understanding of the function of the sacred within culture that is distinctly Igbo and also distinctly superior to that of the “new religion.”

Following this, we find Ezeulu’s oldest son, Edogo, working alone in the market on the new ceremonial Mask for the Festival of the Pumpkin Leaves, “when this spirit was expected to return from the depths of the earth and appear to men as a Mask” (338). As I have argued, the mask is the sign of an entire system of signification, a highly contingent, indeterminate system. It represents the duality of the Igbo sacred and the

ultimate incommensurability of the human with the divine. Edego works in the market because “he had always found the atmosphere of this hut right for carving masks. All around him were older masks and other regalia of ancestral spirits, some of them older even than his father” (339). Along with Unachukwu, Edego is one of the only characters who can speak about the past with anything like security. His work, like Unachukwu’s, takes place at “the fountainhead” of a religion, but where the seminal moment in colonial Christianity is authorized, arbitrary violence, the first act of the Igbo sacred is the perennial carving of a new Mask. The first is religion of an Adam, a violent arrogation of power that masks the fiction of originality that authorizes it; the second is the religion of a Lazarus, who can, like Unachukwu, mark his arrival into faith as a moment of violence, yet who, like Edego, perpetually regenerates that faith. Later, when the Mask performs at the Festival, Edego chooses “to stand with the crowd” rather than sit where he can command a full view, “so as to see the Mask from different positions” (484). He is uncertain about his work—“something about the nose which did not please him”—but he knows, “however, that he must see the Mask in action to know whether it was good or bad. So he stood with the crowd.”

Achebe insists that “The world is like a Mask dancing. If you want to see it well you do not stand in one place” (333-34). Unlike Ezeulu, whose tragic fate it is to speak these words without understanding them, Achebe understands that the key to surviving in the new, cosmopolitan world is to stand “with the crowd” and yet apart from it, generating new masks to suit a new era in the life of his people. For Achebe, Igbo-ness is ineradicable *except* when Igbo individuals accept the tactics of ontological warfare that characterize European modernity (via Christianity); therefore, cultures *become* their

attitudes towards difference. Culturally particular content, while valorized, is presented as mutable, perhaps especially among the Igbo. Achebe's Igbo-ness is a perspective, not a rubric; or better, it is perspective as a rubric—it is perspectival. Perhaps the delusion of colonial Christianity is its conceit of definition by authoritative content, whereas it can actually be summarized in its attitude towards the Other.

When Joseph Conrad sends Marlow to confront the “heart of darkness,” he is sending him on a metaphorical journey within the Western imagination to investigate what “horrors” might be lurking there to explain the corresponding nightmares of modernity and Empire. What Marlow finds, he struggles and largely fails to understand, and what little he understands he struggles mightily to articulate. His narrative, though rich and suggestive in its particulars, does not cohere into the pithy ideologies which it is so often the business of politics or literary criticism to collect. But it is also true that much of Marlow's equivocation is performed. He does, after all, withhold what he has learned about Kurtz from his Intended, whose “mature capacity for fidelity, for belief” has become more precious than ever in the face of an encroaching darkness (73). There is safety, therefore, in the incommensurable, when to commit oneself to a course of action, to accept a set of givens, is to become *implicated* in a world that has gone to the Devil. Kurtz has “kicked himself loose of the earth” (66), but Marlow occupies a liminal, contingent world—in many ways, a “saving marginality.”

Chinua Achebe recognized in 1972 that this was also a world without obligations and without accountability. The God in whom Marlow no longer believed demanded of private individuals a private guilt, and the trauma of imperialism was thus also the private trauma of the Judeo-Christian soul. Not satisfied with Marlow's guilt, which was at least

appropriate, even exceptional, Achebe castigated the “preposterous and perverse kind of arrogance in thus reducing Africa to the role of props for the breakup of one petty European mind” (“Image” 9). For Achebe, the inevitable consequence of the notional private soul was the subjugation of the Other. Not only that, but to become completely absorbed in the Other was simply to glorify the self by another means.

The solution he found was to anchor the pursuit of “spiritual congruence with the other” in the concrete obligations to one’s community (“The Writer and His Community” 51, see epigraph).<sup>16</sup> The problem with the Western imagination is that “[I]t promoted the view of society and of culture as a prison-house from which the individual must escape in order to find space and fulfillment” (“The Writer and His Community” 51):

But fulfillment is not, as people often think, uncluttered space or an absence of controls, obligations, painstaking exertion. No! It is actually a presence - powerful demanding presence limiting the space in which the self can roam uninhibited; it is an aspiration by the self to achieve spiritual congruence with the other...

What preserves the agency of the Igbo people throughout the onslaught of aggressive Christianity, even among those who have been contaminated “converts,” is their rootedness within a community; but the Igbo community as Achebe represents it is exceptional among cultures in its capacity to maintain its roots. This is because Achebe’s Igbo culture is as much a *way of thinking about culture* as it is anything else. In this way, Achebe is also able to articulate a universal cosmopolitan ethic through a highly particularized local one—his reconstruction of the Igbo sacred through an examination of

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<sup>16</sup> As Marlow admits, on his expedition to Africa he never did “stop long enough to get a particularized impression” (14) of the communities through which he was passing like a Kurtzian shade.

its strategies for encountering “the other” invites the guardians of other local cultures to do the same.

This is the third act of “unmasking” Achebe achieves in his trilogy: by unsettling facile binaries of belief and practice, fact and fiction, Achebe exposes the realm of the sacred as a socially constructed space. This enables him to recover an “authentic” Igbo cultural essence without recapitulating the violent ontologies of colonial Christianity. Where his readers demand a sign to stand for “Africa,” Achebe substitutes the sign of the mask, a sign that refers to the contingent act of signification itself. Yet far from some “saving marginality,” the contingency of Igbo identity is anchored in the regimen of concrete cultural practices that constitutes the sacred.

## CONCLUSION: THE FREEDOM OF SLAVERY

What sets Equiano's Methodist conversion apart from other more equivocal moments of triumph in *The Interesting Narrative*, particularly his legal manumission, is a paradoxical willingness to *surrender* agency, whereas before he has been at pains to provide "proper ground to believe I had an interest in divine favour" by dint of "my own good deeds" (189). This idea is unpalatable to many modern-day readers, not only because becoming "a first-rate Christian" (Equiano 178) seems to have no bearing on Equiano's physical freedom, but also because, even worse, the price of total conversion appears to be resignation to a more complete slavery of the soul. Jonathan Elmer asks the operative question: "From what perspective does sovereignty look like slavery?" (58) How can Equiano become free in submission to the religion of his oppressors? Elmer turns to the metaphor of slavery employed by the apostle Paul in his letter to the church in Rome, a marginal community struggling to survive in another imperial metropole: "But now that you have been set free from sin and have become slaves of God," Paul says, "the return you get is sanctification and its end, eternal life" (Romans 6: 22). Elmer explains that the effectiveness of Paul's juxtaposition of slavery and freedom is dependent on making slavery to God "actively appreciable as promising a kind of salvation," but one realized "*in the here and now*" as well as in eternity (59).<sup>17</sup>

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<sup>17</sup> Equiano appreciates the ironic promise of slavery to God, Elmer argues, because the metaphor ties emancipation to a "future perfect" state in which it always will have been realized; that is, the future state Equiano anticipates is merely an idealized past "treasured up" in memory to be "capitalized" into present comfort (78)—Equiano using memory "as a technique for managing shock and risk" (66). The traumas of history become contingencies to be ameliorated if possible, but "will no longer matter" in a programmatically deferred future when "they no longer divide the mortal self from the immortal sovereignty for which we continue to yearn" (77). My only qualification is that the cosmopolitan



Both Equiano and Achebe deploy religion and the sacred as models for the paradoxical freedom of "rootedness." If the watchword of contemporary cultural criticism has been *emancipation*, the texts I have studied here offer important qualifications to what often becomes an overdetermined ideal of radical, "rootless" emancipation. They explore the rhetorical possibilities of social and even metaphysical contingency, and therefore, ironically, they tap into sources of individual freedom more accessible than merely notional—and thus chimerical—conditions of hybridity.

Their respective "rooted cosmopolitanisms" take shape within idealized communities that respect racial (Equiano) and cultural (Achebe) differences. Equiano's appropriation of the radical *logos* theology of revivalist Methodism, in addition to his representation of its democratizing ritual practices, provides with a location *within* Christian theology that also preserves the dissident tone of his anti-slavery message. His piety is best understood not as cooptation by inherently "white" ideologies but rather as a revision of available common discourses for more radical political purposes than these would seem to allow. Similarly, Achebe accepts the burden of cultural "recovery," only to reimagine an indigenous sacred imagination that is constitutively cosmopolitan. He depicts the Igbo sacred world as an often severely restrictive matrix, systematically chastising the members of a community who aspire to too much autonomy over the group. And yet this takes shape not as a Hegelian master-slave dialectic but as a conversation between a man and his *chi*: "If a man agrees, his chi agrees" ("Chi" 164); or else, "no matter how many divinities sit together to plot a man's ruin, it will come to

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Christianity Equiano hopes for, certainly in addition to a more departicularized "future perfect," is presented as a distinct possibility for which he has a specific plan.

nothing unless his chi is there among them” (“Chi” 164). Against those who, in Achebe’s words, view society as “a prison-house from which an individual must escape to find space and fulfillment,” he and Equiano both find the key to real emancipation within the “obligations” and “painstaking exertion” of relationships in a cosmopolitan community.

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## VITA

Joel David Cox was born in Newnan, GA, to parents on furlough from missionary work among the Kalenjin people of Kenya. He returned with his family to Kenya for the remaining six years of their ten-year commitment, after which the family relocated to Searcy, AR. In 2008, Joel took his B.A. in English Education at Harding University, a small Christian liberal arts institution located in Searcy. After teaching in Memphis City Schools in 2008-09, Joel returned to Harding as an adjunct instructor in World Literature. Joel married Rebecca Abell in the Fall of 2009, and the couple moved to Shanghai, China, in July of 2010 to teach English at international schools. Joel began work on an M.A. in English at The University of Tennessee-Knoxville in 2011, taking his degree in the spring of 2013. His primary fields of study are African literature and literature of the African diaspora, postcolonial literature and theory, and religion in literature.