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# POSTSECULAR POETICS

NEGOTIATING THE SACRED AND SECULAR IN  
CONTEMPORARY AFRICAN FICTION

Rebekah Cumpsty



“In a series of supple arguments and granular readings, *Postsecular Poetics* enables African criticism to catch up with African fiction, recognizing that the sacred and the secular will not be disentangled. Rebekah Cumpsty’s searching and compassionate book is a vital new reading of the African novel.”

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“*Postsecular Poetics* is a groundbreaking book that powerfully explores the fascinating but understudied connections among the sacred, secular, religious, and postsecular in African literatures. Marked by rigorous interdisciplinary theorizations and subtle close readings across diverse national and literary cultures, Rebekah Cumpsty’s analyses are persuasive and timely. A pioneering achievement, this book has set the mark for future criticism and understanding of the sacred and postsecular in African literatures.”

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# Postsecular Poetics

This book is the first full-length study of the postsecular in African literatures. Religion, secularism and the intricate negotiations between the two, codified as postsecularism, are fundamental conditions of globalised modernity. These concerns have been addressed in social science disciplines, but largely neglected in postcolonial and literary studies until now. To remedy this oversight, this interdisciplinary study brings current debates in religious and postsecular studies to bear on African literatures and postcolonial studies to understand how postsecular negotiations manifest in postcolonial African settings and how they are represented and registered in fiction. Through this focus, the book demonstrates how African and African-diasporic authors radically disrupt the epistemological and ontological modalities of globalised literary production, often characterised as secular, and imagine alternatives which incorporate religious discourse into a postsecular world.

**Rebekah Cumpsty** is Assistant Professor of Anglophone World Literature at Weber State University. Her recent work includes articles for *The Journal of Commonwealth Literature*, *Interventions* and the co-edited project 'The Body Now' (2020), a special issue of *Interventions*.

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Contemporary African Fiction

Rebekah Cumpsty

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# Preface

This book is the first full-length study of the postsecular in African literatures. Religion, secularism, and the intricate negotiations between the two, codified as postsecularism, are fundamental conditions of globalised modernity. These concerns have been addressed in social science disciplines, but largely neglected in postcolonial and literary studies. To remedy this oversight, this monograph draws together four areas of study: it brings debates in religious and postsecular studies to bear on African literatures and postcolonial studies. The focus of this interdisciplinary study is to understand how postsecular negotiations manifest in postcolonial African settings and how they are represented and registered in fiction. Through this focus, the book demonstrates how African and African-diasporic authors radically disrupt the epistemological and ontological modalities of globalised literary production, often characterised as secular, and imagine alternatives which incorporate religious discourse into a postsecular world.

The book makes four critical interventions. First, while the sacred is rarely considered in postcolonial studies, undergirded as this is by Edward Said's 'secular criticism,' this monograph reads the dynamic of sacred and secular experience as a condition of postcolonial or neo-colonial contexts.<sup>1</sup> The secular denotes life worlds and spaces devoid of the religious. For Said, the secular signifies that 'texts are worldly... a part of the social world, human life, and of course the historical moments in which they are located and interpreted.'<sup>2</sup> Criticism in Said's parlance is 'oppositional':

In its suspicion of totalizing concepts, in its discontent with reified objects, in its impatience with guilds, special interests, imperialized fiefdoms, and orthodox habits of mind, criticism is most itself and, if the paradox can be tolerated, most unlike itself at the moment it starts turning into organized dogma.<sup>3</sup>

'Secular criticism,' therefore 'deals with local and worldly situations, and... is constitutively opposed to the production of massive, hermetic systems.'<sup>4</sup> As Jackson and Suhr-Sytsma qualify, Said's secularism criticism was a reaction against religious criticism ala 'Harold Bloom, Northrop Frye, and René

Girard' that 'Said rejected as both too committed to systems of belief and not committed enough to political action.'<sup>5</sup> Given that Said's secular criticism opposes dogmatism and the status quo, postsecular literary critique is a necessary and timely intervention into the totalising concept of secularism. The sacred, in etymological terms, merely denotes a setting apart or a separation. However, following David Chidester, I understand the sacred to be an excess of meaning that is 'produced through the labour of intensive interpretation and regular ritualization.'<sup>6</sup> For literary studies, what is especially promising about Chidester's analysis is that it highlights the diegetic and poetic aspects of the sacred-making process. Indeed, Jennifer Wenzel (2009) and Harry Garuba (2003) understand enchantment or reenchantment to be a defining condition of late-modernity and the literary to be where much of this wonder is registered and celebrated. The sacred and religion are related but distinct terms. The sacred is a product, a consequence of persistent interpretive and performative engagement that sets something or someone apart from the ordinary. While the sacred is typically used in religious language and practice, it is not necessarily religious. My father, John Cumpsty, defines religion as a system of belonging. Similarly, Émile Durkheim defines a religion as 'a unified system of beliefs and practices relative to sacred things, that is to say, things set apart and forbidden – beliefs and practices which unite into one single moral community.'<sup>7</sup> The sacred informs religious belief and practice, but is distinct from it. Indeed, as I discuss in chapter 2, the forms and mechanisms of the sacred can be entirely severed from religion.

Second, while there has been a consideration of the postsecular and secular in Euro-American literature, there is a dearth of work on the postsecular in postcolonial literatures.<sup>8</sup> The few exceptions to this include Manav Ratti's postsecular reading of postcolonial Indian and Sri Lankan writing in *The Postsecular Imagination: Postcolonialism, Religion, and Literature* (2013); and from postcolonial African criticism, Mark Mathuray's *On the Sacred in African Literature: Old Gods and New Worlds* (2009) and a handful of articles, including Alyda Faber's "The Post-Secular Poetics and Ethics of Exposure in J. M. Coetzee's *Disgrace*" (2009). A much-needed special issue of *Research in African Literatures* on 'Religion, Secularity, and African Writing' (2017) edited by Jeanne-Marie Jackson and Nathan Suhr-Systema laments this lack of scholarly work and suggests that African Studies' proficiency in destabilising dichotomies and its transnational perspective would benefit postsecular criticism. Jackson and Suhr-Systema propose that African postsecular criticism should consider the specific conditions from which the global rises and falls, or put another way, the dialectical relationship between the global and local. This monograph directly addressed this gap in literary studies. *Postsecular Poetics* considers the local mediations of, and contributions to, the global; it attends to local specificity and provides a postcolonial comparative approach.

The term postsecular indicates the conceptual instability of religion and the secular. In his famous critique of the secularisation thesis, which posits

the falling off of religious belief and practice, and the privatisation of religion, Jürgen Habermas observes the emergence of ‘new’ spiritual movements, the increase in global migration bringing religions into contact, and although changing, so-called traditional religions are very much present in the public sphere, and in many people’s private lives. While there is disagreement about the connotations of the postsecular,<sup>9</sup> there is general agreement that the term highlights the conceptual instability of religion and the secular; that it provides a critical vocabulary through which to read the concatenations of religious and secular spaces, ideologies and experiences; and that, if deployed comparatively as it is in this monograph, it offers a way to understand the intimate, local, and global iterations of postsecular experience.

Third, the interdisciplinary approach brings longstanding debates from religious studies, anthropology and philosophy to African literatures, and the distinct postcolonial, neo-colonial and diasporic realities of literary production from the continent. The postcolonial is understood, not as the time after colonialism,<sup>10</sup> but as a critique of its ongoing and reactivated processes, which includes globalised modernity and capital.<sup>11</sup> African literatures emerge from the syncretic and adaptive nature of religious and cultural practices that incorporate indigenous epistemologies, oral and print traditions, Christianity, Islam, colonialism, postcolonialism, neo-colonialism, and globalisation. Jean and John Comaroff (1991) assert that this dynamic of religious and secular presence and practice has been an aspect of African history since the moment of colonial administrative encounter that brought the organisation of secular power into contact with sub-Saharan communities. Thus, from the transposition of Yoruba deities to the streets of New York in Teju Cole’s *Open City* (2011), to the centrality of ancestral narration in Phaswane Mpe’s *Welcome to Our Hillbrow* (2001), to the exquisite reverential language used to describe the delicate and violated female body in Yvonne Vera’s *The Stone Virgins* (2002), and to the New York art gallery that trades in sacred statues of indigenous deities in Okey Ndibe’s *Foreign Gods, Inc.* (2014), this book builds a conceptual vocabulary with which to explore the ways select African authors and their characters manage the points where religion and the secular intersect, overlap or override.

Fourth, the book addresses the postsecular poetics of African literary production by demonstrating the formal integration of the sacred and ritual into narrative structure. Developing from the ancient Greek *poiesis*, which denotes any type of production or creation, the book understands poetics to be the process of bringing something into being, creating something out of nothing, generating meaning where there was none, much like the sacred-making process Chidester describes. For Linda Hutcheon, poetics signifies the intersection between art and theory,<sup>12</sup> and her conception of ‘a post-modern poetics would account for the theory and art that recognise their implication in that which they contest: the ideological as well as aesthetic

underpinnings of the cultural dominants.<sup>13</sup> Postsecular poetics is similarly situated between the lyrical and protean quality of language and the cultural, religious and political contexts from which the fiction emerges. One cannot read for postsecular poetics without accounting for the religious and secular matrix. In her work on a new formalist method, Caroline Levine (2017) draws from the design theory concept of affordance, the potential uses or actions latent in materials and designs, to think through the technologies and possibilities of form (an arrangement, ordering, patterning or shaping of elements – to include patterns of sociopolitical experience). Thus as literary representations of the sacred and ritual take shape through language, they order the spaces and experiences of characters and generate a surplus of meaning textually and extra-textually. Reading for postsecular poetics exposes how the affordances of the sacred and ritual—the ordering of space, repetition, patterning, differentiation, extended lyrical attention to an object or person, ancestral narration—are integrated into the arrangement of narrative.

By expanding the geo-historical and socio-religious reach of postsecular literary criticism to postcolonial contexts characterised by entanglements of tradition, nationalism and globalised modernity, the argument addresses not only the mediations between Abrahamic belief systems and the secular, it also includes indigenous religions, post-independence national building, and diasporic African experiences into this dynamic. The chapters are organised around three concepts and aspects of religious discourse – ritual, the sacred, and sublime – and each reads for the presentation of this discourse in the fiction and assesses the texts structurally, to demonstrate how the affordances of religious language and practice are integrated into the novel form. *Postsecular Poetics*, as both a subject study and a hermeneutic, offers a way to read, develop and celebrate the agency of the subject, attuning the reader to the recuperative and reconstructive strategies of each novel as the protagonists negotiate the conditions of postsecular globalised modernity through affirmative gestures of belonging and selfhood.

The Introduction, ‘The sacred and postsecular in African fiction,’ sets up the theoretical foundation for a postsecular reading of the poetics of the sacred in sub-Saharan African literatures. While this monograph is a literary study, it is interdisciplinary in nature and so begins with an overview of the anthropological and sociological terms of this discussion – sacred, secular, postsecular – and the current critical thinking on postsecular, postcolonial literature. I argue that the intermediary position of the sacred makes it the ideal conceptual tool for reading the intimate and entangled negotiations between the secular and religious. This initial discussion demonstrates how the sacred has been unmoored from religious conceptions, and is rather a process of meaning-making that can be found in secular spaces and in literature. In short, reading for the sacred in African fiction draws out the postsecular mediations and aesthetics present in these texts. I demonstrate that the sacred operates in the literary realm, where



writing creates a self-sufficient site of meaning and the writer produces a language through which the reader might experience a surplus of meaning. Putting the account of African cultural production in conversation with postsecular and literary scholarship, this chapter concludes that first, African literatures are already engaged in a process of meaning-making and sacralisation; and second, that a reading attuned to these strategies draws out the distinct postcolonial negotiations between ‘secular modernity’ and indigenous religious practice that can be read as postsecular poetics. The chapters that follow each draw out a particular aspect of postsecular aesthetics: ritual, the sacred, and sublime.

Chapter 1, ‘Ritualisation and the limits of the body in Chris Abani’s and Yvonne Vera’s fiction,’ considers the postsecular poetics of ritual and the ritual of writing. The shared characteristics of ritual and lyrical prose, and the displacement of ritual practice into writing, emerge forcefully in Chris Abani’s *Becoming Abigail* (2006) and *Song for Night* (2007), and Yvonne Vera’s *The Stone Virgins* (2002) and *Butterfly Burning* (2000). In this chapter I demonstrate how these authors use both the writing of ritual and the poetics of ritual language to construct a singular experience of the precarious, vulnerable, and sacred body. Vera has written the stories of women and taboo into Zimbabwe’s historiography. Nigerian-American novelist Abani has garnered much attention for his representations of the liminal, suffering subject caught in the no man’s land between human rights and state law. While Vera’s and Abani’s aestheticisation of violence might be considered distasteful, I argue that it is the lyricism of their prose that establishes a somatic empathy between reader and text – exposing and destabilising the unevenness in this relationship. From the lyrical and graceful choreography of female bodies in Vera’s scenes of pleasure and violation, to Abani’s descriptions of ritual scarification on sacrificed and spiritual bodies, these writers dwell on the finitude and exposure of the human, illustrating the uneven, and sometimes partial, strategies of somatic belonging and habitation.

Addressing the postsecular poetics of urban spaces, chapter 2, ‘The sacred in the city: Pedestrian mapping in the work of Phaswane Mpe, Teju Cole and Ivan Vladislavić,’ illustrates how the sacred is integrated into the narrative and form of Nigerian-American Teju Cole’s *Open City* (2011), and Phaswane Mpe’s *Welcome to Our Hillbrow* (2001), and Ivan Vladislavić’s *Portrait with Keys* (2006), both South African writers. The first two novels illustrate the incorporation of African epistemologies into the postsecular, postcolonial city, while the third is structured as a ritualised resignification of Johannesburg. These novels marvel at the possibilities of urban pedestrian access, while representing the precarious position of the subject in the globalised city. Traversing, naming and mapping the territory that has been covered as they walk and integrating sacred knowledge systems in the city, the protagonists of these texts assert a hard-won knowledge of the streets, establishing a point of identification and belonging in

the otherwise sprawling, anonymous mass of the city – a process I call *pedestrian mapping*. Moving beyond the detached voyeur of Benjamin's and de Certeau's *flâneur*, the chapter exposes the narrator-protagonists' productive strategies of belonging through the incorporation of African epistemologies and ritualised behaviour into the seemingly public, secular urban environment.

In response to J. M. Coetzee's *Boyhood* (1998) and Marlene van Niekerk's *Agaat* (2006), chapter 3, 'Cultivation, containment and excess: The sublime in J. M. Coetzee's *Boyhood* and Marlene van Niekerk's *Agaat*,' approaches the particular anxieties of settler colonialism in relation to the sacralised space of the farm and the experience of the sublime. I argue that the protagonists' ethical, affective and psychological ambivalence towards the space of the farm is where the contradiction of the sublime is registered. The sublime experience of fear and pleasure occurs when the spectator is confronted with the limits of their imagination and the failure of reason to fully comprehend the unrepresentable expanse of the landscape; it is an aesthetic concern about what is conceivable and representable. John and Milla, the protagonists of *Boyhood* and *Agaat*, are devoted to their respective farms, Voëlfontein and Grootmoedersdrift. These demarcated and cultivated pieces of land provide John and Milla with an understanding of their position in the world, and a place to which they feel they belong. But Voëlfontein hums with a sacred silence John cannot fully comprehend, and Grootmoedersdrift seems to resist Milla's attempts to tame and contain the landscape. While John's and Milla's settler anxieties around land ownership remain unresolved, the sacred enables Milla and John to spatially organise the profane and transcendent, and to codify their troubled connection to the land and their ambiguous experience of the sublime.

While African fiction is the focus of this monograph, chapter four extends the analysis of postsecular poetics to postcolonial and world-literary texts. The chapter engages with two literary theorists: John A. McClure's explanation of the characteristics of postsecular fiction and Manav Ratti's postcolonial examination of the intersection between secular politics and religiously-inflected nation building. Comparing their readings of well-known postsecular, postcolonial writer Michael Ondaatje with my own, I demonstrate how *Postsecular Poetics* emphasises the reinvestment of religious discourse into secular spaces so that the postsecular describes not the evacuation of the sacred from public spaces, as Ratti argues, but rather the reintegration of the transcendent into the everyday. With this basis the chapter extends the thematic focus of each chapter – ritual, the sacred and sublime – to global postcolonial fictions, such as Chris Abani's *The Virgin of Flames* (2008), Karen Tei Yamashita's *Tropic of Orange* (1997), Jesmyn Ward's *Sing, Unburied, Sing* (2017), Kei Miller's *Augustown* (2017), and Alexis Wright's *Carpentaria* (2006). Demonstrating that *Postsecular Poetics* has profitable applicability beyond African and African-diasporic contexts, as it facilitates an analysis attuned not only to the mediation of religious

and secular experience, but also to the incorporation of the forms of ritual and the sacred into literary structure. Finally, the coda returns to the features of African postsecular fictions, its inflection with postcolonialism and potential as a decolonial framework.

Each of the following chapters is focused on the literary representations of particular patterns of anxiety and explores the ways in which sacred discourse and its affordances signify and partially alleviate that discomfort: this is reading for postsecular poetics. Chapter 1 articulates the angst of physical and social precarity relieved by somatic and written ritual. Chapter 2 regards the uncertainty of diasporic urban belonging quelled by sacred epistemologies and pedestrian access. Chapter 3 formulates the disquiet of land claims as a relation to the sublime, subdued, however briefly, by the conceptual order of sacralisation. *Postsecular Poetics* intervenes at the forefront of a robust body of scholarship concerned with the intersection of religious, secular and postsecular studies and literature.

## Notes

- 1 Jeanne-Marie Jackson and Nathan Suhr-Sytsma, 'Introduction: Religion, Secularity, and African Writing,' *Research in African Literatures* 48, no. 2 (2017): vii, <https://doi.org/10.2979/reseafritlite.48.2.01>; Abdelaziz El Amrani, 'The Postsecular Turn: Interrogating Postcolonialism after 9/11,' *Interventions* (published online April 5, 2021): 2.
- 2 Edward W. Said, *The World, the Text, and the Critic*, Reprint edition (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1983), 4.
- 3 Said, 29.
- 4 Said, 26.
- 5 Jackson and Suhr-Sytsma, 'Introduction,' vii.
- 6 David Chidester and Linenthal, *American Sacred Space* (Indiana: Indiana University Press, 1995), 17.
- 7 Émile Durkheim, *The Elementary Forms of the Religious Life*, trans. Karen E. Fields (London: The Free Press, 1995), 44.
- 8 See John A. McClure, *Partial Faiths: Postsecular Fiction in the Age of Pynchon and Morrison* (Athens, Ga.; London: University of Georgia Press, 2007); Manav Ratti, *The Postsecular Imagination: Postcolonialism, Religion, and Literature* (London; New York: Routledge, 2013); Justin Neuman, *Fiction Beyond Secularism* (Evanston, Ill.: Northwestern University Press, 2014); Martin Hägglund, *This Life: Secular Faith and Spiritual Freedom* (New York: Pantheon Books, 2019).
- 9 See Talal Asad et al., *Is Critique Secular?: Blasphemy, Injury, and Free Speech*, Townsend Papers in the Humanities; No. 2 (Berkeley, Calif.; London: Townsend Center for the Humanities, University of California, distributed by University of California Press, 2009); John D. Caputo, *On Religion, Thinking in Action* (London: Routledge, 2001); John D. Caputo, *The Insistence of God [Electronic Resource] : A Theology of Perhaps*, Indiana Series in the Philosophy of Religion (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2013); Saba Mahmood, 'Secularism, Hermeneutics, and Empire: The Politics of Islamic Reformation', *Public Culture* 18, no. 2 (March 20, 2006): 323–347, <https://doi.org/10.1215/08992363-2006-006>; Aamir R. Mufti, 'Part 1: Why I Am Not a Postsecularist', *Boundary 2* 40, no. 1 (March 20, 2013): 7–19.

- 10 Ella Shohat, 'Notes on the "Post-Colonial",' *Social Text*, no. 31/32 (1992): 104, <https://doi.org/10.2307/466220>.
- 11 Aijaz Ahmad, 'The Politics of Literary Postcoloniality,' *Race & Class* 36, no. 3 (January 1, 1995): 7. See also Neil Lazarus, *The Postcolonial Unconscious*, 1 edition (Cambridge ; New York: Cambridge University Press, 2011); Neil Lazarus, 'What Postcolonial Theory Doesn't Say,' *Race & Class* 53, no. 1 (July 1, 2011): 3–27, <https://doi.org/10.1177/0306396811406778>; Sharae Deckard et al., *Combined and Uneven Development: Towards a New Theory of World-Literature*, 1st edition (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 2015); Ann Laura Stoler, *Duress: Imperial Durabilities in Our Times* (Durham, N.C.: Duke University Press Books, 2016).
- 12 Linda Hutcheon, *A Poetics of Postmodernism: History, Theory, Fiction, A Poetics of Postmodernism*, 1st edition, Book, Whole (London: Routledge, 2004), 17, <https://doi.org/10.4324/9780203358856>.
- 13 Hutcheon, 222.



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# Introduction

## The sacred and postsecular in African fiction

Ikechukwu Uzondu, or Ike, the protagonist of Okey Ndibe's novel *Foreign Gods, Inc.*, is a Nigerian immigrant to the US who plans to return to his natal village, steal the statue of the local deity, Ngene, and sell it to the eponymous Manhattan gallery that trades in deities from previously colonised and still economically peripheral regions. The novel thus presents a world where the enchanted and disenchanting, the sacred and profane, religious and secular coexist dynamically and unevenly. Ike is initially disgusted by the gallery's premise, that, as the proprietor Mark Gruels explains, 'in a postmodern world, even gods and sacred objects must travel or lose their vitality; any deity that remained stuck in its place and original purpose would soon become moribund.'<sup>1</sup> Yet, Ike allows himself to be convinced by this secular late-capitalist logic. A New York taxi driver with a degree in economics, Ike seeks to identify himself as a modern, urban, and secular subject; he is equally as sceptical and dismissive of the Pentecostal church his mother belongs to, as he is of the devotees of Ngene. Despite Ike's rationalisations, he is, nevertheless, physically attuned to the 'spectral atmosphere' of the gallery, where he experiences 'an otherworldly chill in the air,' and a smell 'unsettling and hard to name.'<sup>2</sup> Ike demonstrates an embodied awareness of the 'multicultural' deific energies of the gallery. This cognisance is heightened when he returns to the US with Ngene in hand, having accepted his role as chief priest, and the gallery's smell has become a 'more pungent' 'stink.'<sup>3</sup>

As the author explains, the novel establishes a tension between Ike's 'sensory experience and his mental disposition. Ike's posture is one of skepticism towards, even repudiation of, the mystical and transcendental dimensions of his natal community. Yet... that attitude is frequently undermined by his sensory experience, his susceptibility to the terrifying powers of phenomena that he discounts.'<sup>4</sup> Ikechukwu means God's power, in Igbo. Despite his name's descriptive force, Ike's acknowledgement of Ngene's influence does not map onto a singular, linear revelation of the enchantment of the world from a secular to religious experience; rather, the novel reflects on the postcolonial, transnational and postsecular convergences of 'enchanted' and 'disenchanted' versions of the real.

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Postsecular mediation has a long history. The secularist separation of civil and spiritual domains can be traced to the onset of colonial exploration and administration that brought the organisation of secular power into contact with sub-Saharan communities that were primarily maintained through religiously sanctioned social structures. As Jean and John Comaroff argue in *Of Revelation and Revolution*, the co-existence of the sacred and the secular is a stubborn and persistent feature of indigenous sub-Saharan societies, one that Christian and especially Nonconformist missions tried to dismiss. These missions, the Comaroffs explain,

attempted to drive a wedge between the realm of the spirit and the temporal affairs of government, both indigenous and imperial. The object was to lay the ground for a new moral economy based on the clear separation of church and state, of sacred authority and secular power.<sup>5</sup>

This separation of power was, however, incomplete; instead, the Comaroffs detail the distinctly postsecular negotiations evinced by the shifting authority of the missionaries' colonial (secular, bureaucratic and religious) enterprise and the Tswanas' resistance that was fortified by the community's socio-religious organisation.

The struggle against secularist social organisation demonstrated by Tswana resistance is indicative of a persistent feature of sub-Saharan African societies: the continued intertwining of secular and religious spheres. Given this, the examination of Ike's postsecular experience helps to build a conceptual vocabulary with which to explore the ways select African fiction manages the points where religious and secular worldviews intersect, overlap or override. Similar mediatory depictions can be seen in the transposition of Yoruba deities to the streets of New York in Teju Cole's *Open City* (2011), the use of ancestral narration in Phaswane Mpe's *Welcome to Our Hillbrow* (2001), and the exquisite ritualistic language used to describe the delicate and violated female body in Yvonne Vera's *The Stone Virgins* (2002). This monograph explores the representations of the postsecular and its attendant poetic entanglements in African and African-diasporic literatures. I argue that the authors under discussion radically disrupt the epistemological and ontological modalities of globalised 'secular' literary production and imagine alternative strategies of belonging that incorporate the sacred, ritual and the sublime into a postsecular world. In what follows I explicate the texts' postsecular poetics: formal engagements with the sacred, ritual and the sublime, concepts derived from 'religious' vocabulary, but which, I contend, present a locus of mediation between religious and secular spheres.

Reading for the postsecular in African literatures exposes how these texts work to instantiate intimate, local alternatives to the teleology of secular modernity. In their introduction to a much-needed special issue on 'Religion, Secularity, and African Writing,' Jeanne-Marie Jackson and Nathan

Suhr-Sytsma 'suggest that Africanists have long since internalised the breakdown of dichotomies with which (post)secular theorists now struggle,' noting that '[b]oth "Africa" and "secular modernity" as organising concepts in fact originate, differentially, from colonial encounters.'<sup>6</sup> The deconstruction of binaries and careful contextualisation of concepts is a set piece of Africanist praxis that is vital to understanding the postsecular in African postcolonies. This is especially important in light of the syncretic nature of African traditional religions, Christianity and Islam and their entanglement with oral and print traditions, colonialism, neo-colonialism, and globalisation.

The numerous forms of African literatures, past and present, draw from this multiplicity to depict the syncretic, dynamic and heterogeneous nature of globalised modernity in Africa. To live in this reality is to feel and be familiar with the simultaneity, contradiction and comingling of different religious subjectivities. It is to live, Achille Mbembe writes, in a postcolony 'rooted in a multiplicity of times, trajectories, and rationalities that, although particular and sometimes local, cannot be conceptualised outside a world that is, so to speak, globalised.'<sup>7</sup> The threads, strands, and seams that trace these multiplicities are conceptualised by Mbembe as an entanglement: 'the postcolony encloses multiple *durées* made up of discontinuities, reversals, inertias, and swings that overlay one another, interpenetrate one another, and envelope one another.'<sup>8</sup> Entanglement signifies the immense scope of all that the postcolony encompasses, and the creative potential of myriad confluences, discontinuities, multiplicities, and simultaneities, and should include the conceptual entanglement of the postsecular. However, the co-implication of religion and the secular, faith and praxis have long been overlooked in favour of 'secular literary critique.'<sup>9</sup>

There is a significant lack of scholarship on the postsecular in African literatures. With the exception of Jackson and Suhr-Sytsma's special section, Justin Neuman's consideration of asceticism in J. M. Coetzee's work, Mark Mathuray's assessment of the sublime in *Foe*, Alyda Faber's reading of postsecular ethics in *Disgrace*, there is limited work being done on the religio-secular negotiations in contemporary African literatures.<sup>10</sup> These negotiations are the focus of John A. McClure's *Partial Faiths*. While this study is limited to North American writers and overlooks the perspectives of racialised minorities, its methodology is foundational.<sup>11</sup> McClure argues that while 'stylistically and thematically diverse,' postsecular fictions share a set of common features, some of which can also be found in the postsecular African fictions I discuss.<sup>12</sup> In postsecular fictions, for example, 'instability and incompleteness' are persistent features of the representations of spiritual communities and narratives of partial conversion.<sup>13</sup> Two aspects of McClure's argument are salient here. First, that postsecular fictions can be characterised by a 'break with secular versions of reality,' where 'other realms become visible but either partially and fleetingly or in bizarre superabundance.'<sup>14</sup> Second, while the concerns of some postsecular



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novels align with the project of reenchantment, McClure notes that ‘this process’ should be seen ‘as fraught with risk and uncertainty,’ with these texts ‘emphasizing not only the false promise of secularism and religious fundamentalism but also the profound difficulties of any life, including that lived within the mysterious precincts of the spirit.’<sup>15</sup> These two features of McClure’s postsecular fiction, the break with the purely secular and the emphasis on existential uncertainty, is found in the work of Chris Abani, Yvonne Vera, Teju Cole, Phaswane Mpe, J. M. Coetzee, and Marlene van Niekerk discussed in the chapters that follow. In my analysis of these and other illustrative novels, I highlight the aspects of postsecular negotiation particular to contemporary sub-Saharan African literatures. In these examples, neither McClure’s north-Atlantic postsecular fiction nor indeed magical realism accounts sufficiently for the vibrant literary negotiations between sacred, spiritual, and mundane spheres of experience. Christopher Warnes asserts that magical realism in postcolonial settings is a response to the cultural and epistemological violence of colonialism. He contends that

its most characteristic feature is that it naturalises the supernatural, integrating fantastic or mythical features smoothly into the otherwise realistic momentum of the narrative. It does this in order either to expand existing categories of the real (processes often associated with faith in the possibilities of the unseen and of the novel to convey them) or in order to rupture them altogether (processes usually associated with varieties of epistemological irreverence).<sup>16</sup>

To position postsecular African fiction solely within this genre is reductive, because the supernatural is not naturalised in the movement of the narrative it is already written as real, a part of the protagonist’s life that must be mediated, and possibly, partially reconciled.

#### ‘Secular,’ ‘secularism,’ ‘secularisation,’ and ‘postsecular’

The sacred and secular are most profitably understood as operating together in the constitution of contemporary politics, in both its public and private domains. The binary oppositions that are frequently staged between religious/secular and sacred/profane are an impediment to understanding the sacred and the secular as co-constituents of modern life, but especially in the postcolony. There are longstanding debates about the meaning, history and application of the term secular.<sup>17</sup> Among these critical works, Talal Asad’s incisive questioning is remarkable in its commitment to understanding how ‘changes in concepts articulate changes in practices.’<sup>18</sup> He takes the view, as others have, that, “‘religious” and the “secular” are not essentially fixed categories’; it is not enough to assert that they overlap in ‘certain respects’ nor that their interrelation is contingent rather than necessary. ‘The secular,’ he argues,

is neither continuous with the religious that supposedly preceded it (that is, it is not the latest phase of a sacred origin) nor a simple break from it (that is, it is not the opposite, an essence that excludes the sacred). I take the secular to be a concept that brings together certain behaviours, knowledges, and sensibilities in modern life.<sup>19</sup>

Declining a teleological narrative, in other words, Asad asserts that the secular is a useful concept in considerations of modern life. The sacred is neither excluded from, nor included in, this concept, but seen as one of many possible aspects in a modern constellation of ideas.

While much attention has been paid to secularism in Europe and North America, and the so-called 'rise of Islam' in these settings, there has been comparatively little work done on secularism in sub-Saharan African countries. 'Secular,' 'secularisation,' and 'secularism' are evidently related terms; used differently in academic, socio-political and cultural contexts. José Casanova draws clear analytical distinctions between these terms. Casanova is attentive to the terms' historicity, recognising that with 'the world-historical process of globalisation initiated by the European colonial expansion, all these processes everywhere are dynamically interrelated and mutually constituted.'<sup>20</sup> He writes:

- a 'The secular' as a central modern category – theologico-philosophical, legal-political, and cultural-anthropological – to construct, codify, grasp and experience a realm or reality differentiated from 'the religious'... Phenomenologically one can explore the different types of 'secularities' as they are codified, institutionalised, and experienced in various modern contexts and the parallel and correlated transformations of modern 'religiosities' and 'spiritualities.'
- b 'Secularisation' refers usually to supposedly actual empirical-historical patterns of transformation and differentiation of 'the religious' (ecclesiastical institutions and churches) and 'the secular' (state, economy, science, art, entertainment, health and welfare, etc.) institutional spheres from early modern to contemporary societies.
- c 'Secularisms' refers more specifically to the kind of secular world-views (or 'Weltanschauung') which may be either consciously held and explicitly elaborated into historico-philosophical and normative-ideological state projects, projects of modernity and cultural programs or as an epistemic knowledge regime that may be unreflexively held and phenomenologically assumed as the taken for granted normal structure of modern reality, as a modern *doxa* or as an 'unthought.'

Secularism and processes of secularisation are intricately bound up with the history of European Christianity, which in turn, is bound up with the Enlightenment, the primacy of reason, and the developments of humanism and political liberalism – the configurations of these developments have particular local and global iterations. This is not to suggest that secularism

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is singular, but rather to foreground its interactions with colonial projects. 'The formations of the secular follow different historical trajectories and have different religious genealogies in different places, yet they are closely interconnected with hegemonic impositions of Western modernity and colonialism.'<sup>21</sup> Owing to the expansive logics of (neo)colonialism, pluralist democratic statehood, human rights discourse, and (neo)liberal economic policies secularism and secularisation are operative in every nation, in differentiated and varying degrees.

For example, neither the 1999 Nigerian constitution, nor the 2010 Kenyan constitution proclaim a secular state; however, they both prohibit the government and state from adopting a religion. Further, the Nigerian constitution guarantees 'every person the right to freedom of thought, conscience and religion as well as the right to freedom from discrimination on grounds ... of religion,' yet it also 'enjoins the state to provide facilities for, among other things, religious life.'<sup>22</sup> Similarly, the 2010 Kenyan constitution guarantees religious freedom, prohibits a state religion (Article 8) and discrimination on religious grounds (Article 26, Section 4), and does not permit the formation of political parties on a religious basis (Article 91 (2)(a)). It does, however, accommodate Muslim Kadhi courts, subordinate to Kenyan civil courts (Article 170). In Nigeria and Kenya, the constitutional separation of religion and the state is entrenched precisely because of the pervasiveness, diversity and volatility of religious life.

Charles Taylor sees the confinement of religious belief and practice to private domains as a fundamental shift in North Atlantic secular societies.<sup>23</sup> This does not, however, have the same valence in societies where relations between public and private, religious and secular are determined by the legacies of colonialism and postcolonial nationalisms – in substantial ways references to divine reality and God continue to be a part of African public spheres. Take, for example, the National Church and the National Mosque which dominate the skyline of Abuja, Nigeria's capital city. For Rudolf P. Gaudio, writing about Nigerian publics and their religions, 'these impressive architectural monuments symbolise the crucial place of organised religion in the postcolonial Nigerian state's efforts at forging a unified national public.'<sup>24</sup> A vastly heterogeneous population, Nigeria's public discourse is dominated by Christian/Islamic oppositions, yet Gaudio goes on to assert that negotiating the tensions between these transnational, but locally embedded religions offers 'many Nigerians a kind of transnational citizenship that complements and even reinforces national belonging – a sense of oneself as Nigerian.' While pluralism is a founding principle of the kind of political secularism evinced in the constitution, religious beliefs and affiliations are a powerful source of identification that can either bolster or undermine national belonging. The conditions of belief are altered and administrated by the state in Nigeria and Kenya, as they are elsewhere in the world; and it is the subject-citizen who has to find creative ways to navigate these religio-secular conditions.

The postsecular critique, famously articulated by Jürgen Habermas in 'Religion in the Public Sphere,' attacks the simplest form of the secularisation thesis, which posits the falling off of religious belief and practice, and the privatisation of religion. Habermas observes the emergence of 'new' spiritual movements, the increase in global migration bringing religions into contact, and although changing, 'traditional' religions are very much present in the public sphere, and in many peoples' private lives.<sup>25</sup> Contemporary debates about the word postsecular and what it is meant to denote vary,<sup>26</sup> but the notion that there has ever been, or will be, an entirely secular society has been refuted. These debates are often focused on a resurgence of religious fundamentalism, especially Islamic, and the threat this poses to the pluralist toleration of Euro-American liberal democracies. Nevertheless, what postsecular questions bring to the fore is a realisation that religious and secular beliefs and practices are challenging the boundaries set by the private and public spheres. In a later dialogue with Joseph Ratzinger, then-Pope Benedict XVI, Habermas argues for an ethical duty of religious and non-religious citizens to determine together the boundaries and functions of the religious and secular, suggesting that this is possible through religio-cultural translation.<sup>27</sup> Thus, like Asad's more expansive explanation of the secular as a concept that helps to explain behaviours and ideologies in modern society, the postsecular is best understood to exist, as Graham Huggan explains, 'on the knife-edge between scepticism and idealism, much in the spirit of postcolonialism and postmodernism; and to clear a space that allows, as they do, for a continual displacement of the conceptual categories on which all ideologies depend.'<sup>28</sup> Affirming a similar assessment of 'postsecular thought' as a form of critique that 'stems from a desire to resist any master narrative,' Michael Kaufmann asserts that,

Postsecularism attempts to qualify these master narratives in several ways: (a) complicating our understanding of the terms 'religious' and 'secular' by deepening our awareness of the ideological, cultural, and historical valences of those terms; and (b) complicating our understanding of the relationships between the religious and the secular by moving beyond any model that posits too stark a binary opposition and towards models based on co-existence and co-creation.<sup>29</sup>

Under this formulation postsecular literary criticism is grounded in the deconstruction of master narratives and the identification of the instability of binary oppositions, both of which are also foundational to African and postcolonial studies. Unlike postmodern and postcolonial modes of analysis, which are predominantly secular, postsecular criticism foregrounds the congeries of religious and secular spheres. The postsecular ought not to become its own master narrative, but should be understood, according to Peter Coviello and Jared Hickman, as 'an epistemological and methodological reorientation from which history might look different.'<sup>30</sup> Postsecular

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literary criticism, Kaufmann affirms, identifies ‘thematic and structural traits that are distinctively postsecular,’ and articulates ‘the critical consequences of identifying these traits for our understanding of postsecularism and literature.’<sup>31</sup>

Manav Ratti, further explains that ‘the postsecular is neither a rejection of nor a substitute for the secular. It does not signal a teleological end of secularism,’ nor a ‘return to religion, especially not in postcolonial nation-states where the combination of religion and nationalism continues to be explosive and often violent.’ The postsecular is ‘an intimately negotiated term,’ that ‘advocates neither a religious, sectarian nation-state nor the espousal of religious belief at the personal level.’<sup>32</sup> Parsing Aamir Mufti, Ratti understands ‘the relation between the secular and its post’ in the sense of ‘new combinations,’ ‘social crisis,’ and ‘[interfusing] the other.’<sup>33</sup> The ‘postsecular is caught in a double bind between religion and secularism,’ yet it is in this ‘closeness and interwovenness’ that the critical and productive force of the term is to be found.<sup>34</sup>

Not all texts are postsecular and not all postsecular literature is alike. Some of the shared traits of postsecular literature include texts which, expose the false binary between religious and secular experiences and spheres; present the secular and religion not as oppositional concepts, but instead as terms in dialectical mediation; include a character or characters that are seen to be negotiating their spiritual or secular condition; and demonstrate a postsecular engagement with terms, such as, sacred, ritual and sublime. This is in addition to the postsecular features identified by McClure, such as narratives of partial, incomplete or unstable conversion and the ‘disruption of secular structures of reality.’<sup>35</sup> Structurally, postsecular literature incorporates religious language, praxis and mechanisms into the content and form of the novel. ‘Sacred discourses figure everywhere in postsecular novels,’<sup>36</sup> McClure writes. I focus on three instances of this: the sacred, ritual and the sublime. In the postsecular analysis of African literatures, in particular, one of the consequences of this critical project is that it challenges the teleology of secular modernity and secular literary production. Moreover, in his analysis of post-independence Zimbabwean fiction by white writers, Cuthbert Tagwirei argues that, ‘[t]he colonial concept of religion was one of Christianity and, consequently, African spirituality was discursively marked as pathologically secular.’<sup>37</sup> Thus, postcolonial postsecular critique also exposes and reverses the colonial privileging of Christianity over other forms of religious belief.

### **Enchantment, magic and the literary**

Identifying the thematic and structural traits of postsecular literature in contemporary African fiction brings to the fore the cross-pressures and mediation of the secular and sacred. Postsecular literary critique offers a space where it is possible to imagine, even if one does not believe, a world

in which enchantment and disenchantment operate together in a relation always in flux.<sup>38</sup> The novels I consider through a postsecular literary critique each contribute to this imagining in different ways. For instance, to return to Ndibe's novel and Ike's embodied negotiation of his postsecular condition, Ike's enchanted reaction to storms should be considered: confined to the driver's seat of his taxi, with a passenger in the back, Ike fights against his body's response to the rain beating down on the taxi's roof, which he experiences as 'assault[s]' and 'raptures.'<sup>39</sup> His 'heart beat violently. His hands shook. Sweat pooled in his armpits.'<sup>40</sup> 'He heard his passenger ask if he was alright. But the storm's wild, whirring music was already sweeping him up to that terrain of enchantment, up in the cloud, way beyond the wet, weeping skies.'<sup>41</sup> Ngene's influence is not confined to the village, nor to private spaces of worship; instead, Ike is elevated to the 'terrain of enchantment' inside his taxi on the streets of New York, a public, seemingly secular setting. The scene recalls Jane Bennet's description of the somatic experience of enchantment, a 'momentarily immobilizing encounter,' 'a more *unheimlich* (uncanny) feeling of being disrupted or torn out of one's default sensory-psychic-intellectual disposition.'<sup>42</sup> Ndibe's presentation accords with Bennet's view that modern life is already enchanted, as the novel figures both the embodied and spatial mediation of secular and religious experience. A flashback explains that Ike's uncle Osuakwu, Ngene's current chief priest, experienced something similar when he was called to serve Ngene, a call he could not refuse. Ike has not yet been chosen as Ngene's next chief priest, but he has been 'favoured' by him, as his grandmother explains when he is only a child.<sup>43</sup> Ike seems to forget or suppress this knowledge, until he returns home to steal the statue of the deity.

Much like Achebe's *Things Fall Apart*, Ndibe's novel appears to be deeply concerned with the reader's and Ike's religious education, presenting the complexity and global reach of Igbo cosmology that challenges and transcends the transnational materialism and neo-colonial exploitation the novel cautions against. Osuakwu, the novel's primary didact, is prone to exposition, explaining, for example, that the material anthropomorphisation of the gods means that they can be held in check, unlike the invisible god of the Pentecostals. Osuakwu says that if a deity should abandon its duties, turn against the community it is meant to protect, or 'when it begins to thirst for too much human blood, the people snatch up its body – its wooden body – and set it afire at the boundary of the clan. That's one way of killing a god.'<sup>44</sup> The animist complexity of Ngene, the material embodiment of the deity, makes him susceptible to human dissatisfaction.

Animism describes a way of relating in and to the world. 'The person or social group with an "animistic" sensibility attributes sentience – or the quality of being "animated" – to a wide range of beings in the world, such as the environment, other persons, animals, plants, spirits, and forces of nature like the ocean, winds, sun, or moon.'<sup>45</sup> Sentience is 'envisioned as a

vital force, life force, or animated property that is “immanent,” accessible, and “ready to hand” in the everyday world, even if this property is usually latent and not perceivable.<sup>46</sup> Animist does not designate a specific religion; rather, as Harry Garuba explains, it is a mode of ‘elastic,’ ‘religious consciousness’ the most important feature of which is ‘its almost total refusal to countenance unlocalised, unembodied, unphysicalised gods and spirits... animist gods and spirits are *located* and *embodied* in objects: the objects are the physical and material manifestations of the gods and spirits.’<sup>47</sup> In *African Literatures, Animism and Politics*, Caroline Rooney outlines the Eurocentric origins of the term that sought to define ‘primitive,’ ‘pre-rational’ religions against the normativity of North-Atlantic secularism and Christianity.<sup>48</sup> Instead, drawing on the work of VY Mudimbe and Kwame Anthony Appiah among others, Rooney explores the ‘accommodative receptivity of African cultures’ with animism at one such cultural/religious vector.<sup>49</sup> African indigenous knowledge systems remain ‘very much a part of contemporary Africa, in a dynamic and often pluralistic way,’ often in concert with Islam or Christianity.<sup>50</sup> In many ways, explained by Garuba in different terms, animism, animist materialism and animist unconscious are modes of postsecular thought. Garuba notes that animist deities such as Sango or Ngene, symbolise the ‘meeting point between “tradition” and “modernity.”’<sup>51</sup> Animism’s ‘accommodative receptivity’ assimilates ‘the diverse instruments of European modernity... into the matrix of traditional ritual and culture.’<sup>52</sup> This happens, Garuba argues, through a continual ‘re-enchantment of the world,’ which is a ‘manifestation of the animist unconscious.’<sup>53</sup> Proposing the obverse of Max Weber’s disenchantment, Garuba suggests that through an animist unconscious ‘the rational and scientific are appropriated and transformed into the mystical and magical.’<sup>54</sup> Social and cultural meanings accrue to spiritualised worldly objects – objects that symbolise the mediation between secular and sacred modes of being.

For Osuakwu there is no distinction between the world he inhabits and the realm of Ngene’s influence. He is the chief priest who serves Ngene and the community. In Ike’s fainting spells, precipitated by rain storms, he has been favoured by Ngene, and there is also the suggestion that Ngene will choose him next, whether he is in Nigeria or the US. While Osuakwu might be said to live in an enchanted world, Ike has established himself as a hardened New York cabdriver and modern urbanite, so detached from his early cultural education that he is able to convince himself that stealing the statue is acceptable. The novel’s didacticism works harmoniously with Ike’s re-education, as he becomes aware of the magic, the presence and power of Ngene, which is already a force in his life, and has been since his first fainting spell. Ike’s narrative is in part a cautionary tale, detailing the consequences of knowing but ignoring the will of Ngene, of forgetting an education that is foundational to Ike’s experience of the world.

In the final scenes of the novel Ngene punishes Ike for his transgressions. His apartment is filled with an unwavering and overpowering stench, a

growing infestation of maggots, and he feels a presence in the apartment he cannot see. Ike tries to appease the deity: accepting the role he has usurped as chief priest he buys food and libations for himself and the deity. Days after finally selling the statue, Ike regrets the sale and calls Gruels to get Ngene back, but the statue has already been sold to a collector in Japan. The novel ends in Ike's rank and maggot infested apartment, with his debtors banging on the door – his enchanted punishment colliding with the consequences of his financial missteps. The overlapping tensions the novel narrates, between enchanted and disenchanting, religious and secular worldviews, are all played out in Ike's relation to the sacred, the deity Ngene and its wooden embodiment. Ngene is the sacred centre of the novel that undermines any simplistic oppositions between religious and secular, enchanted and disenchanting, urban and rural. Ike, a well-educated, modern Nigerian man, is forced to accept the influence of his people's cosmology; that this finally happens in his New York apartment further destabilises easy identifications of a 'secular Western' experience.

Ndibe's novel, like the others discussed in the chapters to follow, offers a sanctioned space for enchantment, but also contributes to imagining a world in which magic, enchantment and wonder operate in the same realm as modernity, scepticism and secularism. Gauri Viswanathan critiques Matthew Arnold's assessment that 'secularism is conceived to be the inaugural moment of literature's formation.'<sup>55</sup> In her examination of the 'evolution of the literary field,' Viswanathan notes 'that the primary ruptures are not between reason and religion but, rather, between belief and imagination, pointing to a development in which religious belief is contested by the alternative (even heterodox) knowledge systems it had suppressed or marginalised.'<sup>56</sup> Further, Viswanathan enquires how a study of the development of 'literary forms' might produce 'alternative descriptions that will help clarify the dynamics of transition from a religious to a secular order?'<sup>57</sup> If one considers African religions in all their variety and complexity as heterodoxies to secular modernity and Euro-American Christianity, then their representations in African literatures are eminently useful for thinking about African alternatives to dominant conceptions of a postsecular world. From this perspective the postsecular also presents an opportunity to decentre Euro-American formations of the sacred and secular. The decolonial potential of the postsecular begins with prioritising autochthonous epistemologies and establishing the postsecular entanglements of colonialism, and what Aníbal Quijano calls the 'coloniality of knowledge.'<sup>58</sup>

### **Sacred discourse in postsecular fiction**

If, as McClure notes, one of the characteristics of postsecular fiction is a preponderance of religious discourse, then a vital aspect of postsecular critique must be an assessment of how this discourse operates. Does it affirm religious presence or ideology? Does it offer a critique of secular or religious



hegemony? How do characters engage with the sacred or ritual? A cross-disciplinary genealogy of the sacred will help to elucidate how religious discourse shows up in postsecular fiction.<sup>59</sup>

The sacred, understood in the simplest terms, refers to things which are set apart from the profane through doctrine and ritual. Emile Durkheim states: 'Sacred things are things protected and isolated by prohibitions; profane things are those things to which the prohibitions are applied and that must keep at a distance from what is sacred.'<sup>60</sup> Neither the sacred nor profane has inherent moral value; rather, the profane threatens to contaminate the conceptual boundaries of the sacred.<sup>61</sup> While Durkheim's definition fails to consider the constant negotiation that takes place between the sacred and profane, Mircea Eliade addresses this through the notion of the threshold.<sup>62</sup> The church threshold, Eliade explains, is the point at which the sacred and profane meet, which 'signifies a solution of continuity.'<sup>63</sup> 'The threshold,' he writes, 'is the limit, the boundary, the frontier that distinguishes and opposes the two worlds – and at the same time the paradoxical place where those worlds communicate, where passage from the profane to the sacred world becomes possible.'<sup>64</sup> Unlike the strict opposition that Durkheim proposes, Eliade is concerned with the proximity between the two: the carefully protected and strongly contested boundary and meeting point between the sacred and profane.<sup>65</sup>

Subverting Eliade's claim that the sacred is separate and opposed to the profane, David Chidester and Edward T. Linenthal argue, as I have above, that the problem with Eliade's thesis is that although sacred space is 'set apart' it is not set apart in 'the absolute, heterogeneous sense that Eliade insisted upon.'<sup>66</sup> Rather they argue that despite the effort made by 'religious actors' to maintain this clear separation, sacred space and the sacred are inexorably interwoven with the profane.<sup>67</sup> In *Wild Religion: Tracking the Sacred in South Africa*, Chidester<sup>68</sup> explains that,

The sacred... is produced through the labour of intensive interpretation and regular ritualization, which generates a surplus of meaning that is immediately available for appropriation, as people make the sacred their own, but is also vulnerable to contestation over who legitimately owns and operates the sacred.<sup>69</sup>

For Chidester then, the sacred is not merely space or objects that have been set apart and placed in constant opposition with the profane. Rather, the sacred is something that is produced by two complementary processes. The first is the interpretive work needed to conceptualise a space as set apart and as something which might possibly be sacred, and the second is the ritualised performance or act of demarcating that space as something particularly significant. It is these two processes which combine to produce a 'surplus of meaning' that makes possible an ordering of the chaos of heterogeneous space.

Chidester and Linenthal definition of the sacred takes its proximity to the profane and the secular into consideration, and further seeks to explain and explore the labour of constructing the sacred, such as ‘choosing, setting aside, consecrating, venerating, protecting, defending, and redefining sacred places.’<sup>70</sup> Chidester and Linenthal assert that it is precisely because of the openness of the sign that it is available for interpretive symbolic engagement, and also ‘powerful, practical manoeuvres.’<sup>71</sup> For it is through ‘appropriation and exclusion, inversion and hybridization’ that ‘sacred space is produced and reproduced. Relational, situational, and contested, sacred places are necessarily located within these conflictual strategies of symbolic engagement.’<sup>72</sup> Chidester and Linenthal’s definition of the sacred is particularly productive, because founded as it is on the interpretive and ritual labour necessary in the construction of the sacred, it strikes a chord with the literary. The sacred is not simply a symbolic or metaphorical opposition to the profane; it is an enacted process that is performed to bring order and therefore meaning into focus.

### Literary dimensions of the sacred

What is especially promising about Chidester and Linenthal’s analysis of the sacred, from a literary point of view, is that it highlights the narratological aspects of the sacred-making process. In the literary realm sacralisation operates on a number of levels. First and foremost, writing creates a self-sufficient site of meaning; the writer produces a language through which the reader might experience a surplus of meaning. Sacralisation is also operative in the ritualised performance of characters as they categorise and organise space. Thus, the dual process of sacralisation is articulated through the stages of writing and reading, and present in the text itself. Moreover, there is vital interpretive work that is required to symbolically appropriate a space and delineate boundaries between it and unordered, profane space in what Chidester calls strategies of exclusion. On the one hand, this is an interpretive process that requires an imaginative engagement to create a story or narrative that explains or justifies the separation of that space; on the other hand, and happening simultaneously, is the process of demarcating physical boundaries, often through a cleaning and ordering of space. While ‘utopia might have no real place in the world,’ Chidester and Linenthal note, ‘a heterotopia, in Foucault’s sense, can be located as a real site for altering spatial relations,’<sup>73</sup> for establishing heterodox modes of belonging and imagining alternative organisations of space and relation. The sacred can be conceptualised, then, as a result; as the ‘effect’ or *consequence* of a sustained hermeneutic and performative engagement which separates the ‘thing’ from the mundane world which surrounds it.

Drawing from Chidester, I argue that this construction of the sacred involves a simultaneous process of two parts. The first instance is an

extended interpretive engagement which employs narrative or myth-making strategies to conceptually distinguish the object from its surroundings. The second instance, overlapping and fused with the first, is a performative engagement where the ‘thing’ is physically touched, moved, cleaned, or organised in accordance with the principles of the first. The combinatory process of these two interrelated elements is what we call ‘ritual.’ Importantly, conceptualisation is the necessary and antecedent ground that makes possible the performative aspect. Thus, I define the sacred as that space or object which is set apart from the mundane by ritualised strategies of hermeneutic and performative engagement. Ritual is a basic feature of sacralisation: similarly motivated by the threat of forgetting and loss, the repetition of performance and investment are activities which seek to recuperate or bolster that which is vulnerable. I return to a further discussion of ritual in the following chapter. Although this conceptualisation of the sacred does not depend upon religious experience, it does offer a way to read religious discourse in postsecular fiction. In the chapters that follow I offer similar expositions of ritual and sublime discourse, considering their genealogical development and how they might be understood to operate in postsecular fiction and can best be read through postsecular poetics.

The etymology of poetics can be traced back to the ancient Greek *poiesis*, which translates as ‘any kind of production or creation.’<sup>74</sup> For Giorgio Agamben ‘the experience of production into presence,’ of bringing something ‘into being, from concealment into the full light of the work’ is a central aspect of *poiesis*.<sup>75</sup> Given this, poetics is understood as the process of bringing something into being, creating something out of nothing, generating meaning where there was none, much like the sacred-making process Chidester describes above. Poetics also provides a way to read the formal integration of ritual and the sacred. On this second point, Caroline Levine’s work on a new formalist method is invaluable. Levine notes that the varied definitions of form share a common thread: “Form” always indicates an arrangement of elements – an ordering, patterning, or shaping.<sup>76</sup> Expanding this definition to include ‘patterns of sociopolitical experience,’<sup>77</sup> Levine asserts that form is both political and aesthetic. While this is taken for granted in Postcolonial and African studies, Levine draws from the design theory concept of affordance, which ‘is used to describe the potential uses or actions latent in materials and design’ to think through the technologies and possibilities of form.<sup>78</sup> Applying affordance to form allows the theorist to consider what potentials lie dormant in the patterning and repetitions of literary, sociopolitical or indeed socio-religious forms. ‘Literature,’ Levine notes, ‘is not made of the material world it describes or invokes, but of language, which lays claim to its own forms – syntactical, narrative, rhythmic, rhetorical – and its own materiality – the spoken word, printed page.’<sup>79</sup> Similarly, literary representations of the sacred and ritual take shape through language, they order the spaces and experiences of characters and generate a surplus of meaning textually and extra-textually.

The affordances of the sacred and ritual – the ordering of space, repetition, patterning, differentiation, extended lyrical attention to an object or person, ancestral narration – are integrated into the arrangement of the narrative.

With respect to the sacred in Ndibe's text for example, space is ordered and differentiated in relation to Ngene when Ike has a seizure in his taxi, when Ngene makes Ike's apartment stink, and in the shrine Osuakwu maintains. In each instance the text affirms Igbo, rather than Christian theology, offering a critique of the normalisation of colonial Christianity, the exploitation of the Pentecostal church, and the imposition of secular ideology. There is no linear development from a secular to believing subject in *Foreign Gods Inc.*: Ike's burgeoning awareness of Ngene's sacred power is disjointedly revealed through flashbacks which establish the importance of the physical symptoms Ike is unwilling to understand. The revelation of Ngene's power does not bring peace nor resolution; the novel does not depict the joy of spiritual awakening. Rather, the text depicts the anguish and uncertainty of the enchantment of modern life.

### Postsecular poetics: Vulnerability and loss

Martin Häggglund's work (2008, 2012, 2019) helps to clarify an important facet of postsecular literary production – the tension between care and inevitable loss. Häggglund understands religion as belief in a supernatural god and in an eternal afterlife, against which he proposes a secular faith as a humanist alternative.<sup>80</sup> I am not concerned with Häggglund's arguments for atheism or secularism; rather, what is of consequence is the dynamic of faith he identifies. In *Radical Atheism*, Häggglund deconstructs the idea of God, but denies that immortality is desirable in the first instance.<sup>81</sup> He writes:

Radical atheism proceeds from the argument that everything that can be desired is mortal in its essence... [O]ne cannot love without the experience of finitude. This is the premise from which radical atheism necessarily follows. If one cannot love anything except the mortal, it follows that one cannot love God, since God does not exhibit the mortality that makes something desirable.<sup>82</sup>

What is desired then is to live on in a life that you know will end. The trace (the becoming-space of time and the becoming-time of space), which makes possible an apprehension of temporal finitude, allows you to recall this life: the now that passes away and an awareness of the movement towards a future which is not yet. The attachment to temporal life and the investment in survival together generate 'what one desires and what one fears, both the desirable and the undesirable.' Building on the concerns of *Radical Atheism*, in *Dying for Time* Häggglund employs the logic of what he terms 'chronolibido' 'to read the desire for immortality against itself from

within.<sup>83</sup> What motivates us to care and act is the co-implication of chronophobia (the ‘fear of time and death’) and chronophilia (attached to a temporal being). ‘Care in general... depends on such a double bind.’<sup>84</sup> What is pertinent here is the source of care, which is based on the ever-shifting balance between what we fear and what we desire: an unsteadiness that speaks to the vulnerability of a finite, human life.

In *This Life: Secular Faith and Spiritual Freedom*, Hägglund explains that to ‘be finite means primarily two things: to be dependent on others and to live in relation to death.’<sup>85</sup> This, he argues, is the basis for care and investment in this life, for secular faith:

The sense of finitude – the sense of the ultimate fragility of everything we care about – is at the heart of what I call *secular faith*. To have secular faith is to be devoted to a life that will end, to be dedicated to projects that can fail or beak down... Secular faith is the form of faith that we all sustain in caring for someone or something that is vulnerable to loss.<sup>86</sup>

Hägglund articulates that secular faith emerges from the validation of the inherent value of finite lives. His central aim is to demonstrate that faith in the worth of what will be lost is a condition care. Without the threat of loss and death, investment in the beloved or survival would be unnecessary. Secular faith has three interrelated aspects, it is first ‘an existential commitment,’ to the inherent value of ‘a fragile form of life’; second, it is ‘a necessary uncertainty,’ which requires trust and faith; third ‘the precariousness of secular faith is a motivational force’ that initiates concern but is ‘inseparable’ from the sense that ‘it cannot be taken for granted.’<sup>87</sup> For Hägglund, secular faith is animated by the commitment to and care for something or someone which is finite, precarious and can be lost. Vulnerability and risk motivate care and demand a faith in the intrinsic value of a finite life and faith in a future that is yet to come. Despite the secularity of Hägglund’s argument, it turns on the mechanisms of the sacred and describes the dynamic of care and loss that underpins postsecular poetics.

In the chapters that follow I argue that this inextricable tension between a commitment to care and a sense of the precariousness of existence are important to understanding the postsecular presentation of sacred discourse. The motivation to sacralise originates from the finitude of living on. We care enough to make something sacred because it might be lost, and we certainly will die. We evaluate it as important and worth attention, and this too is founded on faith in the future, and in those we care about. The constant counterbalancing of care for what is valued and the ‘sense of its precarious existence’ – the co-implication of value and loss – is the basis of sacralisation, ritualisation and the experience of the sublime. The inclusion of religious or sacred discourse in postsecular fiction is there not only to challenge the dichotomy of religion and the secular, nor merely to allow for

narratives of partial conversion, it also offers a way of reading the co-implication of care and loss against hegemonic notions of religious faith.

### Reading postsecular poetics in African literatures

Under this reading the sacred is an aspect of the everyday; sacralisation, the impetus to make sacred, is motivated by the finitude and vulnerability of the subject. The central aspect of the sacred, the point around which all others orbit, is the intrinsic constitutive tension between precarity and value, between the promise of an end to life and the sense of care this imparts. In its simplest terms the sacred is the careful, precarious investment (value) made material, or assigned to a material 'thing.' In this way, the sacred is both vulnerable in itself and a metonym for the uncertainty of meaning. This is not a necessarily religious conception of the sacred; rather, it articulates the sacred as a consequence of considered and repeated performance and investment in aspects of everyday life.

African indigenous knowledge systems are heterogeneous, but share a set of common features. African traditional religions are, for the most part, anthropocentric, positioning man, not God, as the centre of the universe. Additionally, many gods are given human characteristics and vulnerabilities, even anthropomorphised in wooden carvings. In *Myth, Literature and the African World*, Wole Soyinka begins 'by commemorating the gods for their self-sacrifice on the altar of literature, and in so doing presses them into further service on behalf of human society, and its quest for the explication of being.'<sup>88</sup> He goes on to detail the distinctly human features and stories of some of the gods in the Yoruba aegis, who despite their essential purity, are marked at some time in their history by acts of 'excess, hubris or other human weakness.'<sup>89</sup> 'The consequences are, significantly, measured in human terms and such gods are placed under an eternal obligation of some practical form of penance which compensates humanity.'

What exists in the universe exists in relation to humankind and since an eternal future cannot be experienced, it does not exist in any real sense. The myths, rituals and praxis of African knowledge systems are predicated upon finite human temporality, that does not necessarily end with death. The ancestors, departed or living-dead do not continue on in eternity as the dead do in a Christian sense; rather, they only retain this status as long as they (their name) is remembered by someone living. This might be called, as John Mbiti suggests, 'personal immortality.'<sup>90</sup> This is one reason that lineage is so foundational to African indigenous religions – without a son to continue the name, a family line reaches a dead end. Marriage, childbirth and community are all primarily concerned with the continuation of temporal existence.

The figure of a unitary creator is common to most African indigenous religions, and in many cases this creator is supported by deities and spirits

who perform certain roles, but as Mbiti claims, '[t]hese mythological figures of a spiritual nature are on the whole man's attempt to historicise what is otherwise "timeless," and what man experiences in another context as divinities.'<sup>91</sup> This aspect, even though it has changed with the influence of Christianity, colonialism, modernity and globalisation, finds an experience of the world that values above all human life (and afterlife), not merely of the individual but of the community.

The syncretic nature of contemporary African religious theology, praxis and culture and its representation in literature is a particularly fertile area for a postsecular literary analysis. This book, therefore, draws together a vast body of scholarship on religion, colonialism and the African continent to consider the intersections of religious and secular social structures. In *The Invention of Africa*, for example, V. Y. Mudimbe considers the European intellectual traditions that justified and maintained colonial and missionary agendas, as well as how African philosophers, theologians and scholars have come to construct Africa for themselves. In particular, Mudimbe examines the origination of African forms of Christianity. This 'new model of conversion,' he writes, tended to 'present conversion in terms of critical integration into Christianity; that is, on the one hand, asserting cultural autonomy and, on the other, defining Christianisation as a way of accomplishing in Christ a spiritual heritage authentically African.'<sup>92</sup> Mudimbe details the strategies through which African philosophers and theologians made Christianity conversant with and representative of local socio-cultural structures; facilitating what we might now think of as a postsecular negotiation not only between religious traditions, but also between distinct social structures. Similarly, Achille Mbembe argues that 'Africans used Christianity as a mirror through which to represent their own society and history to themselves'; that Christianity 'offered itself to Africans as a form of allegory and aesthetics.'<sup>93</sup> This leads to what Mbembe calls 'heretical genius': the potential of creative engagement with religion, language and social form that facilitates 'the capacity of Africans to inhabit several worlds at once and situate themselves simultaneously on both sides of an image.'<sup>94</sup>

F. Abiola Irele reinforces Mudimbe's and Mbembe's decolonising intellectual trajectory as he traces the beginnings of African imaginative expression to its sacred origins, and outlines the continuing influences and legacies of this history. He argues that 'as a signifying dimension of the African imagination,' 'narrative' is the 'effort by the African writer to discern for the continent, beyond the harsh realities of African experience in modern times, a principle of transcendence in history.'<sup>95</sup> Irele identifies this transcendent history in his genealogy of African literatures which includes the sacred, 'mythic sources' of 'traditional cultures,' orality, and the 'influence of Christian and Islamic religious texts.'<sup>96</sup> These sources 'identified as a collective resource from which to derive a new relation to the world' present African writers with an 'existential and affective' predicament.<sup>97</sup>

Whether these sources are used as organising tropes, ‘formal categor[ies],’ or as authentic representations of the author’s worldview, they still pose ‘serious dilemmas in the formation of a consciousness adapted to the exigencies of the modern world’ – a world where postcolonial and postsecular negotiations determine the course of everyday life.<sup>98</sup> These dilemmas are transcribed in various ways by the Black African authors discussed here: Ndibe, Abani, Vera, Mpe and Cole. Despite their bifurcated histories, for these writers as for the White South Africans Coetzee and van Niekerk, writing is its own ritual. ‘[T]he act of writing itself,’ notes J. Z. Smith, is ‘the chief ritual activity’: ‘the ritual of writing is ... a displacement of ritual practice into writing.’<sup>99</sup> Thus, the hermeneutic and iterative work of writing is a valuable site for studying the mediation of postsecular poetics.

## Notes

- 1 Okey Ndibe, *Foreign Gods, Inc.* (New York: Soho Press, 2014), 62.
- 2 Ndibe, 2.
- 3 Ndibe, 307.
- 4 Rebekah Cumpsty, ‘History, Humour and Spirituality in Contemporary Nigeria: An Interview with Okey Ndibe,’ *Wasafiri*, February 17, 2021, 26.
- 5 Jean Comaroff and John L. Comaroff, *Of Revelation and Revolution: Christianity, Colonialism, and Consciousness in South Africa* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1991), 11.
- 6 Jackson and Suhr-Sytsma, ‘Introduction,’ xi.
- 7 Achille Mbembe, *On the Postcolony* (Berkeley; London: University of California Press, 2001), 9.
- 8 Mbembe, 14.
- 9 See Talal Asad et al. *Is Critique Secular? Blasphemy, Injury, and Free speech* and Edward Said, *The World, the Text, and the Critic*.
- 10 Manav Ratti’s *The Postsecular Imagination: Postcolonialism, Religion, and Literature* is the first book-length study of postcolonial literary postsecularism. While concerned with Indian and Sri Lankan authors, Ratti presents a global postsecular theorised through diaspora, as seen in the work of Michael Ondaatje, Salman Rushdie, Shauna Singh Baldwin, Amitav Ghosh, and Allan Sealy. His work is discussed in more detail in chapter 4.
- 11 The authors McClure discusses are Thomas Pynchon, Don DeLillo, Toni Morrison, N. Scott Momaday, Leslie Marmon Silko, Louise Erdrich and Michael Ondaatje. I offer my own brief analysis of Michael Ondaatje’s *The English Patient* in chapter 4.
- 12 John A. McClure, *Partial Faiths: Postsecular Fiction in the Age of Pynchon and Morrison* (Athens, Ga.; London: University of Georgia Press, 2007), 3.
- 13 McClure, 4.
- 14 McClure, 4.
- 15 McClure, 7.
- 16 Christopher Warnes, *Magical Realism and the Postcolonial Novel: Between Faith and Irreverence* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2009), 151.
- 17 For further discussion of the secular and secularism see Jürgen Habermas, ‘Religion in the Public Sphere’; Matthew Scherer, *Religion, Politics and Democracy*; Talal Asad, *Formations of the Secular*; Marcel Gauchet, *The Disenchantment of the World*; Charles Taylor, *A Secular Age*; Max Weber, *The*



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- Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism*; Talal Asad, Wendy Brown, Judith Butler, Saba Mahmood, *Is Critique Secular?*
- 18 Talal Asad, *Formations of the Secular: Christianity, Islam, Modernity* (Stanford, Calif.: Stanford University Press, 2003), 27.
- 19 Asad, 26–27.
- 20 José Casanova, ‘Secular, Secularizations, Secularisms,’ *The Immanent Frame* (blog), October 25, 2007, n. pag., <http://blogs.ssrc.org/tif/2007/10/25/secular-secularizations-secularisms>.
- 21 L. Cady and E. Hurd, *Comparative Secularisms in a Global Age* (Springer, 2010), 41.
- 22 Osita Ogbu, ‘Is Nigeria a Secular State? Law, Human Rights and Religion in Context,’ *The Transnational Human Rights Review* 1, no. 1 (January 1, 2014): 1.
- 23 Charles Taylor, *A Secular Age* (Cambridge, Mass.: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2007), 2.
- 24 Rudolf P. Gaudio, ‘Faith in the Nation: Nigerian Publics and Their Religions,’ *The Immanent Frame* (blog), September 2, 2014, n. pag., <http://blogs.ssrc.org/tif/2014/09/02/faith-in-the-nation-nigerian-publics-and-their-religions>.
- 25 Jürgen Habermas, ‘Notes on a Postsecular Society,’ *New Perspectives Quarterly* 25, no. 4 (2008): 1.
- 26 See Asad et al. 2009; Caputo 2001, 2013; Mahmood 2005; Mufti 2013.
- 27 Joseph Ratzinger and Jürgen Habermas, *The Dialectics of Secularization: On Reason and Religion* (San Francisco, Calif.: Ignatius Press, 2007), 47.
- 28 Huggan, ‘Is the “Post” in “Postsecular” the “Post” in “Postcolonial”?’, 766.
- 29 Michael Kaufmann, ‘Locating the Postsecular,’ *Religion & Literature* 41, no. 3 (2009): 68–69.
- 30 Peter Coviello and Jared Hickman, ‘Introduction: After the Postsecular,’ *American Literature* 86, no. 4 (December 1, 2014): 646.
- 31 Kaufmann, ‘Locating the Postsecular,’ 69–70.
- 32 Manav Ratti, *The Postsecular Imagination: Postcolonialism, Religion, and Literature* (London; New York: Routledge, 2013), 20–21.
- 33 Ratti, 22.
- 34 Ratti, 22.
- 35 McClure, *Partial Faiths*, 3.
- 36 McClure, 5.
- 37 Cuthbeth Tagwirei, ‘The “Horror” of African Spirituality,’ *Research in African Literatures; Bloomington* 48, no. 2 (Summer 2017): 25.
- 38 Max Weber first uses the term disenchantment to describe conditions of modern (post-Enlightenment) European secular society which privileges the rationalisation of the cultural sphere and the valorisation of science over the mystical, which, he argues, can still be found in ‘traditional societies’ where ‘the world remains a great enchanted garden’ Max Weber, *The Sociology of Religion* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1993), 270. While Sung Ho Kim argues for a more nuanced reading of Weber’s theory of rationalisation and disenchantment, not as a linear, unidirectional trajectory towards secularism, but rather as a dialectic between disenchantment and reenchantment, others such as Jane Bennet, attend to the linear reading Sung Ho Kim, ‘Max Weber,’ in *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, ed. Edward N. Zalta, Fall 2012, n. pag., <http://plato.stanford.edu/archives/fall2012/entries/weber>. Bennet relates Weber’s theory as an explanation of how the world became ‘calculable’ and goes on to argue that we need not be nostalgic for religion because the modern world we inhabit is itself enchanted (Jane Bennett, *The Enchantment of Modern Life: Attachments, Crossings, and Ethics* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 2001), 14).
- 39 Ndibe, *Foreign Gods, Inc.*, 16, 17.

- 40 Ndibe, 19.
- 41 Ndibe, 21.
- 42 Bennett, *The Enchantment of Modern Life*, 5.
- 43 Ndibe, *Foreign Gods, Inc.*, 17.
- 44 Ndibe, 200.
- 45 Katherine Anne Swancutt, 'Animism,' *The Cambridge Encyclopedia of Anthropology*, 2019, 1.
- 46 Swancutt, 1.
- 47 Harry Garuba, 'Explorations in Animist Materialism: Notes on Reading/Writing African Literature, Culture, and Society,' *Public Culture* 15, no. 2 (May 28, 2003): 267.
- 48 Caroline Rooney, *Animism and Politics in African Literature* (London: Routledge, 2001).
- 49 Rooney, 17.
- 50 Rooney, 13.
- 51 Garuba, 'Explorations in Animist Materialism,' 262. I also wish to quote Garuba's explanation of use of scare quotes. He explains: 'I have placed these terms in scare quotes, first, to highlight the crude dichotomy that this paper problematizes and, second, to draw attention to the contested nature of the terms themselves. When, for instance, we deploy such concepts as *tradition* and *modernity* unproblematically, we get caught in the conceptual teleology and binarist hierarchies of the transition narrative, which compels us to read/write the histories of so-called Third World societies in terms of a lack that is only rectified by an "orderly" progression toward modernity and modernization.'
- 52 Garuba, 264.
- 53 Garuba, 266.
- 54 Garuba, 267.
- 55 Gauri Viswanathan, 'Secularism in the Framework of Heterodoxy,' *PMLA* 123, no. 2 (March 1, 2008): 466.
- 56 Viswanathan, 468.
- 57 Viswanathan, 468.
- 58 Aníbal Quijano, 'Coloniality of Power and Eurocentrism in Latin America,' *International Sociology* 15, no. 2 (2000): 215–232.
- 59 Similar genealogies of the sacred can be found in works of literary criticism such as Bill Ashcroft's (et al.) *Intimate Horizons: The Post-colonial Sacred in Australian Literature* and Mathuray's *On the Sacred in African Literature: Old Gods and New Worlds*, both of which I return to in subsequent chapters.
- 60 Emile Durkheim, *The Elementary Forms of the Religious Life*, trans. Karen E. Fields (London: The Free Press, 1995), 38.
- 61 Emile Durkheim defines religion as 'a unified system of beliefs and practices relative to sacred things, that is to say, things set apart and forbidden – beliefs and practices which unite into one single moral community... all those who adhere to them' (Durkheim, *The Elementary Forms of the Religious Life*, 44).
- 62 Eliade's argument centres on the idea of hierophany or the manifestation of the sacred. He explains:  
 'When the sacred manifests itself in any hierophany, there is not only a break in the homogeneity of space; there is also revelation of an absolute reality, opposed to the nonreality of the vast surrounding expanse. The manifestation of the sacred ontologically founds the world... [T]he hierophany reveals an absolute fixed point, a centre' (Eliade, *The Sacred and the Profane: The Nature of Religion* (New York: Harcourt Australia, 1959), 21).
- 63 Eliade, 25.
- 64 Eliade, 25.

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- 65 In *Purity and Danger* (2002), Mary Douglas uses the terms purity and dirt, in place of sacred and profane, in her assessment of dirt (impurity that can move across thresholds) and the containment of that threat. Douglas employs dirt as a means of discussing both the setting out of the boundaries of purity, and the terms in which they can be defiled. Much like Eliade's exposition of the church door, it is the proximity between the clean and unclean that is an important step in better understanding the richly interlinked and highly performative aspect of the sacred and the profane (Douglas 2002).
- 66 David Chidester and Linenthal, *American Sacred Space* (Indiana: Indiana University Press, 1995), 17.
- 67 Chidester and Linenthal, 17.
- 68 David Chidester has published widely in the areas of South African studies and comparative religion. See *Religions of South Africa* (1992), 'Mapping the Sacred in the Mother City: Religion and Urban Space in Cape Town, South Africa' (2000), and *Empire of Religion* (2014).
- 69 Chidester, *Wild Religion: Tracking the Sacred in South Africa*, ix.
- 70 Chidester and Linenthal, *American Sacred Space*, 17.
- 71 Chidester and Linenthal, 19.
- 72 Chidester and Linenthal, 20.
- 73 Chidester and Linenthal, 20.
- 74 Plato, *Plato Symposium*, trans. Alexander Nehamas and Paul Woodruff, Copyright 1989 edition (Indianapolis: Hackett, 1989), 51.
- 75 Giorgio Agamben, *The Man Without Content*, trans. Georgia Albert, 1 edition (Stanford, Calif.: Stanford University Press, 1999), 68–69.
- 76 Caroline Levine, *Forms: Whole, Rhythm, Hierarchy, Network*, Reprint edition (Princeton, N.J.; Oxford: Princeton University Press, 2017), 3.
- 77 Levine, 2.
- 78 Levine, 6.
- 79 Levine, 10.
- 80 For criticism of Häggglund's narrow conception of religion see David Biernot and Christoffel Lombaard, 'Finitude, temporality and the criticism of religion in Martin Häggglund's *This Life: Why Mortality Makes Us Free* (2019),' *HTS Theologiese Studies/Theological Studies* 76, no. 2 (2020): 10.
- 81 It is not clear which religious conception of God Häggglund is referring to. It accords with Judaic and Islamic understandings, more closely than it does with Christian, and yet Derrida's notion of the 'The unscathed' is applied as a normative religious claim.
- 82 Martin Häggglund, *Radical Atheism: Derrida and the Time of Life* (Stanford, Calif.: Stanford University Press, 2008), 111.
- 83 Martin Häggglund, *Dying for Time: Proust, Woolf, Nabokov* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2012), 9.
- 84 Häggglund, 9.
- 85 Martin Häggglund, *This Life: Secular Faith and Spiritual Freedom* (New York: Pantheon Books, 2019), 4.
- 86 Häggglund, 5.
- 87 Häggglund, 50.
- 88 Wole Soyinka, *Myth, Literature and the African World* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990), 1.
- 89 Soyinka, 13.
- 90 John S. Mbiti, *African Religions and Philosophy* (Oxford: Heinemann, 1990), 25.
- 91 Mbiti, 77.
- 92 V.Y. Mudimbe, *The Invention of Africa: Gnosis, Philosophy, and the Order of Knowledge* (Bloomington, Ind.: Indiana University Press, 1988), 60.

- 93 Achille Mbembe, *Critique of Black Reason*, trans. Laurent Dubois (Durham, N. C.: Duke University Press Books, 2017), 101.
- 94 Mbembe, 102.
- 95 F. Abiola Irele, *The African Imagination: Literature in Africa and the Black Diaspora* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001), 114.
- 96 F. Abiola Irele, 'Introduction: Perspectives on the African Novel,' in *The Cambridge Companion to the African Novel* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009), 5, <http://universitypublishingonline.org/ref/id/companions/CBO9781139002608>.
- 97 Irele, *The African Imagination*, 60.
- 98 Irele, 61.
- 99 Jonathan Z. Smith, *Relating Religion: Essays in the Study of Religion* (Chicago; London: University of Chicago, 2004), 226–227.

# 1 Ritualisation and the limits of the body in Chris Abani's and Yvonne Vera's fiction

A preoccupation with the body and loss is apparent in the work of Chris Abani and Yvonne Vera. Abani writes, 'So it seems that the desire to make art, to draw the limits of the body, to create a simulacrum has its roots in loss; or at least, the possibility of loss.'<sup>1</sup> For Abani, the desire to make art, the desire to trace the limits or finitude of the body, is rooted in the inevitability of loss. Similarly, for Vera, the body is conceived, its limits drawn, through its vulnerability. She writes, 'The body is only a feather held upright, pinned down to the ground and poised to fall from the slightest whisper. It is suspended, ready to collapse when a shadow falls.'<sup>2</sup> The work of both writers is notable for the lyrical attention paid to the bodies of their protagonists; specifically, this attention integrates and deploys aspects of ritual in the diegetic construction of these fictional bodies. Taking its cue from these strategies, this chapter considers ritual through the lens of postsecular poetics, addressing the intersections of the sacred, ritual and the body. First, I continue to explore the notion that the sacred is motivated by the inevitability of loss and the finitude of human life. Second, the body, which is contained, choreographed, purified, disciplined and beautified in an attempt to ward off disease and forestall death, illustrates this dynamic of vulnerability and veneration. Third, ritual provides strategies to manage these contradictions. The body, the sacred and ritual are connected by their conceptual dependence on, and management of, the promise of pollution and an impending end. This is perhaps illustrated most clearly in the cases of subjective and somatic vulnerability – so effectively rendered by Chris Abani and Yvonne Vera as they write through the transformative qualities of language, ritual and metaphor.

Chris Abani and Yvonne Vera, I argue, also seek to establish a community of shared experience, based not on political or religious affiliations, but on somatic empathy and unequal relations between reader and text. This relies on Abani's and Vera's lyrical prose, and the unique bodily aesthetic created in their work. Abani and Vera engage explicitly with the precarious position of the human body as a site that is terrifyingly vulnerable to violation and illness. Thus, building on Hägglund's conception of secular faith, I demonstrate the ways in which this fiction relies on, as well as helps to produce, a communal experience of human vulnerability. This all hinges on the performance of the protagonists' bodies: how these bodies are

aesthetically and imaginatively set apart from others in the text and made to hold excess symbolic value. This hinges on the sacralisation of the body through ritual practice in Abani's novellas, and ritual poetics in his and Vera's work.

## The body and ritual

### *The body*

Developments in body studies suggest 'that the body is most profitably conceptualised as an unfinished biological and social phenomenon which is transformed, within certain limits, as a result of its entry into, and participation in, society.'<sup>3</sup> Chris Schilling's explanation is clearly indebted to Foucault's work on the body,<sup>4</sup> discipline and power but his argument is notable for its focus on how the body and death are 'increasingly central to the modern person's sense of self-identity.'<sup>5</sup> The desacralisation of social life and the retreat of religious belief to private domains, which theorists of modernity have seen as a process twinned with the rise of science in the modern age, leaves individuals to establish and maintain meaning in the face of a certain end. Without the 'trans-personal meaning structures' provided by religious faith and the grand narratives of humanist, nationalist and economic triumph, the body 'initially appears to provide a firm foundation on which to reconstruct a reliable sense of self in the modern world.'<sup>6</sup> Yet the more scientific and social inquiries teach us about the body, the starker the limits of our control over ageing and death become.

Schilling's argument is echoed in Hägglund's assessment that it is only the certainty of death which instils the desire to live on, that the care for the beloved, for livable lives, and for a sustainable world are all premised on physical vulnerability and the finitude of human life. In a similar vein, Judith Butler conceptualises 'the body as the site of a common human vulnerability,' even as it is differentially articulated.<sup>7</sup> 'The body,' Butler asserts 'implies mortality, vulnerability, agency: the skin and the flesh expose us to the gaze of others, but also to touch, and to violence, and bodies put us at risk of becoming the agency and instrument of all these as well.'<sup>8</sup> Butler proposes a 'new basis for humanism,' where the potential of an 'ethical encounter' depends upon the recognition of a "common" corporeal vulnerability.<sup>9</sup> This is precisely the ethics of recognition that Abani and Vera establish in their work: a somatic empathy formed between reader and text.

Literature is particularly attuned to the 'complexities of embodied life,' for as David Hillman and Ulrika Maude note, '[l]iterary texts... tend to deal with the more ambivalent and amorphous areas of experience where simple definitions break down or prove inadequate.'<sup>10</sup> 'The body,' they suggest, 'is not simply as immediate a presence in literature as anywhere else: rather, here, precisely in its illusory absence (and, by the same token, its illusory presence), it is perhaps most intimately engaged with the endless aporia of corporeal

presence and absence.<sup>11</sup> The literary conjuring of the body ‘confronts the reader’ with its ‘legible materiality,’ and in so doing ‘often provides powerful forms of resistance to socially instituted perceptions and demands.’<sup>12</sup>

The novels discussed in this chapter articulate the discomfort and ethical imbalances of a reader’s immersion in the text. In these novels the body is both represented in the text, and written on as a text itself. Socio-political, biomedical and economic authorities structure the body in particular ways, and have vested interests in doing so, but by drawing attention to the constructed nature of these discourses, and by writing heterogeneous alternatives that pay homage to the alterity of the body, the bodies in Abani’s and Vera’s fiction are also loci ‘of socio-political resistance.’<sup>13</sup> Setting the body apart in this way relies on ritualised language and performance.

### *Ritual*

Ritual is a vital component of sacralisation since the sacred is a consequence of ritualised strategies of hermeneutic and performative engagement which set the sacred object apart from the everyday world. Like the concepts considered in the introduction, ‘ritual’ is similarly difficult to define.<sup>14</sup> Etymologically ritual derives from the correct performance of religious rites, and over time the word has come to mean something as commonplace as routine or habitual behaviour. There is a long religious and intellectual history between these two usages, which Talal Asad traces in establishing a genealogy of ritual. He investigates how ‘changes in institutional structures and in organizations of the self’ have made possible the ‘concept of ritual as a universal category,’ and further what these changes might illustrate about the genealogies of ‘religion’ and ‘secular.’<sup>15</sup> Asad proposes that alterations in the connotations of rite and ritual illustrate shifting conceptions of religion, the self, and the growing influence of ideologically secular scholarship.<sup>16</sup>

Asad’s critique is extended by Catherine Bell, who reasons that there is no universal understanding of what constitutes ritual; as a set of activities historically and culturally determined, ‘ritual is always contingent, provisional and defined by difference,’ whether ritual is congruent with or uniquely separated from ordinary behaviour.<sup>17</sup> Rather than focusing on ritual as a category, Bell attends to ‘ritualization’: the process by which ritual is established as a cultural form; ritualisation is praxis. She writes:

Ritualization is a way of acting that is designed and orchestrated to distinguish and privilege what is being done in comparison to other, usually more quotidian, activities. As such, ritualization is a matter of various culturally specific strategies for setting some activities off from others, for creating and privileging a qualitative distinction between the ‘sacred’ and the ‘profane,’ and for ascribing such distinctions to realities thought to transcend the powers of human actors.<sup>18</sup>

Bell's ritualisation turns on differentiation and distinction. She points to J. Z. Smith's pivotal claim that '[r]itual is, above all, an assertion of difference.'<sup>19</sup> Hence the process of ritualisation intends the differentiation of the sacred and the profane, the distinction between what has been invested with symbolic meaning through ritual, from that which remains mundane. It does not intend the related construction of the ritualised body: 'a body invested with a "sense" of ritual.'<sup>20</sup> A cyclical relation exists between ritualisation, the ritualised body, and the structured and structuring environment. The physical and linguistic acts of ritual order, schematise, and transform a spatio-temporal environment according to a logic of 'privileged opposition.'<sup>21</sup> The body with a 'sense of ritual' is a body mediated and transformed, one that mediates and transforms its environment in turn, as we shall see with Abani's protagonist. In this way, ritual does not exert control. It does however, Bell argues, 'constitute... a particular dynamic of social empowerment,' since 'ritual practices are themselves the very production and negotiation of power relations.'<sup>22</sup>

Considering the 'the role of ritual in African modernity,' Jean and John Comaroff argue that 'in the efforts of people to empower themselves, thus to assert a measure of control over worlds often perceived to be rapidly changing,' the dynamic technologies of ritual have been employed to intervene in and manage the production of power relations across the precolonial, colonial and postcolonial epochs.<sup>23</sup> They suggest that

ritual, as an experimental technology intended to affect the flow of power in the universe, is an especially likely response to the contradictions created and (literally) engendered by processes of social, material, and cultural transformation, processes re-presented, rationalised, and authorised in the name of modernity and its various alibis ('civilization,' 'social progress,' 'economic development,' 'conversion' and the like).<sup>24</sup>

Each alibi has a local valence that informs the structured and structuring environment the ritualised body inhabits. Although ritual may have been conceptually aligned with 'tradition,' 'superstition' and 'religion' against the progressive narratives of modernity, the genealogies offered by Asad, Bell and the Comaroffs transcend these limitations. Indeed, in *Modernity and Its Malcontents*, the Comaroffs 'try, instead, to make the concept embrace more mundane meaningful practice, practice often meant to transform, not reproduce, the environment in which it occurs.'<sup>25</sup> After all, 'we are confronted on all sides,' particularly in African contexts, 'with evidence of global systems – systems of capital, technology, ideology and representation – these systems are in the plural: diverse and dynamic, multiple and multidirectional.'<sup>26</sup> In order to make sense of the alibis of modernity, and the polyphonies and entangled simultaneities of contemporary African experience the transformative labour of ritual is unending. This transformative and appropriative dimension of ritual originates in its



creative and imaginative potential; it is a way of performing ‘the way things ought to be in conscious tension to the way things are in such a way that this ritualised perfection is recollected in the ordinary, uncontrolled, course of things.’<sup>27</sup> Performing the way things ought to be, such that this perfection is able to exist in tension with the mundane or even profane reality, relies on the creative power of ritual, which

arises from the fact that (i) it exists in continuing *tension* with more mundane modes of action, of producing and communicating meanings and values; (ii) its constituent signs are ever open to the accumulation of new associations and referents; and (iii) it has the capacity to act in diverse ways on a contradictory world.<sup>28</sup>

Ritualisation is the process of distinction and differentiation; the value or meaning of ritual is derived from its opposition to mundane action. Ritual creates alternative meanings and heterogeneous power relations by employing literary techniques like repetition, metaphor, metonymy, elaboration and occlusion. Ritual ‘deploys the poetic properties of signs to the fullest’; it depends upon the openness of the sign to instantiate alternative modes of belief and praxis in order to codify the multivalent tensions of ‘recalcitrant realities.’<sup>29</sup> Thus, it is the protean quality of language that makes ritual such a powerful imaginative tool. As Bell reminds us, ritual is always contingent on and defined by difference: its signs and symbols are dynamic, receptive to multiple and contradictory meanings and are thus a vibrant mechanism for navigating the concatenations of modern African experience. The first section of the discussion that follows analyses the representation of ritual in Abani’s novellas, demonstrating how the sacred emerges through ritual scarification. The second elucidates Vera’s deployment of ritual discourse to sacralise the female body. I explain how ritual its performative and linguistic manifestations contributes to the development of the characters in the work of both authors, and thus to a shared experience of vulnerability between reader and text. Reading for postsecular poetics across this fiction, I illustrate how the mechanisms of ‘patterning and repetitions’ – the affordances of ritual performance and language – are integrated into narrative form. As Caroline Levine explains, ‘Literature is not made of the material world it describes or invokes, but of language, which lays claim to its own forms – syntactical, narrative, rhythmic, rhetorical – and its own materiality – the spoken word, printed page.’<sup>30</sup>

## **Abani: Human rights, scarification, and the ritualised body**

### **Becoming Abigail: *Ritual bodily inscription and sacrifice***

Chris Abani is a writer and political activist, born in Nigeria and now residing in the US. In a 2008 TED talk, Abani says he is always searching

‘to find ways to chronicle, to share and to document stories about people, just everyday people. Stories that offer transformation, that lean into transcendence, but that are never sentimental, that never look away from the darkest things about us.’<sup>31</sup> Abani’s continued engagement with these issues is reflected in his poetry, fiction and non-fiction writing. For example, the novel *GraceLand* (2004) follows its adolescent protagonist Elvis as he moves through the underground and alternative economies of the Lagos ghetto where he lives. The often violent episodes are interlaced with the sacred: every chapter begins with an explication of the rituals of the kola nut (*Igo Oji*),<sup>32</sup> and these chapters are interspersed with extracts from Elvis’s mother’s notebook which holds recipes akin to spells.<sup>33</sup> Gestures to the sacred or transcendent are present in much of Abani’s fiction. *The Virgin of Flames* (2008), which I discuss in the final chapter, is a particularly explicit example of Abani’s engagement with the sacred.<sup>34</sup> Similarly, transcendence and sacralisation are pivotal aspects of *Becoming Abigail* (2006) and *Song for Night* (2007). The protagonists of these novellas, a sex-trafficked teenage girl and a child soldier, inhabit the unregulated space between human rights and state law.

*Becoming Abigail*, as the title suggests, is a story of becoming: a version of the *bildungsroman* that follows an adolescent girl’s formation of selfhood in response to experiences of loss, displacement and sexual violation. Abigail’s mother, after whom she is named, died giving birth to her. Her father, in a perpetual state of mourning, watches as she grows to look more and more like her mother. Abigail feels detached from her body, as if it does not belong to her: she looks like her mother, but cannot know her, and incites sadness and longing in her father. The novella compellingly relates Abigail’s performative and material attempts to know her mother, and failing that, becomes herself by asserting a connection with and possession of her own body through ritual scarification and sacralisation. In his use of the third person omniscient narrative voice, Abani makes clear the privileged and vexed position of the reader as voyeur. It is the intimacy of this perspective that permits the reader to observe how Abigail’s exploration and marking of her body enables her to develop a sense of self.

The development of Abigail’s sexualised and gendered body, and her awareness of it, is intricately bound up with the ghostly figure of her mother, and the attention she receives from her father. Nonetheless, she is fascinated by the changes to her body, perceiving the pubescent alteration of her embodied form and constitutive subjectivity:

At first it was a curiosity, a genuine wonder at the burgeoning of a self, a self that was still Abigail, yet still her. With the tip of a wax crayon she would write ‘me,’ over and over on the brown rise of them [her breasts]. And when she washed in the shower the next day, the colour would bleed, but the wax left a sheen, the memory of night and her reclamation.<sup>35</sup>

Abigail's use of a wax crayon, a child-like tool, to write on her skin is juxtaposed with her developing physical maturity – her acts of personal inscription are washed away in the morning like menstrual blood, as the colour bleeds but the memory of her reclamation remains. The novella traces the ever more permanent methods Abigail uses to mark her body: the rituals of inscription and scarification that facilitate her careful recovery and reappropriation of her embodied self lead to the sacralisation of her body in the text. Often read in secular terms as self-harm, bodily markings and ritual scarification are an important part of many indigenous cultures. Rituals of scarification signify the body in its religio-cultural form: as signs of cultural or communal identity; as markers of initiation into man or womanhood; as symbols of a connection to the ancestors or gods. 'Among the Yoruba of southwestern Nigeria,' Olanike Ola Orié notes, 'lineage identification marks are etched into people's cheeks.'<sup>36</sup> While 'Among the Igbo of south-eastern Nigeria, the ichi scarification on a man's forehead indicated that he was a free person... and was therefore not legally subject to the possibility of enslavement.'<sup>37</sup> Similarly, Abigail's scarification at once establishes her lineage through her mother and signals her growing independence.

Abigail's interpretive resignification of the symbolic value of her body, her possession and performative organisation of it are read as affirmative gestures of incorporation. At first marking her body is a way of getting to know her mother. She collects anecdotes about her mother: 'Collected until she was suffused with all parts of her.'<sup>38</sup> Later she writes these fragments of information on pieces of paper and stick them to her skin, 'wearing them under her clothes; all day. Chaffing [*sic*]. Becoming. Becoming and chaffing, as though the friction from the paper would abrade any difference, smooth over any signs of the joining, until she became her mother and her mother her.'<sup>39</sup> From crayon, to paper, to fire: Abigail's maturity is measured in how she chooses to inscribe her body: 'This burning wasn't immolation. Not combustion. But an exorcism. Cauterisation. Permanence even.'<sup>40</sup> Her use of fire is prophylactic, sterilising – the mass of scars begins to tell her story, they 'had the nature of lines in a tree trunk: varied, different, telling.'<sup>41</sup> Abigail's marking of her body is ritualised in the constitutive repetition and symbolic valence of her scarification. It is the ritual practice and its descriptive, linguistic aspects that transform her body, and her relationship to it. Despite the desire to chafe away their difference, Abigail sets her body apart from her mother's through affirmative acts of ritual scarification, mourning her mother by rendering the limits of herself, thereby reclaiming herself. Reading for the novel's postsecular poetics foregrounds Abigail's strategies of self-ordering and it illuminates the religio-secular dynamic of Abigail's ritual practice. Although he falls short of engaging with its sacred and productive aspects, Ashley Dawson supports the constructive nature of Abigail's scarification, analysing her scars as 'willed rituals of remembrance,' which 'are a means of charting the world on the body, an assertion of loss but also of an ordering of self.'<sup>42</sup>

Reflecting on Abani's characterisation of Abigail as an illegally displaced person but highly profitable cargo, Dawson argues that Abani offers a unique and necessary insight into the interior worlds, and 'struggle for agency' of those human beings who are made cargo.<sup>43</sup> The novella facilitates this interiority in Abani's choice of narrative voice and the chapter structure which alternates between 'then' and 'now.' These spatio-temporal indicators track between present and past, and England and Nigeria. The shifting focus forces 'the reader to piece together a life lived – and recounted – in fragments.'<sup>44</sup> Piecing these fragments together through Abigail's recollected memories (offered as she walks through London at night), the reader learns that Abigail and her father were duped by her uncle Peter. Peter promised her father he would provide a better life for Abigail in London; instead, he traffics her into England under a false name and passport, intending to use her as a sex worker. When Abigail violently resists the first man Peter brings to rape her, Peter chains her to the dog kennel in the backyard. Binding her hands, he urinates on her, brings her only 'rancid water' and 'rotting food,' and repeatedly sexually assaults her – occluding her humanity, turning her into a dog:

And she no longer fought when Peter mounted her.  
Wrote his shame and anger in her. Until. The slime of it threatened to  
obliterate the tattoos that made her.  
Abigail.  
One night.  
Unable to stand it anymore, she screamed. Invoking the spirit of  
Abigail.  
And with her teeth tore off Peter's penis.<sup>45</sup>

For fifteen days Abigail is tortured, brutalised and violated. Yet, in the moments when she is alone, using her nose because her hands are bound, Abigail searches for 'the brandings, for the limits of herself.'<sup>46</sup> It is when Peter's filth threatens to cover 'the tattoos that made her,' that she fights back again. Abigail's name is repeated twice in this short passage: first as an assertion of the self she has shaped through ritual scarification, and second as an invocation of her mother. In these moments of extreme pain, a verification of lineage and selfhood fuel Abigail's revolt – her markings are the tangible sign of her exposure, but they are also the sacred scars which bring her back to herself.

Abigail is the embodiment of the vulnerable subject, but as Susan Hall notes 'she rejects the stereotypes that accompany victimhood in trafficking discourse.'<sup>47</sup> She is in England without official documentation; she is orphaned since her father committed suicide a week before she left Nigeria with Peter. The formation of Abigail's character contradicts the desire to reduce her to a helpless victim, since the novella so carefully narrates Abigail's becoming. This is reinforced as the 'now' sections of the story happen

after she has escaped Peter, and after she has had an affair with her state-appointed caseworker, Derek. The plot moves beyond her violation to the moments when she experiences sustained sexual desire and pleasure with Derek. Once again denying simplistic identification with or sympathy for Abigail, she has a relationship that is illegal and inappropriate; not only is Abigail a legal minor, but Derek is also a married man responsible for her care.

Nevertheless, it is with him that Abigail falls in love and in doing so becomes 'herself, this Abigail.'<sup>48</sup> After they have had sex for the first time, Abigail burns herself with the scorching end of a needle. She presents herself and her scars, new and old, to Derek:

'This one,' she said, touching the ones on each breast, first one, then the other. 'This one is you, this, me. In the middle is Greenwich. Here,' and she was down on her stomach, 'is my hunger, my need, mine, not my mother's. And here, and here and here and here, here, here, here, me, me, me. Don't you see?' and she showed him the words branded in her skin... 'This is my mother. Words. And words. And words. But me? These dots. Me, Abigail.'<sup>49</sup>

This is the singular instance of reported speech in the novella; it is the only time Abigail voices an assertion of herself, offering Derek an explanation of herself and of the map that orders her world. Throughout the novella the words 'branding,' 'scar,' and 'tattoo' are repeated, both in the text and on Abigail's body. As Jonathan Z. Smith says of myth and ritual, 'repetition guarantees significance.'<sup>50</sup> The affective rhythm of this passage depends almost entirely on repetition, metaphor and metonymy. 'One' and 'here' pepper the description of Abigail's ritual scarification, and it is the grammatical refrain coupled with her repetitive performance which designate her body as sacred. She sacralises her body, reappropriating it by inscribing her skin, her body, herself, with signs only she can interpret. Each burn stands in for some aspect of her life: the point on her sternum is her sign for Greenwich, fixing her in time and space; the words branded on her skin are her mother, but the dots are Abigail, 'Me, Abigail.' Each burn is a mark of braille script: 'And he traced her in that moment, the map of her, the skin of her world, as she emerged in pointillism. Emerging in parts of a whole.'<sup>51</sup> A map, a script, dabs of paint on a canvas, a constellation of bodily inscriptions, ritualistically marked – ritualised not merely in the repetition of performance, but also in their symbolic reverberations. A body made sacred through the metaphor and metonymy of ritual: 'Sometimes,' the narrator says 'there is no way to leave something behind... We know this. We know this. We know this. This is the prevalence of ritual. To remember something that cannot be forgotten. Yet not left over.'<sup>52</sup>

The teleology of Abigail's becoming includes her suicide at the end of the novella. Abigail understands her death as a sacrifice, though it is unclear for

what: 'It is just like the Igbo said. The sacrifice is always commensurate to the thing wished for. Sometimes a lizard will do, sometimes a goat, or a dog, sometimes a cow or buffalo. Sometimes a human being.'<sup>53</sup> Her body, already sacralised through her repeated rituals of scarification and self-creation, is made sacred once again as a sacrifice. Abigail's suicide is not an act of nihilism: like her scarification it is an act of incorporation, transformation and a demonstration of personal choice in a sea of difficult decisions. In many ways Abigail's experiences and circumstances locate her in the position of bare life, however, her final sacrificial act can be understood as a reclamation of value, of herself. She refuses the role of *homo sacer*, the person 'who may be killed and yet not sacrificed.'<sup>54</sup> Instead, she insists upon her subjective and bodily worth, its currency as sacrifice imbued with socio-political and personal symbolism and, therefore, sacred.

### Human rights, aesthetics and shared vulnerability

The confluence of literary studies, narrative and human rights has generated significant critical work. Lynn Hunt's *Inventing Human Rights* (2007) offers a historical account of the eighteenth-century evolution of human rights and the novel, which hinges on the self-evidently autonomous subject, arguing that narrative practice made possible the advancement of a human rights movement. Similarly, Joseph Slaughter's *Human Rights, Inc.* (2007) traces the relation between the rise of world literature and international human rights law, noting that a particular conception of the human individual connects human rights law and the novel (especially the *bildungsroman*), and that this formation of the individual has 'hints of the Western cultural imperialism that infuses the human rights regime.'<sup>55</sup> Summarising these approaches James Dawes writes that as 'an artistic form,' the novel is 'dependent upon a certain conception of the human (individualistic, autonomous, defined less by status than by valuable interior feelings which, implicitly, all can share).'<sup>56</sup> He goes on to assert that this conception of the human 'is likely also a prerequisite for the modern, liberal conception of (natural, equal, and universal) human rights.' If, as Slaughter argues, the *bildungsroman* and the novel form in general do some of the cultural labour of normalising human rights law, liberal secular values and the autonomous, individual human subject, then the aesthetics of such an endeavour are an ethical concern.

Human rights scholars have been critical of the literary aesthetic on the 'grounds that it not only aestheticises suffering but, more pointedly, masks the structural imbalances that generate human rights violations, cultivates a sense of literary humanitarianism, and substitutes sympathy with the text for action in the world beyond it.'<sup>57</sup> The reader is affected by the aesthetic: experiencing the pain of others, through a moment of lyrical pleasure that occludes the differences of 'class, race, gender,' ethnicity and geography, which make possible the inequality of this imaginative interaction and the

possibility of a ‘universalizing humanism.’<sup>58</sup> Alexandra Schultheis Moore and Elizabeth Swanson Goldberg outline these theoretical foundations and explain that,

When the aesthetic produces concern in this way, and sympathy elides the distance between reader and subject, it contributes to what Makau Mutua calls a ‘messianic ethos,’ Lilie Chouliaraki analyzes as “‘universal’ morality and grand emotion,’ and Joseph Slaughter and Elizabeth Anker each critique as literary humanitarianism that re-centers the ostensibly secure (read: Western) reader as the paradigmatic liberal subject and, thus, the true subject of human rights.<sup>59</sup>

Abani’s two novellas, however, intervene in the questioning of the aesthetic to argue that lyric can destabilise the easier, unequal identification that elides distance and difference. His work is premised on a shared experience of human mortality and vulnerability expressed through lyric, as we have seen in *Becoming Abigail*. Moore and Goldberg echo this reading in their assertion that Abani’s form evades the ethical pitfalls of narrating violation, violence, and human rights abuses because his lyrical prose relies on what Abani calls a ‘deeper human syntax... that we value the lives of others precisely because we know the limits of our own.’<sup>60</sup><sup>61</sup> Moore and Goldberg suggest that Abani grounds ‘human rights not in individual dignity and autonomy... but in the recognition of our shared capacity to harm and be harmed as a deep structural arrangement, or “ordering together,”’ which therefore ‘calls for innovative strategies of literary representation that seek alternatives to the teleology of the triumphant protagonist or mourned victim.’<sup>62</sup>

Abani’s preoccupation with ‘our shared capacity to harm and be harmed’ can be read, *pace* Hägglund’s secular faith, as our shared experience of finitude and vulnerability. Thus, as he begins to do in his 2008 Ted talk, Abani reconceptualises the basis of human rights, not in terms of an Enlightenment conception of an autonomous individual,<sup>63</sup> but rather, in terms more closely aligned to sub-Saharan African epistemologies whereby an individual has value and dignity by virtue of their positive participation in the community.<sup>64</sup><sup>65</sup> Though iterations of this philosophy can be found in many sub-Saharan African traditions, in the languages of Southern Africa which share the Bantu root it is called *ubuntu* and its basic principles emerge, for example, from the Xhosa proverb, *umuntu ngumuntu ngabantu* which translates as ‘a person is a person by or through other people.’<sup>66</sup> This philosophy underpins Abani’s alternative conceptualisation of human rights,<sup>67</sup> and the relations between persons. Drucilla Cornell, a scholar of jurisprudence and philosophy explains:

*uBuntu* is both the African principle of transcendence for the individual, and the law of the social bond. In *ubuntu* human beings are

intertwined in a world of ethical relations and obligations from the time they are born... It is only through the engagement and support of others that we are able to realise a true individuality and rise above our biological distinctiveness into a fully developed person whose uniqueness is inseparable from the journey to moral and ethical development.<sup>68</sup>

A moral, political and social philosophy of this order accords with Abani's conception of the foundation of human rights: a relation between persons premised on a shared responsibility, communal obligation and vulnerability, which leads to an ethic of inherent human dignity. For Abani, this formulation depends on a linguistic 'ordering together,' so, while his fiction may at times make the reader uncomfortable, this feeling of discomfort, this affect, so carefully orchestrated, is in itself an ethical injunction against the easier identification of universal humanism that elides the distance and difference between reader and the representation of suffering. This is the ethos that he explores in the novellas under discussion here: challenging the limits of religious and secular rhetorics of personhood, offering instead alternative modes of affinity and a distinctly postsecular poetic. While the protagonists of *Becoming Abigail* and *Song for Night* figure the stateless and silenced persons peripheral to governmental or human rights law, and in this way illustrate the failure of these systems, Abani's lyrical prose generates an alternative, 'deeper human syntax' that facilitates an uneasy recognition between the reader, and the victim and aggressor. This syntax or 'ordering together' depends upon human finitude – somatic and psychological precariousness and vulnerability. Like the motivation for the sacred, in the certainty of exposure, pain, and loss, Abani finds not only order but meaning. This meaning is carefully curated by Abani's post-secular poetics: the repetition and rituals of his lyrical prose. Abani constructs a more ethical reading practice dependent on a mutual but uneven experience of vulnerability and finitude.

Understood in these terms, it becomes clear that there is great intellectual sympathy between the socio-political dimensions of Abani's work, Butler's work on common corporeal vulnerability, and Hägglund's theorisation of secular faith. Abani, Butler and Hägglund share a common concern for the vulnerability of the subject and the frailty of the body, casting it as a necessary condition of secular faith and the relation between persons, and reader and text. The sacralisation of the body is an important aspect of this dynamic, and reading precarious bodies in Abani, and later Vera's fiction, through postsecular poetics extends the moral and political interventions of their work as it establishes a community of shared mortality between reader and the fiction. In what follows, the sacred is understood as the careful setting apart of the body through ritualised, performative engagement, coupled with a hermeneutic resignification of its value. Through the particular aesthetic quality of their lyrical prose, Abani and Vera reconceive the terms under which the body is constituted and also then the terms of



the relation between novel and reader. Abani wants his work to confront the reader, to challenge them to imagine a world in which we are all capable of anything, the beautiful, the ugly and the terrible. ‘The point,’ Abani writes,

is to... dare ourselves to imagine, to conjure and then face all of our darkness and all of our light simultaneously. To stand in that liminal moment when we have no solid ground beneath us, no clear firmament above, when the ambiguity of our nature reveals what we are capable of, on both sides.<sup>69</sup>

Abani confronts the ethical ambiguity of the reader’s position. He engages the reader’s empathy by creating an experience of shared somatic and existential vulnerability and transformation. For Abani and Vera, I argue, this is facilitated by singling out the body as a site of rich and complex symbolic value explored and extended by these writers’ aesthetic representations of the body.

### **Song for Night: *Ritual markings and a spiritual journey***

My Luck, the 15-year-old, narrator-protagonist of Abani’s *Song for Night*, is a child soldier in what historical details suggest is either the Biafran war or, perhaps, a more contemporary West African conflict in Liberia and Sierra Leone.<sup>70</sup> This historical elasticity is suggestive of Abani’s concern with precarious subjects across spatio-temporal contexts.<sup>71</sup> My Luck warns his reader in the opening of the novella, ‘What you hear is not my voice’: he, and the other children in his platoon, have had their vocal cords cut so that, should they trigger a mine while defusing it their cries of pain from injury or death will not distract the others.<sup>72</sup> My Luck regains consciousness after such an explosion, separated from his platoon. Believing he is still alive; My Luck attempts to reunite with his platoon. This journey is organised by chapter titles: ‘Silence is a Steady Hand, Palm Flat’; ‘Memory is a Pattern Cut into an Arm’; ‘Dreaming is Hands Held in Prayer over the Nose,’ each an evocative and prescient description of the sign language the children use to communicate with one another.<sup>73</sup> The sign language continuously brings the reader back to the body:<sup>74</sup> not only as a language performed through the body but also in the somatic descriptions of each sign. It becomes apparent as the narrative develops that My Luck is dead. He died as the mine he was defusing exploded. The purpose of his spiritual passage is not to reunite with his platoon or with his physical body, but to achieve a spiritual wholeness. My Luck’s stygian journey takes place alongside or on a river. Treading in the literary footsteps of eminent Nigerian writers like Amos Tutuola, Daniel O. Fagunwa, and Wole Soyinka, Abani writes of a coextensive universe inhabited by the living and dead, a world in which a boy soldier undertakes a sacred journey.

Despite the obvious violence of the novella's premise, the reader is confronted by the moral ambiguity of My Luck's character, portraying him as both victim and aggressor. 'Who taught me to enjoy killing,' My Luck wonders, 'a singular joy... It doesn't matter how the death is dealt – a bullet tearing through a body, the juicy suck of flesh around a bayonet, the grainy globular disintegration brought on by clubs.'<sup>75</sup> The 'intensity of the confrontation' Abani wishes to impart is clearly articulated in these visceral and poetic descriptions. The reader is challenged in a similar way when My Luck's platoon commander forces him, at gunpoint, to rape an elderly woman. The scene is fraught with moral uncertainty, and ultimately the question of who is to blame falls far short of providing any insight into the complexities of this particular horror. The carefully curated discomfort of *Song for Night* and *Becoming Abigail* undermines the empty sympathies and voyeuristic identifications of the reader. In these novellas readers are confronted by the relative privilege and safety of their position, while still being made aware of the precariousness of their own somatic and existential experience – here again, a deeper human syntax.

What I term somatic empathy, Sam Durrant extends beyond the human in his analysis of *Song for Night*, where he argues that it is not in the rediscovery of a shared humanist ethic that hope is to be found; this lies, rather, in what he terms 'creaturely mimesis,' the recognition of corporeal affinity, a morphological, 'trans-species spirit of relatedness.'<sup>76</sup> For Durrant the aim of both historical and animist materialism is the re-enchantment of the world, and the role of African literatures is to do more than merely represent this world. It is, instead, to perform its re-enchantment through allegorical rites of re-ancestralisation. Durrant sees *Song for Night* as a clear example of Abani embracing 'art as a transformative rite,' a type of literary ritual.<sup>77</sup> Indeed, Durrant asserts that the 'lyricisation of Abani's prose exemplifies a passage from a secular to a sacred understanding of his novelistic vocation, from the more or less realistic representation of a disenchanted, necropolitical world in *GraceLand* to its ritualised re-enchantment in *Song for Night*.<sup>78</sup> It is not merely that the novella is about a passage of the soul; it is, more importantly, that this stygian journey structures the narrative, re-enchanting the world as My Luck moves through intimate scenes of care and trauma. The novella's animist re-enchantment and the successful orchestration of somatic empathy depend upon Abani's prose which contrasts lyricism and violence with the singular treatment of the body.

Like Abigail, My Luck marks his body. On his right forearm, 'There are six X's carved there: one for each person that I enjoyed killing.'<sup>79</sup> On his left forearm is his 'own personal cemetery,' one cross for 'every loved one lost in this war, although there are a couple from before the war. I cut the first one when my grandfather died; the second I cut when my father died, with one of his circumcision knives.'<sup>80</sup> My Luck's father was an Imam and My Luck uses his ritual circumcision knife to cut a cross into his skin to

commemorate his father. He marks his body with a ritual object in an act of remembrance that will become a ritual of commemoration. The crosses on his left arm, signs for the loved ones he has lost, are a personal cemetery carried on his body, symbols of loss and memory:

To ground myself, I run my fingers meditatively over the small crosses cut into my left forearm. The tiny bumps, more like a rash than anything, help me to calm myself, center my breathing, return me to my body. In a strange way they are like a map of my consciousness, something that brings me back from the dark brink of war madness. My grandfather, a fisherman and storyteller, had a long rosary with bones, cowries, pieces of metal, feathers, pebbles, and twigs tied into it that he used to remember our genealogy. Mnemonic devices, he called things like this. These crosses are mine.<sup>81</sup>

Here, as in Abigail's case, marking the body with sacred symbols is a route to personal sovereignty. My Luck's scar cemetery is transformative because it maps the trajectory of his life in each death it represents. That the scars have become so indistinct from the skin itself, so patterned as to be a rash emerging from the skin, not carved by a foreign object, affirms their symbolic value in My Luck's story of himself. They are his rosary, a mnemonic device, a system of memory that locates him in time, in his body and within his lineage. The ritualised distinction of My Luck's body is similar to that of Abigail's body; he cuts to script his experience and affirm his embodied presence.

The meaning of My Luck's embodied experience is altered, however, as he becomes increasingly uncertain about what is happening to him. He reflects that he is 'mostly moving from one scene of past trauma and to another,' 'thoroughly confused,' but relentlessly propelled 'forward.'<sup>82</sup> The time between his memories is collapsing. Retracing the steps through the places his platoon has been, trying to reunite with them, My Luck realises that the spatial distance between them remains. The mine explosion which My Luck believes has resulted in a concussion has, in fact, killed him, and the violence of his death has separated his spirit from his body. My Luck explains:

Here we believe that when a person dies in a sudden and hard way, their spirit wanders confused looking for its body. Confused because they don't realise they are dead. I know this. Traditionally a shaman would ease such a spirit across to the other world. Now, well, the land is crowded with confused spirits and all the shamans are soldiers.<sup>83</sup>

The purpose of My Luck's journey is not to reunite him with his platoon, but rather, for him to find some peace after the devastations he has committed and experienced. In this place, where 'everything is possible,' what My Luck knows of the experience of violent death comes to pass: the text

constructs this very possibility. Like the world imagined in Ndibe's *Foreign Gods Inc.*, the literary realm of Abani's novella is the sanctioned space where enchantment and disenchantment operate together. My Luck eventually comes upon a shaman helping the spirits of dead soldiers find their bodies, but there is no mention of his lost body.

In a novella suffused with damaged, violated and decaying bodies it is unsettling that the protagonist is unaware of his spirit's violent rupture from his body, and that he is not reunited with his body. Yet the crosses on his forearms organise his memories, anchoring him in an embodied experience of loss and remembrance. The confusion of My Luck's physical presence makes his relation to his body and to his markings all the more important, they are his mnemonic anchor. Finally, after reencountering the traumatic moments of his life before and during the war, My Luck achieves a semblance of peace, and even this he experiences in and through his body:

This morning, unaccountably, I am filled with an almost unbearable lightness. This light comes not from a sudden wholeness on my part, but from the very wounds I carry on my body and in my soul. Each wound, in its particular way, giving off a particular and peculiar light.<sup>84</sup>

The ritual he used to scar his flesh in commemoration of loss now marks his body in light. The protagonists of Abani's two novellas share a similar relationship to the limits of their body; they use their flesh, mark it, in order to create a tangible, scripted narrative of their lives: each scar a sign for a past trauma or lost loved one. The scarring of their bodies should not be understood negatively as self-mutilation; it should be read for its constructive potential as ritual scarification and as an assertion of somatic sovereignty. The body is scarred not simply to inflict pain, but rather the ritual of marking is performed to write a story of loss and the fear of forgetting – the skin is paper and ink. The body, as object and actor, is made sacred by sacrifice and spiritual journey, and by these signs of ritual, which commemorate the frailty and strength of the human form. Abani explains that 'the creative process is a ritual of remembrance' motivated by the promise of loss. He writes,

So it seems that the desire to make art, to draw the limits of the body, to create a simulacrum has its roots in loss; or at least, the possibility of loss. The need to remember, to create (or re-create) a body out of loss, but also against loss, and against forgetting, is what drives the artist... It can be argued that.<sup>85</sup>

### **Vera: The female body, ritual and postsecular poetics**

Abani's words have purchase too in reading the representation of trauma and loss in Yvonne Vera's novels. Vera is well known for her attention to women, and for the chronology of her fiction that inserts the experiences of

women into Zimbabwe's historiography. Vera's oeuvre begins with *Nehanda* (1993), set in the late nineteenth century during the first moments of colonial encounter, followed by *Without a Name* (1994) and *Under The Tongue* (1996) that take place in the 1970s during the guerrilla campaigns against white minority rule, then *Butterfly Burning* (1998) set in a township in the 1940s, and ending with *The Stone Virgins* (2002) which takes place during the civil war in the 1980s. Aside from the obvious political and social issues, Vera addresses taboo themes by writing openly about women's experiences of sex, incest and abortion.<sup>86</sup> Vera's depictions of these concerns are often explicitly related to the land, to women's relation to the land and how this relation is disturbed by assault and violence. She says: 'The connection to the land for the women is that of the disturbance. Something negative.'<sup>87</sup> *Nehanda*, for instance, opens with this description of its heroine: 'Rivers and trees cover her palms; the trees are lifeless and the rivers dry. She feels that gaping wound everywhere... The grass has abandoned the soil and sprouts triumphantly from her very feet.'<sup>88</sup> The inspiration for *Nehanda* comes from a mythic story of a female spirit medium who was a prominent leader during the first *Chimurenga* (1896–1897), when locals fought against British colonial expansion. The afterlife of her story has become an important narrative of anti-colonial resistance. Ranka Primorac notes that *Nehanda* finds 'herself precariously placed at the intersection of *two* spatio-temporal borderlines: one between the living and the dead ... and the other between the African universe and that of the invading white men.'<sup>89</sup> Vera's poetic style turns on the descriptive focus to *Nehanda*'s body where this borderline between local epistemology and colonial authority is mediated. The effects of British encroachment on the land materialise on her body, which is both continuous with and distinct from the land: 'The earth moves. She feels her body turn to water.'<sup>90</sup> Vera's style relies on somatic metaphor: her writing sets the body apart through its opacity and lyricality. Thus, as Primorac asserts, Vera's novels are 'not only an organization of signs which produces meaning,' they produce 'a world charged with meaning,'<sup>91</sup> and the body is the lightning rod, sacralised through poetic ritual attention.

Like Abani, whose fictional works expose the cracks in a globalising and transnational world and the voiceless people who inhabit these spaces (literally, in *My Luck*'s case), Vera's work narrates Zimbabwean women's experiences of the moments overlooked by national historiographies. Avoiding the pitfalls of attempting to represent the subaltern subject, neither Vera nor Abani offers any direct or transparent access to their protagonists. The narration keeps the subject at a distance, and whatever resolution might be offered, Phephelaphi's self-immolation, Nonceba's slow recovery after the rape and mutilation, Abigail's suicide or *My Luck*'s acceptance of his death, none of these narratives provide a fruitful story of self-realisation. Instead, they describe moments of violence and violation as well as struggles for selfhood, agency and resistance.

I argue that Vera's work, like Abani's, expresses and explores the inevitability of loss, pain and human vulnerability, and does so through ritualised attention to the body. While Abani's protagonists clearly ritualise their bodies through marking, the female bodies in Vera's work are ritualised through the lyrical descriptions they receive, which rely heavily on repetition and metaphor – ritual and literary modes of expression. Vera's style is characterised by 'the seductive rhythms of the prose, the apparent simplicity of the language, the repetition of syntactic patterns and motifs,' symbolism, metonymy, the embedded influence of orality, and its 'synaesthetic character.'<sup>92</sup> All of this contributes to the ritual attention on the body, their additional symbolic valence, and consequent sacralisation.

*The Stone Virgins*, which gives voice to the experience of two sisters, Thenjiwe and Nonceba, is divided into two sections. The first reflects the sense of promise in Zimbabwe's pre-independence period; the second takes place after independence from white minority rule, during the Gukurahundi Massacres (1980–1986).<sup>93</sup> During this time the Fifth Brigade, known to be loyal to then-ZANLA leader, Robert Mugabe, were sent into Matabeleland under the ruse of rooting out political dissidents. However, recently recovered documentation proves what has long been suspected: that under orders from Mugabe the Fifth Brigade waged an ethnic war against the Ndebele, who supported Joshua Nkomo, the leader of ZIPRA, and Mugabe's political competition. There were 20,000 estimated casualties, and the majority of these deaths were women, many of whom had also been raped.<sup>94</sup>

The sisters' experiences allegorise the hope of a new nation, and the violent disappointment when that promise is unfulfilled. In the pre-independence section of the novel *Thenjiwe*, the elder of the two sisters, takes a lover. These scenes are lavish and sensual, with a particular adoration directed towards Thenjiwe's body. In the post-independence part of the novel, Thenjiwe is decapitated and her sister, Nonceba, is raped and disfigured. Here too the descriptions are vividly focused on the body. This novel explores not only the ritualisation and sacralisation of the site of the body, but also the violent transgression of that site – one informing the other. The title of the novel refers 'to San paintings in the Motopo hills in western Zimbabwe depicting virgins sacrificed before the burial of a king.'<sup>95</sup> During the rape the narrator describes Nonceba as 'a woman... from long ago, from the naked caves,' 'her hands chaste dead bone, porously thin, painted on a rock.'<sup>96</sup> After his attack on the sisters, Sibaso retreats to these hills, to the sacred Mbebele Cave, or 'shrine of Mbebele' where these paintings are found.<sup>97</sup> This is clearly an allusion to the sacrifice required of the sisters.<sup>98</sup> Their bodies are in one way or another sacrificed for the nation, a rewriting of the history depicted in the cave paintings. Vera does not, however, write sacred painted stillness; she writes erotic and violated bodies made sacred in ritual language, and not by location. Even though they are brutalised and violated in the text, Vera maintains an aesthetic tenderness, even reverence, for the female body in the lyricism of her

composition. The eroticism of the first section of *The Stone Virgins* celebrates Thenjiwe's agency and sense of control over her body, while the second poetically narrates Nonceba's recovery after the rape and traces her slow and painful reclamation of her body.

Thenjiwe is described by the omniscient narrator as fecund, lithe, and rich with the possibility of creation: she 'moves without hesitation, with lips ripe.' She offers Cephas, her lover, 'her hips, her laughter, her waiting thighs.'<sup>99</sup> Thenjiwe's attention to Cephas wanes in favour of a seed he has inadvertently carried with him on his clothing. The procreative potential of Thenjiwe's body is expressed metaphorically in the sexually charged imagery of her mouth and the seed: 'With the tip of her tongue, she slides the seed around... with one touch of her tongue tip, she loses the rest of her senses... She has been hit by an illumination so profound, so total she has to breathe deeply.'<sup>100</sup> This synecdochal imagery is characteristic of Vera's writing, Elleke Boehmer asserts, where 'body parts, especially those belonging to lovers, and those in pain, are – like music and labour – often depicted in synecdoche, as disconnected from whole bodies.'<sup>101</sup> Parts of bodies are differentiated from the whole, establishing their symbolic difference, which is, following Bell the basis of ritual. Thenjiwe's mouth stands in for the potential of her whole body; similarly, the fragmented description of her bones relates metaphorically to her physical vulnerability and her inevitable end:

He loves each of her bones, from her wrist to her ankle, the blood flowing under her skin... He loves her bones, the harmony of her fingers. He loves most the bone branching along her hip. The sliding silence of each motion, tendons expanding... He places his palm along her waist and announces, as though she is a new creation, 'This is a beautiful bone.'<sup>102</sup>

Thenjiwe's body is broken down to its composite parts through her lover's gaze, which is simultaneously erotic and violent, foreshadowing Thenjiwe's decapitation.

Bone: the only material in us that cracks, that fractures, that can hurt our entire being, that breaks while we are still living. This he loves, this bone in her, as it is the deepest part of her, the most prevailing of her being, beyond death, a fossil before dying.<sup>103</sup>

The lover's disarticulating perspective moves from the impermanence of flesh to the longevity of bone: 'the most prevailing of her being.' The exposure of Thenjiwe's body, her susceptibility to pleasure, pain and death are precisely what make her form so precious to Cephas. The elongated and metered description together with the immediacy of the present tense, celebrate this precarious balance and mark her body as sacred through repeated, ritualised and reverential attention.

Cephas's veneration for Thenjiwe, and her own sexual agency are juxtaposed with the appalling brutality of Nonceba's rape and disfiguration. While Thenjiwe is described in ripe fullness, Nonceba's body is a void:

He enters her body like a vacuum. She can do nothing to save herself. He clutches her from the waist, his entire hand resting boldly over her stomach. He presses down. He pulls her to him. She hesitates. He forces her down. She yields. She is leaning backwards into his body. He holds her like a bent stem. He draws her waist into the curve of his arm. She is moulded into the shape of his waiting arm – a tendril on a hard rock.<sup>104</sup>

In contrast to the seamless, elongated sentences that describe Thenjiwe's sensual body, these are clipped. The parataxis is cinematic, creating what Ratti might term tableaux of violence. Each sentence is a separate violence inflicted on Nonceba's body. There are no names in this passage; instead, Sibaso and Nonceba are reduced to a series of personal and possessive pronouns, bodies in space rather than persons. His violation is absolute: 'His fingers part her lips, dry skin, find her tongue. His fingers are on her tongue... move into her mouth... over her tongue.'<sup>105</sup> Recalling the traumatised and mute protagonist of *Under the Tongue*, and the seed rolling around Thenjiwe's mouth, Nonceba's mouth is invaded by her rapist's fingers. There is no seed here; there is no creative potential, only invasion and imposed silence.

While Nonceba is raped, Thenjiwe lies dead on the floor, Sibaso having killed her as he approached the home. The description of Thenjiwe's death resonates uncomfortably with the assault on Nonceba: 'His head is behind Thenjiwe, where Thenjiwe was before, floating in her body; he is in her body... He is absorbing Thenjiwe's motions into his own body, existing where Thenjiwe was, moving into the spaces she has occupied.'<sup>106</sup>

Thenjiwe's murder, orchestrated in almost balletic movements, is articulated not as an incursion on her body, but as an assault on her physical space – where she was, now he stands. This is repeated in the equally difficult and poetic rape scene. Though the imagery and rhythm of the prose changes, Vera maintains the aesthetic, synaesthetic quality of her composition from scenes of love to rape. Thenjiwe and Nonceba's bodies are treated with lyrical reverence throughout the novel; here, if nowhere else, Vera imagines tenderness and compassion. As Boehmer notes, 'Writing in the context of Zimbabwe's history of independence struggle, women in her view can be the interpreters of the nation's destiny, just as their bodies provide an accurate gauge of its (pre- or post-independence) condition.'<sup>107</sup> Women and their bodies can have both destructive and restorative relationships to a national history, and it is in the matter of choice, in the exercising of agency, that Vera imagines a different world for her heroines.

Agency and taboo come together in the depiction of Phephelaphi in Vera's earlier novel *Butterfly Burning*, where Phephelaphi performs a



'self-induced abortion and self-immolation.'<sup>108</sup> The novel is set in Makokoba, a township in Bulawayo, at the end of the 1940s. It follows the story of Phephelaphi, a young woman drawn to the possibilities of her own freedom and independence – to potential futures outside of the township. She believes that she has control over her own body and her fate. She meets Fumbatha, an older man, who becomes her lover. Slowly Phephelaphi comes to realise that her world is constrained, that her choices, while she has them, are limited, and that her body can be both her salvation and her destruction. Despite Fumbatha's objections and cautions of rejection, Phephelaphi applies for a nurses training program and is accepted. She is, however, pregnant and pregnant women are not accepted into the course. Feeling betrayed by her body and constrained by the limits of her life in Makokoba with Fumbatha, Phephelaphi performs a self-induced abortion. Phephelaphi goes to the dry bush-land on the outskirts on Makokoba: 'Push. She has pushed it in. Sharp and piercing... Her hand is steady inside her body. Her own hand inserting an irreversible harm.'<sup>109</sup> In what is still exquisitely choreographed expression and movement, Vera writes the edge of somatic control: 'It is herself, her own agony spilling over some fine limit of becoming which she has ceased suddenly to understand, too light and too heavy. She embraces it, braces for the tearing. Her body breaks like decaying wood.'<sup>110</sup> Phephelaphi's pain, the consequence of her choice is entangled and co-implicated with the land. The tool she uses to break the 'watery sac' comes from a dry thorn bush – the thorn, 'the longest and strongest needle she could find.'<sup>111</sup> This same bush is 'now bright with dots of red,' the landscape appears as sympathetic and claustrophobic witness to her pain.<sup>112</sup>

Fumbatha leaves her, and when Phephelaphi finds that she is pregnant again, she does not return to the land. The novel ends at the limit of her agency, with her self-immolation. The comparison Boehmer draws between this and the Indian burial custom of *sati*,<sup>113</sup> where a widow is expected to immolate herself on her husband's pyre, recalls the sacrificial myth of *The Stone Virgins*. Despite Phephelaphi's belief in her independence, in her freedom, she is constrained by the single room she shares with Fumbatha, by Sidojiwe E2, and by the single road she seems to walk on. The one thing left to her is choice and the control she has over her body. She uses this to liberate herself:

The fire moves over her light as a feather, smooth like oil. She has wings. She can fly. She turns her arms over and sees them burn and raises them higher above her head... She is a bird with wings spread. She falls into a beautiful sound of something weightless rising, a blue light, a yellow light, the smell of skin burning.<sup>114</sup>

Through the transformation of metaphor Vera imagines Phephelaphi's end in the perfection of what it ought to be. The lyrical, synaesthetic prose

characteristic of Vera is evident here – metaphor and fire releasing Phephelaphi from the restrictions of her form. In this novel, as in *The Stone Virgins* and *Nehanda*, Vera's poetic style elevates the bodies of her heroines to the forefront of the text. The bodies of Nehanda, Thenjiwe, Nonceba, and Phephelaphi are the signs of their struggle, of their precarious and vulnerable place in the patriarchal, national history of Zimbabwe. Yet, their bodies too are the site of their struggle and resistance, the site of their agency and strength. And it is here that Vera dares to imagine, and dares her reader to imagine, an alternative. Vera's veneration for the female body is expressed in the repetitions and patterns of ritual attention, the affordances of ritual drawn into the text. Vera makes use of the syntax and signification of ritual to set the female body apart. She writes the female form as sacred – as vulnerable, violable and finite, and therefore sacred. Despite the violent, sometimes horrific taboos about which Vera writes, the poetic veneration of the female body is a constant presence in her work. Female bodies remain the objects of ritual attention, and no male body is treated in the same way. Both Vera's and Abani's work illustrate poesis, the transformative capacity of prose, as it enacts the care, reverence, and formal integration of ritual their work describes.

Vera's heroines embody, in every sense of the word, the precarity of the world they inhabit, as do My Luck and Abigail. In a world where the limitations and failures of human rights are daily evident; in the absence of belief in a transcendent good; and without plausible national and transnational grand narratives of improvement, the writing of Yvonne Vera and Chris Abani documents this often violent reality, at the same time envisioning heterodox alternatives. Their work constructs, and relies on, the somatic empathy between reader and text; it depends on a shared experience and acceptance of the vulnerability and precarity of the human form, and in doing so, presents the possibility of a deeper human syntax, an affiliation of shared mortality. To repeat J. Z. Smith's definition of ritual: Vera and Abani write 'the way things ought to be in conscious tension to the way things are in such a way that this ritualised perfection is recollected in the ordinary, uncontrolled, course of things.'<sup>115</sup> The objects of poetic and ritual attention, bodies in Vera and Abani's fiction are resignified and made sacred by the ritualised attention they receive in the text. Abigail's ritual scarification; My Luck's cemetery of crosses on his forearm, his already dead spirit-body seeking resolution; Phephelaphi's self-immolation and Cephas's poetic consecration of Thenjiwe's form – in each case the ritual of lyrical description sacralises the body, rejoicing in and mourning its limits.

## Notes

- 1 Chris Abani, 'Painting a Body of Loss and Love in the Proximity of an Aesthetic', *The Millions*, 25 November 2013, <http://www.themillions.com/2013/11/painting-a-body-of-loss-and-love-in-the-proximity-of-an-aesthetic.html>.

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- 2 Yvonne Vera, *Butterfly Burning* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2000), 114.
- 3 Chris Shilling, *The Body and Social Theory* (London; Thousand Oaks, Calif.: Sage, 2003), 11.
- 4 As Stuart Hall explains, Foucault ‘places the body at the centre of the struggles between difference formations of power/knowledge. The techniques of regulation are applied to the body. Different discursive formations and apparatuses divide, classify and inscribe the body differently in their respective regimes of power and “truth”’ (Hall, ‘Foucault: Power, Knowledge and Discourse,’ 78).
- 5 Shilling, *The Body and Social Theory*, 1.
- 6 Shilling, 2.
- 7 Judith Butler, *Precarious Life: The Powers of Mourning and Violence* (London: Verso, 2004), 44.
- 8 Butler, 26.
- 9 Butler, 42–43.
- 10 David Hillman and Ulrika Maude, eds., *The Cambridge Companion to The Body in Literature*, Cambridge Companions to Literature (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2015), 1.
- 11 Hillman and Maude, 4.
- 12 Hillman and Maude, 4.
- 13 Hillman and Maude, 6.
- 14 More detailed discussions of theories of ritual and their development can be found in Catherine Bell’s *Ritual Theory, Ritual Practice* and *Ritual: Perspectives and Dimensions*, in Talal Asad’s *Genealogies of Religion*, and in Sally Moore and Barbara Myerhoff’s *Secular Ritual*. As an example of the developing definitions of ritual, Victor Turner views ritual as ‘prescribed formal behavior for occasions not given over to technological routine, having reference to beliefs in mystical beings or powers’ (Victor Witter Turner, *The Forest of Symbols: Aspects of Ndembu Ritual* (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 1967), 19). Jonathan Z. Smith’s theorization of ritual maps onto both religious and secular contexts; for him, ‘ritual represents the creation of a controlled environment where the variables (i.e., the accidents) of ordinary life have been displaced precisely because they are felt to be so overwhelmingly present and powerful. Ritual is a means of performing the way things ought to be in conscious tension to the way things are in such a way that this ritualised perfection is recollected in the ordinary, uncontrolled, course of things’ (Jonathan Z. Smith, ‘The Bare Facts of Ritual’, *History of Religions* 20, no. 1/2 (August 1, 1980): 124–125). Further, in their introduction to the collection *Secular Ritual*, Sally Moore and Barbara Myerhoff define ritual as, ‘in part a form, and a form which gives certain meanings to its contents. The work of ritual, then, is partly attributable to its morphological characteristics. Its medium is part of its message’ (Moore and Myerhoff, 8).
- 15 Talal Asad, *Genealogies of Religion: Discipline and Reasons of Power in Christianity and Islam* (Baltimore, Md.; London: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1993), 91.
- 16 Beginning with the first edition of the *Encyclopaedia Britannica*, Asad tracks how the entries under ritual change over time. From the first 1771 entry on ritual, a book which presents ‘the order and manner to be observed in performing divine service in a particular church,’ to the entry from 1910 which is preoccupied with ritual’s ‘symbolic character, the meaning attached to it, and the fact that it is a universal phenomenon’ (Asad, 56, 60). Ritual, once associated with written script that detailed practices in a particular premodern Christian church, is now an action that has universal applicability. Asad’s critique undermines the claims of ritual as a universal phenomenon emerging from early anthropologists and ethnographers.

- 17 Catherine M. Bell, *Ritual Theory, Ritual Practice* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1992), 91.
- 18 Bell, 74.
- 19 Jonathan Z. Smith, *To Take Place: Toward Theory in Ritual*, Reprint edition (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1992), 109.
- 20 Bell, *Ritual Theory*, 98.
- 21 Bell, 98.
- 22 Bell, 181, 196.
- 23 Jean Comaroff and John L. Comaroff, *Modernity and Its Malcontents: Ritual and Power in Postcolonial Africa* (University of Chicago Press, 1993), xiv.
- 24 Comaroff and Comaroff, xxx.
- 25 Comaroff and Comaroff, xvi.
- 26 Comaroff and Comaroff, xi.
- 27 Smith, 'Bare', 124–25.
- 28 Comaroff and Comaroff, *Modernity*, xxi.
- 29 Comaroff and Comaroff, xxi.
- 30 Caroline Levine, *Forms: Whole, Rhythm, Hierarchy, Network*, Reprint edition (Princeton, N.J.; Oxford: Princeton University Press, 2017), 10.
- 31 Chris Abani, *On Humanity*, 2008, [https://www.ted.com/talks/chris\\_abani\\_m\\_uses\\_on\\_humanity](https://www.ted.com/talks/chris_abani_m_uses_on_humanity).
- 32 James M. Hodapp, 'The Postcolonial Ecopolitics of Consumption: Reimagining the Kola Nut in Chris Abani's *GraceLand*', *Critical Arts* 32, no. 2 (March 4, 2018): 5.
- 33 For a review of current literature on the kola nut in *GraceLand* and a focused exposition on its importance see Hodapp, 'The Postcolonial Ecopolitics of Consumption,' 2008.
- 34 See Rebekah Cumpsty, 'Tracing the Transnational: Scaling (Neo) Imperial Realities through the Body in Chris Abani's Fiction', *Interventions* 22, no. 5 (2020): 624–640.
- 35 Chris Abani, *Becoming Abigail* (New York: Akashic Books, 2006), 29.
- 36 ÆlanikꞤ Æla Orie, 'The Structure and Function of Yoruba Facial Scarification,' *Anthropological Linguistics* 53, no. 1 (April 1, 2011): 15.
- 37 Paul E. Lovejoy, 'Slavery in Africa,' in *The Routledge History of Slavery* (Routledge, 2010), 38.
- 38 Abani, *Abigail*, 33.
- 39 Abani, 36.
- 40 Abani, 36.
- 41 Abani, 35.
- 42 Ashley Dawson, 'Cargo Culture: Literature in an Age of Mass Displacement,' *WSQ: Women's Studies Quarterly* 38, no. 1 (2010): 185.
- 43 Dawson, 181.
- 44 Dawson, 183.
- 45 Abani, *Abigail*, 97–99.
- 46 Abani, 93.
- 47 Susan L. Hall, 'The Uncanny Sacrifice: Sex Trafficking in Chris Abani's *Becoming Abigail*,' *Critique: Studies in Contemporary Fiction* 56, no. 1 (January 1, 2015): 43.
- 48 Abani, *Abigail*, 118.
- 49 Abani, 55.
- 50 Jonathan Z. Smith, *Relating Religion: Essays in the Study of Religion* (Chicago; London: University of Chicago, 2004), 362.
- 51 Abani, *Abigail*, 55.
- 52 Abani, 61.
- 53 Abani, 120.

48 *Ritualisation and the limits of the body*

- 54 Giorgio Agamben, *Homo Sacer: Sovereign Power and Bare Life* (Stanford, Calif.: Stanford University Press, 1998), 12.
- 55 James Dawes, 'Human Rights in Literary Studies,' *Human Rights Quarterly* 31, no. 2 (2009): 401.
- 56 Dawes, 397.
- 57 Alexandra Schultheis Moore and Elizabeth Swanson Goldberg, "'Let Us Begin with a Smaller Gesture': An Ethos of Human Rights and the Possibilities of Form in Chris Abani's 'Song for Night' and 'Becoming Abigail'," *ARIEL: A Review of International English Literature* 45, no. 4 (2014): 60.
- 58 Dawes, 'Human Rights in Literary Studies,' 399–400.
- 59 Moore and Goldberg, "'Let Us Begin with a Smaller Gesture",' 60.
- 60 Chris Abani, 'Resisting the Anomie: Exile and the Romantic Self,' in *Creativity in Exile* (New York: Rodopi, 2004), 29–30.
- 61 This resonates with what Mark Sanders calls 'foldedness.' Addressing intellectual 'responsibility-in-complicities' in Apartheid, Sanders writes: 'Complicity, in this convergence of act and responsibility, is thus at one with the basic folded-together-ness of being, of being-human, of self and other. Such foldedness is the condition of possibility of all particular affiliations, loyalties, and commitments' (Mark Sanders, *Complicities: The Intellectual and Apartheid*, Philosophy and Postcoloniality (Durham, N.C.; London: Duke University Press, 2002), 11).
- 62 Moore and Goldberg, "'Let Us Begin with a Smaller Gesture",' 65.
- 63 See also John and Jean Comaroff's discussion of African personhood in *Theory from the South* (Comaroff and Comaroff 2012, 51–64).
- 64 Abani, *Humanity*.
- 65 Abani says in his 2008 TED talk: 'But what I've come to learn is that the world is never saved in grand messianic gestures, but in the simple accumulation of gentle, soft, almost invisible acts of compassion, everyday acts of compassion. In South Africa, they have a phrase called Ubuntu. Ubuntu comes out of a philosophy that says, the only way for me to be human is for you to reflect my humanity back at me... So what Ubuntu really says is that there is no way for us to be human without other people.'
- 66 Augustine Shutte, *Philosophy for Africa* (UCT Press, 1993), 46.
- 67 Chris Abani, 'The Graceful Walk', in *The Routledge Companion to Literature and Human Rights* (Oxford: Routledge, 2018), 501.
- 68 Drucilla Cornell, *Ubuntu and the Law: African Ideals and Postapartheid Jurisprudence* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2012), 3.
- 69 Chris Abani, 'Ethics and Narrative: The Human and the Other,' *Witness*, 2009, <http://witness.blackmountaininstitute.org>.
- 70 An independent Biafra was the nationalist hope of the Igbo people. The civil war was fought between June 1967 and January 1970 by secessionist Biafra in the southeast and the federal government of Nigeria. The Biafran polity is the subject of significant literary endeavour: Achebe's *There Was a Country* (2012) and Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie's *Half of a Yellow Sun* (2006) are among the most recent publications in a long bibliography.
- 71 Sam Durrant, 'Creaturally Mimesis: Life After Necropolitics in Chris Abani's *Song for Night*,' *Research in African Literatures* 49, no. 3 (2018): 187.
- 72 Chris Abani, *Song for Night: A Novella* (New York: Akashic Books, 2007), 9.
- 73 Abani, 9, 28, 79.
- 74 Durrant, 'Creaturally Mimesis,' 195.
- 75 Durrant, 135.
- 76 Durrant, 178.
- 77 Durrant, 191.
- 78 Durrant, 189.

- 79 Abani, *Song*, 29.  
 80 Abani, 28–29.  
 81 Abani, 15–16.  
 82 Abani, 139.  
 83 Abani, 101.  
 84 Abani, 143.  
 85 Abani, ‘Millions’.  
 86 Ranka Primorac, “‘The Place of the Woman Is the Place of the Imagination’”: Yvonne Vera Interviewed by Ranka Primorac,’ *The Journal of Commonwealth Literature* 39, no. 3 (September 1, 2004): 160.  
 87 Primorac, 161.  
 88 Yvonne Vera, *Nehanda* (Harare: Baobab Books, 1993), 1.  
 89 Ranka Primorac, ‘Crossing into the Space–Time of Memory: Borderline Identities in Novels by Yvonne Vera,’ *The Journal of Commonwealth Literature* 36, no. 2 (June 1, 2001): 81, <https://doi.org/10.1177/002198940103600207>.  
 90 Vera, *Nehanda*, 1.  
 91 Primorac, ‘Crossing,’ 78.  
 92 Robert Muponde and Mandivavarira Maodzwa-Taruvinga, *Sign and Taboo: Perspectives on the Poetic Fiction of Yvonne Vera* (Oxford: James Currey, 2002), 5.  
 93 Sandra Chait, ‘The Stone Virgins (Review),’ *Africa Today* 50, no. 4 (2004): 132.  
 94 Chait, 132; Stuart Doran, ‘New Documents Claim to Prove Mugabe Ordered Gukurahundi Killings,’ *The Guardian*, May 19, 2015, sec. World news, <http://www.theguardian.com/world/2015/may/19/mugabe-zimbabwe-gukurahundi-m-assacre-matabeleland>.  
 95 Elleke Boehmer, *Stories of Women: Gender and Narrative in the Postcolonial Nation* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2005), 194.  
 96 Yvonne Vera, *The Stone Virgins* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2002), 78.  
 97 Vera, 142.  
 98 In her interview with Ranka Primorac, Vera explains that she wanted to address the Matopo rock paintings, ‘but in a way that is surrounded by this war, and the man interprets this very sexually, this language of the rocks. And the women – in violence’ (161).  
 99 Vera, *Stone*, 36, 38.  
 100 Vera, 39.  
 101 Boehmer, *Stories of Women: Gender and Narrative in the Postcolonial Nation*, 179.  
 102 Vera, *Stone*, 37.  
 103 Vera, 37.  
 104 Vera, 68.  
 105 Vera, 70.  
 106 Vera, 73.  
 107 Boehmer, *Stories of Women: Gender and Narrative in the Postcolonial Nation*, 198.  
 108 Boehmer, 178.  
 109 Vera, *Butterfly*, 115.  
 110 Vera, 116.  
 111 Vera, 115, 117.  
 112 Vera, 117.  
 113 Boehmer, *Stories of Women: Gender and Narrative in the Postcolonial Nation*, 178.  
 114 Vera, *Butterfly*, 150.  
 115 Smith, ‘Bare’, 125.

## 2 The sacred in the city

### Pedestrian mapping in the work of Phaswane Mpe, Teju Cole and Ivan Vladislavić

The sacred permeates the pages of Phaswane Mpe's *Welcome to Our Hillbrow* (2001), Teju Cole's *Open City* (2011) and Ivan Vladislavić's *Portrait with Keys* (2006). It is written into the text by Cole's protagonist, for whom the city of New York is built upon slave burial grounds, while the presence of Yoruba deities punctuates his experience and understanding of the city. The entirety of Mpe's novel is narrated from Heaven, a place of liminality and transcendence where the ancestors reside and where the protagonist's stories are told after he has died. Vladislavić's work of creative non-fiction sacralises the city through the poetic prose and creative structure of the text. These novels excavate the layers of urban memory, exposing the palimpsestic significations that ground the sacred in Johannesburg and New York. In these novels Mpe, Cole, and Vladislavić envision the ways the sacred may be leveraged to resignify urban environments so that their protagonists might assert a sense of belonging in their chosen locality.

The sacred can be understood as a result of repeated and sustained hermetic and performative engagement which distinguishes the 'thing' from the mundane world which surrounds it. This chapter turns to the sacred dynamics and postsecular poetics of pedestrian narratives. It demonstrates firstly, how sacred epistemologies are drawn into urban spaces in order to establish a personal pedestrian map and thereby assert a measure of habitation and belonging; and secondly how the affordances of ritual and the sacred – repetition, signification, differentiation – are integrated into the formal structure of these novels. Reading for these two layers of postsecular poetics attunes the reader to the experiences of alienation and belonging in the postcolonial globalised city, and the role of sacralisation in mitigating these pressures.

Walking to construct a pedestrian map of their environment allows Mpe's, Cole's and Vladislavić's protagonists to access the history of the places they encounter and to use their own sacred knowledge and the ritual of walking to order and categorise the space they now inhabit, thus conceptually mapping the city in different terms. The affordances of the sacred, that is the repeated engagement with and interpretation of a given environment or object that is then differentiated from the mundane, finds significant resonances with Michel de Certeau's walker. In his well-known

essay 'Walking in the City,' de Certeau asserts that walking defines or creates a 'space of enunciation.'<sup>1</sup> de Certeau's explanation of 'pedestrian enunciation' celebrates the creative agency of the individual,<sup>2</sup> and has an additional 'function of introducing an other in relation to' the walker.<sup>3</sup> In a following essay 'Practices of Space,' he writes: 'the act of walking is to the urban system what the act of speaking, the *Speech Act*, is to language or to spoken utterance.'<sup>4</sup> He goes on to explain that the pedestrian walking the city has 'a threefold "uttering" function.'<sup>5</sup> The first is 'a process of *appropriation* of the topographic system.'<sup>6</sup> As a 'speaker appropriates and assumes language' through utterance, so too does the pedestrian appropriate the urban streets by walking.<sup>7</sup> Thus, the act of walking, central to Mpe's, Cole's and Vladislavic's novels, is not merely a physical action, it is a 'taking in,' a conceptual assumption of the street facilitated by the second 'uttering' function of walking which is 'a spatial *realisation* of the site.'<sup>8</sup> The pedestrian moves through the city, at each moment gaining a new awareness of their spatial orientation, physically and imaginatively locating themselves in space. Paired with the third function of walking, the distinction between places, this provides the pedestrian a space *against* which to position themselves, but also enables them to differentiate between discrete places in the city. The comparison between the act of walking and the act of speaking is pertinent to understanding how the characters make sense of their urban presence. If speech brings the subject into language, then walking brings the subject into the city. In these literary narratives walking is an expression of the imminent presence of the pedestrian in the city, a physical and conceptual claim to the space, made feasible by the interpretive and imaginative engagement of the character in categorising and organising their knowledge and experience.

When conceptualising the sacred, there are significant resonances between the ways in which de Certeau's pedestrian constructs a version of the city by walking, and how Chidester and Linenthal claim a space is sacralised by particular interpretive manoeuvres. They explain that 'characteristic modes of symbolic engagement in the production of sacred space include strategies of appropriation, exclusion, inversion, and hybridization.'<sup>9</sup> Chidester and Linenthal's theory of the sacred valorises the capacity of the individual to make strategic organisational choices, similar to those of de Certeau's pedestrian. Just as the speech act is a materialisation of language, so too is walking a materialisation of the space of the city, as it brings an aspect of the city into being. The physical and conceptual appropriation of space is common to both pedestrian and sacralising theories. Chidester and Linenthal's assertion, however, that sacralisation is an interpretive and imaginative appropriation and recategorisation of space that enables the subject to establish a sense of control and belonging as a way to access the transcendent, goes beyond the capabilities of de Certeau's pedestrian. Here, then, it is possible to consider what de Certeau's theorisation cannot but overlook: that forms of pedestrian movement that rely on



repetition to generate meaning and intimate understandings of place mirror and draw from the dynamics of the sacred. Gevisser's *Lost and Found in Johannesburg (Dispatcher)* and Vladislavić's *Portrait* demonstrate this habitual, indeed ritualised, mapping of the globalised city, which takes on an added dimension in Cole's and Mpe's fiction, where the repetition of pedestrian movement and signification is augmented by the integration of African systems of knowledge.

These novels represent a distinctly African mode of modernity; the entanglements, mobility, flexibility and multiplicity of the globalised African city, or postcolony.<sup>10</sup> Claire Chambers and Graham Huggan distinguish between the global and postcolonial city:

The global city is perhaps best understood as a relatively recent phenomenon, coextensive with economic developments in late-capitalist modernity and allied to spiralling increases in world population, both of which help account for accelerated rates of urbanization – the unevenly developed transition from rural to urban ways of living – all over the world. The postcolonial city, on the other hand, is connected to a more distant past: it is both informed and transformed by the 'long' colonial histories that shape it, as well as by more recent patterns of migration, and the social dynamics tied in with these, which are in turn often linked directly or indirectly to the colonial past.<sup>11</sup>

Johannesburg, Lagos and New York are global and postcolonial cities, marked as they are by colonial pasts, they are arenas of multiplicity and mobility – actual and attempted; financial and physical; imaginative and creative; developed and underdeveloped. On the continent this 'entanglement of the modern and the African,' Sarah Nuttall and Achille Mbembe argue, 'produce[s] an original form, if not of African cosmopolitanism, then of worldliness.'<sup>12</sup> Mbembe argues that there is a violence and threat inherent to the postcolony: in this space of entanglement the violence cannot be negated or ignored, though it does not foreclose the possibility of creativity, productivity or resistance – in fact violence may be thought of as constitutive of this affirmation. For the postcolonial flâneur discussed here, the threat of violence contributes to the exposition of uneven development and historical contingencies which make the protagonists physically vulnerable and aware of their surroundings. Isabel Carrera Suárez 'contends that contemporary, postcolonial, post-diasporic texts create embodied (and at times exposed) *pedestrians*, rather than the detached modernist flâneurs, and even the resistant *walkers* imagined by de Certeau.'<sup>13</sup> Despite articulating how the walker might transgress the 'boundaries of an imposed spatial grammar' and model creative strategies of resistance, what de Certeau underestimates are the constraints on urban mobility experienced by working-class, 'racialised, gendered and sexualised subjects.'<sup>14</sup> Instead, the walker of contemporary fiction, who Carrera Suárez describes as the 'pedestrian-

artist,' 'acknowledges her body and urban boundaries as located sites of interaction with the world.'<sup>15</sup> This pedestrian-artist engages emotionally and physically with the city through 'a poetics involving the body as a site of learning and border negotiation.'<sup>16</sup>

Following Carrera Suarez's pedestrian-artist *Welcome to Our Hillbrow, Open City* and *Portrait with Keys* present distinctly and differentially embodied accounts of the teeming entanglement of the postcolonial city. While the protagonists of the novels discussed in detail here are male, and therefore are not subject to the physical and existential vulnerability experienced by women, they are each keenly aware of their embodied position in the city. The body is understood as a bio-cultural product that generates and mediates a sense of agency, subjectivity and belonging in response to the boundaries and localised realities of the city.

### Gevisser and Vladislavić: Routes, recollections and repetition

Mark Gevisser's Johannesburg, for instance, is comprised primarily of barriers, edges, security fences and violence. As a white, gay, South African man Gevisser's perspective is informed by his troubled political position in the post-Apartheid city and, unlike the other protagonists in this chapter, his primary mode of transport is the private car, a sign of his privileged socio-economic status, the city's sprawl, and his own sense of physical vulnerability. Drawing a direct contrast between his home and the accessibility of New York described in Cole's *Open City*, Gevisser remarks:

it leads me to think about Johannesburg as anything but that: it draws its energy precisely from its atomization and its edges, its stacking of boundaries against each other. It is no place to wander; no place, either, to throw your window open and let the world blow in.<sup>17</sup>

While he is not quite Carrera Suárez's pedestrian-artist, the narrator is keenly aware of the balkanisation of the city, of its continuing spatial inequality, and of his physical privilege and vulnerability. For Mpe's protagonist and Vladislavić's narrator, Johannesburg is, despite its dangers, a place to wander, not so for Gevisser's for whom the social and structural legacies of apartheid are evident in the population who do walk:

These people who walk Johannesburg daily are not flâneurs at all but migrants, or workers, to whom the city still denies the right to public transport... the stories their feet tell, unlike those of the idealised flâneurs, imagined by Baudelaire or Walter Benjamin, are often ones of pain and dislocation. The rest of us drive.<sup>18</sup>

In addition to the critique of the flâneur, economic unevenness is conceived here in terms of mobility; walking in this case is no longer the performative

aspect of pedestrian mapping, it is the sign of those who migrate, labour, and those who struggle – ‘The rest of us drive.’ The hubris of the flâneur characteristically conceived of as a European male urban subject clashes against the pedestrian in this South African metropolis who is instead a migrant, walking the streets either looking for work, or commuting, an indication of socio-economic precarity.

Although the narrator is not a walker, he does imaginatively construct the city through repeated tracings that read as ritual. The memoir’s title is taken from Gevisser’s favourite childhood game: with a 1979 street atlas, *Holmden’s Register of Johannesburg* feeding his cartomania, the young Gevisser sends his imaginary couriers out on journeys. The game is the ‘master metaphor’ of the memoir, positioning Gevisser’s ‘street-map obsession’ as the primary plot device.<sup>19</sup> As such, the memoir is structured by recurring itineraries that take on the status of ritual through the narrator’s interpretive engagement. The affordances of ritual are taken up by the organisational repetition of the narrative:

According to the *Holmden’s*, here is your route. You are to travel west up Roosevelt, (as Alfred Nzo was previously called), crossing into the industrial area of Wynberg and continuing along 2nd, over the old Pretoria road. And here, as you hit Andries Street at the top edge of page 75, you will find yourself in trouble. For here you are up against that uncrossable divide between pages 75 and 77.<sup>20</sup>

The present tense, second person narration generates the immediacy of a conversation, making it easy to forget that these directions are not given according to the streets themselves but according to their representation in *Holmden’s*. The inclusion of page numbers as impediments to mobility finds purchase in the cityscape itself. What the young Gevisser comes to realise is that the neat, discreet suburban borders in his street atlas do not adequately represent the geography of the city – between pages 75 and 77 is the cartographic blank where Soweto should be. The narrator’s awareness of Apartheid urban planning and the politics of map making frame rest of the memoir.

With a consistency that echoes the other authors in this chapter, Gevisser enacts in and through his narrative the cartographic ritual of his childhood game. The narrative shifts within a phrase between actual descriptions of moving through the streets and those imagined in the terms of the game. Although the game rehearses the incorporation and resignification of the city that we shall see in *Welcome to Our Hillbrow*, *Open City* and *Portrait with Keys*, the narrator is, even within his game, isolated by the borders and edges of the city.

This is not the case with Vlad, the narrator of *Portrait with Keys*, who steadily excavates Johannesburg’s historical and political layers as he walks. While Vladislavić is often described as a ‘writer of place,’ he

explains that *Portrait with Keys*, in particular, is concerned with the 'layering of memory and place.'<sup>21</sup> 'I consciously decided,' he explains, 'to write about places of significance to me, to find a set of street addresses that would allow me to map my own attachments to Johannesburg. One could say I sought out places where the topsoil of memory lay thick.'<sup>22</sup> This layering and excavation of the topsoil, so carefully integrated into the structure of the text, not only imaginatively maps the city, it also draws the mechanisms of the sacred into the narrative.

The pedestrian mapping enacted by Vlad is a creative act of incorporation; it is an attempt to be situated in the spaces of the city, to belong within them. While urban theorists such as Nuttall and Mbembe glorify the mobile and flexible characteristics of African experience, Pablo Mukherjee contends that the 'casualised and migratory mode of human existence signals... the unfolding of a single, uneven, global modernity over time and space.'<sup>23</sup> In contrast with Mbembe's emphasis on the creative potential of postcolonial instability, Mukherjee asserts that

it is precisely in the resistance to the enforced and involuntary conditions of migration, circumlocution and 'flexible existence' that the creativity and dynamism of contemporary modernity's human subject becomes most obvious. That is, they often fully realise themselves in acts of rooting and habitation instead of acts of uprooting and travel.<sup>24</sup>

By positioning the conditions of the postcolony within the broader context of 'uneven global modernity' Mukherjee's intervention facilitates a comparative analysis of the experience of the subject in African metropolises and those further afield in London and New York. Moreover, Mukherjee looks through the flux and fragmentations of global modernity to see that resistance is offered not through further flexibility but through habitation and assertions of belonging. The most successful forms of resistance to the sometimes 'forced' mobility of modernity are those that root the subject in the particularities of place; for Vlad this rooting in place relies on his pedestrian access to the city and his cultural, geographic and historic knowledge.

*Portrait with Keys* enacts through its form and content the pedestrian mapping of a narrator who is South African and has lived in Johannesburg for decades. As a particularly urban iteration of sacralisation pedestrian mapping is both the imaginative construction of the city in and through the text, and the performative appropriation of the space through peripatetic narratives – an integration of the affordances of the sacred. Together these processes combine to resignify the urban environment in the narrator's terms. *Portrait* performs this most successfully, since the novel's artfully constructed assemblage of textual pieces depict an ever-shifting urban imaginary. The immersive and affecting fragments are numbered. The impulse is to read them linearly; however, Vladislavić offers alternative 'Routes' of

varying lengths, short, medium and long, through which the reader can explore the text. The final section, 'Itineraries,' lists these conceptually organised, curated fragments: 'Walking' and 'Street addresses, Johannesburg' are two cycles or pathways through the text that speak directly to the argument of this chapter. Significantly, the structure of the work relies on the repetition, differentiation and signification: the affordances of the sacred.

Repetition and differentiation are evident in the concern with memory on the one hand, and walking on the other. *Portrait* begins with an epigraph from South African poet, novelist and publisher Lionel Abrahams, 'Memory takes root only half in the folds of the brain: half's in the concrete streets we have lived along.' The division of memory between the subject and the city intricately binds him to that locality. As the work unfolds each entry is a new memory: a fragment situated precisely in the topography and the history of the city. In a later reference to Abrahams as part of the 'Writers' book' itinerary, the narrator recalls him writing about how 'certain stray corners of the city' assume personal significance through association: 'places where we feel more alive and more at home because a "topsoil of memory" has been allowed to form there.'<sup>25</sup> The text is an excavation of the narrator's personal topsoil; an exploration of the places where the sediment of memory has settled. The book as a whole is, therefore, an interpretive engagement with Johannesburg. Additionally, the structure which encourages the use of alternative, but still ordered pathways performs an imaginative organisation, indeed signification of the narrator's familiar urban environment.

It is also true that the complexity of cities, the flows of traffic across ever-changing grids, coupled with the peculiarities of physical addresses, occupations, interests and needs, produces for each one of us a particular pattern of familiar or habitual movement over the skin of the earth, which, if we could see it from a vantage point in the sky, would appear as unique as a fingerprint.<sup>26</sup>

The habituated pathways, those driven and walked, 'would appear as unique as a fingerprint,' and would leave a mark as delicate and almost always unseen. This text makes those patterns explicit by foregrounding private, ritualised trajectories layered with urban history.

With the recollections and repetitions of memory differentiating intimate and unfamiliar spaces of the city, the forms of the sacred structure the narrative. This is evident in the peripatetic descriptions of the city that utilise the three affordances of the sacred: interpretive and performative engagement, differentiation and resignification. For example, Vladislavić describes the area where he lives in Johannesburg:

I live on an island, an accidental island, made by geography and the town planners who laid out these city streets. Roberts and Kitchener,

avenues in the uniforms of English soldiers, march away to the east, side by side. A spine of rock, an outcrop of the gold-bearing reef on which the city depends, blocks every thoroughfare between the avenues, except for Blenheim and Juno. When I am driven to walk, which is often, only the long way round, following this shore – Blenheim, Roberts, Juno, Kitchener – will bring me back to the beginning. Johannesburg surges and recedes like a tide. I come home with my shoes full of sand.<sup>27</sup>

The mimetic layering of this account brings Vladislavić's hermeneutic engagement, his historical knowledge of the city to bear on the descriptions of the streets, mirroring the experience of walking those streets. His description in this extract and in many others in the text seems to abstract the perspective in order to bring a fuller image into view. The structure of the fragments is almost Cubist. In this passage, the streets Roberts and Kitchener – named for the two successive English commanders-in-chief during the South African War – are metaphorically figured in uniform marching off together to the east. Recalling a history ignored or forgotten by many inhabitants, the narrator uses his knowledge of these details to anchor his place in the neighbourhood, and the city beyond his accidental island. Vlad walks the edge of the island; he is 'driven to walk' the boundary where the sea of Johannesburg, a city without water, begins to encroach. Returning home with his pockets weighed down by the sandy matter he has collected along the way, the streets resignified by the sedimentation of history and personal memory.

Vladislavić's descriptions of the city and of the narrator's pedestrian mobility are distinctly embodied and often reply on somatic metaphors. Gerald Gaylard asserts that this is an important consideration in reading Vlad as an 'African *flâneur*'.<sup>28</sup> Gaylard echoes Gevisser's assessment of the city, noting that 'Johannesburg discourages *flâneurism*,<sup>29</sup> nevertheless what emerges from Vladislavić's fiction is a particular type of walker: 'a tense and nervous observer.'<sup>30</sup> Gaylard opines that 'the African *flâneur*' is not only 'stressed... he must somehow maintain emotional openness if he is to notice anything';<sup>31</sup> he must not let fear nor physical vulnerability foreclose engagement with his uneven urban environment. The narrator's willingness to expose himself to the city, to be vulnerable in it helps to establish a sense of belonging, where '[h]ome is discovered through the body's intimacy with place' and the subject's personal and historical spatial knowledge.<sup>32</sup> The *flâneur* in Vladislavić's novel is not a disinterested observer; rather, he is a historically and politically engaged subject, who poetically figures a more ethical pedestrian mode that integrates the multiple histories of place into a single moment.

The layering of information in these passages brings multiple historical moments to exist in the same space – a purposeful flattening of time to expose the fractious overlaps of historical space. The city's material history

is 'coming back to the surface' – tramlines from the sixties pushing up through the tarred street.<sup>33</sup> Such material histories are ever-present in a city founded on mining: 'Today, going down Commissioner into the high-rise heart of the city, I am reminded that here we are all still prospectors, with a digger's claim on the earth beneath our feet.'<sup>34</sup> The narrator's claim, like others, can only be speculative: 'a digger's claim' to the land and what it might provide. Vlad's speculative claims of belonging are amplified through his performance of urban knowledge. Shopping malls, residential areas, the Marymount maternity hospital that becomes a home for the elderly – each entry offers spatial and temporal coordinates as the city transforms. The liberalisation of Johannesburg's urban planning, Edward Charlton considers an attempt to efface the brutal history of Apartheid and its continuing structural implications.<sup>35</sup> Perhaps because of this institutional amnesia Vladislavić, Gevisser and Mpe appear committed to archiving the spatial and subjective memory of the ever-changing city. The persistent feeling of alteration is mimicked by the transitions between entries: the narrative, like the city, is constantly shifting.

The uncanny feeling of movement and alteration is generated by the structure of the work that shifts as though in conversation:

The way and the walker (and the driver, too, if he has time for such things) are in conversation. The 'long poem of walking' is a dialogue. Ask a question of any intersection... and it will answer, not always straightforwardly, allowing a quirk of the topography, the lie of the land, a glimpse of a prospect to nudge you one way or another.<sup>36</sup>

Vladislavić echoes de Certeau's comparison between the acts of speaking and walking. The way and the walker are mutually constitutive, engaging in a dialogue which propels them through time and space. The puns 'straightforwardly,' 'lie' and 'nudge' extend the metaphor of this conversation, personifying the ways in which urban topography might mislead or waylay the walker.

Yet it is precisely this elusiveness that fascinates the narrator: 'I live in a city that resists the imagination. Or have I misunderstood? Is the problem that I live in a fiction that unravels even as I grasp it?'<sup>37</sup> The city resists imaginative capture by evading the narrator's attempts to signify it in singular terms, to map it along a single vector. Even though each entry is an attempt to grasp some facet of the narrator's urban environment, what emerges is striking in its shifting multiplicity. An epistemological gamble, the text as a whole operates as an imaginative resignification of Johannesburg, one which treasures the conceptual slipperiness of such a city. Where the narrator 'should feel utterly out of place,' yet 'I feel that I belong here. I am given shape. I do not follow but I conclude, as surely as a non sequitur.'<sup>38</sup> Vlad's rootedness in Johannesburg flouts the alienating logic of the street map and the politics of post-1994 South African belonging. Gevisser

mediates his difficult relationship to Johannesburg through the ritual of his game, but he still withholds himself from the city. Vladislavić's narrator insists on his pedestrian access, and it is this ritualised movement through the city, mirrored in textual form, that structurally incorporates the affordances of the sacred. In the case of Mpe's and Cole's narratives, sacralisation is taken a step further, as Johannesburg and New York are reinvested with African epistemologies.

### **Cole and Mpe: Pedestrian mapping, the sacred and ancestral narration**

The novels in this chapter each expose or disrupt colonial mapping and neo-colonial/neoliberal restructuring of the city. A map is always already a conceptual appropriation and resignification of space, a two-dimensional representation of a three-dimensional world. They are, as Jeremy Black asserts, 'instruments of power.'<sup>39</sup> In his influential poststructuralist reading of cartography, Graham Huggan argues that although the map continues to be a 'paradigm of colonial discourse, its deconstruction and/or revisualisation permits a "disidentification" from the procedures of colonialism (and other hegemonic discourses) and a (re)engagement in the ongoing process of cultural decolonization.'<sup>40</sup> These literary maps emerge from dissenting cartographic impulses – the desire to construct a map of the city that is representative of an individual's cultural script and its place in a multi-faceted urban reality. In the assertion of personal presence, the protagonists resignify spaces of the city as intimate, utilising forms of the sacred.

There are echoes of Jameson's comparison between the situation of the subject in postmodern late capitalist society and the experience of the subject in the postmodern city. Jameson writes 'that the alienated city is above all a space in which people are unable to map (in their minds) either their own positions or the urban totality in which they find themselves.'<sup>41</sup> Cognitive mapping is salve for this feeling of alienation and 'involves the practical reconquest of a sense of place and the construction or reconstruction of an articulated ensemble which can be retained in memory and which the individual subject can map and remap along the moments of mobile, alternative trajectories.'<sup>42</sup> Mapping as a mobile assertion of place corresponds with pedestrian mapping. However, while the 'vocation' of cognitive mapping is an ideological critique that allows the individual to conceptualise their place in systems of multinational capital and postmodern culture, pedestrian mapping operates on a more intimate scale, closer to the pedestrian-artist. It conceptualises the particularly sacred and proximate dimensions of the protagonist's assertions of belonging and appropriations of urban space, as a strategy of resistance to the radical precariousness of urban experience.<sup>43</sup>

While the diegetic and formal integration of the sacred, and its importance to pedestrian mapping have been articulated, there is the added



postsecular dynamic of the postcolonial city. In the introduction to their edited collection *Postsecular Cities*, Justin Beaumont and Christopher Baker argue that this century has been marked by a return of ‘religion, faith communities and spiritual values,’ to the ‘centre of public life, especially public policy, governance, and social identity.’<sup>44</sup> Urban areas, defined as they often are by immigration and rapid diversification, are a prime location to observe the ways in which ‘religious and spiritual traditions are creating both new alliances but also bifurcations with secular sectors.’<sup>45</sup> In these city spaces where ‘new relations of possibility are emerging,’ they suggest that the ‘metaphor of fusion or the notion of “rapprochement” are generative for thinking about cities as the interface between disciplines, theoretical orientations and philosophical perspectives.’<sup>46</sup> Beaumont proposes, as I have in the introduction, that

[i]f we consider postsecular as the indication of diverse religious, humanist and secularist positionalities – and not merely an assumption of complete and total secularization – it is precisely the relations between these dimensions and not just the religious that are taken into account and [are] the focus of attention.<sup>47</sup>

The term postsecular does not suggest that these complex processes are somehow ‘new,’ but it does offer a grammar for the concatenations, fusions and heterogeneity of the sacred and the secular in contemporary African experiences and its written fictions. Beaumont and Baker note a lack of scholarship on the cultural production of postsecular cities, an absence this chapter attends to.

By virtue of their integration of religious and humanist positions, the cities in Cole’s and Mpe’s fiction are distinctly postsecular. Religious knowledge is fundamental to both reconceptualisations of the urban environment as it allows the texts to construct and mobilise a sense of agency and belonging. This postsecular reading also extends the capacity of mapping beyond the solitary pedestrian walking the streets as a way of asserting control, to pedestrian mapping that draws imaginative communion with the ancestors and an ancestral ‘home’ into a cartography of the city. Thus, the sacred is drawn into these novels both in their form, through the differentiation and repetition of mapping, and in their content as indigenous cosmologies are used to signify personal spaces of the city. Analysed through the lens of postsecular poetics, assertions of belonging and ancestral ties to community are reconsidered as related affordances of the sacred, which resignify, the urban spaces of globalised modernity. The texts in this chapter emerge from an African and diasporic context distinct from that of de Certeau, Charles Baudelaire or Walter Benjamin’s flâneur – in these globalised, postcolonial spaces, making sense of the city demands a culturally polyglot subject.

Refentše and Julius, the protagonists of Mpe’s and Cole’s respective novels, are representative of polyglot migrants who have left their homes to

pursue study and career opportunities. Their migration distances them psychologically and emotionally from the comfort and familiarity of home, leaving them isolated in the anonymity and sprawl of their new environment. In order to compensate for this, Refentše and Julius reframe the city through their pedestrian access and through the imaginative, sacred, and intellectual resources they use to establish order and generate meaning.

The novelistic reflections on migration and belonging emerge from the autobiographical experience of the authors. Like his protagonist Refentše, Mpe moved to Johannesburg from a rural town in Polokwane, South Africa to study at the University of the Witwatersrand (Wits) – living in the ‘menacing monster’ of Hillbrow during this time.<sup>48</sup> Mpe was 34 when he died in 2004. He was a lecturer at Wits, but in the weeks before his death, following a long period of illness, he decided to apprentice as a Ngaka (Sepedi for healer).<sup>49</sup> In his personal life, and in his fiction, Mpe enacts a syncretic vision of modern African experience. Teju Cole was born in the US to Nigerian parents. Raised in Nigeria, he moved back to the US in 1992 when he was 17.<sup>50</sup> The narrator-protagonist of his novel *Open City* is a part-Nigerian, part-German psychiatrist who walks New York (and, for a short time, Brussels) interacting with the city’s other immigrant inhabitants. The novel is, as James Wood writes, ‘as close to a diary as a novel can get, with room for reflection, autobiography, stasis, and repetition.’<sup>51</sup> From this intimate form Julius’s ‘feelings of isolation’ and intensified ‘solitude’ emerge as symptoms of his psychological alienation from the city.<sup>52</sup>

### **Burial grounds and the Yoruba aegis in Cole’s New York**

Julius’s experience of New York is punctuated by the presence of the dead, entombed in burial grounds beneath the streets. Although Julius’s daily walks propel the narrative and draw ritual behaviour similar to that of Gevisser and Vladislavić into the text, it is in the incorporation of buried slaves and the sacred (Yoruba epistemologies) that Julius’s resignification of the city is cemented. From the opening pages the importance of walking is evident: ‘These walks, a counterpoint to my busy days at the hospital, steadily lengthened, taking me farther and farther afield each time... In this way, at the beginning of the final year of my psychiatry fellowship, New York City worked itself into my life at walking pace.’<sup>53</sup> On the one hand, the novel offers a cartographic description of the city where Julius orientates himself and his apartment within the urban landscape, on the other, the role of mobility as salve for the monotony of his days is also established. In a nod to Frantz Fanon’s profession, Julius spends his days completing a fellowship in psychiatry, and his personal time working himself into the city, and the city into his life. From the perspective of an alienated and, indeed, alienating narrator, questions of migrant belonging and racialised violence are explored through Julius’s peripatetic excavation of the city’s history. He even goes as far as Brussels in search of his maternal

grandmother, but returns to New York, and its streets, unsuccessful in this quest for personal belonging. As Madhu Krishnan asserts, Julius inhabits ‘a home in displacement,’ and ‘emerges, then, in a register which melds the local and the global into a single, ambulatory figure of belonging in the cosmopolitan heterotopia.’<sup>54</sup> A consequence of this displacement, Ashleigh Harris argues, is that ‘African becomes a site of melancholic return,’ and Julius, the ‘city-walker provide[s] the mechanism through which this process of forgetting is narrated.’<sup>55</sup> Adding to the complexity of Julius’s cosmopolitan subjectivity, Julius disinters the history of the African enslaved and brings Yoruba deities into the cityscape of New York: Africa is not entirely forgotten, it is, however imperfectly, re-placed.

The ambiguity of Cole’s representation of cosmopolitanism has generated several critical responses. Pieter Vermeulen argues that the novel presents the limitations of aesthetic cosmopolitanism, since the presentation of Julius as a cosmopolitan flâneur, exalting in ‘mobility and tourism’ is contoured by the *fugueur*, ‘a figure of restless mobility’ whose “ambulatory automatism”... was associated with vagabondage and the unbearable boredom of modern life.<sup>56</sup> Katherine Hallemeier avers that although Cole’s protagonist maintains his cosmopolitan identity, he does so by interweaving elite culture with the experiences of marginalised global subjects, the migrant and the refugee.<sup>57</sup> Meanwhile Emily Johansen sees the novel’s cosmopolitanism as a ‘territorialised’ form: a ‘model for thinking through the individual’s material and embodied participation in larger communities, both above and beyond the scale of the nation state.’<sup>58</sup> These debates have limited applicability to the sacred; however, they consider potentialities of a subject’s immersion in their city setting. Cole’s and Mpe’s novels are both transnational in scope, palimpsestic in their construction of urban histories and translocal links, and postsecular in their deployment of African epistemologies into narrative and form. While cosmopolitan considerations are usually limited to the aesthetic, the conception of humanist association is not entirely divergent from Beaumont’s idea of postsecular rapprochement, where intersectional city spaces bring religions and ideologies into contact. This is certainly the case in Cole’s novel, and in Mpe’s, as both draw indigenous religions into dynamic relation with modern urban dwelling.

The title, *Open City*, seems to indicate the potential of urban habitation and an ease of access, a city that is open to all: a promise of inclusion that Julius seeks but struggles to find. The irony of the title’s supposed inclusion is clear when the narrator explains that Brussels was declared an ‘open city,’ so that it might avoid bombardment during the Second World War.<sup>59</sup> The ambiguous title signifies this history of political capitulation as well as the promise of mobility and access. It is little wonder then, that Julius’s first experiences of the streets of New York are not welcoming but overwhelming:

At first, I encountered the streets as an incessant loudness... as though someone had shattered the calm of a *silent private chapel* with the

blare of a TV set... but the impress of these countless faces did nothing to assuage my feelings of isolation; if anything it intensified them. (emphasis mine)<sup>60</sup>

Against the feeling of isolation, solitude and alienation, Julius takes to walking New York, each time a little farther or following a different route, extending his knowledge and experience of the city.<sup>61</sup> Julius is obsessive about orientating and mapping his location; the novel is littered with accounts positioning Julius within the topos of the city: 'Wall Street, from where I stood on the corner of William Street.'<sup>62</sup> Julius's descriptions of his location are persistent and precise: 'I walked north on Sixth Avenue as far as Fifty-ninth Street' and 'From the intersection of 172nd Street, the George Washington Bridge came into view for the first time.'<sup>63</sup> It is their repetition throughout that conveys the almost compulsive need to pinpoint his place in New York. Further, like the peripatetic ritual found in the form and narrative of *Portrait with Keys*, Julius repeatedly walks and maps his location in order to imagine how things ought to be in constant tension with how things are. His walking is ritual: an assertion of his vital and temporary presence in the city.

Julius's ritualised conceptualisation of an alternative urban environment depends upon his knowledge of the city and its history. He locates himself within the city by locating the city within his knowledge of its history:

The circuit from the old Customs House to Wall Street, and then down to South Street Seaport, was a distance of less than a mile. The Customs House faced Bowling Green, which had been used in the seventeenth century for the executions of paupers and slaves.<sup>64</sup>

A space once used for executions is now a park, where an immigrant community gathers. Aware of the park's history, Julius situates his experience as an immigrant within the present moment of the park, but still to locate that knowledge within the longer history of the area. 'The site was a palimpsest,' Julius muses earlier in the novel 'as was all the city, written, erased, rewritten.'<sup>65</sup> The palimpsest is, Krishnan asserts, a 'spatial metaphor,' which unfurls 'a dynamic and polyphonic history' of the city. The palimpsestic structure, the spatial layering and excavation of history, 'reveals a deeper logic of contradiction and suppression at the heart of' what Krishnan terms 'postcolonial spatiality.'<sup>66</sup> The palimpsest productively signifies the writing and recalling of stories, as it simultaneously registers the seemingly inevitable scratching out and rewriting of those narratives. The metaphor illustrates the continual processes of spatial restructuring, and the possibilities of urban habitation. Two contributing features of Julius's palimpsest, of his postcolonial heterotopia, are the city's burial grounds and Yoruba deities.

The dead are ever-present in Julius's descriptions. Returning from Brussels and seeing New York from the window of the airplane, he experiences

a ‘mental transposition,’ in which ‘the plane was a coffin, and the city below was a vast graveyard with white marble and stone blocks of various heights and sizes.’<sup>67</sup> In this moment, the metropolis below appears as a graveyard, the buildings transfigured into gravestones. The plane carrying Julius is now a coffin, conveying him to the graveyard below. This imagery reflects Julius’s knowledge that the city is built upon the dead bodies of those buried beneath it. The mental transposition reminds Julius of his own mortality and the violent racialised history of exploitative labour that built the city. He does not experience this constant somatic history as morbid or threatening; rather, it is essential to how he imagines his urban presence. This is one reason why Alexander Hartwiger argues that Julius is most profitably read as a postcolonial flâneur whose aesthete wanderings are counterpointed by his keen observations of ‘the legacies of colonial and imperial dominance.’<sup>68</sup> Much like the layering of historical and cultural detail evident in Gevisser’s and Vladislavić’s texts, Hartwiger asserts that Cole seeks to expose the colonial legacy of this global city that elides its ‘historical links to global capitalism.’<sup>69</sup> In short, Hartwiger suggests that Cole uses the contrapuntal form to read ‘history back into the city.’<sup>70</sup> The aerial and grounded perspectives of the above passage demonstrate this contrapuntal mode, which ‘provides a multidimensional space and time configuration from which to situate New York in longer historical narratives that account for the “barbarism” that built the city.’<sup>71</sup> Whether one reads the novel through a palimpsestic or contrapuntal structure, the imbrication and resignification of postcolonial historical perspectives is evident. Both the calligraphic and musical metaphors indicate a formal integration of interpretive processes, which resignify areas of the city according to Julius’s conception. The formal affordances of the sacred (hermeneutic engagement and differentiation) are, therefore, manifest in the structure of the novel. On another of his evening walks Julius comes upon a monument, identified as ‘a memorial for the site of an African burial ground.’<sup>72</sup> In the landscape of New York, Julius almost overlooks this unassuming historical marker, yet it establishes, once again, the affecting postcolonial presence of the dead in Julius’s experience of New York.

The tiny plot was what had been set aside now to indicate the spot, but in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, the site had been large, some six acres, as far north as present-day Duane Street, and as far south as City Hall Park. Along Chambers Street and in the park itself, human remains were still routinely uncovered. But most of the burial ground was now under office buildings, shops, streets, diners, pharmacies, all the endless hum of quotidian commerce and government.<sup>73</sup>

Setting the limits of the burial ground along the boundaries of contemporary streets transposes the burial ground, and the bodies of long-dead Africans, into the present-day – disinterring the US’s history of slavery and

linking the city to the legacies of global capitalism. The contrapuntal structure shifts between the burial ground and the consumer economy, linking the ruins of colonial capitalism to the infrastructure of the neo-liberal present. The sacred must be added to this multidimensional account of the city. The burial grounds are sacred, and constructed as such in the text as Julius sets them apart from the mundane space of the city through his hermeneutic engagement with them. Julius, thus, incorporates these sacred burial grounds into his urban environment, positioning the sacred as a vital aspect of his personal construction of the city.

Julius's re-casting of the city emerges from an African epistemology similar to Mpe's. While Mpe's training as a Ngaka, traditional healer, suggests that the world imagined in his fiction is perhaps more closely related to his own worldview, his writing of coextensive spheres is, as will be shown, also a successful narrative strategy. Similarly, Cole's references to the Yoruba aegis are as much a literary and mythical allusion as they are a way of interpreting what Julius sees before him in the streets of New York. In *The African Imagination*, F. Abiola Irele shows that the literary use of epistemological and mythical sources is a complex endeavour. With reference to Soyinka's use of the Yoruba deity Ogun 'as an organizing symbol,' Irele asks whether Ogun functions as a 'master trope, a formal category of his system of images, or an authentic agency of the writer's imaginative grasp of the world, constituting, therefore, a principle of conduct in that world?'<sup>74</sup> Irele's question gets to the postsecular heart of African literatures, where mythical and sacred sources are variously employed diegetically, formally and as a presentation of the writer's worldview. Mpe's narrative construction falls into the last two categories, while Cole's functions more as a formal category or inquiry. Accounts of Cole's post-colonial spatiality and postcolonial flâneur are productive in this regard, but do not account for the structural and narratological deployment of the sacred and sacred ontologies. Reading for the postsecular poetics of fiction such as Cole's draws to the fore the distinctly postcolonial intervention of reintroducing African epistemologies into New York's cityscape. In so doing the novel not only draws the historical continuities of colonial and global capitalism in the city's present, it reincorporates the religions and gods of those forced into slavery into this seemingly secular, cosmopolitan setting: a postsecular rapprochement.

The incorporation of the dead is one part of the novel's deployment of the sacred, the other is the consideration of Yoruba gods. Growing up in Nigeria, Julius is familiar with the pantheon of Yoruba deities. He employs them as he reimagines New York as the site of his belonging by investing this global city with the presence of Olodumare 'the owner of the Spirit,' 'the owner of life,' the Supreme Being who created the other deities in the Yoruba aegis, and Obatala, 'the creator of man.'<sup>75, 76</sup> On his way home one evening Julius is discomfited by the sight of two men with disabilities, one after the other. He draws from what is familiar and finds an explanation in Ifá, the Yoruba belief

system. I quote at some length here because Julius's matter-of-fact explanation of the interaction between the two gods undercuts the mysticism of the account, coolly positioning this mythical account in a 'secular' city.

I got the idea that some of the things I was seeing around me were under the aegis of Obatala, the demiurge charged by Olodumare with the formation of humans from clay. Obatala did well at the task until he started drinking. As he drank more and more, he became inebriated, and began to fashion damaged human beings. The Yoruba believe that in this drunken state he made dwarfs, cripples, people missing limbs, and those burdened with debilitating illness. Olodumare had to reclaim the role he had delegated and finish the creation of humankind himself and, as a result, people who suffer from physical infirmities identify themselves as worshipers of Obatala. This is an interesting relationship with a god, one not of affection or praise but of antagonism.<sup>77</sup>

Julius's Nigerian childhood is transferred to New York's urban landscape, insistently locating the transcendental Yoruba episteme in his immediate world. The rationality of Obatala's drunken creation of 'misformed' humans comes to him as a conceptual thread linking his natal and adopted homes.

The presence of Olodumare appears again in Central Park when Julius finds a cloud of bees. 'Above a boxwood hedge, a swarm of hovering bees reminded me of certain Yoruba epithets for Olodumare, the supreme deity: he who turns blood into children, who sits in the sky like a cloud of bees.'<sup>78</sup> Sitting beneath this 'cloud of bees,' Julius feels he is led there as if by an 'invisible hand,' and is overcome, his breath rising, as he watches the bees hover and leave. In this slightly incongruous moment of spiritual ecstasy in Central Park and in the instance in the train station, Julius is appeased by the life world Ifá offers as it enables him to make meaning and create order.

Inclusions of Ifá in the narrative are particularly interesting when set alongside enclosed Christian spaces. On two separate evening walks Julius comes to churches that are inaccessible. It is not that the church doors are closed; there is simply no point of entry through the walled and fenced perimeter: 'Going around Rector Street, I came into Trinity Place, where an ancient wall hemmed the church in.'<sup>79</sup> 'There were chains on all the gates, and I could find neither a way into the building nor anyone to help me.'<sup>80</sup> Churches, which are expected to be accessible sanctuaries, are not only closed, but enclosed. Instead, Julius's only option is to walk on Rector Street and Trinity Place: street names that ironically signify what he seeks, but is denied by the urban geography as it manifests the secularist divisions between religious and public space. Julius is left with 'no place in which to pray' for his patient who has been ill.<sup>81</sup> Julius's Christian and Yoruba cosmologies are not at odds; they are equally important facets of his culturally and religiously polyglot identity.

Julius's transposition of Yoruba deities into his conception of New York's urban landscape seems to be the singular successful attempt to create a sense of meaningful order, and is a significant part of his conceptual, historical and pedestrian mapping of this city. At all other turns his attempts crash against the boundaries of the late capitalist city. In a city that is twice defamiliarised, once by his immigrant status and once as the public spaces of the city close to him or alter, Julius's pedestrian mapping resonates strongly as an act of incorporation: of his incorporating the streets, and therefore selected parts of the city, into his life and thus forcing his inclusion into those spaces as well.

His walks begin shortly after he witnesses a migration of geese from his window: 'the miracle of natural immigration.'<sup>82</sup> Julius casts the movement of people, like the movement of birds, as a natural phenomenon, a clear counter to the current political discourse on migration. Symbolic of Julius's migration, the imagery of birds bookends the narrative. At the novel's close, Julius recounts how birds seem unable to navigate around the Statue of Liberty, especially in a storm. The irony is clear: thousands of birds die as they strike this symbol of US hospitality and hope.<sup>83</sup> The flight, ease of movement and risk that Julius perceives as he watches the birds, speaks to the transience and rootlessness that he feels. Excavating the city's colonial past and establishing links to its late-capitalist present, Julius illustrates to boundaries and erasures of this palimpsestic space. Through his walks and polyglot cultural knowledge, however, Julius is able to resignify places in New York and assert his belonging.

### **Mapping Hillbrow from Heaven: Mpe's ancestral narration**

In *Welcome to Our Hillbrow*, Mpe writes coextensive worlds suggestive of Sepedi epistemology. The narration of the novel is ingenious, as the story is told retrospectively to Refentše by an ancestor, after he has died. This narrative construction enables Mpe to enact in his fiction a particular cultural knowledge in which the dead, the living and the unborn inhabit coextensive spheres.<sup>84</sup> Sam Durrant, writing about Chris Abani's work, argues that this type of writing revives and sustains the materiality of spiritual inheritance. In other words, ancestral narration is the enactment of a material and cultural knowledge that constructs new traditions against colonial erasure and contemporary necropolitics. 'To stress the act of writing,' Durrant avers, 'is to move beyond models in which writing is merely a passive reflection or representation of historical reality toward an idea of writing as a process of enactment, a performative remaking of the world.'<sup>85</sup> Though he makes no mention of the postsecular, Durrant's argument clearly resonates with postsecular poetics, for what he describes here is poesis, the act of bringing something into being, from which the term poetics follows. Durrant cautions that writing of this kind 'cannot recover or make whole cultural traditions that have been irrevocably damaged by



colonialism and modernity, but it can offer itself as a mimesis of tradition, a mimesis of the very process of passing on.<sup>86</sup> Mpe's ancestral narration brings into being a Sepedi construction of the world that contributes to both postcolonial and postsecular discourses.

Ancestral narration has further implications for a postsecular poetic reading of the novel. First, the representation of the city and its transnational links are framed by this sacred perspective. Second, Heaven, where the stories of the living and dead are recollected, functions as an archive of ancestral knowledge, chronicling the challenges of global subjects inhabiting the postcolony. Mpe's fiction, hereby, deploys the mechanisms of sacred ancestral narration, in a challenge to the secular teleology of the novel form.

The coextensive worlds of Mpe's novel are transnational in their scope. The novel is set in Hillbrow, a once middle-class inner-city suburb of Johannesburg that is now the home to immigrants from the rest of the African continent, as well as migrants from rural areas in South Africa. The collection of stories the narrator relates are drawn from these migrants who offer a view of the city from the ground, while the narrator offers a view from above. The integration of these perspectives creates a global scale by connecting Hillbrow and Johannesburg to the rest of Africa, to England and the rural villages closer to home.<sup>87</sup> This perspective asks the reader to consider Johannesburg as a globalised city, with transnational and local networks of migration and capital, also extending the ancestral narration beyond geographical boundaries, following first Refentše and then Refilwe as they travel.

The novel begins when Refentše arrives in Hillbrow to study at the University of the Witwatersrand. Initially, he lives with his cousin who is a policeman in Hillbrow. At the completion of his degree Refentše finds employment at the university, which enables him to stay in Johannesburg. During this time Refentše dates Lerato, a woman his mother disapproves of because she is not from his rural home, Tiragalong. The discord between Refentše and his mother alienates him from Tiragalong and causing him to rely more on Lerato and their life in Hillbrow. When Refentše discovers that Lerato has been unfaithful to him with their mutual friend, the physiological stability he briefly found in Hillbrow is lost and he commits suicide. Refentše's suicide is caused partially by the disintegration of his personal relationships and partially by the impossibility of secure belonging or identification. 'You discovered, on arriving in Hillbrow, that to be drawn away from Tiragalong also went hand-in-hand with a loss of interest in Hillbrow. Because Tiragalong was in Hillbrow.'<sup>88</sup> Like Julius, the cultural alienation Refentše feels has additional existential implications: the precariousness of his psychological position and mortality motivate his need to delineate his world, establishing his pedestrian map.

Through Refentše's pedestrian access and the ancestral narration, Mpe imagines Hillbrow enriched and made vibrant by the heterogeneous African

inhabitants and their cultures. The impulse to set Hillbrow up as an intersectional and multicultural place strengthened by its differences is indicative of Mpe's optimistic, but troubled, attempt to construct a place of successful community and personal identification. For Mpe, Emma Hunt explains, the opening of South Africa's newly democratic borders enabled a 'new mobility between Johannesburg and other spaces' that 'can be harnessed to build an inclusive city and a heterogeneous society that rejects the boundaries of race, ethnicity, and nationality set up by apartheid in favour of a broad vision of allegiance based on a common humanity.'<sup>89</sup> This optimistic construction of a South African community based on an 'allegiance of common humanity' only materialises in Heaven, while Hillbrow remains a place of highly contingent inclusion, derelict buildings and governmental and police neglect. Hunt argues that the novel looks 'at the expansion of the city beyond the borders of the nation,' positioning it as a 'metonym for an increasingly globalised world.'<sup>90</sup> In particular ways, addressed by Charlton earlier in this chapter, Johannesburg has followed the neoliberal trend of urban restructuring observed in other global cities.<sup>91</sup> Gentrification of inner-city areas like the Maboneng Precinct (meaning 'Place of Light') and Newtown have further isolated the suburb of Hillbrow and its impoverished and overlooked inhabitants. Yet due to the (im)migrant workforce that reside there, Hillbrow remains an area of cultural overlap and exchange.

As Sarah Nuttal explains, post-apartheid urban fiction narrates 'the intricacy of the city as a spatial formation, its density as a concentration of people, things, institutions and architectural forms; the heterogeneity of lives juxtaposed in close proximity, the citiness of cities.'<sup>92</sup> The complexity and multiplicity of Johannesburg, its 'citiness' carries over to the novel's sentence structure as Hillbrow is described thus: 'All of these things that you have heard seen heard about felt smelt believed disbelieved shirked embraced brewing in your consciousness would find chilling haunting echoes in the simple words... Welcome to our Hillbrow.'<sup>93</sup> These sentences close the first and second chapters ('Notes from Heaven') and describe the two primary locations of the novel, Hillbrow and Heaven. They speak to the complexity of urban habitation and to the difficulty Refentše has in finding a consistent point of identification. The lack of punctuation, which echoes the destabilisation of place, is an enactment of the subject grasping at meaning – Refentše attempts to establish a sense of coherence. Yet, the only sense of order he creates is through the 'linguistic trip,' the story of his movement through Hillbrow, he spins for Lerato when she has joined him in Heaven after committing suicide.<sup>94</sup>

The presentation of Johannesburg as a global city develops through depictions of human migration that brings labour into and out of its financial centre. A consequence of this construction is the instability of place, where the various locales of the novel seem to collapse in on one another. Refentše moves from Tiragalong to Hillbrow while his friend

Reflwe, the novel's second protagonist, follows him and then goes to Oxford to further her studies: 'Hillbrow in Hillbrow. Hillbrow in Cape Town. Cape Town in Hillbrow. Oxford in both. Both in Oxford. Welcome to our All.'<sup>95</sup> The multiple locations are imaginatively conflated – the national and local boundaries, made permeable by the characters that travel between them. Hillbrow, Cape Town and Oxford are forced together by the stories the immigrants tell and the experiences they share. It is only the location of Heaven that remains conceptually intact, since it embraces its necessarily unidirectional permeability (one may enter but cannot leave). The conceptual collapse of place registers the transnational and translocal networks that characterise Johannesburg as a globalised city, and this instability and material fluidity isolates Refentše.

The translocal, Lena Mattheis defines as side-by-side narration of two or more places, which demonstrates 'how places and cities can permeate each other as well as the world of the reader.'<sup>96</sup> Mattheis argues that the palimpsest is the key form that makes possible the diegetic layering and comparison of place, personal and public history, and indeed religious experience. This is certainly the case with Vladislavić's, Cole's and Mpe's novels. These formal modalities are also vital to conveying the simultaneity of postcolonial and postapartheid urban experience, where modernity in all its late-capitalist and cultural guises is represented dialectically with the intimacies and particularities of African experience, as Nuttall and Krishnan have argued. The translocal layering of *Welcome to Our Hillbrow* takes on an additional spiritual dimension because the stratification of place is narrated by an ancestor from Heaven. In this way, ancestral narration formulates the urban environment and its migratory networks.

With the translocal construction of the novel, similar to others discussed in this chapter, it is important to note that *Welcome to Our Hillbrow* is still intent on mapping the protagonist's urban environment through walking. This secures, at least temporarily, the limits of place and grounds the spatial comparisons upon which translocal, and indeed, postcolonial spatiality depend. The attempt to counteract the mutability of place through pedestrian mapping is, moreover, an attempt to dwell, to establish a sense of belonging and habitation, as Mukherjee notes above. This map is assembled, not only through Refentše's repeated and ritualised walking but also through the stories which help to imaginatively construct Hillbrow.

The imperative to map and, therefore, to belong are evident both in the novel title and in the chapter 'Hillbrow: The Map.' The eponymous refrain, '*Welcome to Our Hillbrow*,' much like Cole's *Open City*, is both a bi-fold gesture of problematic inclusion as the reader and Refentše are introduced to the perils and intolerance of Hillbrow and Tiragalong, and an instantiation of place, as the notion of Hillbrow is articulated for the first time. The ironic 'welcome' of the title signals an inclusion that only materialises in Heaven. The plural possessive 'our' defines Hillbrow as a communal space: 'that locality of just over one square kilometre, according to official records; and

according to its inhabitants, at least twice as big and teeming with countless people.<sup>97</sup> Neither Refentše nor the narrator know where the precise boundaries of Hillbrow lie. The juxtaposition of the cartographic measurement of Hillbrow with the estimation offered by the inhabitants illustrates the tension between the stories that create Hillbrow in the narrative, and the pedestrian map that is an attempt to define it in concrete terms. In the chapter following this description, the reader accompanies Refentše as he walks the streets between Hillbrow and the University of the Witwatersrand:

You cross Twist, walk past the Bible Centred Church. Caroline makes a curve just after the church and becomes the lane of Edith Cavell Street, which takes you downtown; or, more precisely, to Wolmarans at the edge of the city. Edith Cavell runs parallel to Twist.<sup>98</sup>

Like grids on a map, or measured steps, the paratactic rhythm resounds with certainty, and the ease of local knowledge – a journey marked by street names and neighbourhood landmarks. The compulsive cartographic references resound with the attempt to belong. The compulsion to walk, according to de Certeau, to map by walking, is by necessity to lack a site, yet it is also the impulse to overcome this absence. Despite this, Refentše's attempts to claim a space for himself in Hillbrow fail. It is only when he inhabits the world of the ancestors that he is able to construct a pedestrian map and a narrative of his life and death. The retelling and reinterpretation of his story from the sacred space of Heaven provides Refentše with a stable place of identification, to which he wants to and does feel a sense of belonging. Since Heaven is imaginatively constructed and made possible through such stories, Refentše's narrative is one part of the fabrication of this sacred space.

The narrative is told from Heaven where the narrator tells Refentše, and later Refilwe, the stories of their lives. Heaven allows Refentše not only to see the errors of his life, but also the mistakes and follies of his friends and family who are still living. The 'benefit of retrospect and omniscience' that Refentše and the narrator provide draws the liminality of Heaven into the structure of the novel as the boundaries between Hillbrow and Heaven deteriorate:<sup>99</sup>

As you, Refentše... sat in the lounge of Heaven and pondered the complex paradox of life, death and everything in between, you seemed to see, simultaneously, the vibrating panorama of Hillbrow and all its multitudinous life stories, conducting themselves in the milk, honey and bile regions of your own expanding brain.<sup>100</sup>

Refentše's ancestral perspective of his life and the lives of others is overwhelming – the panorama vibrates with biblical promise (milk and honey), and with the bitter bile of the post-apartheid, global city. Refentše has

moved beyond the limits of his experience and is granted a point of view only possible in Heaven: ‘Your skull threatened to collapse at any moment... the infinite fragments combining and recombining in the containing frame of your head.’<sup>101</sup> Although Heaven is the only place that maintains its boundaries, it is disconcertingly described in earthly terms as Refentše sits in the ‘lounge,’ the meeting area in Heaven. While Heaven is certainly a transcendent place, it is also linked in profound ways to earthly realities, because it is constructed by the stories of those still living and inhabited by those recently dead. Heaven is, thus, explained simultaneously as a mundane and sacred archive:

the world of our continuing existence, located in the memory and consciousness of those who live with us and after us. It is the archive that those we left behind keep visiting and revisiting; digging this out, suppressing or burying that. Continually reconfiguring the stories of our lives, as if they alone hold the real and true version.<sup>102</sup>

An archive, but also an archival construction; Heaven and its inhabitants are the product of memory – of the violations, intrusions, and reconstructions of memory, of ancestral narration. Like burial mounds dug, visited, and refashioned, Heaven is the site of memory and of its making. The ‘personal immortality’ of the ancestors depends upon the remembrance of the living.<sup>103</sup> Ancestors ‘are the guardians of family affairs, traditions, ethics and activities,’ acting as intermediaries between the living and the spirits or God.<sup>104</sup> They are a material condition for cultural inheritance. The protagonists and the narrator of the novel inhabit Heaven, the sacred home of the ancestors. From this transcendent place, through ancestral narration, the map of Hillbrow is created and the networks of global migration are figured. Mpe’s novel, thus, locates fiction in a space marked out by African epistemologies; indeed, he resituates fiction in the sacred. The temporal strangeness of the novel, as it is told in the present tense despite both protagonists being dead, means that Heaven is present in the text from the first line, and what the reader experiences is a ‘linguistic trip’ through the Hillbrow of Refentše’s imagining.<sup>105</sup>

The identity of the narrator is unknown; however, the persistent second person narration that simultaneously distances and engages the reader enacts the complexity of Refentše’s search for belonging.<sup>106</sup> This persistent double positioning of retrospective second person perspective means that Refentše is constantly orientated and then reoriented as the narrator tells his story, mimetic of his repeated attempts to dwell and belong. These attempts are successful only in Heaven, where, through his ancestral perspective Refentše is able to map not only the streets of Hillbrow, but the networks of his fellow migrants, the connections between places and people, and therefore better able to understand his position within it all. Refentše’s experience of this sagacious perspective, and its focalisation

through the narrator, incorporates the sacred and its forms into the text. He now inhabits the world of the ancestors, the world of Heaven, and from here he is able to construct a pedestrian map, differentiating and resignifying familiar spaces of the city. The repetition of recollection provides Refentše with a place to dwell, to belong, in the archive of Heaven.

Gevisser, Vladislavić, Cole and Mpe each respond to the ontological and physical vulnerability confronted in the globalised, postcolonial city. Their novels register and respond to this uncertainty by modelling strategies of habitation that depend upon pedestrian mapping, rooting the protagonists within their local history. The trope of the flâneur is not adequate to the task of unravelling the entanglement of postcolonial and postsecular negotiation evident in these texts. Nonetheless, de Certeau's theory of how the walker brings the city into being resonates strongly with the process of sacralisation where a thing is resignified through repeated hermeneutical engagement. The mapping of and repeated ritual attention to Johannesburg in *Dispatcher* and *Portrait* draw the forms of the sacred into the narrative structure. The strategies of pedestrian mapping rely on the affordances of ritual and the sacred – repetition, differentiation, resignification – to figure modes of dwelling and belonging keenly attuned to long and inequitable spatial histories. Contrapuntal and palimpsestic narrative forms, foregrounded through the pedestrian perspective, excavate the capitalist and colonial legacies of urban management. Pedestrian mapping takes on an added dimension in *Open City* where the integration of Yoruba deities bolsters Julius's reimagining of New York as a postcolonial city, and similarly in *Welcome to Our Hillbrow* where Johannesburg comes into being through a sacred archive and ancestral narration. It is not merely that the sacred is represented in the latter novels, it is integrated into their form. Thus, attention to the affordances of ritual and the sacred evident across these works demonstrates how they enact religio-cultural knowledge that challenges linearity of secular modernity, and its fictional depiction.

## Notes

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- 2 Walter Benjamin 'stressed the flâneur's embeddedness in commercial mass culture.' Yet, rather than being entirely alienated by 'commodified urban culture,' the flâneur was a figure who emphasised the 'public and heroic potential of the city.' While this is one version of the modern, 19<sup>th</sup> century flâneur, a figure privileged by whiteness and financial means, Mpe and Cole recast the pedestrian protagonist not as heroic observer but as an inquirer into the concatenations of secular, spiritual, and urban experience. Mary Gluck, 'The Flâneur and the Aesthetic Appropriation of Urban Culture in Mid-19th-Century Paris,' *Theory, Culture & Society* 20, no. 5 (2003): 54, 55.
- 3 de Certeau, *Everyday*, 99.
- 4 Michel de Certeau, *On Signs* (Baltimore, Md.: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1985), 129.

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- 6 de Certeau, 130.
- 7 de Certeau, 130.
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- 9 David Chidester and Linenthal, *American Sacred Space* (Indiana: Indiana University Press, 1995), 18–19.
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- 20 Geisser, *Lost and Found*, 326.
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- 23 Pablo Mukherjee, ‘Ivan Vladislavić: Traversing the Uneven City,’ *Journal of Postcolonial Writing* 48, no. 5 (2012): 476, <https://doi.org/10.1080/17449855.2012.720797>.
- 24 Mukherjee, 476.
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- 26 Vladislavić, 12.
- 27 Vladislavić, 18.
- 28 Gerald Gaylard, ‘An African Flâneur? Walking Johannesburg in Portrait with Keys,’ *Cities in Flux: Metropolitan Spaces in South African Literary and Visual Texts: Festschrift in Honour of Professor Em. Dr. Therese Steffen* 12 (2017): 57.
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Baudelaire, as ‘the newest drug for the solitary,’ and ‘the newest and most inscrutable labyrinth. Through them, previously unknown chthonic traits are imprinted on the image of the city.’ Yet Julius is distinct from the secular European flâneur. His trajectory through the labyrinthine city is marked by his personal and political sensitivity to its racist, exploitative history, by his search for an open church, and by his incorporation of Yoruba deities into the urban environment (Walter Benjamin, *The Arcades Project* (Cambridge, Mass.: Belknap Press, 1999), 429, 446).

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- 88 Mpe, *Welcome*, 49.
- 89 Hunt, ‘Post-Apartheid Johannesburg and Global Mobility in Nadine Gordimer’s “The Pickup” and Phaswane Mpe’s “Welcome to Our Hillbrow”,’ 104–5.
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- 94 Mpe, 68.
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- 97 Mpe, *Welcome*, 1.
- 98 Mpe, 11.
- 99 Mpe, 47.
- 100 Mpe, 79.
- 101 Mpe, 79.
- 102 Mpe, 124.
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- 104 Mbiti, 82.
- 105 Mpe, *Welcome*, 68.
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### 3 Cultivation, alterity and excess

#### The sublime in J. M. Coetzee's *Boyhood* and Marlene van Niekerk's *Agaat*

A fascination with land, landscape and belonging is a common concern in South African literature where ongoing contestations over land and land rights draw from settler colonial and apartheid histories to register ongoing political, ideological and existential anxieties.<sup>1</sup> The *plaasroman* genre, in particular, seeks to validate settler ideology, 'justifying colonial subjugation and white supremacist claims to Afrikaner ownership of the land,' which in turn relies on the notion that land can be legally, conceptually and agriculturally controlled.<sup>2</sup> While much has been written about Coetzee's and van Niekerk's writing back to the traditional *plaasroman*,<sup>3</sup> my interest here is in the tamed, farmed landscape which *resists* being fully known, and by doing so entices the love, reverence and fear of the cultivator or spectator. Coetzee's *Boyhood: Scenes from Provincial Life* (1998) and van Niekerk's *Agaat* (2006)<sup>4</sup> revise the genre to envisage alternatives to colonial and anthropocentric power relations; instead, John and Milla, the novels' respective protagonists, describe how the landscape is unknowable and will persist long after they have died. This experience of the sublime is registered formally in the persistent juxtaposition between human finitude and the spatio-temporal expanse of deep time. I argue that John and Milla experience a profound existential and psychological ambivalence towards the land, which is untameable, unrepresentable and yet owned, demarcated and cultivated. The affordances of the sacred – differentiation, hermeneutic engagement, and resignification – are deployed in both novels to manage and mediate, at least partly, the subjective experience of the sublime.

A similar spatio-temporal contrast is evident in Olive Schreiner's, anti-pastoral and feminist novel, *The Story of an African Farm* (1883). Perhaps the most famous South African farm novel in English, this was, as Nicole Devarenne notes, the 'first in a series of literary encounters (many written in Afrikaans) with the South African landscape.'<sup>5</sup> Schreiner's novel sets up the discursive engagement with the transcendence of nature seen in the *plaasroman* genre. Waldo, the son of the German caretaker, makes unanswered appeals to a Christian God and instead cultivates a spiritual connection to the landscape, where he perceives a 'deep unity':

And so, it comes to pass in time, that the earth ceases for us to be a weltering chaos. We walk in the great hall of life, looking up and around reverentially... The life that throbs in us is a pulsation from it; too mighty for our comprehension, not too small.<sup>6</sup>

Waldo is keenly aware of the numinous and the enduring time of the natural expanse, beyond 'comprehension.' This experience of the sublime in *The Story of an African Farm*, like *Agaat* and *Boyhood*, relies on juxtaposed temporal scales: 'too mighty' and 'too small.' Indeed, Coetzee affirms that 'Schreiner's Karoo has a chronography extending from prehistory to a posthistory after man. In this chronography, the life-spans of individuals and even of peoples constitute negligible intervals.'<sup>7</sup> 'Fiction affords ways of ordering time,' Stefan Helgesson explains, because 'fictionality provides... a qualified freedom imaginatively to explore and produce temporalities that question or ironise the dominant version of time as Europe-cantered progress.'<sup>8</sup> Helgesson reads the temporal presentation of the novel as a clash between sacred temporalities and secular registers of time, 'which follow the diurnal/nocturnal and seasonal rhythm of the colonial farm.'<sup>9</sup> In an illustrative scene Waldo listens to the clicking of his father's hunting watch, which begins with the secular mechanical 'tick-tick-tick,' then shifts to "'Dying, dying, dying!'" said the watch,' and finally ends with "'Eternity, eternity, eternity.'"<sup>10</sup> Waldo's disjunctive experience of mechanical, human and sacred time is personified by the watch. Added to these sacred and secular temporal registers is geologic time, present from the novel's opening lines: 'The Full African moon poured down its light from the blue sky into the wide, lonely plain... all were touched by a weird and almost oppressive beauty as they lay in the white light.'<sup>11</sup>

Waldo's investigation into evolutionary or geologic time begins with his desire for the koppie to explain its origins. He finds his explanation in the book 'Physical Geography,' which says 'that what are dry lands now were once lakes.'<sup>12</sup> Waldo becomes aware not only of the passing of his personal time, farm time, or a Christian sense of eternity, but also of geologic time which reaches into an unknowable past and future. The incomprehensibility of deep time, 'the immense arc of non-human history that shaped the world as we perceive it,'<sup>13</sup> Waldo experiences as the transcendent, the sublime, that which is beyond his ken. 'Somewhere intermediate,' Coetzee writes, 'between the infinitesimal and the infinite, the farm asserts its own measures of time and space.'<sup>14</sup> Following Wai-chee Dimock, I understand 'deep time' to be 'a set of longitudinal frames, at once projective and recessional, with input going both ways, and binding continents and millennia into many loops of relations, a densely interactive fabric.'<sup>15</sup> Dimock goes on to assert, echoing Coetzee and Helgesson, that 'Literature is the home of nonstandard space and time. Against the official borders of the nation and against the fixed intervals of the clock, what flourishes here is irregular duration and extension.'<sup>16</sup> I argue, therefore, that the literary

experience of the sublime is generated by the juxtaposition of spatio-temporal scales depicted through metaphors of excess.

John, the child protagonist of *Boyhood*, loves a farm he will not inherit or cultivate, because he is drawn to its sacred vastness. Coetzee's 'novels extend Schreiner's antipastoral vision,' Dominic Head notes.<sup>17</sup> In addition to *Boyhood* and *Summertime* (2009), Coetzee's preoccupation with the farm is present in *In the Heart of the Country* (1977), *Life & Times of Michael K* (1983), *Disgrace* (1999) and the short story 'Nietverloren' (2009). The sacred is an especially important dimension of Michael K's relationship to the land and his 'life as a cultivator.'<sup>18</sup> The doctor's narration in section two ascribes sacred meaning to Michael's garden, similar to Waldo's spiritual description: 'Let me tell you the meaning of the sacred and alluring garden that blooms in the heart of the desert and produces the food of life... It is another name for the only place where you belong.'<sup>19</sup> The doctor invokes the sacred and refers to Michael's garden as though it were Eden. Yet the abundance of this conjured image contradicts the ascetic spirituality that defines Michael's bond to the dry land and his beloved pumpkins. There is an austere purity to Michael's self-assumed role as cultivator. He is neither owner nor settler; there is no claim to nature. His garden is as impermanent as he is: its small furrows and delicate produce vulnerable against the barren Karoo landscape. Similarly, in the final days of her life, Milla, the narrator-protagonist of *Agaat*, reasserts her claim to a farm and landscape which persistently resists her control. There are echoes, too, of Waldo's apprehension of nature's sublimity in the animist spirituality demonstrated by Agaat, Milla's servant and carer. While representations of land are legion in South African cultural production, especially in English and Afrikaans, *Boyhood* and *Agaat*, responding to Schreiner, are particularly interesting in the constellation of the sacred, the sublime and belonging.<sup>20</sup> To begin, I contextualise the *plaasroman* and discuss five articulations of the sublime: the Kantian versus the Burkean, Bill Ashcroft's horizontal sublime, what Mark Mathuray calls the stalled sublime, and Jana María Giles' postcolonial sublime. My analysis begins with *Boyhood* and closes with *Agaat*.

### Belonging – 'the secret and sacred word'

*Boyhood* is a difficult confessional memoir, set in South African in the late 1940s and early 50s, following John through the dawning years of adolescence in Worcester, a small 'rural' town, Cape Town and the family farm in the Karoo.<sup>21</sup> As Derek Attridge notes, the text is at once immediate and intimate as it is told in the present tense, and dissociative and distancing by virtue of the third person narration.<sup>22</sup> The only son of educated Afrikaans parents, who prefer to speak English and send their son to English-medium classes, the memoir records John's growing sense of marginality and burgeoning awareness of the suffering legalised by the Apartheid state. The

farm is, however, 'the place on earth he has defined, imagined, constructed, as his place of origin,' as Coetzee explains in *Doubling the Point*.<sup>23</sup> Despite the carefully crafted narrative distance, John's love and reverence for the farm are palpable: the farm is sacred, and he ritualises his devotion to it. His experience of the farm is akin to the sublime – overwhelmed and absorbed as he is by the stillness and excess of the landscape: 'the silence that descends heavy as a cloud... and always the landscape enclosing them.'<sup>24</sup> John feels the farm is where he belongs, and yet he has no claim to the land, it belongs to his father's family: 'He must go to the farm because there is no place on earth he loves more or can imagine loving more... Yet since as far back as he can remember this love has had an edge of pain.'<sup>25</sup>

Nonetheless, John traces his lineage through the farms held by his paternal and maternal relations: 'Through the farms he is rooted in the past; through the farms he has substance.'<sup>26</sup> John's myth of origin does not rely on a deity, as one might expect; rather, the farm takes the place of creator. Alyda Faber argues that *Disgrace*, published two years after *Boyhood*, is a 'post-secular novel that envisions new terms for ethics in post-apartheid South Africa by both engaging and resisting religious language and practice.'<sup>27</sup> Coetzee's engagement with religious discourse and practice is evident too in descriptions of the farm, and particularly as John walks through the family graveyard:

Whatever dies here dies firmly and finally: its flesh is picked off by the ants, its bones are bleached by the sun, and that is that. Yet among these graves he treads nervously. From the earth comes a deep silence, so deep that it could almost be a hum.<sup>28</sup>

There is no mention of a Christian afterlife; instead John is aware of another form of the numinous, the longevity of the earth, its deep silence. Like Waldo's experience of entangled temporalities in the Karoo, John contrasts the ephemerality of human life with deep time, engaging and resisting religious discourse and practice.

'The rocks under my feet are a reminder of the geological time in which we are but a speck,' Martin Hägglund writes: '[T]he brevity of my life is made salient by the forms of time to which I am recalled.'<sup>29</sup> Hägglund's explanation of how human finitude is understood in relation to non-human temporal registers, echoes Waldo's and John's experience. For Hägglund to 'be finite means primarily two things: to be dependent on others [human and non-human] and to live in relation to death.'<sup>30</sup> This sense of existential and physical vulnerability, 'of finitude – the sense of the ultimate fragility of everything we care about – is at the heart of' what Hägglund terms '*secular faith*.'<sup>31</sup> To be finite in this mode is precisely what Waldo, John, and Milla experience: their care for the land is motivated by the limited nature of their own lives, their living in relation to death and dependence on human and non-human others. John's adoration of the farm is not

based on ownership; rather, he defines himself through his dependence to it for belonging and selfhood. This in turn depends on his perception of the farm's spatio-temporal excess: the harsh sun of the Karoo, the insects which eat the flesh of the dead, the personification of the land that seems to vibrate with silence – this is the landscape that cannot be owned, tamed or fully known; this is John's experience of the sublime.

The Karoo is a vast semi-arid region in the heart of South Africa. The area is not defined by particular geographical boundaries but by the climate, which produces very little rain. There is only sufficient ground water to maintain small settlements and sheep farming. Like other semi-deserts, the Karoo is marked by the beauty of its contrasts, the clear blue horizon against the olive and ochre of the dry landscape, the extremes of hot and cold, and the harsh stillness. The silence and mystery of the landscape absorbs John's imagination. He knows his family's history on the farm, he understands his place within it, yet the uncontained excess of the landscape exceeds his rational mind: 'There is not enough time in a single life to know all of Voëlfontein, know its every stone and bush. No time can be enough when one loves a place with such devouring love.'<sup>32</sup> The expanse of Voëlfontein exceeds John's imagination and his finite life. John is drawn to this feeling of sublimity:

But in his secret heart he knows what the farm in its own way knows too: that Voëlfontein belongs to no one. The farm is greater than any of them. The farm exists from eternity to eternity. When they are all dead, when even the farmhouse has fallen into ruin like the kraals on the hillside, the farm will still be there.<sup>33</sup>

The farm John refers to is not owned, demarcated agricultural land, it is the landscape itself measured across geologic time compared to the relative insignificance of the gravestones, fences and houses that signify human habitation. John's description displaces the human subject in favour of nature, subverting the patriarchal features of the *plaasroman*: reorienting the 'lineal consciousness' of the genre.<sup>34</sup> In the logic of this kind of narrative the farmer sees himself as the temporary overseer of 'permanent family land,' as the intermediary between 'past and future generations' which are manifest in agricultural and biological inscriptions on the land.<sup>35</sup> Jennifer Wenzel explains that *Boyhood* is distinguished from this genre because '[t]he farm will outlast the boy and his family; his uncle is not a transitory steward of family land... but merely a temporary sojourner on land that belongs merely to itself.'<sup>36</sup> The farm is personified, ascribed agency and procreative potential as it is the chosen site of John's beginning. Yet Voëlfontein exceeds the capacity of John's rationality and imagination; it is described in the register of transcendence: humming with deep silence and infinite beyond John's comprehension. John experiences the farm as sacred and sublime.

When John returns to the farm as an adult, having recently returned from living in the United States, he feels the same sublimity. In *Summertime*, the third instalment of Coetzee's fictionalised memoir, Margot, John's cousin, recounts his reunion with the family and Voëlfontein. Among their relatives, John and Margot are bound together by their love for the Karoo: 'It touches one's soul, this landscape. They are in the minority, a tiny minority, the two of them, of souls that are stirred by these great, desolate expanses.'<sup>37</sup> It is the abundance of space along the horizon, the pallet of scorched colours stretching out as far as the eye can see that resonates so profoundly with John and Margot. Margot acknowledges, as John does, that this is 'a sacred space.'<sup>38</sup> For both of them the farm and the Karoo are experienced as excess: 'That is what they share above all: not just a love of this farm, this *kontrei*, this Karoo, but an understanding that goes with the love, an understanding that love can be too much.'<sup>39</sup> For Margot, as for John, the farm is defined by its perceptual, emotional and imaginative excess. When Margot asks John if he is pleased to have come back to South Africa and the farm his answer is incomplete: "I don't know," he replies. "Of course, in the midst of this" – he does not gesture, but she knows what he means: this sky, this space, the vast silence enclosing them.'<sup>40</sup> In *Boyhood* and *Summertime*, as child and adult, John experiences the 'great, desolate' landscape of the Karoo as sublime. Coetzee establishes an alternative relation between the subject and the land. John and Margot do not feel a proprietary claim to the land, they belong to it.

Colonial power relations are subverted in *Boyhood* around the notion of belonging:

The secret and sacred word that binds him to the farm is *belong*. Out in the veld by himself he can breathe the word aloud: *I belong on the farm*. What he really believes but does not utter, what he keeps to himself for fear that the spell will end, is a different form of the word: *I belong to the farm*.<sup>41</sup>

The simple change in preposition alters the truth of his connection. The farm is at once inhabited and beyond reach – and it is this mystery – belonging and the yearning for belonging that signify the farm for John. He even incorporates a performative ritual into this relationship: 'Once, out in the veld far from the house, he bends down and rubs his palms in the dust as if washing them. It is ritual. He is making up a ritual.'<sup>42</sup> Like water, which would cleanse his hands, John immerses his hands in the dust of the farm, drawing the farm onto his body, ritualising his adoration. Through this ritual – understood as the process of always contingent classification and differentiation – John imagines the perfection of the farm in conscious tension with the realities of his relationship to it. John's ritual allows him to draw an aspect of the sacred vastness of the farm literally within his grasp; he is able, if only for the duration of the ritual, to contain his sublime experience of the Karoo landscape.



Private ownership, cartography and agricultural specialisation allow for the organisation and categorisation of land and time. The untameable expanse of the natural world is circumscribed by the boundaries of the farm and the land within, harnessed for production. Farm time is arranged around seasonal labour and nocturnal/diurnal rhythms, while geologic time underpins it all. Against this excess, this experience of the non-human other, the boundary fence signifies the subject's effort to control the land; the attempt to contain and cultivate. Understood in this way, the farm is an attempt to tame the sublime by controlling the landscape. Reason cannot order the sublime; it can, however, categorise, differentiate and resignify (make sacred), a relation between the subject and land.

### The sublime and the *plaastroman*

Eighteenth-century discussions of the sublime were, Vanessa Ryan asserts, concerned with 'how a particular experience of being moved impacts the self,' rather than with the artistic.<sup>43</sup> Thus, in the most famous discussions of the sublime by Emmanuel Kant and Edmund Burke, 'the sublime most fully explores the question of how we make sense of our experience: "Why and how does this object move me?"'<sup>44</sup> Kant holds that the sublime 'is not contained in anything in nature, but only in our mind,' just as Burke proposes that the sublime 'is productive of the strongest emotion which the mind is capable of feeling.'<sup>45</sup> Burke and Kant agree that the sublime is interior to the subject; it is a feeling of awe, terror, or astonishment generated by the subject's perception of a magnitude which defies the capabilities of the imagination. This is, however, where their accounts of the sublime diverge. In Kant's explanation, the feeling of 'displeasure, arising from the inadequacy of imagination,' is met by 'a simultaneously awakened pleasure,' which lies in the capacity of reason to judge the 'inadequacy' of the imagination.<sup>46</sup> While Kant maintains that the 'sublime allows us to intuit our rational capacity, Burke's physiological version of the sublime involves a critique of reason.'<sup>47</sup> Burke holds that the sublime 'is a question not of the subject's increasing self-awareness but of the subject's sense of limitation and of the ultimate value of that experience within a social and ethical context.'<sup>48</sup> For Burke, 'the power of the sublime' is not a product of reason; the sublime 'anticipates our reasonings, and hurries us on by an irresistible force,' resulting in 'astonishment' in its 'highest degree.'<sup>49</sup> The Burkean sublime, close to what is found in *Boyhood* and *Agaat*, is a feeling of astonishment that results from the subject's exposure to the limits of the imagination and reason. The sublime is the consequence of the subject being confronted by that which is unrepresentable, unknowable – the numinous. As John says, 'There is not enough time in a single life to know all of Voëlfontein.'<sup>50</sup> This statement conveys delight at the mystery that the farm maintains, just as it contrasts the finitude of John's lifetime with the landscape's deep time. While deep time attempts to bring the history of

earth's evolution within human understanding, it is precisely in the enormity of the task that the sublime is experienced.

*Boyhood's* critical inversion of colonial power structures is preceded by Coetzee's explanation of the discourse of power operative in representations of the South African landscape in *White Writing*. Searching for an appropriate language with which to know Africa, Coetzee argues, South African writers and artists displace the European vertical sublime in favour of one true to local particularities. Coetzee relies on Shaftsbury and Burke in establishing the sublime as an aesthetic category.<sup>51</sup> He defines the sublime as 'spectacle' that 'exceeds all measure (all comparison),' and 'is in this sense absolute.'<sup>52</sup> The aesthetic sublime seeks to formulate the viewer's experience of awe, fear and wonder when beholding the incomprehensible vastness of nature. As seen in Caspar David Friedrich's *Wanderer Above the Sea of Fog* (1818) the visual vocabulary of this European, vertical sublime includes high peaks reaching into the heavens; the lone male figure resolute on a rocky outcrop beholding the magnificence of forested mountain below him. This hierarchy of nature, man, God serves the ends colonial discourse. As Jana María Giles asserts the 'sublime and its related aesthetic, the picturesque often served as tropes for colonial power, enabling white settlers to rationalise incomprehensible new environments, reconceive hostile nature as imbued with the potentiality for cultivation, and valorise their efforts at domestication.'<sup>53</sup>

Coetzee notes that the landscape paintings of the South African artist J. H. Peirneef draw from this European tradition of the sublime, but for the most part, the vertical sublime does not find a foothold in South African art. Coetzee attributes this to the absence of a 'tradition of landscape painting or writing... among the Dutch at the Cape,' or among the English travelling in the area at the time.<sup>54</sup> Though a fascination with the sublime does not emerge in any significant way, an interest in the pastoral does, and even here the 'landscape remains alien, impenetrable, until a language is found in which to win it, speak it, represent it.'<sup>55</sup> Coetzee is interested primarily in the capacity of language to capture and depict the landscape in particular ideological, historical and cultural terms. He suggests, for instance, that the descriptive language of British poets alienates the South African landscape by privileging comparisons between the rolling, verdant plains of their homeland and the perceived 'wildness' of an 'uncontrollable' Africa.

In contrast, Coetzee contends that Afrikaans is a local language capable of grappling with the particularities of the South African landscape – able to tease out the tensions between landscape and landed property.<sup>56</sup> The *plaasroman* represents these concerns: the genre is an ideological justification of the Afrikaner right to the land, to own property, to tame landscape – a validation and valorisation of an agrarian, settler existence. The broad characteristics of the *plaasroman* are the representation of an empty wilderness; the relationship between the farmer and land created

when the farmer sheds blood and sweat as he captures the land from the chaos and disorder of the wilderness. Through this dedicated labour the farmer comes to be a husband to and protector of the land; this patriarchal link is morally and culturally preferable to a purchase of land. The burial of family members on the land assures a family heritage and claim, while the promise of a son to inherit the farm provides longevity into the future. All of this is ideologically founded on the invisibility of black labour. The result of this discourse is clear. The Afrikaner farmer has a special relationship with the land: his containment of the landscape, his taming of the empty wilderness, and his harnessing of its fertile potential signify the farmer as the God-ordained king of his domain. This imagined and strongly asserted claim is present in the *plaasroman*, but so too is the continued mystery and irrepressible power of the land that resists cultivation and representation. The demarcation of boundaries and utility is merely an attempt to tame and contain the expanse of space – a perpetual attempt, continually failing – since the sublime persists in the moment when the imagination falters and comprehension fails. The collapse of the settler imagination before an unfamiliar form of plenitude in the ‘uncentered’ geomorphic space of the colony generates anxiety that echoes the unease of the sublime, before the moment of transcendence.

The ideological and cultural specificity of the *plaasroman* reflects South Africa’s settler colonial history. However, neither the discourse nor the colonial power relations are unique to the area and there are profitable comparisons to be drawn from Australian literary and artistic engagements with landscape.<sup>57</sup> In *Intimate Horizons* Bill Ashcroft, Frances Devlin-Glass and Lyn McCredden demonstrate the presence of the sacred in Australian postcolonial literature. Tracing a creative trajectory between the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, Ashcroft, Devlin-Glass and McCredden propose that the European vertical sublime is altered, reimagined and ‘re-placed’ in Australian art and fiction.<sup>58</sup> The writers they discuss share a common formulation of the sacred ‘imagined as earthed, embodied, humbled, local, demotic, ordinary and proximate’; ‘it is also the sacred of interrelationship – an ethics which is open not just to the agency of human ego but also to the other, to the land, and to that which is not human.’<sup>59</sup> In the Australian ‘literary and artistic imagination,’ ‘the numinous, the unrepresentable [*sic*], the awesome’ was projected onto ‘the incomprehensible vastness of Australian space,’ and the ‘sacred provided a grammar with which to consider that vastness and that difference.’<sup>60</sup> For this critical trio, the grammar provided by the sacred ‘is the language of the sublime.’<sup>61</sup> The vocabulary used to articulate the contradictory feelings of the sublime is the language of the sacred: a language of awe and order. Ashcroft et al argue that in Australian literary production the sacred and the sublime are ‘re-placed’ as they are invested with and transformed by the particularity of place rather than the universal or transcendent. They hold that the beginnings of ‘an aesthetically conceived sacred... occurred in a transformation of the

sublime.<sup>62</sup> Whereas the Romantic notion of the sublime is focused on ‘wild natural spaces’ and a vertical relation between the subject and Subject, this is disrupted in the Australian setting where the excess of space is not only vertical but also horizontal, as it is in the Karoo. With the vocabulary provided by the sacred this incomprehensible vastness (the sublime) is brought within the taxonomic capabilities of language. The two particular features of the Australian sacred drawn out in *Intimate Horizons* are its quotidian and the emplaced nature, one expression of which is the horizontal sublime. The horizontal sublime is experienced as alien and intimidating and yet still available for ‘intimate engagement (it can “charm” and its subdued innerness, waywardness and exuberance become familiar).’<sup>63</sup> While the materiality of the landscape makes the sacred imminent, the unrepresentable excess of space locates the numinous in the horizontal vastness.

The uncanny experience of the sublime, ‘its “not-at-home-ness” is a direct consequence of sublime plenitude of space rather than its ‘form’ or location. The horizon traces the ‘edge’ where *no-thing* – the unrepresentable [*sic*] Subject – appears.’<sup>64</sup> Thus, similar to John’s experience of Voëlfontein, the horizontal sublime is experienced not as a result of being in awe of one grand place, but rather as the experience of the incomprehension of too much unlimited space: a void of understanding which is taken up by the numinous and the unknowable. Ashcroft, Devlin-Glass and McCredden are careful to locate the Australian literary sacred outside of the ‘hermeneutic of received religion or systematic theology,’ figuring it instead as an ‘(aesthetic) moment “beyond meaning”.’<sup>65</sup> The Australian sacred, positioned between the sacredness of ordinary life and material, and the sublime of expansive space, clearly resonates with John’s experience of his beloved Voëlfontein, and with Milla’s experience of her farm, as we shall see. The sublime conceptualised as an aesthetic moment when meaning is disrupted corresponds to the sublime depicted in *Boyhood* and *Agaat*. The horizontal sublime helps to theorise settler anxiety and awe of unlimited space in the South African context, but it does not address the disjunctive experience of deep time.

Mark Mathuray provides a different reading of Coetzee’s sublime. In discussing the sacred in African literature, Mathuray picks up on a particular formulation of the sacred in Coetzee’s work, what he calls the ‘stalled sublime.’ While the focus of his analysis is *Foe*, with references to *Life & Times of Michael K* and *Waiting for the Barbarians*, I believe that a version of Mathuray’s stalled sublime functions in the *plaasroman*, and its more contemporary, self-conscious iterations. Mathuray traces the development of the notion of the sacred and sublime through a number of theorists, beginning with Emile Benveniste’s identification of two words which denote the sacred in Latin: *sacer* and *sanctus*. *Sanctus* indicates a person who has risen above other men because he has been attributed ‘divine favour,’ yet for Mathuray it is the ambiguity of *sacer*, which ‘incorporates both the

mythic hero and the sacrificial victim' that suggests the duality of the sacred he develops. Mathuray concludes that the sacred and the sublime are not only connected, but that they move towards a similar point, the numinous, and inspire a related affect: delight, horror and the continuously deferred moment of transcendence. It is at the moment just before resolution, before meaning is restored and before transcendence that the stalled sublime takes shape. Using Thomas Weiskel's division of the sublime experience into three distinct 'mental moments,' Mathuray identifies where the sublime begins and stalls.<sup>66</sup> In the initial phase the 'mind and object, signifier and signified, are in a determinate relationship.'<sup>67</sup> In the second phase the association between the mind and what it sees falters, such as when the reader is met with a 'text that exceeds comprehension by having too many signifiers or signifieds.'<sup>68</sup> The third and final phase is the moment of transcendence, when we are allowed to glimpse our 'destiny as moral beings' and the 'possibility of meaning is rescued.'<sup>69</sup> The stalled sublime does not reach the third phase; it is

a post-Kantian, post-Romantic rupture and stalling of the sublime movement. This suspension prevents the intervention of the transcendent. The refusal to resolve the breakdown of discourse/meaning means that Coetzee's novels rest uneasily on the moment of defeat. There is no intervention of grace, no resolution of the breakdown in meaning.<sup>70</sup>

If the sublime moment is an experience of transcendence, however fleeting, when meaning is revealed and order created, then the sublime precedes the numinous. Such ecstatic comfort is not available to Coetzee's characters or his readers. The moment when meaning might become whole never arrives; 'Terror does not transform into tranquil superiority.'<sup>71</sup> In Coetzee's texts, Mathuray notes,

we are confronted not with a failed dialectic (the disarticulation between self and other) but rather with a failed epiphany. The principal subjective dimension of the stalled sublime is alienation – the metaphysical homelessness of the modern subject and the solitary individual estranged from history are its correlatives.<sup>72</sup>

The stalled sublime does not permit catharsis, or ease; rather, the movement of the sublime is halted at the point of confusion, where meaning is forever deferred. The prime example of this, found in *Foe*, is Susan Barton's incomprehension of Friday's tonguelessness. The meaning of Friday as a subject is beyond what Susan can imagine, and her confusion about him is never resolved. For Coetzee, it appears, the mind of the other is sublime in its alterity: the Magistrate's bafflement by the barbarian girl, the Medical Officer's obsession with understanding Michael K, the inscrutability of

Vercueil to Mrs. Curren, and David Lurie's suspicions of Petrus.<sup>73, 74</sup> The stalling of the moment of transcendence can also be found in *Agaat* in Milla's seemingly impossible attempts to find resolution as she tries to comprehend her relationship with the farm and resolve the psychological damage she has inflicted upon Agaat. Echoing Susan's fascination with Friday's mouth, Milla dreams about Agaat's tongue as an aerial, an object designed to convey meaning: 'Dream I pull out her tongue like an aerial, one section, two, three, longer and longer.'<sup>75</sup> The horror, fear and awe of this phase of the sublime movement persist, and Agaat and Friday remain inscrutable.

The horizontal sublime replaces the phenomenon, and the stalled sublime turns on deferral of meaning. Both move away from the Kantian scheme which, as Gayatri Spivak asserts, is only available to those European males educated within dominant colonial culture: 'Those who are cooked by culture can "denominate" nature sublime.'<sup>76</sup> Building on Jean-François Lyotard's notion of the differend, 'the non-discursive sign of heterogeneity,' Jana María Giles proposes a politically inflected postcolonial sublime. 'The sublime in Coetzee's postcolonial and postmodern incarnation,' Giles writes, 'no longer guarantees access to the abstractions of pure practical reason, but redirects our focus to our immersion in material events, demanding that we witness and address our political differends.'<sup>77</sup> 'As in aesthetics, a political differend occurs when a conflict cannot be resolved due to the lack of a common rule, criterion, or discourse,'<sup>78</sup> it 'signals the incommensurability between reason and imagination.'<sup>79</sup> The postcolonial sublime extends the sublime beyond religious discourse to account for 'the feeling that signals the limits of representation and reason,' when the subject is confronted by something that resists comprehension.<sup>80</sup> In this way, the postcolonial sublime redirects attention to human and non-human others, who operate beyond the subject's linguistic and imaginative capacity. Friday and Agaat can be read as political differends; similarly, the land of the farm, confronts John and Milla with their immersion in material events and their reliance on human and non-human others who resist their imaginative capture.

Let me summarise my argument in this chapter so far. First, I demonstrate the formal integration of the affordances of the sublime. In other words, how the mechanisms of the sublime – the metaphors of excess and the contrast between spatio-temporal scales – are incorporated into the structure and poetics of the novel. Second, the chapter reveals how John and Milla sacralise aspects of the farm in order to mitigate their feelings of alterity and finitude. In the hands of Coetzee and van Niekerk, the postcolonial *plaasroman* reveals how the landscape is made to bear the signification of the farm as a way of overriding the manifold signifiers of the land. This attempt to create order and meaning by taming nature and the sublime moment cannot be successful, these novels show, because what is sought is not the transcendent, but control over a landscape that continually resists. The central tension of the sublime as it is depicted in

*Boyhood* and *Agaat* is the strain between the transience of the farm (its built structures and human organisation), and the permanence of the land itself; the disjuncture between human time and geologic time. Imaginatively and materially the land cannot fully satisfy the subject's desire for belonging and plenitude; instead, the geomorphic vastness emphasises the subject's impermanence. It is an encounter between human and non-human others, which is experienced as both aesthetic and political anxiety. The farm is the axis point between the finite subject and extended ecological time, because it is the site of alteration and altercation where John and Milla intervene in the landscape. For both protagonists the farm is a place of belonging; a place which is simultaneously the foundation of their origin stories and a reminder of their finite influence and presence. John and Milla deploy the affordances of the sacred in order to organise and thereby make sense of this experience. John performs this through his sand ritual and, as we shall see, Milla does this through her mapping of the farm. In each case differentiation, interpretation and resignification, the mechanisms of the sacred, enable the protagonist to conceptualise their relation to the farm, to its contained, cultivated spaces, beyond which is the 'non-discursive sign,' the unrepresentable excess of the land.

### ***Agaat*: Confession, the sacred and sublime**

Postsecular poetics is generative in reading three interrelated aspects of van Niekerk's novel: the depiction of ritual and integration of its affordances, the confessional mode, and the representation of the sublime, the mechanisms of which rely on the juxtaposition of human and non-human temporal scales. A postsecular negotiation of religious discourse is evident throughout the novel in Milla's scepticism of biblical promise, *Agaat*'s syncretic spiritual practice, and in the redeployment of ritual and sacral language, not to traditional religious spaces, but to Milla's body and the farm.

Each chapter contains four narrative strands taken up in a different form and temporal register. The first, recounted by Milla in the first-person, is set in 1996 (the narrative present) as she suffers the progressive paralysis of motor neuron disease. The second, narrated in the second person, is Milla's recollections of her troubled relationships with her husband, her son, *Agaat* and the farm itself. There are also Milla's diary entries from the late 1950s and 1960s that *Agaat* is reading to her, and finally there are the italicised sections which depict Milla's stream of consciousness anxieties and reminiscences. With the exception of the epilogue and prologue, which are narrated by Milla's son Jakkie, the entirety of the novel is focalised through Milla. In an act of ventriloquism that demonstrates the power inversion in their relationship, *Agaat* reads Milla's journal entries aloud to Milla, forcing her to listen to her own past mistreatment of *Agaat* as she was 'made and unmade and remade.'<sup>81</sup> *Agaat* was adopted daughter, then servant, and finally carer.

The farm remains, through the unfolding of Milla's confession and Agaat's resistance, the social and linguistic intermediary between Milla and Agaat. Grootmoedersdrift is the constant referent in their relationship; it mediates their interactions and provides a shared vocabulary. In a scene of rare intimacy Agaat washes Milla's paralyzed body and Milla imagines each 'soapy stroke' referring to their shared experience of the farm and their adoration of it:

She soaps the cloth, wrings it half dry and washes the arm with firm soapy strokes up to the armpit... she washes as if I'd just deboned a chicken. And between my fingers, which she straightens, and up against the cuticles she washes as if I'd been working in the black garden soil.<sup>82</sup>

In the latter stages of the novel Milla eventually asks Agaat, through their ocular grammar, all the questions she has wanted to ask over the years. Agaat answers each probing question by explicating tangentially related agricultural procedures. She uses the farm to answer Milla's questions indirectly, keeping herself at a distance. The farm, then, is more than demarcated agricultural space, it is a grammar that Milla and Agaat use to order their respective worlds and navigate their fraught relationship. The knowledge and skill Agaat has gained from running the farm enables her to care for Milla. For Milla, the land and its cultivation are the metaphors through which she retains some purchase on her body: 'I feel around inside me. There's still vegetation, there's water, there's soil.'<sup>83</sup>

Milla uses her intimate knowledge of agricultural procedures of the farm to encourage the muscles of her body to respond to once basic commands:

I feel the porridge ooze down both sides of my tongue before I'm ready for it. I close my eyes and picture the sluice in the irrigation furrow, the water damming up, a hand pulling out the locking-peg and lifting the plate in its grooves, letting through the water, and lowering it again, so that it bumps shut in the track of the sluice frame below. That is how I try to activate my swallowing.<sup>84</sup>

The muscles of Milla's body, the very force that enabled Milla to shape the farm, no longer obey her. The physical processes that happened independently of Milla's attention now require her total concentration. Milla imagines a familiar agricultural process; she imagines water moving through the irrigation furrow and the sluice that controls the flow, a process she knows and understands. The sluice replaces her gullet as the part of the body that controls the movement of porridge down her throat. Control is the motivation behind Milla's conflation of the function of her body with the thing she feels she is expert at ordering and controlling – the farm. When she speaks of her body the sentences are contracted, yet when she speaks of the movement of water over the farm the syntax protracts.



Structural liquidity is reserved for the phrases that describe the associated movement of the water, while the contained, stationary sentences echo the state of her body. Milla substitutes her failing bodily processes for familiar and reliable agricultural mechanisms; she metaphorically replaces the physiology she cannot control with aspects of the farm she has spent her life managing. Milla collapses the conceptual boundaries between her body and the farm again when she needs to encourage her body to urinate.

I think of the water map. I think of the underground water-chambers in the mountain, of the veins branching from them, of the springs in the kloofs, of the fountains of Grootmoedersdrift, the waterfalls in the crevices. I think of the drift when it's in flood, the foaming mass of water, the drift in the rain, when the drops drip silver ringlets on the dark water.<sup>85</sup>

She thinks about the water map of Grootmoedersdrift; she considers the liquid which connects the land of the farm to the geomorphic expanse beyond it: the 'underground water-chambers of the mountain' to the drift in flood. It is not merely that Milla overrides the bodily constraints separating her body from the farm; she also seems to disrupt the fixity of the mind as she transports her imagination to the land to walk the fences and follow the flow of water. Unlike the previous passage which related agricultural to somatic processes, this passage links Milla's body to the water table, to movement of water across ecological time. The contrast between Milla's body-bound, finite life and the expanse of geologic space-time emphasise Milla's vulnerability. Management of the farm allows Milla to order her world; it also enables her to encode her presence onto the landscape. Through hermeneutic and performative engagement, Milla resignifies her body and farm through ritual harmony.

In chapter 1, I argued that repeated lyrical attention to the body, an affordance of ritual, resignifies the body in text, presenting the body as it is, in conscious tension with a desired perfection. The poetry of van Niekerk's prose, translated by Heyns, performs the same ritual process: as Milla imagines her body at one with the farm, van Niekerk's use of bodily and religious metaphors resignifies the body as sacred. In the passage that follows, Milla's determined attempts to ask Agaat for the maps of the farm, for the 'schematic representation' of her world, is overshadowed only by the reverence of her description.<sup>86</sup>

It will take time to make clear that the downstroke is the beginning of an m and that m stands for map, that I want to see the maps of Grootmoedersdrift, the maps of my region, of my place. Fixed points, veritable places, the co-ordinates of my land between the Korenlandrivier and the Buffeljagsrivier... I want to hook my eye to the little blue vein with the red bracket that marks the crossing, the bridge over

the drift... Places to clamp myself to, a space outside these chambered systems of retribution, something on which to graft my imagination, my memories, an incision, a notch, an oculation leading away from these sterile planes.<sup>87</sup>

Milla wants tangible evidence of her claim to the land; she wants to look upon the maps not merely as a sign of her ownership, but also as a sign of her lineage, and as a material representation of her place in the world – the coordinates of longitude and latitude which demarcate her belonging. Metaphysically, Milla wants to see the maps so that she can transport herself out of the confines of her body and her room, onto the farm itself. The scene shifts from the symbols on the map to the actual objects on the farm. From the vertical, cartographic perspective the description shifts to a grounded, somatic view that affirms Milla's embodied presence on the farm, 'Oculation,' Heyns' translation of 'okulering,' which connotes the materiality of Milla's vision, hooking her eye to the lines of the map, a bodily seeing. Milla's performative and hermeneutic engagement with the maps and the space of the farm echo the affordances of the sacred, attempting to resignify the farm in Milla's terms.

The sacralisation of land is evident too in the reverential, even liturgical attention given to the naming of farms and rivers in the area: 'But there is also space, cartographed, stippled, inalienable, the mountains, the valleys, the distance from A to B, laid down in place names for a century or two or three, Susverlore or Sogevonden, farms Foundlikethis or Lostlikethat.'<sup>88</sup> In the Afrikaans novel there is no need to translate the names of the farms: they are already 'emblems and sediment of a whole history of human habitation and cultivation.'<sup>89</sup> Hoping to convey something of the cultural, linguistic and aesthetic quality of the names, Heyns has chosen to translate them. It is their richly imagistic translation, a creative iteration of all they signify, also evident in Jakkie's epilogue, that draws a reverential tone into the text: the repetition, the list, the litany of once wild spaces named for the visions, hopes and devastated wishes of the people who 'found' it. Throughout his translation, Heyns highlights the poetic quality of van Niekerk's language, exposing the reverence imbricated in her descriptions of the land. Much like Yvonne Vera's reverential treatment of female bodies discussed in an earlier chapter, van Niekerk's poetic prose draws reverence for the land into the structure of the novel.

Heyns' translation is true not only to the lyricism of van Niekerk's prose, but also to the quality of her narrative that draws the sacred and sublime into the novel. Milla persistently relies on a cartographic liturgy in an always, already failed attempt to contain the sublime and the sacred: 'If only I could once again see the places marked on the map, the red brackets denoting gates, cattle-grids, sluices, the red is-equal-to sign of the bridge over the drift.'<sup>90</sup> Mirroring the feeling of alienation and familiarity elicited by the horizontal sublime, Milla attempts to codify her experience of

spatio-temporal excess through her agricultural recitation. The gate over the drift: 'first and last gateway over which the livestock of Grootmoedersdrift move and will continue to move when I am gone. Sheep, cattle, cars, lorries, wire cars, mud and time. Slippery, supple, subtle, silvery time.'<sup>91</sup> The liturgy ends in sibilance: the repetition and rhythm mimicking the intangible qualities of time, just as the previous phrases trace its objective progression. Deliberating once again on the maps, and the correspondence between the drawn figures and the material object, Milla is forced to consider that all of these apparatuses will outlive her. 'Maps attend lifetimes. What is an age without maps?'<sup>92</sup> The maps and the farm reach into a past and will persist into a future that are beyond Milla's ken. While Milla is caught 'between heaven and earth,' she wants the map to show her the totality of her 'world, so that [she] can see the map of Grootmoedersdrift and its boundlessness.'<sup>93</sup> However, through Agaat's stubborn refusal to show Milla the maps, Caren van Houwelingen argues that 'the author denies the protagonist's ownership of the farm, and the white Afrikaner's drive to cultivate the land and civilise others, while simultaneously rejecting the knowability of the African land through the maps.'<sup>94</sup> Thus, while the maps represent the intersection of Milla's failing body, the limited permanence of the farm, and the geologic time of the landscape, Agaat's resistance encodes the inaccessibility of her own subjecthood, her and the land's position as differends.

Like John's experience of sublime excess on Voëlfontein, Milla too acknowledges the spatial expanse of Grootmoedersdrift, her experience of the sublime. Milla imagines containing or taming this excess in a moment of Eucharistic devotion, using the maps of Grootmoedersdrift to fortify her for her death.

Between the land and the map I must look, up and down, far and near until I've had enough, until I'm satiated with what I have occupied here. And then they must roll it up in a tube and put on my neckbrace again like the mouth of a quiver. And I will close my eyes and prepare myself so that they can unscrew my head and allow the map to slip into my lacunae. So that I can be filled and braced from the inside and fortified for the voyage.<sup>95</sup>

The sacramental maps fortify Milla from within, giving her deflated body structure and strength so that she might withstand the 'voyage' towards transcendence. What is most arresting about this passage is the complete erasure of the boundaries between Milla's body, the farm and its cartographic representation: 'Because without my world inside me I will contract and congeal, even more than I am now, without speech and without actions and without any purchase upon time.'<sup>96</sup> In a postsecular inversion of the Eucharist, Milla's ingesting of the maps connect her, not to God, but to the transcendence of deep time. In this and the passages quoted

above, the poetic attention to the body and the farm integrates the forms of the sacred into the novel. Milla's reverence for Grootmoedersdrift, her experience of its sublime plenitude discursively incorporates the sublime into the text, and it is interwoven formally through the entanglement of human and geologic time.

A postsecular scepticism of religion is evident in this postcolonial feminist response to the *plaasroman*. It examines Afrikaner identities, exposing, as Nicole Devarenne notes, the relationship between religion, 'colonialism, racism and misogyny.'<sup>97</sup> Cheryl Stobie further asserts that van Niekerk represents 'religion as an unethical practice used in consolidating a narrowly nationalist Afrikaner ideology,' and instead presents 'alternative forms of spirituality syncretically associated with Christianity.'<sup>98</sup> Illustrative of the novel's postsecular critique, Milla's earliest hopes for the farm rely on biblical allusion where she imagines a preordained, biblical paradise that she and Jak will create together, that he will help her to 'make a garden,' 'like paradise.'<sup>99</sup> This biblical promise is tarnished by Jak's incompetence and cruelty, and is replaced over time by Milla's sacralisation of the farm. The religious and patriarchal underpinnings of Afrikaner identity, the novel suggests, insufficiently manage the subject's relation to land and death; instead, Milla recasts her relation to place, history and her own body through sacralisation and the scientific register of agriculture processes.

The novel's critical engagement with religious discourse is evident, too, in its confessional form. Though confession is 'based on a model of communication,' Dennis A Foster writes, it is often used in narrative for its modes of evasion.<sup>100</sup> This is certainly the case in *Agaat*, as the fragmented structure destabilises the linear religious formula of confession, contrition, and absolution, whereby 'to be absolved, it is enough to submit to the rite of the sacrament.'<sup>101</sup> Foster explains that the 'confessional narrative occurs... between two substantial, unsettled subjects' where some private knowledge is revealed to a confessor, listener, reader that allows them to 'understand, judge, forgive, and perhaps even sympathise.'<sup>102</sup> The reciprocal relationship between speaker and confessor is complicated by the novel's diegetic mode, because Milla's transgressions against *Agaat* are revealed to the reader and *Agaat*, as *Agaat* reads Milla's journal entries to her. In other words, *Agaat* narrates the confession of her aggressor, who is paralyzed and largely mute, unable to verbally confess, contest or seek absolution. *Agaat* is a resentful and begrudging confessor, and yet their routine has the hermeneutical weight of ritual, of the rite of sacrament, of meaning making. Drawing on Jacques Lacan's formulation, Foster explains that confession 'is an attempt to objectify the self – to present it as a knowable object – through a narrative that "restructures" the self as history and conclusions,' instead of 'sensations.'<sup>103</sup> Nevertheless, the self remains elusive behind the instability of language that renders confession a mode of interpretation that necessarily draws 'the listener into the production of meaning.'<sup>104</sup> Thus, *Agaat* and the reader fulfil the role of listener, confessor and interpreter drawn into the

ritual of Milla's confession. Lara Buxbaum asserts that the text's bodily and narrative fragmentation are a structural mode that conveys the protagonist's trauma, belying the linear trajectory of confession and forgiveness modelled by the South African Truth and Reconciliation commission (TRC). Buxbaum suggests that social and subjective healing in the novel is predicated on recognition rather than narrative coherence, on the process of meaning-making, rather than concrete resolution. Milla's prolonged and fragmented confession does not follow the 'sequence of transgression, confession, penitence, and absolution' Coetzee identifies in his well-known essay on confession.<sup>105</sup> This sequence, which moves towards absolution, the 'liberation of the oppression of memory,'<sup>106</sup> breaks down in *Agaat* as narrative coherence is superseded by recognition and subjective signification that allows stories, bodies and landscapes to be recognisable, if not linearly legible.

Devarenne's argument turns on the distinction between recognition and legibility. While there is recognition between Milla and Agaat, and between Milla and the land, both remain opaque and illegible to Milla. Agaat is largely silent in the novel, which Devarenne argues 'gestures towards a missing narrative, expressed glancingly through Agaat's double-speak and oblique statements, that refuses to let its epistemic and emotional energies be harnessed or explored by Milla's "white" imagination.'<sup>107</sup> Indeed, Agaat's missing narrative enacts the internal contradiction at the heart of confessional fiction. If 'an underlying motive' of the subgenre is to 'tell an essential truth about the self,' then as Heyns identifies, 'it is in the nature of fiction to explain, to contextualise that "essential truth," to provide motives, and, if not to absolve, then at least to make that truth intelligible.'<sup>108</sup> This, however, problematically privileges the protagonist's necessarily limited perspective. Van Niekerk refuses the trajectory from confession to the liberation of memory, or in religious terms from absolution to grace; instead, her presentation of Milla's confession continuing to silence Agaat, suggests a critique of both secular and sacred modes of confession.

Agaat's syncretic spirituality is another aspect of the novel's postsecular critique of politically polluted faith, and is founded on Milla's instruction of Agaat that has taught her reverence for and deference to the farm above all. Stobie explains that Agaat identifies as a Christian, but is also 'something of an animist or pantheist,' practicing 'a kind of nature mysticism allied to the elements, particularly fire, but also associated with animal sacrifice and butterflies, symbolizing metamorphosis.'<sup>109</sup> Agaat has developed a 'highly individualistic' form of prayer that 'consists of exposure of the shame of her deformed arm, a personal bloodletting, a litany of farmyard disease which stands in for Milla's condition, and a cry of love for Milla.'<sup>110</sup> The origins of Agaat's mysticism lie in Milla's early care for Agaat and in her wonderful agricultural instruction. The morning warm-up dance Milla teaches Agaat when she first arrives on Grootmoedersdrift is the basis for her adult ritual. Milla calls this childhood dance 'The Greeting of the Sun':

I demonstrate it to her, first nice and high on the toes, then stretch with one arm, then stretch with the other, one big step forward, one big step back, dip at the knees, down with the head, up with the head, good morning, o mighty king sun!<sup>111</sup>

As the years pass Agaat makes the dance her own. On two occasions, once on the farm, and once at Witsand, Milla sees Agaat perform some kind of dance but is unable or unwilling to recognise it:

That to-do on the hill I can't figure out. Sideways & backwards knees bent foot-stamping jumping on one leg jump-jump-jump & point-point with one arm at the ground. Then the arms rigid next to the sides. Then she folded them & then stretched them out. Looked as if she was keeping the one arm in the air with the other arm & waving.<sup>112</sup>

Milla does not understand the connection between the dance she taught Agaat and the ritual she sees: 'Judgement? Blessing?... A farewell ritual?'<sup>113</sup> Like John's dust ritual or Friday's petal ceremony in *Foe*, Agaat performs her ritual first silhouetted on a Grootmoedersdrift hill against the night sky, and then in the early morning knee deep in the waves. In all three instances the meaning of the ritual remains opaque to Milla; however, it is possible to discern that the ritual Agaat performs is practiced, deliberate and filled with personal meaning, connecting her with the land, 'explicating the horizon,' just as Milla has taught her.<sup>114</sup>

With the narrative focalised exclusively through Milla, Agaat and her syncretic faith remain illegible, representing the political differend, 'the non-discursive sign of heterogeneity' that 'signals the incommensurability between reason and imagination.'<sup>115</sup> Giles' postcolonial sublime foregrounds the subject's immersion in uneven material experience and the politics of the human and non-human others. The experience of sublime alterity Giles describes is imbricated in the lyricism of van Niekerk's writing, which Devarenne suggests is

often combined either with an awareness of the relationship between language and power, or with violent imagery that speaks of a deliberate refusal to obediently inhabit an inherited linguistic register. The farm and the natural world are described as an Eden that can be tamed by the acquisition of vocabulary, and the child Agaat as a Caliban whose education by Milla and Jak has taught her to curse and whose skill with language disputes their authority.<sup>116</sup>

Both Agaat and the natural world resist linguistic and conceptual capture by the settler imagination, each represents the differend that confronts Milla with the limit of her imagination and reason. This is most clearly evident in Milla's sublime response to Agaat's master embroidery that depicts the natural world of Grootmoedersdrift.

A straight inside section of the body of the rainbow. All over the cloth. The yellow of the spectrum runs off into creamy white, then pure white. The veld gradated so subtly that my eye reels, that I seek for a stay inside of me, for the blue-green of the Waenhuiskrans horizon, for yellow-green shoots of self-sown oats, water-green pineapple drink, lime peel, sunflower, orange cannas, a dust-dimmed sun over stubble field, a harvest moon blood-red, a watermelon's flesh... Swift effulgences, pleats of light.<sup>117</sup>

Milla registers and locates each colour of the rainbow in the specific pallet of Grootmoedersdrift, a record of Agaat's life on the farm. Milla is overwhelmed by the colour, detail and emotion of what 'radiates down on' her,<sup>118</sup> and yet 'here is neither place nor time. It's an embroidery of nothing and nowhere... everything that slipped out of her grasp, Jakkie's whole childhood, replaced by this embroidered emptiness.'<sup>119</sup> While the pallet is distinct to the farm, the embroidery conveys an overabundance of emotion and personal history, an illegible excess felt to be emptiness. The movement of this section follows the movement of the sublime. Milla recognises the detailed artwork in all its complexity, before it is abstracted into its multi-tonal pallet; she is awed and overwhelmed. It is a 'complete colour chart. The origin, the fullness, the foundation of all.'<sup>120</sup> In a moment approaching transcendence Milla feels 'Perfection, purity, order,'<sup>121</sup> but she balks at the tardiness of this resolution. It is 'too late,' this 'completeness' is 'the wrong medicine.'<sup>122</sup> It is an iteration, a shade of the perfection of order that Milla has sought to create on Grootmoedersdrift, an artistic containment of the land that she was never able to achieve. The embroidery is a ritual. It 'supplants mapmaking,' Gail Fincham asserts, 'as the new language in which the protagonists communicate an alternative vision of reality.'<sup>123</sup> In this version, the material and metaphorical form of the rainbow ritualised the containment of the farm itself; it holds the sublime excess of the landscape in the tension of coloured thread. Milla's recasting of the pallet as the 'Rainbow of Death' once again subverts a traditional religious reading.<sup>124</sup>

If Milla's experience of the rainbow embroidery is her first revelation of Agaat's syncretic schema of the farm, her fusion of 'the natural and realistic with the imaginary,' then Milla's reflection on Agaat's expertly embroidered cap that marries the natural and the mystical is, as Fincham argues, her 'epiphany.'<sup>125</sup> 'It's like looking into clouds,' Milla thinks.

Everything is possible. Wings it looks like, angels' wings. They arch out gracefully from the backs of the musicians. But the trumpet-player has a pig's snout. And the beak of the harpist is that of a bat. A wolf, grinning, beats the tambourine. A baboon with balloon-cheeks blows the syrxinx, a rat with tiny teeth hangs drooling over the lute.<sup>126</sup>

Fincham argues that this epiphany registers a shift in 'Milla's ways of perceiving': that she has 'abandoned the hierarchies of the Christian Chain of Being for a fundamentally pagan/indigenous vision of a universe cohabited equally by humans and non-humans.'<sup>127</sup> This may be a generous reading of Milla's religious introspection, but does offer greater insight into Agaat's syncretic vision of the world that is founded on the four texts Milla used to educate her: 'the Bible for spiritual matters, a handbook for farmers for agricultural matters, an Afrikaans folk-song book for cultural matters, and a book on embroidery for a practical – and appropriately feminine and domestic – form of aesthetics.'<sup>128</sup> It is Agaat's representation of the universe, then, which is pagan/indigenous, 'cohabited equally by humans and non-humans.' As such, the 'book which has pride of place amongst the others is not the Bible; Agaat's sacred text is, as Rossmann and Stobie note, her *Hulpboek vir Boere in Suid-Afrika* (Handbook for Farmers in South Africa).'<sup>129</sup> Agaat reads from this book, not from scripture, during the 'intimate church service around Milla's bed, attended by the farm laborers and their families.'<sup>130</sup>

The sublime alterity of Agaat and the natural world also falls into a gothic register, when Milla experiences the limitations of her imagination and this leads to anxiety, fear or a sense of dread. 'The Gothic,' Gerald Gaylard writes, 'points beyond itself to the change, the uncanny, irrational, horrific and sublime in modern life; the other which never fully disappears despite the best attempts of modern empirical rationality and social engineering.'<sup>131</sup> Several of Milla's journal entries register the haunting quality of the farm, where she is reminded of her alterity, her otherness from and imposition on the landscape. One reads: 'Yard quiet but something's not right... I was awake just now even though I feel all the time as if I'm walking just above the ground on somebody else's farm in a dream in somebody else's head.'<sup>132</sup> Milla's anxiety stems from the limited conditions of her land tenure: she may have legal claim to the property but the land itself is beyond conceptual capture. The angst of settler imposition takes on a more threatening tone when a herd of cows turn cannibalistic: 'Cows that eat skeletons. As if death itself had nutritional value.'<sup>133</sup> The cows' consumption of bones is associated with a lack of oxygen and phosphorus in the soil. Unable to get the nourishment they need from nature, the cows begin to eat the carcasses instead. Rossmann and Stobie note that Milla's horror at the scene 'marks a confrontation with the "utmost of abjection," that which erodes the boundaries between ingested and expelled, inside and outside, dead and alive: pregnant cows, erupted carcasses, drool, skeletons, a dead foetus.'<sup>134</sup> The health and productivity of the cows is correlative to the condition of the soil and the land: their cannibalism an indication of agricultural and existential imbalance.

Milla is confronted by the *unheimlich* again when she falls into a ditch at night, containing a rotting bovine carcass.



You didn't see the ditch in time... You screamed as you tried to find a handhold against the side, but the soil was mushy and muddy and broke up into lumps under your hands... there was something under your feet, it gave way with a smacking sound, you sank into it up to your ankles. Something crawled against your legs.<sup>135</sup>

Contrasted with the lyrical, first person account that describes the farm imagined from Milla's sickbed, the second person narration emphasises the tone of panic. Literally and figuratively Milla's hands simply cannot find a hold on the earth inside the ditch, even though it is the earth of the farm, her soil. The alarm Milla feels gives way to visceral horror as she realises that she is standing on and in the rotting, maggot infested carcass of a cow. Matched only by Jakkie's birth on the Tradouw Pass, where Agaat cuts Milla open with sheep shears, the haunted, gothic quality of this except reverberates through the text and the landscape. These grotesque moments destabilise the separation of human and non-human others such that the natural world becomes amorphous and intangible, visceral, yet illegible.

In a novel which compulsively returns to the anxiety and ambivalence of settler colonialism and death, it is not only the land which is manifold; death too becomes an excess. It is the unimaginable excess of death and the geomorphic expanse that consistently draw the sublime and the related, but ever-deferred moment of transcendence into the novel. The movement towards transcendence stalls when the subject is confronted with their own alterity, with an incomprehensible abundance of signs. John experiences this at Voëlfontein. Milla's movement towards transcendence stalls at the illegibility of the land and Agaat, and at her own death. The novel does not offer resolution or transcendence; it cannot resolve the tension between the finite, mortal subject and the geomorphic expanse.

This trajectory is echoed in the narrative structure. Each narrative mode seems to move towards the italicised sections that abstract and destabilise meaning. These sections relate Milla's unconscious wandering thoughts, memories, reflections and anxieties. Similar to the journal entries, which also lack punctuation, these stream of consciousness sections evoke the most intimate aspects of Milla's life.

I don't add up on any side am wrong geometry am failed electricity am vapour before the sun am nothing more than particles and waves my irradiated skeleton a room-divider my head in a tunnel my neck in a whole my leg in a bath my arms weightless groping for nothing.<sup>136</sup>

The disintegration of meaning in the structure of the extract mimics the disarticulation of the body that Milla describes. This example, one of many, gestures to the dissolution of the mind, the self and of meaning in the face of a definite end. Until the last, these sections read as the stalled sublime. Like the italicised sections in *Welcome to Our Hillbrow*, those in

*Agaat* indicate Milla's search for meaning and order. They mimic Milla's sublime experience: they are frequent, richly imagistic and tend toward abstraction and multivalence. Milla persistently uses the farm as a metaphor for her body; she compares her finite time to the geologic, seemingly infinite time of the natural world. The italicised sections, uncanny moments, unheimlich landscape, and *Agaat*'s silence all register the linguistic and imaginative failure to present the unrepresentable; the failure to successfully contain the manifold signs of geologic time through agricultural and personal narrative. Neither *Boyhood* nor *Agaat* offer a resolution of the sublime. John's abounding love for the farm does not dissipate in the pages of *Boyhood*. The vast, haunted expanse of Grootmoedersdrift and the mountains beyond do not reveal their coherence to Milla. Nevertheless John's, *Agaat*'s and Milla's love for the farm is contained and ordered through their rituals.

From the first page to the last Milla's narrative is confessional, as she attempts to make sense of the story of her life and her mistreatment of *Agaat*. In the novel's closing pages Milla remembers her first days with *Agaat* on the farm, then a small, terrified child. *Agaat* tends to her as she dies and Milla's story closes with a final stream of consciousness section:

where are you *agaat*?  
here I am  
a voice speaking for me a riddle where there is rest  
a candle being lit for me in the mirror  
my rod and my staff my whirling wheel  
a mouth that with mine mists the glass in the valley of the shadow of death  
where you go there I shall go  
your house is my house  
your land is my land  
the land that the Lord thy God giveth you  
is this the beginning now this lightness?<sup>137</sup>

In the 'final epiphany of her death' Milla recalls her adoration of the farm, and her claim to the land, both of which she passes on to *Agaat*.<sup>138</sup> Psalm 23 is rewritten in a syncretic inversion typical of the novel.<sup>139</sup> *Agaat* appears as a stygian figure guiding Milla towards death and peace. Taking David's words of biblical comfort *Agaat* seems to speak from Milla's unconscious: '*speaking for me a riddle where there is rest.*' Amended to first person perspective this final benediction accounts for their love and for their labour: '*my rod and my staff my whirling wheel.*' Although Stobie reads this alteration as an inclusion of the feminine symbol of the spinning wheel, it also suggests the agricultural mechanisms of farming – a reference to their life-long labours. Milla's ancestral claim to the land is ordained by God, referring to a common theme of the *plaasroman*. This is subverted,

however, as the pronouns in the rest of the passage refer to Milla and Agaat; rather than Milla and a divine creator. All that remains is the land, Agaat and Milla asking if this is transcendence – ‘*lightness*.’

Milla’s final words signify her postsecular trinity: ‘in my overberg/ over the bent world brooding/ in my hand the hand of the small agaat.’<sup>140</sup> Grootmoedersdrift is a metaphysical and mystical presence: never merely an inanimate area of earth, this piece of land brings order to Milla’s universe; it is how she understands her relation to the world and the people who inhabit it. This link, forged by Milla’s legal and ancestral claim to the property, is also the sign of her sublime alterity as the natural world remains an imaginative excess. In the flatness of the arid Karoo, John’s Voëlfontein vibrates with a sacred stillness; in the verdant and mountainous region of the Overberg, Milla and Agaat’s Grootmoedersdrift pulses with an animistic energy. John, Agaat and Milla conceive of their mortal limitations in relation to the transcendent permanence of the land. Alleviating some of the anxiety of this sublime encounter each sacralises their kinship with the farm: John’s sand ritual, Agaat’s dance, and Milla’s maps.

The sublime provides a vocabulary to explain the subject’s experience of finitude when confronted with spatio-temporal overabundance. It describes Milla’s and John’s anxiety as they become aware of their own limited influence and mortality contrasted with the unrepresentable, unlimited reach of geomorphic time and space. Postsecular poetics presents a way of reading the *plaasroman*, and similar settler fictions, that draws out the metaphysical and material concerns of the text, exploring the mediation of religious and secular life worlds, the depiction of ritual and the sacred, asymmetrical power relations, and sublime alterity.

## Notes

- 1 Land reform was a topic of debate during the 2019 general elections, and it is little wonder, given that the Land Audit Report 2017, undertaken by the South African government, found that 72% of the country’s arable land remains in the hands of white landowners, while white South Africans make up less than 10% of the population overall Christopher Clark, ‘Why Land Reform Is a Key Issue in South African Elections,’ *The Atlantic*, 3 May 2019, <https://www.theatlantic.com/international/archive/2019/05/land-reform-south-africa-election/586900>.
- 2 Nicole Devarenne, ‘Nationalism and the Farm Novel in South Africa, 1883–2004,’ *Journal of Southern African Studies* 35, no. 3 (September 1, 2009): 627, <https://doi.org/10.1080/03057070903101854>. See also Rebecca Duncan, ‘South African Gothic: Anxiety and Creative Dissent in the Post-Apartheid Imagination and Beyond’ (University of Wales Press, 2018).
- 3 See Jennifer Wenzel, ‘The Pastoral Promise and the Political Imperative: The Plaasroman Tradition in an Era of Land Reform,’ *MFS Modern Fiction Studies* 46, no. 1 (2000): 90–113; Devarenne, ‘Nationalism and the Farm Novel in South Africa, 1883–2004’; Caren van Houwelingen, ‘Rewriting the Plaasroman: Nostalgia, Intimacy and (Un)Homeliness in Marlene van Niekerk’s “Agaat”,’ *English Studies in Africa* 55, no. 1 (2012): 93–106.; Loraine Prinsloo, *Marlene van*

- Niekerk Se Afaat* (2004) as'n Postkoloniale Plaasroman = Marlene van Niekerk's *Afaat* (2004) as a Postcolonial Farm Novel (PhD Thesis, 2006).
- 4 The chapter refers to Michiel Heyns' English translation of Marlene van Niekerk's novel *Afaat*. For an analysis of his translation see Heyns (2009) 'Irreparable Loss and Exorbitant Gain: On Translating "Afaat".'
  - 5 Devarenne, 'Nationalism and the Farm Novel in South Africa, 1883–2004,' 627.
  - 6 Olive Schreiner, *The Story of an African Farm* (Cape Town: Penguin Random House South Africa, 2008), 133.
  - 7 J. M. Coetzee, 'Farm Novel and "Plaasroman" in South Africa,' *English in Africa* 13, no. 2 (1986): 1–2.
  - 8 Stefan Helgesson, 'Unsettling Fictions: Generic Instability and Colonial Time,' in *True Lies Worldwide: Fictionality in Global Contexts*, 2014, 262.
  - 9 Helgesson, 266.
  - 10 Schreiner, *Story*, 5–6.
  - 11 Schreiner, 3.
  - 12 Schreiner, 18.
  - 13 David Farrier, 'What Does Deep Time Mean?,' *The Atlantic*, October 31, 2016, <https://www.theatlantic.com/science/archive/2016/10/aeon-deep-time/505922>.
  - 14 Coetzee, 'Farm Novel and "Plaasroman" in South Africa,' 2.
  - 15 Wai-chee Dimock, *Through Other Continents: American Literature across Deep Time, Fulcrum.Org* (Princeton University Press, 2006), 3–4.
  - 16 Dimock, 4.
  - 17 Dominic Head, *J. M. Coetzee* (Cambridge University Press, 1997), 60.
  - 18 J. M. Coetzee, *Life and Times of Michael K* (London: Vintage, 2004), 59.
  - 19 Coetzee, 166.
  - 20 In the South African context the settler, the subject of this discussion, is white, so the relationship to land I am articulating is particular to a white South African experience. The legacies of colonialism and apartheid dictate that black South Africans have a different relation to land, a relation based in part on forced removals and dispossession.
  - 21 J. M. Coetzee, *Doubling the Point: Essays and Interviews*, ed. David Attwell, Reprint edition (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1992), 393.
  - 22 Derek Attridge, 'J.M. Coetzee's "Boyhood," Confession, and Truth,' *Critical Survey* 11, no. 2 (January 1, 1999): 81.
  - 23 Coetzee, *Doubling the Point*, 393–394.
  - 24 Coetzee, *Boyhood*, 90.
  - 25 Coetzee, 79.
  - 26 Coetzee, 22.
  - 27 Alyda Faber, 'The Post-Secular Poetics and Ethics of Exposure in J. M. Coetzee's *Disgrace*,' *Literature and Theology* 23, no. 3 (September 1, 2009): 303, <https://doi.org/10.1093/litthe/frp036>.
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  - 29 Martin Hägglund, *This Life: Secular Faith and Spiritual Freedom* (New York: Pantheon Books, 2019), 3.
  - 30 Hägglund, 4.
  - 31 Hägglund, 5.
  - 32 Coetzee, *Boyhood*, 91.
  - 33 Coetzee, 96.
  - 34 J. M. Coetzee, *White Writing: On the Culture of Letters in South Africa* (New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 1988), 109.
  - 35 Jennifer Wenzel, 'The Pastoral Promise and the Political Imperative: The Plaasroman Tradition in an Era of Land Reform,' *MFS Modern Fiction Studies* 46, no. 1 (2000): 94.

- 36 Wenzel, 108.
- 37 J. M. Coetzee, *Summertime: Scenes from Provincial Life* (London: Harvill Secker, 2009), 129.
- 38 Coetzee, 134.
- 39 Coetzee, 134.
- 40 Coetzee, 132–33.
- 41 Coetzee, *Boyhood*, 95–96.
- 42 Coetzee, 96.
- 43 Vanessa L. Ryan, ‘The Physiological Sublime: Burke’s “Critique of Reason,”’ *Journal of the History of Ideas* 62, no. 2 (April 1, 2001): 265, <https://doi.org/10.2307/3654358>.
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- 45 Immanuel Kant, *Critique of the Power of Judgment*, trans. Paul Guyer (Cambridge, UK; New York: Cambridge University Press, 2000), 147; Edmund Burke, *On the Sublime and Beautiful*, ed. Charles W. Eliot, vol. 24, Part 2, The Harvard Classics (New York: P.F. Collier & Son, 2001), pt. I, sect. 7, [www.bartleby.com/24/2](http://www.bartleby.com/24/2).
- 46 Kant, *Critique of the Power of Judgment*, 141.
- 47 Ryan, ‘The Physiological Sublime,’ 266.
- 48 Ryan, 266.
- 49 Burke, *On the Sublime and Beautiful*, vol. 24, Part 2, pt. II, sect. 1.
- 50 Coetzee, *Boyhood*, 91.
- 51 Coetzee, *White*, 51–52.
- 52 Coetzee, 54.
- 53 Gillian Borland Pierce, *The Sublime Today: Contemporary Readings in the Aesthetic* (Newcastle-upon-Tyne: Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2013), 14.
- 54 Coetzee, *White*, 55.
- 55 Coetzee, 7.
- 56 Coetzee, 7; Coetzee, ‘Farm Novel and “Plaasroman” in South Africa,’ 2.
- 57 Cuthbeth Tagwirei and Leon de Kock offer an analysis of similar issues particular to Zimbabwean literature. Discussing the places of white belonging before and after the land reform, they trace the changing valence of ‘bush’ and ‘farm’ as white protagonists seek and establish places of belonging, through what they term emplacement (Cuthbeth Tagwirei and Leon de Kock, ‘From “Bush” to “Farm”: Emplacement and Displacement in Contemporary White Zimbabwean Narratives’, *The Journal of Commonwealth Literature*, March 16, 2015, 1–16, <https://doi.org/10.1177/0021989415573033>).
- 58 Bill Ashcroft, Frances Devlin-Glass, and Lyn McCredden, *Intimate Horizons: The Post-Colonial Sacred in Australian Literature* (Adelaide: ATF Press, 2012), 4.
- 59 Ashcroft, Devlin-Glass, and McCredden, 2–3.
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- 61 Ashcroft, Devlin-Glass, and McCredden, 4.
- 62 Ashcroft, Devlin-Glass, and McCredden, 5.
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- 77 Pierce, *The Sublime Today*, 14.
- 78 Pierce, 19.
- 79 Pierce, 14.
- 80 Pierce, 18.
- 81 van Niekerk, *Agaat*, 181.
- 82 van Niekerk, 157.
- 83 van Niekerk, 14.
- 84 van Niekerk, 35.
- 85 van Niekerk, 69.
- 86 van Niekerk, 50.
- 87 van Niekerk, 34.
- 88 van Niekerk, 55.
- 89 Michiel Heyns, 'Irreparable Loss and Exorbitant Gain: On Translating "Agaat",' *Journal of Literary Studies* 25, no. 3 (2009): 126, <https://doi.org/10.1080/02564710902869351>.
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- 91 van Niekerk, 69.
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- 93 van Niekerk, 88.
- 94 van Houwelingen, 'Rewriting the Plaasroman', 98.
- 95 van Niekerk, *Agaat*, 88.
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- 99 van Niekerk, *Agaat*, 27.
- 100 Dennis A. Foster, *Confession and Complicity in Narrative* (Cambridge University Press, 1987), 2.
- 101 Foster, 2–3.
- 102 Foster, 3, 2.
- 103 Foster, 10.
- 104 Foster, 10.
- 105 Coetzee, *Doubling the Point*, 251.
- 106 Coetzee, 252.
- 107 Devarenne, 'Nationalism and the Farm Novel in South Africa, 1883–2004', 640–641.
- 108 Michiel Heyns, 'The Whole Country's Truth: Confession and Narrative in Recent White South African Writing,' *MFS Modern Fiction Studies* 46, no. 1 (March 1, 2000): 50, <https://doi.org/10.1353/mfs.2000.0005>.

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- 110 Stobie, 65.
- 111 van Niekerk, *Agaat*, 404.
- 112 van Niekerk, 126.
- 113 van Niekerk, 127.
- 114 van Niekerk, 263.
- 115 Pierce, *The Sublime Today*, 14.
- 116 Devarenne, 'Nationalism and the Farm Novel in South Africa, 1883–2004,' 642.
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- 118 van Niekerk, 183.
- 119 van Niekerk, 183.
- 120 van Niekerk, 184.
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- 122 van Niekerk, 184.
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- 127 Fincham, "Reterritorialising" the Land', 141.
- 128 Stobie, 'Ruth,' 63.
- 129 Jean Rossmann and Cheryl Stobie, "Chew Me until i Bind": Sacrifice and Cultural Renewal in Marlene van Niekerk's "Agaat",' *Journal of Literary Studies* 28, no. 3 (September 1, 2012): 24, <https://doi.org/10.1080/02564718.2012.677991>.
- 130 Rossmann and Stobie, 24.
- 131 Gerald Gaylard, 'The Postcolonial Gothic: Time and Death in Southern African Literature,' *Journal of Literary Studies* 24, no. 4 (December 2008): 15.
- 132 van Niekerk, *Agaat*, 124.
- 133 van Niekerk, 195.
- 134 Rossmann and Stobie, "Chew Me until i Bind",' 20.
- 135 van Niekerk, *Agaat*, 426.
- 136 van Niekerk, 197.
- 137 van Niekerk, 560–561.
- 138 Stobie, 'Ruth,' 66.
- 139 'Yea, though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil: for thou art with me; thy rod and thy staff they comfort me,' Psalm 23:4 (King James version).
- 140 van Niekerk, *Agaat*, 561.

## 4 Postsecular poetics in world literature

The previous chapters have each dealt with a particular feature of post-colonial African modernity: the sovereignty of the body under state or patriarchal power, urban dwelling and the conditions of migration, land claims and relations to the natural world. These features are, however, not limited to the continent, but are persistent characteristics of late-capitalist modernity and the continuing realities of imperial expansion. As such, the applicability of postsecular poetics extends to other postcolonial and peripheral contexts where secular modernity is mediated partially or unevenly by religious or postsecular life worlds. In this final chapter, therefore, I extend the reading and application of postsecular poetics beyond African contexts to consider their applicability to postcolonial literature more broadly. The chapter is organised in the same thematic order as the previous chapters (ritual, sacred, sublime) and around similar concerns (the body, the city and the land). I have drawn from a cross-section of well-known and contemporary postcolonial fiction to illustrate the persistence of postsecular and postcolonial registration.

McClure reminds the readers of *Partial Faiths* that ‘religion returns... when worldly life becomes intolerable’; ‘it returns with a specific, historically supercharged force, as secular modernity’s promises of peace, prosperity and progress fail to materialise and as reason itself begins to undermine secular rationalism’s claims to exclusive authority on matters of truth.’<sup>1</sup> Habermas’s explanations for the resurgence of religion,<sup>2</sup> are not neatly mirrored in African contexts where religion has played a role in precolonial, colonial, anti-colonial and postcolonial contexts. Nevertheless, the postsecular – as it signifies the negotiation of religious and secular institutions and experience – has purchase across these contexts and, indeed, the task of postsecular fiction as it is presented here and by McClure, ‘aims at once to reaffirm and to weaken the religious, to represent it as a resource for personal and collective empowerment that must itself be weakened in order to be deployed responsibly.’<sup>3</sup> McClure’s conception echoes what Gianni Vattimo calls ‘weak religion’ and what William Connolly addresses as ‘weakened religiosity,’ a conditional approach to belief, based not on absolute authority over truth and the real, but rather on



human ‘historicity,’ ‘finitude’ and ‘fallibility.’<sup>4</sup> With clear allusions to Martin Hägglund’s construction of secular faith, this ‘weak religion,’ which operates on the conditions of its authority and limitations, is also the postsecular. Quoting William Connolly’s description of ‘*The posttheist, postsecular*’ moment, McClure writes:

The earth is fragile; highly organised human economies are interwoven with its fragility; the *sovereign* god was on balance a destructive construction; the hegemony of the modern project of mastery results in the globalization of contingency; nontheistic reverence for life and the earth remains to be cultivated. (emphasis in original)<sup>5</sup>

In this moment the authority of rational, secular structures to determine the real is undermined; instead, multiple and, sometimes, conflicting conceptions of the real, of faith, and of the natural are equally valid. This can be read as a weakening of what Charles Taylor refers to as the ‘immanent frame’: the hegemonic influence of the observable, material world experienced by the disenchanted, ‘buffered self,’ where the “natural” order, of the frame is ‘to be contrasted to a “supernatural” one, an “immanent” world, over against a possible “transcendent” one.’<sup>6</sup> Under these social and philosophical conditions, McClure identifies the patterns and preoccupations of postsecular fiction: narratives of partial conversion, the overabundance of the supernatural, alternative spiritual or quasi-religious communities. Postsecular fiction’s illustration of the supernatural and spiritual, McClure writes, presents ‘a peculiar sort of epistemological humanity and ontological abundance: the suggestion is that all truths are potentially true, all realities are potentially real, but no truth and no reality is exclusively true or real.’<sup>7</sup> For the authors discussed here, indigenous religions, Islam and Christianity are inextricably entangled with the history of missionary and colonial encounters, anti-colonial movements and post-independence nationalism. The postsecular, which signals a shift from the juxtaposition of religion and the secular towards the highly mediated overlap of the two terms, is, therefore, an ideological and theoretical counterpart of postcolonial critique.

The influence of poststructuralism and postcolonialism on postsecularism is evident in the revised authority of the real and the true, and the critique of the hegemony of religious and secular orthodoxies. In postcolonial literature, where challenges to the supremacy of Euro-American ontologies and epistemologies are legion, the postsecular takes on a particularly important role in challenging the hegemony of the immanent frame, the normalisation of both Western European secularism and Christianity, and adding indigenous and syncretic cosmologies to the project of decolonisation. ‘Literature written under the conditions of postcolonialism and diaspora,’ Manav Ratti asserts ‘can be the site for enchantment and re-enchantment, and it is thus postsecular within the framework of secularism

as ideology.<sup>8</sup> Indeed, Ratti notes that '[i]f postsecularism is one of the destinies of postcolonialism, then literature stands as a forum where new conceptions of secularism and religion can emerge.'<sup>9</sup> The postsecular presents a representational challenge for authors, Ratti suggests, where it is most often registered in 'that which might be resistant to representation.'<sup>10</sup>

I take the view, therefore, following Talal Asad, that 'the "religious" and the "secular" are not essentially fixed categories.'<sup>11</sup> It is most productive to read the post in postsecular not as a temporal prefix marking the end of a secular age, but instead as Kwame Anthony Appiah construes the 'post' in both postcolonial and postmodern, as a 'space clearing gesture' that makes room for contestation and imagining beyond the colonial, or in this case, beyond the secular.<sup>12</sup> The postsecular is, as Ratti asserts, 'an intimately negotiated term'<sup>13</sup> that signifies a grammatical and sociological relation between the unfixed categories of 'religious' and 'secular'; public and private spaces, institutions and lived realities brought into uneven and strange encounters, to paraphrase Sara Ahmed's formation.

Graham Huggan identifies a limited "'post-secular" turn' in South Asian 'postcolonial theory and criticism,' 'inexorably shaped by the events and aftermath of 9/11.'<sup>14</sup> While Huggan is sceptical of the term, he notes the value of postsecularism as a 'critical methodology – as a specific set of ways of reading narrative.'<sup>15</sup> Given the ideological and methodological sympathies of postcolonial and postsecular literary analysis, it is striking that there is not more scholarship produced in this area. Perhaps, as Jean-Marie Jackson and Nathan Suhr-Sytsma note, the influence of Said's secular criticism is too pervasive in African and postcolonial studies.<sup>16</sup> As such, following Huggan's and McClure's suggestions, this study sits at the intersection of postsecular and postcolonial literary criticism offering a reading methodology that opens up the ideological and critical space of the 'post' to address the innovations of literary form.

While the numerous critiques of the postcolonial are not rehearsed here, a working understanding of the term demonstrates its relation to the post-secular. Following current debates across postcolonial and world literary studies, I understand the realities of empire to be brutal and ongoing.<sup>17</sup> The postcolonial does not indicate a temporal or historical break, but rather 'continuing process[es] of resistance and reconstruction' of what Ann Laura Stoler has called 'colonialism's durable presence':<sup>18</sup> the physical, epistemological, cultural, material, environmental and political violence of colonial imposition by European, and now US and Chinese powers. In his ground-clearing critique of the discipline, Neil Lazarus notes that the temporal and material contradictions at the heart of postcolonial studies have been exposed since 'the US-led and -sponsored invasion and occupation of Iraq and the sorry misadventure in Afghanistan.'<sup>19</sup> Imperialism is a present and urgent reality, politically and materially linked to earlier waves of colonial expansion. Lazarus writes that

conjoining violence and military conquest with expropriation, pillage, and undisguised grabbing for resources, [post-9/11] developments have demonstrably rejoined the twenty-first century to a long and as yet unbroken history, wrongly supposed by postcolonial theory to have come to a close circa 1975. This is the history of capitalist imperialism.

Lazarus's intervention is further developed in his work with the Warwick Research Collective (WReC), who, following Immanuel Wallerstein's world-systems theory, define world-literature as 'A single but radically uneven world-system; a singular modernity, combined and uneven; and a literature that variously registers this combined unevenness in both its form and its content.'<sup>20</sup>

The aftermath of 9/11, an important influence on postcolonial and postsecular studies, exposed not only the continuities of empire but also the limitations of secularism and the persistence of religion. Postcolonial literary analysis explores the representation of durable colonial conditions in local contexts, attuned to the global systems of late-capitalist modernity and the registration of these conditions at the level of form. In the fiction discussed thus far, for example, postcolonial critique is evident in Ndibe's parody of consumer-fetishism in the sale of sacred indigenous statuary and the greed of Nigerian Pentecostal churches; in Abani's challenge to the individualist Euro-centrism of human rights discourse; in Cole's excavation of New York's racist colonial history; and in Coetzee's and van Niekerk's critical rewriting of the *plaasroman* that exposes the inequities and contradictions of settler colonialism. While focused on specific sub-Saharan national histories and geo-politics, the previous chapters have also illustrated the sympathetic methodologies of postsecular and postcolonial analysis. Therefore, in what follows I extend postsecular poetics to read for ritual, the sacred and the sublime across other postcolonial fictions.

### **The affordances of ritual in postcolonial fiction**

Ritual depends upon differentiation and distinction. It is a part of sacralisation: differentiation, hermeneutic engagement, and resignification. Ritual is the consequence of culturally specific strategies of differentiation where, through repeated practice or interpretation, an object or performance is separated from the profane. This is illustrated in Abani's work in the representation of ritual scarification, the diegetic manifestation of ancestral narration, and in his extended lyrical attention to the bodies of his protagonists. In Yvonne Vera's work the poetic and synesthetic prose mobilise the affordances of ritual to resignify the bodies of her protagonists, enacting in fiction a care and reverence for the female body not demonstrated by the Zimbabwean nation-state. In these novels there is both the discursive writing of ritual and the integration of the affordances of ritual into the structure of the narrative. This type of postsecular poetics is present too in the

work of Michael Ondaatje, specifically in *The English Patient* (1992) and *Anil's Ghost* (2001).

Both McClure and Ratti include Ondaatje's work in their postsecular literary critiques. In *The Postsecular Imagination*, Ratti explores the particular intersection of religion and secularism with nationalisms in South Asia, arguing for the political potential of postsecularism as he sees it emerging in South Asian Anglophone literature. He argues that South Asian writers, particularly Salman Rushdie and Michael Ondaatje, disheartened by the devastations of religious and national warfare, undermine and override religious symbolism in their novels, thus opening the possibility for a humanist identification that he calls postsecular faith: 'forms of belief' which originate 'from secular lived experience.'<sup>21</sup> Ratti argues persuasively for the constructive political potential of the South Asian literature, looking at the formal and rhetorical methods authors like Ondaatje use to imagine a community established on humanist, rather than religious or secularist national principles. This is not dissimilar to McClure's notion of open dwelling, where postsecular writers and thinkers model a return to the religious that expands consciousness and community, rather than foreclosing them around fundamentalist secular or religious ideologies. McClure argues that Ondaatje establishes alternative ascetic communities in the North African desert, in the ruins of a once sacred nunnery and in the Sri Lankan mountains, thereby presenting social and ideological formations counter to the enclosures of European nationalism and Christian doctrine. Ratti opines that Ondaatje evacuates the spaces of religious signification by filling them with aestheticised descriptions.

Taking place at the end of the Second World War, in a partially destroyed Tuscan villa, *The English Patient* tells the story of Count Almásy and the nurse, Hana, who cares for him and his fire-ravaged body. Through Almásy's recollections of his past as an explorer of the Egyptian deserts, we learn too of his love affair with Katherine. The Italian churches, frescoes and even the minarets of Cairo, Ratti suggests, are emptied of their religious meaning. While Ratti argues that Ondaatje's aestheticisation leaves no room for religious signification, he overlooks the specific poetic quality of Ondaatje's writing which, like Vera's and Abani's prose, reinvests those spaces with a postsecular sacrality. Developing from Ratti's close reading of *The English Patient*, I propose that rather than evacuating the sacred from the text, Ondaatje relocates the sacred to the body of Almásy's beloved, Katherine, through the ritual attention of poetic language and through the ritualised performance of the protagonist.

'Sinners in a holy city' – Almásy and Katherine walk through the streets of Cairo in the early morning: 'The beautiful songs of faith enter the air like arrows, one minaret answering another, as if passing on a rumour of the two of them... the smell of charcoal and hemp already making the air profound.'<sup>22</sup> In response to this passage, Ratti remarks that rather than calling the righteous to prayer, the call to prayer seems to announce the

couple's affair to the city. The religious symbolism of the minaret is weakened by this description: the minarets, personified not as they call the righteous to prayer, but as they profanely spread gossip. Yet, the postsecular cannot only be a removal of religious signification; it must, in the frame of the argument, also be an intercession between the secular and the religious. Ratti's analysis glosses over the reference to the profundity of the air, and to the holy city. These allusions illustrate not the removal of religious significance, but rather its displacement to secular spaces, elevating these to sacred attention. In other words, the poetics of the text displace religious discourse to otherwise secular spaces, resignifying them as something apart from the normal, mundane world.

This is certainly the case in Almásy's ritualistic treatment of Katherine's body. After their plane crashes into the desert leaving Katherine mortally wounded, Almásy carries her to the Cave of Swimmers, a cave whose walls are covered in beautiful rock paintings which depict swimming figures. Once she has died in the cave, Almásy covers her body in its pigments:

He looked up to the one cave painting and stole the colours from it. The ochre went into her face, he daubed blue around her eyes. He walked across the cave, his hands thick with red, and combed his fingers through her hair. Then all of her skin, so her knee that poked out of the plane that first day was saffron. The pubis. Hoops of colour around her legs so she would be immune to the human. There were traditions he had discovered in Herodotus in which old warriors celebrated their loved ones by locating and holding them in whatever world made them eternal – a colourful fluid, a song, a rock drawing.<sup>23</sup>

Ratti explains that the description of Katherine's beauty is distinctly informed by Almásy's reverence for the desert. He writes 'The desert is "pure" and natural, and the "ritual" through which Almásy consecrates his lover's fragile body reflects some of that purity, away from any artifice' of national sentiment.<sup>24, 25</sup> Following a postsecular poetic analysis the quotation marks should be removed from 'ritual' – here Almásy enacts a ritual that he has read about in his copy of *Herodotus*, the book he treats as his sacred text. Almásy consecrates Katherine's body with a historical ritual practice, an act of differentiation and resignification. For Ratti this is a postsecular moment because 'there is faith here, but it is located in the world and it is neither overly religious nor a return to the religious... Almásy's lover becomes of the world, the secular here-and-now world of the desert.'<sup>26</sup> While Ratti locates faith in Almásy's secular lived experience, postsecular ritual is also found in the novel's lyrical description, the repetitions and rhythms of the language that separate this moment from the mundane.

Katherine's body, the cave, the presence of Almásy, all constitute the space and the scene as ordinary, until Almásy begins his ritualised

movement in the space around her body. Almásy removes the pigmentation from the cave paintings around him and transfers it to Katherine's body. He takes something vital, blood-like, from the cave, 'his hands thick with red.' Almásy enacts a ritual of burial and mourning. He covers Katherine's body in the colour and matter of the desert, removing it from the walls of the cave and placing it on her body; he tries to mark Katherine's body as separate from the immediacy, the 'here-and-now' of the world; to consecrate her in the materials of timelessness – the pigments of the desert, and the burial rituals of desert custom: 'Hoops of colour around her legs so she would be immune to the human.'<sup>27</sup> Although Ratti reads the desert and therefore the cave as secular, he overlooks the ritualised performance of this passage as well as the lyricism and the persistent poetic descriptions of the desert that mark it not as secular, but as intimately sacred, 'a place of faith': 'When I turned her around, her whole body was covered in bright pigment. Herbs and stones and light and the ashes of acacia to make her eternal. The body pressed against sacred colour' (emphasis mine).<sup>28</sup> The desert is sacred to Almásy and the text designates it as such through its repeated lyrical attention, in turn Katherine's body is made sacred through her entombment in the desert and Almásy's ritual.

Similarly, in *Anil's Ghost* ritual attention and displacement of the sacred is evident in the eponymous protagonist's treatment of Sailor (a skeleton excavated from an ancient monastic burial ground, assumed to be a victim of state violence during Sri Lanka's civil war) and in the religious artist, Gunesena's reconstruction of Sailor's skull. Anil Tissera is a forensic anthropologist of Sri Lankan origin who returns to investigate human rights abuses during the protracted civil war between the Buddhist Sinhalese majority and the Hindu Tamil minority. The novel is preoccupied with the body as a signifier of memory, loss and an indicator of state violence. Yet much like the reverential treatment in Vera's work, the bodies in this novel are subject to extended lyrical attention. The novel should be read as a diegetic vigil, because it follows the investigation into Sailor's death with extended reverential attention to his physical form. Indeed, the novel's opening scene describes a '*vigil for the dead, for these half-revealed forms,*' a ritual of mourning and remembrance.<sup>29</sup>

Ratti argues that the novel's postsecular exploration is focused on the body as it relates to human rights: 'Human bodies suffuse the world of *Anil's Ghost* – murdered bodies, painted bodies, emaciated bodies – underscoring the "thing itself" that can be the site of both violence and peace.'<sup>30</sup> He claims that religious, particularly Buddhist, valuations of humanity are devalued and undermined in the novel since religious difference is a primary cause of the war. The rhetoric of human rights is offered as an alternative to orthodox religious appraisals of what it is to be human. Consequently, the novel juxtaposes the transgression of human rights with the political institutions, social connections and physical vulnerabilities that uphold and make necessary those rights. Sailor codifies the impunity of

state violence and the limitations of human rights discourse, just as Anil's investigation of his death seeks to hold the state accountable through the institutionalisation of those rights. The success of Anil's forensic work puts her in danger, but it is this scientific labour coupled with her intimate engagements with Sailor's skeleton that models postsecular forms of connection or dwelling.

As a way of extracting Sailor from the violence of this death, or insulating herself from the conflict happening around her, Anil ritualistically separates Sailor from the world around him. The skeleton is already sacred as it is discovered 'within a sacred historical site.'<sup>31</sup> Anil's ritualised differentiation and resignification of Sailor is evident in her first full investigation of the skeleton:

She sat there watching him... She began to examine the skeleton again under sulphur light, summarizing the facts of his death so far, the permanent truths, same for Colombo as for Troy. One forearm broken. Partial burning. Vertebrae damage in the neck. The possibility of a small bullet wound in the skull. Entrance and exit.

She could read Sailor's last actions by knowing the wounds on bone. He puts his arms up over his face to protect himself from the blow. He is shot with a rifle, the bullet going through his arm, then into the neck. While he's on the ground, they come up and kill him.

Coup de grace. The smallest, cheapest bullet. A.22's path that her ballpoint pen could slide through. Then they attempt to set fire to him and begin to dig his grave in this burning light.<sup>32</sup>

This description can be divided into two tableaux of violence, to paraphrase Ratti: one the evidence of the wounds upon the skeleton, and the other the scene that these wounds bear witness to. In the initial tableau, Sailor's wounds are listed – each wound separated by a full stop, not simply a sentence but a complete, singular image, the violence amplified by the isolated, staccato categorisation. The bone deep evidence of Sailor's wounds enables Anil to reconstruct the manner of his death – this is the second tableau. The image of a man, arms raised, then the path of the bullet through his frame and the final assault. Sailor performs a dual function for Anil: he is both the person she mourns for and the object ritualised through her mourning vigil. Like Benedict Anderson's cenotaphs, tombs void of 'identifiable mortal remains or immortal souls,' Sailor is 'nonetheless saturated with ghostly national imaginings' because Anil names, personifies and sacralises him.<sup>33</sup>

But undressing in her room she thought of him under the claustrophobia of plastic and went out and unpinned the sheets. So the wind and all the night were in Sailor. After the burnings and the burials, he was on a wooden table washed by the moon.<sup>34</sup>

After the violence of his death Anil imagines the balm of the moonlight. Anil's imagined and enacted tenderness also facilitates her a connection with Ananda, though they do not speak a common language. Sailor is a shared focus for both characters: Anil's focus is Sailor's body, and Ananda is recreating the face so that he can possibly be identified.

Before the war Ananda was an artificer, painting the eyes onto completed Buddha statues. The final addition of the eyes makes the statue sacred. Palipana explains the importance of this ritual: '*Nētra means "eye." It is a ritual of the eyes. A special artist is needed to paint eyes on a holy figure. It is always the last thing done. It is what gives the image life. Like a fuse. The eyes are a fuse.*'<sup>35</sup> Ananda performs this sacred transformation for Sailor, constructing his face, leaving the eyes to last. As with the Buddha so too with Sailor: the transmission of a sacred ritual to profoundly postsecular bodily remains. For Anil and Ananda, Sailor signifies the loss of a beloved and the threat of ruthless state violence. Their care for him is motivated by the inevitability of loss. Through the affordances of ritual Sailor's body is distinguished from other anonymous remains; Anil's and Ananda's persistent hermeneutical engagement with his form resignify his body as sacred, transferring the sacrality of the Buddha statue to these humble remains. Mediations of secular and religious rite, autopsy and ritual, converge around Sailor.

The life paths 'most emphatically endorse[d]' by Ondaatje's novels, McClure asserts, are 'versions of medieval religious paths, the practices of monks and nuns, saintly warriors and heroic martyrs.'<sup>36</sup> They are 'characteristically postsecular' narratives of partial religious return, as they feature 'secularised characters who,' influenced by neomonastic worldviews 'turn back towards the religious' and who choose to 'dwell in proximity to the sacred.'<sup>37</sup> These texts suggest that postsecular practices may 'produce forms of revisioning that partially secularise the sacred' and invite participation in communities 'against the grain of modern,' and indeed Euro-American 'secular models.'<sup>38</sup> This postsecular and postcolonial imagining takes form through the affordances of ritual that differentiate and resignify Katherine's and Sailor's bodies, transferring the sacrality from orthodox religious spaces to the bodies of the beloved. Much of this is motivated not by explicit religious sentiment but rather by the dynamic of loss and care that Hägglund identifies as central to secular faith.

*The White Book* (2017)<sup>39</sup> by Han Kang follows a similar discursive and structural logic. Like *Anil's Ghost*, Han's work turns on the affordances of ritual mourning: the text enacts a vigil for the unnamed narrator's infant sister, who died in her mother's arms two hours after her premature birth. The book opens with a list of white objects: 'Swaddling bands, Newborn gown, Salt, Snow, Ice.'<sup>40</sup> These, and other, white items organise the fragmented series of prose poems that constitute the narrative. Each section is a meditation on the titular item, as well as a consideration of death, destruction and political occupation. The successive fragments conjure the



World War II ruins of Warsaw where the narrator resides, as well as the ghost of the infant sister. The narrative shifts between ‘I,’ the narrator, and ‘she,’ the sister; between past and present. Recalling the temporal structure of Abani’s novellas that draw the mechanisms of ritual into the text to suggest alternative modes of somatic empathy, Han’s text, Katie Kitamura writes, ‘proposes a model of genuine empathy, one that insists on the power of shared experience but is not predicated on the erasure of difference.’<sup>41</sup> Like Abani’s and Vera’s fiction, which explore the ritualistic and embodied process of writing, Han’s narrator states, ‘I needed to write this book and that the process of writing would be transformative, would itself transform into something like white ointment applied to a swelling.’<sup>42</sup> The book describes an intimately embodied process of remembrance and mourning that, through the familiarity of the body, even a different body, draws the reader into a shared experience of loss.

The novel describes the transformation of the narrator as the ghost or *Hon* of her sister comes to inhabit her body: ‘And I think of her coming here instead of me. To this curiously familiar city [Warsaw], whose death and life resemble her own.’<sup>43</sup> Her sister is not merely transformed but resurrected in the course of the novel, as an entire life is imagined in place of the narrator’s: ‘She grew up inside this story.’<sup>44</sup> She is born again through the narrator’s vigil. Grief, Han explains, is ‘something which situates the place/space of the dead within the living; and that, through repeatedly revisiting that place, through our pained and silent embrace of it over the course of a whole life, life is, perhaps paradoxically, made possible.’<sup>45</sup> Rituals of writing and mourning embed the dead within sphere of the living, and living is only made possible through this embodied remembrance that ensures a relation of care between living and dead. Indeed, in her review, Deborah Levy’s suggests the novel be read as ‘a secular prayer book.’<sup>46</sup>

Han’s description of grief invites closely accords with postsecular poetics. *The White Book* includes descriptions of sacred acts, such as ‘Mourning Robes,’ yet the entirety of the novel enacts the dynamic between intimate care and bodily vulnerability. It is a secular prayer book, or put differently, it is postsecular mediation on love and loss, that relies, as Abani’s, Vera’s, and Ondaatje’s work does, on sustained lyrical attention to the mundane, and to the body.

### Mapping sacred cities and ancestral narration

In the preceding chapter on the sacred I focused on urban novels with a cartographic concern, arguing, firstly, that the persistent impetus to map and codify city space in writing by Mpe, Cole, and Vladislavić resignifies their intimately inhabited urban spaces as sacred. Secondly, I argue that, especially in the case of *Welcome to Our Hillbrow*, ancestral narration – the formal integration of ancestral and spiritual voices into the structure of

the text – demonstrate how the affordances or mechanisms of sacred realms come to structure the narrative itself. Mechanisms of the sacred, sustained hermeneutic engagement and the integration of spiritual narration, are present not only in African literatures, but also in other world-literary fiction. For instance, the cartographic and narratological sacralisation of Los Angeles is evident in Chris Abani's *The Virgin of Flames* and Karen Tei Yamashita's *Tropic of Orange*. Additionally, forms of ancestral narration are present in Toni Morrison's *Beloved*, Jesmyn Ward's *Sing, Unburied, Sing*, and Kei Miller's *Augustown*.

I do not seek to reinforce a division between African and world literatures, but rather to show a continuity across a shared set of geopolitical and postsecular concerns. The works discussed in earlier chapters present the entanglements of secular and religious life worlds; they, too, demonstrate how the affordances of the sacred, ritual and the sublime are integrated into the formal construction of narrative, exposing the novel itself as a potentially postsecular space. My intention in extending the analysis of earlier chapters to a broader selection of texts is to establish the value of a postsecular poetic reading that is attentive to systemic global forces as well as the specificity of local context. As I have argued elsewhere, Abani's *The Virgin of Flames* (2007) is a prime example of this intersection of ideas, as he uses somatic metaphors to telescope between neocolonial capitalist modernity and its intimate bodily effects.<sup>47</sup>

*The Virgin of Flames* shares the sacralising and cartographic impetus seen in Mpe's and Vladislavić's novels. Black, the protagonist, walks the streets of impoverished and underdeveloped East Los Angeles accompanied by the Angel Gabriel who takes the form of a pigeon. Black is a mural artist, who, in the course of the novel paints a portrait of a syncretic female figure recalling Fatima and the Virgin of Guadalupe.<sup>48</sup> Black cross dresses in a wedding dress and is mistaken as an apparition of the Virgin, who is important to the neighbourhood's Hispanic residents, 'Not only as a symbol of the adopted religion of Catholicism, but because she was a brown virgin who had appeared to a brown saint, Juan Diego. She was also a symbol of justice, of a political spirituality.'<sup>49</sup> In this way the transnational and syncretic sacred is descriptively integrated. World religions are incorporation through Black's parents: his mother is a Salvadorian catholic and his father an atheist Nigerian Igbo. Black's parents represent the presumed dichotomy of modern life – secular and religious, science and belief – that coexist, always in negotiation, in their offspring. Like Ndibe's protagonist, Ike, who lives a seemingly secular life before Ngene intervenes, Abani's novel depicts postsecular subjects sceptical of secularism and in search of spiritual or mundane explanations for their experiences of unevenly globalised modernity. Black embodies this postsecular dynamic in many ways, not least because he built an alter inside of a DIY spaceship, a 'squat metal blimp-like shape... tethered by a forty-foot rusting metal pole,' constructed from found materials.<sup>50</sup>

Abani's work belies a linear narrative of secular or religious transformation; instead, these concepts are presented dialogically – surfacing haphazardly and always in conversation. This is an apt description of Black's wanderings through the city, which is not singularly sacred or profane, but rather, sacred and mundane spaces abut and overlap each other. The mural of Fatima 'Rising fifty feet... in a head to toe yashmak,' is painted on the wall of an illegal halal abattoir, and best seen from a nearby bridge.<sup>51</sup> Black repeatedly likens his artistic process to ritual: 'This too was part of his ritual,' 'Again, it was ritual.'<sup>52</sup> Black's murals are, therefore, a visual manifestation of his presence in the city; a ritualised material intervention into his environment that marries transnational, profane and religious iconography.

Black's murals allow him to inscribe himself and images of the postsecular sacred onto the cityscape. The depiction of East LA is further developed as Black navigates and maps the streets. The Angel Gabriel is an almost constant companion on Black's walks, he appears 'sometimes in the shape of a fifteen-foot-tall man with wings, sometimes as a pigeon.'<sup>53</sup> This twin image highlights the duality of Abani's religio-secular perspective – Gabriel is neither sacred nor mundane, but both, a postsecular archangel. The concatenation of secular and spiritual urban spaces is articulated most clearly in the section 'Angels Walk,' the lengthiest account of walking through East LA.<sup>54</sup>

Black and Gabriel on a quest unfolding like a rosary. And these were the stops. The beads unfolding in sweat-grained piety. These were the stops, not the steps, the careful measure of each, the small steps in which it was done and undone, the subtle movements that made and unmade a life, like the constant seismic tremors of this land, this city.<sup>55</sup>

This section describes wonder and decay: a walk not to a holy site, but nevertheless a postsecular pilgrimage, a peripatetic ritual 'unfolding like a rosary... in sweat-grained piety.' The meditative ritual of the rosary becomes the organising metaphor of this chapter as the description of what they encounter is punctuated by: 'Stop. The Joyful Mysteries,' 'Stop. The Luminous Mysteries,' 'Stop. The Sorrowful Mysteries' and 'Stop. The Glorious Mysteries.'<sup>56</sup> Not steps, but stops: the small measured movements of the thumbed and shifting beads. Abani is clear about the constitutive potential of pedestrian access: 'the small steps in which it was done and undone,' the peripatetic efforts that make and unmake a life.

Postsecular meditation in movement: between each stop is a step, a tableau of the incongruity and unevenness of the late capitalist city presented contrapuntally with the possibilities of the sacred:

Step. The way an old Victorian house in green wood leaned against a fence barely holding back a strip mall. And the trees in this street, thick

and shady, said that someone had loved this place, paid attention, and in that moment, even here, there *was hope for the eternal*. Step. (emphasis mine)<sup>57</sup>

This extended account of their walk is a litany, a lyrical list of the mundane and the eternal. The aesthetic and structural aspects of ritualisation come to the fore in the poetry of these passages. ‘Stop’ and ‘Step’ are percussive parentheses creating singular images of the postcolonial and postsecular negotiations of Black’s city. The meter of ‘Stop’ and ‘Step’ simultaneously contains and propels this poetic pedestrian map as Black tries to chronicle the existential abundance, the mysteries, that surround him.

There are significant correspondences between *The Virgin of Flames* and Yamashita’s *Tropic of Orange*. In his introduction to the novel, poet and East LA native, Sesshu Foster describes the city as one that ‘never stops,’ one ‘that grinds out industrial daydreams and nightmares for the rest of the planet.’<sup>58</sup> In Yamashita’s rendering the historic and ongoing ‘displacement, dispossession, and dislocation’ of Asian American, Chicano, and migrant communities is represented in the interlinked narratives of her sever characters. Like Mpe’s, Cole’s, and Abani’s novels that present the persistently unjust histories of global cities as palimpsestic and contrapuntal, so too does *Tropic of Orange* excavate the often occluded injustices of LA. Arcangel, one of the seven characters, is a five-hundred-year-old messianic figure, with a long view of history: ‘He possessed the beauty of an ancient body, a gnarled and twisted tree, tortured and serene’ with ‘weathered skin stretched like fragile paper over brittle bones... holes in the sides of his torso.’<sup>59</sup> Black’s friend Iggy has similar wounds. Arcangel hooks chains through these holes as a form of ascetic meditation and service. This figure who is both archangel and dishevelled traveller, and neither, ‘predicts doomsday’ on a ‘fifty-two-year cycle.’<sup>60</sup> As with the Angel Gabriel in pigeon form, there is a certain amount of ambiguity as to whether the character is delusional or divine. Sue-Im Lee argues that Arcangel must be read in ‘light of the unmistakable authority that Yamashita endows him. Arcangel is a prophet and a messiah.’<sup>61</sup> He moves inexorably north, contracting the geographical and geopolitical distance between the US and Mexico. Yamashita’s novel falls within the genre of Magical Realism, where secular and supernatural ontologies are treated with equal diegetic heft. In what follows, however, I take issue with the reductive nature of this generic label, which overlooks evident postsecular negotiations. The Arcangel is at once potentially sacred, an ascetic angel, and possibly mundane, a woebegone migrant. Tracing the well-trodden networks of human movement, this postsecular figure symbolises practices of faith always in dialogue with imperial capitalism.

The opening of Abani’s novel describes the phenomenon of the post-secular city: ‘This is the religion of cities.’<sup>62</sup> ‘This’ seems precisely to be the concatenation of secular and sacred, desolate and divine city spaces. The

secularist dismissal of the religious to private domains holds no purchase in this novel; instead, diasporic spiritual communities find revelation here, syncretic and political devotion to The Virgin of Guadalupe is framed against crumbling concrete, and high-rises crowning the landscape as cathedrals once did, the ‘blessed coolness of water’ from a fire hydrant, not a holy font.

The sacraments: iridescent in its concrete sleeve, the Los Angeles River losing faith with every inch traveled [*sic*]. A child riding a bicycle against the backdrop of desolate lots and leaning chain-link fences, while in the distance, a cluster of high-rises, like the spires of old Cathedrals, trace a jagged line against the sky, ever the uneven heart of prayer.<sup>63</sup>

Abani’s oeuvre, and this novel in particular, is profoundly invested in the entanglements of postsecular experience: the lyricism of his prose affords the human body and intimate city spaces ritual attention, and areas of Black’s urban habitant are consecrated with murals and alters.

The dynamic of postsecular mediation is echoed in the structure of the novel, as the sections are entitled ‘Annunciation,’ ‘The Unconsoled,’ ‘Idolatry,’ ‘The Anointing’ and ‘Benediction.’ The structure explicitly tracks Black’s narrative of postsecular becoming that concludes in a moment of apotheosis. ‘Annunciation,’ ironically culminates in the first sighting of the Virgin of Guadalupe atop Black’s spaceship. Black is again mistaken for the Virgin in the closing of ‘Idolatry’ – aptly named. ‘The Anointing,’ the novel’s penultimate section, ends with Black’s immolation. He is anointed with turpentine, the wedding dress set a flame: He is a ‘woman on fire’: the Virgin of flames.<sup>64</sup>

Black’s death is not included in the story; instead, this section ends with pieces of lace from the burning dress floating ‘over the crowd... Adrift on night’s River.’<sup>65</sup> The suggestion is that Black follows these pieces of lace into the infinite flow of the River that alludes both to the Los Angeles River and to an afterlife, echoing the stygian journey in *Song for Night*. Finally, the close of the novel is entitled ‘Benediction’ and the blessing uttered is of the numinous and of love: ‘Leavened. This blue light here and trembling with knowledge beyond measure; also love: perhaps.’<sup>66</sup> Abani makes this biblical grammar (annunciation, idolatry, anointing and benediction) account for Black’s excruciatingly human and mundane experience. Altars, shrines, murals and sightings of the Virgin – these are the landmarks in Black’s city – precious and fleeting incursions of the sacred into the everyday.

Yamashita’s novel is equally devoted to identity formation, the effects of globalisation, and the everyday. The chaos, detritus, and inequality of capitalist modernity are evident across all seven narrative strands. This seven-part fragmentation presents an often atomised and isolated

experience of the city. However, through the diagram 'Hypercontexts,' included at the beginning of the novel, the reader is able to situate the characters in relation to a seven-day cycle. These 'Hypercontexts' subsume the characters within the structure of the working week, isolating them from each other. Not unlike Vladislavić's 'Itineraries,' 'Hypercontexts' provide an alternative reading strategy for the novel where the grid works along character and chronological axes. The chapter headings include a location: 'Koreatown,' 'Hiro's Sushi,' 'Downtown Interchange,' 'Virtually Everywhere.' The grid develops a temporal and spatial map of the city that shifts between geographic specificity and expansive abstraction. The city is irreducible to an A-Z street map. Like Mpe's Hillbrow or Cole's New York, Yamashita's LA is resignified in part by her fictional cartography and in part by her characters' conception of their environment. In this regard, Buzzworm and Manzanar are exemplary.

Buzzworm wears a collection of watches on his wrist and is perpetually tuned into the radio through his Walkman which, 'had a special wave, a pulse' and sounded 'like an inner voice.'<sup>67</sup> He is constantly configured by his relation to time and technology: the watch telling secular time and the radio tuning him into ethereal chatter (a techno-angel on his shoulder). Despite this aural tether to the perpetual present, Buzzworm is attuned to and aware of the alternative scales of time operative in his city. The first is represented by palm trees that 'Been standin' here a long time and will continue to long after you and I are gone.'<sup>68</sup> These trees, offering patches of shade in a desert city, are like his watches 'markin' time.'<sup>69</sup> Like Olive Schreiner's Waldo, who is aware of secular and sacred time, Buzzworm is attuned to multiple temporal layers: the present, the recent colonial past, and natural time indexed by the trees. Considering the gentrification of the city Buzzworm connects the disenfranchisement of current city residents to the *longue durée* of imperial expansion: 'If they'd a known... About the Mexican rancheros and before that, about the Chumash and Yangna... Somebody else must have a big map. Or maybe just the next map. The one with the new layers you can't even imagine.'<sup>70</sup> The map Buzzworm refers to connects the colonial past of the Chumash Native Americans and the Yangna settlement with the neo-colonial present where socio-economic precarity aids gentrification efforts. In Buzzworm's imagining, Yamashita exposes the long history of violence, forced removals and enforced mobility that define urban centres. Like the contrapuntal presentation of history in Cole's and Mpe's work, Yamashita's construction of LA as a spatio-temporal palimpsest allows her characters to find purchase in their often-alienating urban habitat. Buzzworm perceives aspects his environment that others do not: his access to the region's archaeological archive enables him, like Refentše and Julius, to resignify his urban environment and find a sense of belonging. Buzzworm's city is underdeveloped, unjust, and enchanted by the confluences of different time signatures: 'The world teeter-tottered... Time stood still momentarily. Time stood still eternally.'<sup>71</sup>

Manzanar Murakami is also attuned to the city's spatio-temporal layers, and conducts its sonic waves. He was a surgeon, but is now unhoused and considers himself an urban conductor. He perceives the city as a cacophony of sound he orders into partial coherence: he 'sensed the time of day through his feet, through the vibration of rumbling through the cement and steel, and by the intervals of vehicles passing beneath him.'<sup>72</sup> While Buzzworm presents an extended record of urbanisation and gentrification, Manzanar locates urban noises within an expansive sonic register he experiences as transcendent and even sublime. He is described as a 'witch doctor,' a 'conducting shaman' of 'monkish attitude' with 'a kind of head start toward Nirvana.'<sup>73</sup> Manzanar is an urban ascetic, described by others as having an otherworldly quality, a sense that he 'knew *the way*.'<sup>74</sup> Indeed, in the sections narrated from his perspective he seems to have access to spheres of experience beyond the mundane: he had 'an uncanny sense of the elasticity of the moment, of time and space, [that] forced his hands to continue.'<sup>75</sup>

Arcangel, Buzzworm, Manzanar: characters connected to an extra-human domain or experience. They each have an expansive view of time that brings forth the city's archive. This awareness of deep time is described as a moment of enlightenment or Nirvana:

This long moment of stasis allowed Manzanar to drop his arms, to peel himself away from his performance, his music. It was like an out-of-body experience, better understood perhaps on an overpass in Santa Monica rather than against this rational downtown backdrop... The past spread out like a great starry fan and folded in upon itself. Encroaching on this vision was a larger one: the great Pacific stretching along its great rim.<sup>76</sup>

Manzanar's euphoric perspective is contrasted with its 'rational' setting. Much like Buzzworm's temporal shifts, this moment occurs in the heart of downtown where natural beauty is replaced by concrete infrastructure. This contrapuntal presentation of history is also a dialogic presentation of the sacred and secular, illustrating the incursion of the sacred into city space. Limiting this novel to a Magical Realist reading belies the evident postsecular mediation. Each character is caught up in the uneven relations of the world-system, bringing the injustices of the periphery to core spheres. The geo-temporal scale expands beyond Manzanar's personal recollection to geological time, situating the gentrification and traffic jams of modern LA within the long history of geological and human movement: 'the changing crust of the Earth's surface had over billions of years come to this... generations of building upon building the residue, burial sites, and garbage that defined people after people for centuries. Manzanar saw it, but darkly.'<sup>77</sup> His dark vision – this orchestration of human and extra-human time drawn into the downtown freeway – is a moment of postsecular transcendence. Manzanar is an urban ascetic, a postsecular shaman.

Similarly, given the imagery of the following lines, there can be little doubt that Arcangel is a postsecular figure in whom sacred and secular experiences coalesce:

It was one of those odd moments in liberation theology in which a messenger named Arcangel stood at the top of Angel's Flight, looking out over the City of Angels with his arms raised to the heavens and his body fastened to an entire continent.<sup>78</sup>

His triumph and struggle is echoed in the novel's closing, where Arcangel holds the line of the Tropic of Cancer, seemingly holding the world together, and then 'lets go. Lets the lines slither around his wrists, past his palms, through his fingers. Lets go. Go figure. Embrace. That's it.'<sup>79</sup> *Tropic* and *Virgin* conclude with the suggestion of transformation and transcendence. Having dragged an entire continent north, loosening the geopolitical lines of dependence and inequality. Arcangel's final act is liberating.

Reading for postsecular poetics exposes how first, urban mapping and orchestration rely on the affordances of the sacred. The diegetic focus on character's spatiotemporal location works in tandem with their conceptual maps to construct their intimate urban spaces in postsecular and post-modern terms. Second, postsecular poetics reframes the incorporation of religious imagery into downtown LA, in both Yamashita's and Abani's narratives, as emblematic of the postsecular globalised city. In both cases, the bi-partite postsecular resignification of East LA challenges Euro-American narratives of secular becoming, presenting a world where the rational and spiritual are inextricably entangled.

Moreover, postsecular poetics demonstrate the integration of the sacred into the form of fiction, in novels that employ ancestral narration, such as Mpe's *Welcome to Our Hillbrow*. These are narratives where a spirit or ancestor is a primary structural mechanism; where the world-view of African traditional religions is manifest in literary form. Perhaps the most famous example of this diegetic materialisation of ancestral voices is Toni Morrison's *Beloved*. K. Zauditu-Selassie has argued that African spiritual traditions pervade and enliven Morrison's work,<sup>80</sup> and it is, therefore, reductive to read the eponymous character merely as a ghost in the gothic tradition. While parts of her appear to be Sethe's returned daughter, *Beloved* also has memories of the Middle Passage that are not her own.<sup>81</sup> McClure's reading of this novel focuses on emerging spiritual communities positioned between religious and secular world-views. These communities gather, McClure argues, in enchanted and porous enclosures such as Baby Suggs's clearing. In these experimental spiritual communities and inclusive spaces, McClure identifies a postsecular scepticism of religious and secular foreclosures. Despite his insightful examination of the negotiation of competing world-views in Morrison's fiction, McClure glosses over the novel's ancestral narration that enacts the cosmological view that the living and



departed inhabit a shared sphere of existence. The novel extends the critique of both secular enlightenment and Eurocentric Christianity by materialising the transgressive and syncretic figure of Sethe's lost daughter and ancestral rage. Modes of ancestral narration and postsecular scepticism are evident, too, in Jesmyn Ward's *Sing, Unburied, Sing*, a clear descendant of Morrison's narrative, and Kei Miller's *Augustown*.

Ward's novel shifts between three primary narrators Leonie and Jojo, a mother and her estranged thirteen-year-old son who see spirits of the dead, and Richie, a dead adolescent who was imprisoned with Jojo's grandfather and mercifully killed by him. Ancestral narration operates through Richie and Given, who like My Luck in Abani's *Song for Night*, have been separated from their bodies by violent deaths. Richie follows Jojo, is seen by Kayla and torments their grandmother, Mam (Philomène). Given is seen by Leonie, and later by Jojo. He was killed by a white man during a hunting 'accident.' Ward's title indicates the narrative structure that underpins the novel, an injunction calling the unburied to sing that enacts the cosmology of Haitian Vodou, to which Mam subscribes.<sup>82</sup>

In a memory from Mam's childhood, she describes the midwife Marie-Therese explaining to her that she had 'the seed of a gift' that 'runs in the blood.'<sup>83</sup> As in *Beloved*, ancestral visitations and generational memory tether this family to the history of the Black Atlantic and its attenuated religious traditions. Marie-Therese prays to 'the Mothers, to Mami Wata and to Mary, the Virgin Mother of God,' a syncretic devotion that twins the African-based water goddess with the Catholic Virgin Mary.<sup>84</sup> In the duality of the midwife's invocation James Mellis identifies the struggle of characters caught between two worlds: 'black and white, impoverished and affluent, imprisoned and free, leaving and remaining home.'<sup>85</sup> The family's spiritual community, I argue, also mediates between religious and secular life worlds. The interrelation of disenchanted and enchanted spheres undergirds the novel. Ward's depiction of racialised violence, generational trauma, and parental abuse characterise her 'disenchanted America,' Anna Hartnell notes.<sup>86</sup> Meanwhile, the enchanted aspects of the text, presented by African-based religious traditions, offer a sense of power, belonging and the potential for healing.

Mam, Pap, Jojo, and Kayla constitute a Vodou community within which there are believers and Leonie, the sceptic. On the one hand, Mam has taught Leonie to identify plants with healing properties, instructing her that she would be able to find what she needed in the natural world. Yet, when she needs milkweed to soothe Kayla's nausea and all she can find are less effective blackberries, Leonie is left dissatisfied and disaffected. On the other hand, when his grandchildren leave with their mother, Pap slips a gris-gris bag, an object of Vodou protection, into Jojo's backpack. Pap believes but does not have 'the seed of a gift,' does not see the dead as the rest of his family does. The climax of the novel, its spiritual peak, takes place as the family attend Mam's death bed. Mam tasks Leonie with building an alter for Maman Brigitte, the goddess of death, invoking her to

possess her mother and take her to the other side of the veil, to 'her gods.'<sup>87</sup> In Mam's bedroom the veil between the living and dead is lifted. Jojo, Kayla, Mam and Leonie are able to see Richie who is upsetting Mam. Once Leonie calls to Maman Brigitte, Given is able to intervene, holding Richie at bay and taking his mother to her rest. This room is the enchanted centre of the world the characters inhabit: here there are those who see (Jojo and Kayla), Pap, who believe without seeing, and Leonie, who sees but chooses drug-fuelled oblivion in place of belonging. The fragile spiritual community negotiating between the overlapping spheres of enchanted and disenchanted worlds is manifestly postsecular: a feature exaggerated by the dead narrating their own stories, a formal integration of Vodou cosmology.

Mellis similarly argues that to characterise literature embedded in African-based spiritual traditions as Magical Realism is simplistic and incomplete.<sup>88</sup> Instead, he defines the genre of 'African-based spiritual fiction,' explained as 'African-American realist fiction with African-based spiritual and religious elements (particularly Voodoo, hoodoo, conjure and rootwork) incorporated into the universe of the work.'<sup>89</sup> While Mellis cautions that this is a distinctly African-American literary tradition, what he calls attention to, the incorporation of African and African-based religious traditions into realist fiction, is precisely the postsecular literary turn addressed in this book. I argue, therefore, that Mellis's observations might be extended to the Black Atlantic, where the triangulation of Abani, Ward, and Kei Miller present syncretic and heterogeneous African religious traditions dialogically with the disenchantments of capitalist modernity.

Miller's novel, *Augustown*, is a retelling of the history of Alexander Bedward, a messianic preacher from August Town, Jamaica, who, in 1920, convinced his followers to give away their worldly possessions, climb a tree and jump so that they might fly away to heaven. Unfortunately, the preacher and his flock did not ascend, and Bedward was committed to a lunatic asylum.<sup>90</sup> Miller, however, recasts Bedward's historic jump as a successful flight to heaven and Augustown, the fictional village, as a microcosm of the sociopolitical manifestations of uneven development. The omniscient narrator chides, 'this isn't magic realism. This is not another story about superstitious island people and their primitive beliefs... This is a story about people as real as you are.'<sup>91</sup> The narrator chides: 'this story is about the kinds of people you have never taken the time to believe in.'<sup>92</sup> The postcolonial project of magical realism insufficiently describes the narrator's injunction. Here, she insists on the veracity of the world view the novel depicts and the authority of the characters who present it. The decolonial assertion of the narrator, to the generalised 'you' of a Euro-American secular reader, is indicative of the novel's postsecular position. In this light, Rastafarianism, messianic belief, and Ma Taffy's 'higher science and obeah knowledge,'<sup>93</sup> are portrayed with equal, if not greater, explanatory clout than secular bureaucracy.<sup>94</sup> Indeed, the phrase 'higher science' encodes the duality of the text's postsecular poetics.

The diegetic illustration of the concurrence of spiritual and secular epistemologies – the novel’s postsecular poetics – is complimented by the text’s ancestral narration. Gina, Ma Taffy’s niece, is the deceased, omniscient narrator. Gina relates the events of 11 April 1982, the day of her death, the ‘autoclaps’ or coming catastrophe.<sup>95</sup> From her perspective ‘up here,’ ‘another nameless thing in the sky’ she has watched this day ‘over and over again,’ as if she ‘could change things.’<sup>96</sup> Like Refentše and the unnamed narrator in Mpe’s *Welcome to Our Hillbrow*, Gina has a heavenly view of the living, even able to go back in time, but unable to intervene. ‘Come. Let us observe it now,’ Gina instructs.<sup>97</sup>

While the story provides a longer view of events, the sacrilegious act that sets Gina’s death in motion is Kaia’s teacher Mr. Saint-Josephs cutting his dreadlocks off because they make him look like ‘a little bush African,’ an ‘ungroomed hooligan.’<sup>98</sup> Kaia and his family are Rastafarian and have taken the Nazirite vow that ‘*No blade shall ever touch my head.*’<sup>99</sup> Despite the school’s neutral position, Mr. Saint-Josephs perceives Kaia’s dreadlocks as an affront to his Christian values and in a moment of rage cuts them off. When Gina goes to confront him, they wrestle, ‘lost for a moment in their own histories,’ and Gina stabs the teacher in the eye with the scissors used to cut her son’s locks.<sup>100</sup> Gina leaves the school and is shot by police as she approaches home, a confrontation informed by the intersection of race, class, and religious divisions. The pluralistic safety of the school is violated by Mr. Saint-Josephs’ actions, whose name ironically recalls the patron saint of a happy death. The tension between Rastafarianism and Christianity illustrate the postsecular mediation mandated by the secular ‘neutrality’ of the school environment. Gina’s is a story of postsecular and historical reckoning. The spiritual communities depicted in postsecular fiction are often challenged by external forces. Such communities and practices of faith are depicted in often uneasy dialogue with hegemonic religions and/or secular authorities. McClure describes this interstitial position as ‘open dwelling’ where spiritual communities mix and innovate, while ‘sustaining continuity with the tradition.’<sup>101</sup> Postsecular poetics expands McClure’s description of postsecular fiction by focusing on the structural integration of ancestral narration and related epistemologies, and further considers the literary registration of socio-religious and postcolonial entanglements.

### The sublime and deep time

In the previous chapter I argued that the focus on land and landscape is legion in South African literature, particularly in the *plaasroman* genre where the sublime is a regularly deployed motif that registers the ambivalence, anxiety and unease of settler occupation. While the traditional form of the genre validated Afrikaner entitlement to land,<sup>102</sup> farm literature written during the interregnum (South Africa’s transition to democracy)

critiques the erasure of Black labour and the God-given entitlement to land, presenting other forms of human and non-human relation. Accordingly, my analysis of Coetzee's *Boyhood* and *Summertime* demonstrates John's experience of the sublime of the family farm Voëlfontein, and his feelings of sacred belonging: he belongs to the farm, it does not belong to him. Similarly, Milla De Vet, the narrator of Marlene Van Niekerk's *Agaat*, is the proprietor of her farm, Grootmoedersdrift, yet she demonstrates an embodied reverence for the land and the maps of her property that sacralise the farm and her relation to it. The expanse of the farm resists her knowing, and Milla is repeatedly confronted by her own alterity. Like Waldo in Olive Schreiner's *Story of an African Farm*, John's and Milla's experience of the sublime is a partly a disjuncture between finite human space-time and the vast extension of geologic space-time. This tension is not specific to South African literature, and is present in fictions from other postcolonial contexts.

Alexis Wright's *Carpentaria* narrates colonialism's durable presence through historical dispossession of indigenous land that continues to present-day exploitation by a mining company. Told from the Waanyi perspective (Wright's natal region and the name of her people), the novel is formally complex as it shifts between multiple characters' perspectives, between Christian and indigenous epistemologies, and depicts separate but related temporal scales. It is in these last two features that the postsecular negotiation between competing worldviews is most evident. While there is subjective engagement with postsecular imagery and ideas, such as Angel's obsession with a salvaged statue of the Virgin Mary, the form of the novel is the focus here, exposing the manifest postsecular.<sup>103</sup>

Frances Devlin-Glass suggests that *Carpentaria* 'melds satire with a new form of magic realism based in Indigenous knowledge.'<sup>104</sup> She notes that 'whereas much magic realism loosens the narrative's connection to the ordinary world of sense perceptions,' Wright's 'inventive' and 'transformative' text 'draws on Waanyi cosmology to insist that mythological meanings are embedded in the mundane and everyday real, and that this process involves continual renegotiation within Indigenous communities.'<sup>105</sup> This world is presented in 'the manner of hyper-realism (a western literary modality) and re-visions the Dreamtime mythology as an alternative form of scientific discourse, ethno-biology/geography/climatology, based in observation of the forces of nature over many thousands of years.'<sup>106</sup> In Wright's deployment of Magical Realism, the terms are not in opposition, but in 'collusion': the sacred and profane, scientific observation and Waanyi mythology. Dreamtime, Devlin-Glass explains, is a productive 'shorthand for the Indigenous sacred.'<sup>107</sup> This new Magical Realism, not dissimilar from the intervention of Mellis's African-based spiritual fiction, helps to elaborate the representative and political project of Wright's works, as well as the dynamic relation between sacred and secular versions of the real. In this, light the Waanyi experience of and resistance to coloniality and

modernity (experienced through mining and settlement), ought to be read as postsecular fiction, presenting the vitality of Waanyi religion and culture dialogically with capitalist modernity and the secular state.

The form of the novel enacts this postsecular dynamic. Firstly, Wright interweaves two competing world-views: Christian theology and Aboriginal dreamtime. The diegetic weaving of juxtaposed mythologies forces an uneasy and uneven mediation between the two. The novel begins: 'CHURCH BELLS CALLING THE FAITHFUL TO THE TABERNACLE... The ancestral serpent, a creature larger than the storm clouds, came down from the stars laden with its own creative enormity... It came down those billions of years ago.'<sup>108</sup> Punitive and catastrophic Christian faith is contrasted with the lyrical explanation of the gulf's geography according to 'the Aboriginal Law handed down through ages since time began.'<sup>109</sup> The 'contrapuntal evocation of two incommensurable myth systems: the Christian eschatology and the Aboriginal dreaming of the Gulf country' persists throughout the novel, forcing them to occupy, however unevenly, the same literary space.<sup>110</sup> The novel, therefore, constructs a postsecular space where these epistemologies are further mediated by the secular, capitalist order of the mining company.

Towards the end of the text, Will Phantom, Mozzie Fisherman and his devotees blow up the mine, incited by Mozzie's anti-globalisation rhetoric: 'International mining company. Look how we got to suit international mining people. Now, even we, any old uneducated buggers, are talking globally. We got to help United Kingdom money. Netherlands lead air problems. Asia shipping.'<sup>111</sup> Extractive resource-industrialisation is directly at odds with the ethos and ethics of the Aboriginal community. By providing jobs and financial inducements the mining company has bought the compliance of many community members. The company is responsible for the death of Elias, a prophetic and mystical character who washes up out of the sea without memory. The incursion of state-supported mining operations into sacred land and the death of Elias demonstrate the tension between the behemoth global enterprise and the deeply emplaced Waanyi religion. This disjuncture is registered formally in the fragmentation of the narrative, and is particularly evident in the chapter 'Mining,' where descriptions of the explosion and ensuing chaos vacillate between thrilling cinematic and 'frenzied media' coverage, 'Televised on-the-spot reports of the dead ore body' and an omniscient narrator following Will and Mozzie's men, who are in 'the fold of the ancestral spirits who governed the land.'<sup>112</sup>

Sacred spaces abound in the novel: the land and sea are inhabited by ancestral spirits; Mozzie's serpentine caravan carries Aboriginal beliefs across the country like the originary snake, whose 'covenant permeates everything'; Norm Phantom's fishroom, where he taxidermies fish with such precision that '[m]ortality did not belong in this room' because he 'competed with the spirits'; and the cave of the ancestors, where 'the walls... screamed at you with the cryptic, painted spirits of the

Dreamtime.<sup>113</sup> While these spaces are treated with descriptive reverence, some are encroached upon by the mining company and others are encountered by character of weak faith. 'So it was with astonishment and awe' that Mozzie's men entered the ancestor's cave. They

gaped at what they had been shown, and allowed themselves to be taken into the powerful spirituality, which was somehow the same as but much older than the ornate cathedrals made with stone, or the monasteries and places of worship to relics of bone and other bits and pieces of sanctified saints of old Europe and the Holy Land.<sup>114</sup>

This short passage is indicative of the postsecular mediation that draws Christian monuments into pale comparison with the duration of Waanyi sacred time, beheld by a group of sceptics of previously weak faith. In this postsecular novel sacred spaces, spirits, and unassuming mystics dwell in proximity to mine dumps, garbage heaps, and under-resourced sceptics induced by mining salaries.

The second relevant formal feature is the layering of disjunctive time scales that accord with the novel's representative worldviews: secular, biblical, Waanyi and geologic time. Secular time, marked by the clock, has limited applicability, especially during the monsoon season when 'Time stopped tick-tocking,' because of the moisture in the air.<sup>115</sup> The clock metonymically signifies a non-indigenous form of time suspended by the local climate. Biblical time, too, is out of place because as Mozzie explains: 'Biblical stories lived in someone else's desert.'<sup>116</sup> These temporal registers have imperfect purchase; instead, the worldview enacted prioritises Waanyi and natural time. Both Waanyi and geologic time offer conceptions of time that exceed human understanding, and rely on depictions of the sublime. 'The geologic timescale,' Tom Griffiths asserts, 'reduces a human lifetime to an absurdity, a brevity that we possibly cannot ever imaginatively encompass.'<sup>117</sup> For Griffiths, although "'deep time" carries all the baggage of nineteenth-century evolutionary thought,' deep time and Dreamtime share some commonalities:

One seems linear, the other cyclical; one progressive, the other ever-renewing; one a master global narrative, the other a myriad of local stories; one reifying chronology, the other 'timeless.' But both are concerned with origins, with dimensions of space as well as time, and with meaning. Deep time, like the dreamtime, extends the human story into a non-human realm, and is so radically destabilising of conventional, felt timescales, so revealing of long-term cycles, that it upsets linearity and progressivism even as it seems to represent them.<sup>118</sup>

The impossibility of comprehending deep time means that it undermines the order it attempts to explain, and instead becomes dreamlike, as it

moves closer to indigenous mythology relying on poetics, specifically metaphor. It is here, in this reliance on poetic comparisons of vastness and timelessness that the affordances of the sublime can be identified. The opening section, told in the present continuous tense, pits the cruel history of Christian missions, ‘*Armageddon beings here*’ and Australian nation-making against the lyrical creation story of the geography of the gulf: ‘Picture the ancient serpent, scoring deep into – scouring down through – the slippery underground of the mudflats.’<sup>119</sup> The contrasting mythologies operate in and present two distinct temporal registers, one signifying the end of time and colonial history – Armageddon – and the other retelling a vital creation narrative.

Sacred time is endless and expansive, predating secular or biblical time. In a cave with ‘ancestral paintings telling stories of human history,’ Will touches the walls ‘to embrace the timelessness of his own being.’<sup>120</sup> ‘A world without end, *Amen*,’ Norm Phantom awakes in his boat at the sacred place of the groper where he has come to lay Elias to rest: Norm’s ‘time was a spectacular clock.’<sup>121</sup> Father and son are attuned to the expanse of Waanyi time, a sense of the immediacy of the past as well as the timelessness of the present.

Time was a fleeting whisper for Will, sitting on the edge of the lagoon that has been carved by an eternity of rushing flood waters inside the remains of a forest that lived a million years ago, and had, after a moment of shock when drowned by high seas, petrified into rock.<sup>122</sup>

Like Manzanar, Buzzworm, Waldo, and John, Will is aware of the diurnal rhythms that move him through the course of a day and the plot of the novel, he is also aware of sacred Waanyi time, under which Wright subsumes geological time.<sup>123</sup> Devlin-Glass argues that Wright presents Waanyi knowledge as an alternative to colonial and scientific discourse; similarly, Phillip Mead asserts that Wright formally positions geological time within the taxonomy of Dreamtime. This is evident in the novel’s opening chapter, in the ancestral cave, and in many instances when Will and Norm are described in relation to Waanyi time. During a cyclone, attributed to the sea spirits, Norm drown his ‘conscience in the hub and tub of a psychotic Pacific Ocean collapsing through eons of compressed time.’<sup>124</sup> ‘Elias explained that when you went around parts of the country thinking you were walking on rock, it was really fossilised tree stumps from those times. It was hard to imagine. Norm saw both these worlds wherever he looked at [a groper].’<sup>125</sup> The contrast of human finitude, eons of time and Aboriginal knowledge ‘from the beginning of time,’<sup>126</sup> depends upon the affordances of the sublime: using metaphors of excess suggestive of the limitations of rational knowledge and versions of the real. It would be reductive to view Will’s and Norm’s experiences through a Eurocentric notion of the sublime; rather, their ontology includes the numinous and

sacred. The complexity of the novel's form depends upon this juxtaposition of secular and sacred spatio-temporal registers and European and indigenous cosmologies.

Through the fragmentation of the narrative, and the juxtaposition of worldviews and attendant temporal scales, Wright's novel enacts the perspective of Waanyi life worlds. The heart of Wright's novel, Mead opines, 'is a sense that the rebuilding of Aboriginal culture in Australia might happen via language, in the form of storytelling.'<sup>127</sup> The sublime cannot be universalised. It is a consequence of the interrelation of cultural context, subjectivity and the natural world. Wright's depiction of the sublime and sacred is inextricable from Waanyi space and time. A similarly emplaced iteration of the sublime is evident in Amitav Ghosh's *The Hungry Tide*, and its follow-up *Gun Island*. Both novels are set primarily in the Sundarbans, with *Gun Island* juxtaposing Venice, Italy's sinking city with the Indo-Gangetic Delta. The second novel's self-consciously global approach situates *The Hungry Tide*'s presentation of climate change and eco-mythology within a broader transnational or world-systemic framework. In *The Great Derangement: Climate change and the unthinkable*, Ghosh suggests that one of the major problems of addressing climate change is in the difficulty of imaginative presentations.<sup>128</sup> The enormity and uncertainty of climate change make it extremely difficult to imagine, let alone represent. Both works provide an answer to this question that depends upon the sublime; the natural world and its alterations are depicted as sublime through metaphors of comparative excess. Allan Stoekl argues that the experience of the sublime is the impossibility of accurately calculating the 'external or hidden costs of any product we consume.' He writes: 'We suspect that the impossibility of calculating externalities is akin to the withdrawal of God: if we really could calculate externalities all would be possible, foreseeable; without it, we walk through the desert, yearning for the moment of deliverance.'<sup>129</sup> The impossibility of accounting for and representing the costs and consequences of climate change is a problem of scale and imagination, it is a manifestation of the sublime. In *Gun Island* and *The Hungry Tide*, the disjunctive scales of human and deep time, as well as the incalculability of climate change are partially managed and represented by the language of the sublime.

Piya and Kanai, literate urbanites, find the superabundance of the Sundarbans' flora visually overwhelming. Piya is 'struck by the way the greenery worked to confound the eye... it seemed to trick the human gaze in the manner of a cleverly drawn optical illusion.'<sup>130</sup> Similarly, Kanai is confounded by the 'the landscape, in its epic mutability,' where '[d]epending on the level of the tide... the view was either exhilarating or terrifying.'<sup>131</sup> For both, 'the realities of the tide country were of a strangeness beyond reckoning,' while Fokir's sense of the dangers and constant transformations of the landscape are framed by observation, experience and the syncretic myth of Bon Bibi. He is a local and acts as a guide and ecological interpreter for Piya and Kanai. Jana María Giles finds that



The Sundarbans refuse human categories, constituting a liminal space between river and sea... As in the desert where boundlessness evokes the sublime, the superabundance of flora misleads the viewer with mirages. Even the Bengali word for mangrove, Badabon, crosses boundaries, derived from both Arabic (bada: desert) and Sanskrit (bon: forest)... Culturally and environmentally, the Sundarbans constitute a sublime syncretic space.<sup>132</sup>

The natural world is an agent, in Ghosh's and Wright's novels, with the characters and reader reckoning with what Stoekl calls 'ecological finitude.'<sup>133, 134</sup>

*The Hungry Tide's* syncretic vision entwines Hindu and Muslim religious practices, and Greek mythology, a strategy echoed in *Gun Island's* transnational and transhistorical legend. Rajender Kaur argues that the 'narrative's complex interweaving of these myths and legends from different cultures into one common heritage of humanity to mirror the distant geological era before the different continents were configured gestures, in effect, to the "deep time" of geology.'<sup>135</sup> The contrast between human and geological time scales is managed by the islands' indigenous inhabitants, who 'bridge the transcendent and poetic aspects of this ecosystem' through mythology and local knowledge.<sup>136</sup> With evident similarities to *Carpentaria's* serpent, the eco-mythological register of *The Hungry Tide* is set in the early pages:

In our legends it is said that the goddess Ganga's descent from the heavens would have split the earth had Lord Shiva not tamed her torrent by tying it in to his ash-smearred tocks. To hear this story is to see the river in a certain way: as a heavenly braid, for instance, an immense rope of water unfurling through a wide and thirsty plain. That there is a further twist to the tale becomes apparent only in the final stages of the river's journey – and this part of the story always comes as a surprise, because it is never told and thus never imagined. It is this: there is a point at which the braid comes undone; where Lord Shiva's matted hair is washed apart into a vast, knotted tangle. Once past that point the river throws off its bindings and separates into hundreds, maybe thousands, of tangled strands.<sup>137</sup>

This mytho-poetic framing embeds the geological explanation of the Sundarbans, a delta created by the confluence of the Ganges, Brahmaputra, and Meghna Rivers, within Hindu mythology: geological time is subsumed under the local creation narrative. Nirmal, the deceased author of these pages, is a disillusioned Marxist searching for meaning late in his life. He is not a religious man, yet he finds sense in this explanation of the 'tide country' that binds the daily ebb and flow of water, and the people who depend upon it, to transhistorical mythology and deep time. Alessandro

Vescovi suggests that Ghosh is trapped within a form of scholarly secularism; however, it is evident from the entangled presentation of science, myth and indigenous knowledge systems that secular discourse gives way to the dynamics of postsecular mediation.<sup>138</sup> As Vescovi concedes, the presentation of the uncanny and the sublime are not merely 'literary embellishments,' they ought to be understood 'as a way of moving the boundaries of the secular novel into the realm of the non-secular, in other words, from the modes of knowledge of colonisers to the modes of knowledge that are deeply embedded in the Indian culture.'<sup>139</sup>

The intersection of mythology, local knowledge and extra-human time-scales is most evident in the depiction of Fokir, a local fisherman, and his devotion to Bon Bibi and her legend. Fokir is illiterate, yet is able to 'recite from memory many of the cantos that comprise' the legend of Bon Bibi who protects the forest and its worthy inhabitants from the 'tiger-demon, Dokkin Rai.'<sup>140</sup> For Fokir, the myth is not merely a legend, 'it was the story that gave this land its life,' it animates Fokir's surroundings and provides the promise of protection from tigers, and other predators. Piya, a cetologist researching the declining population of Orcaella, witnesses Fokir and his son, Tutul, enact this belief with prayers and offerings at a shrine to Bon Bibi.<sup>141</sup> Fokir's appreciation of his environment is not some mystical innate knowledge, it is borne of experience, his 'abilities as an observer are really extraordinary,' Piya notes. Piya's research into the Orcaella, who are messengers of Bon Bibi, relies on Fokir. He also saves her life during the cyclone that kills him. The duality of these characters – the scientist and the indigenous fisherman – and the successful synthesis of their knowledge systems symbolises the dynamic mediation of postsecular life worlds that include science, mythology and learnt regional knowledge. Across both novels the anxieties of ecological finitude are necessarily linked to the vulnerability and relative brevity of human life. The affordances of the sublime, which deploy contrasting metaphors of spatio-temporal scale, register and help to signify these concerns. The impossibility of calculating and therefore representing the enormity of climate change exacerbates an already uneasy relation to mutable and transhistorical landscapes.

The fiction discussed in this final chapter extends the analysis of post-secular poetics from African and African diasporic literatures to post-colonial literature. Through this perspective, I have shown the congeries of secular, religious, modern and indigenous life worlds to be a dominant feature of postcolonial late-capitalist contexts. While secular literary criticism has long inhibited investigations of religious and postsecular perspectives, this book, opens the discursive field to explorations of postsecular modernity and its attendant fictions. Postsecular analysis provides a vocabulary with which to address human finitude and vulnerability that motivates care and the desire to live on, to find meaning. Postsecular poetics elucidates how the mechanisms of religious discourse, the affordances of

ritual, the sacred and sublime are deployed in literary form. While plot depicts characters negotiating spiritual and secular life worlds, reading for postsecular poetics illustrates how the affordances of religious discourse, its patterns and repetitions, organise and structure narrative. As the authors discussed here have shown, secular and religious forms cannot be siloed. The novel bears the weight of postsecular experiences.

## Notes

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- 5 William E. Connolly, *Identity, Difference: Democratic Negotiations of Political Paradox* (University of Minnesota Press, 2002), 155; McClure, *Partial Faiths*, 15.
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- 10 Ratti, 18.
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- 18 Bill Ashcroft, Gareth Griffiths, and Helen Tiffin, eds., *The Post-Colonial Studies Reader*, 2nd Edition (London: Routledge, 2006), 2; Ann Laura Stoler, *Duress: Imperial Durabilities in Our Times* (Durham, N.C.: Duke University Press Books, 2016), 9.
- 19 Neil Lazarus, *The Postcolonial Unconscious*, 1st edition (Cambridge; New York: Cambridge University Press, 2011), 15.
- 20 Sharae Deckard et al., *Combined and Uneven Development: Towards a New Theory of World-Literature*, 1st edition (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 2015), 49.
- 21 Ratti, *The Postsecular Imagination*, 44.

- 22 Michael Ondaatje, *The English Patient* (London: Bloomsbury Publishing, 1992), 164.
- 23 Ondaatje, 264.
- 24 'And my own monograph, I must admit, had been stern with accuracy. The fear of describing her presence as I wrote caused me to burn down sentiment, all rhetoric of love. Still, I described the desert as purely as I would have spoken of her' (Ondaatje 1992, 256).
- 25 Ratti, *The Postsecular Imagination*, 41.
- 26 Ratti, 41.
- 27 Ondaatje, *The English Patient*, 264.
- 28 Ondaatje, 148, 276.
- 29 Michael Ondaatje, *Anil's Ghost* (London: Picador, 2001), 5.
- 30 Ratti, *The Postsecular Imagination*, 107.
- 31 Ondaatje, *Anil's Ghost*, 52.
- 32 Ondaatje, 64–65.
- 33 Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities* (London: Verso, 1991), 9.
- 34 Ondaatje, *Anil's Ghost*, 169.
- 35 Ondaatje, 97.
- 36 McClure, *Partial Faiths*, 163.
- 37 McClure, 163, 190.
- 38 McClure, 190, 180.
- 39 Translated from Korean to English by Deborah Smith.
- 40 Kang Han, *The White Book*, 1st edition (London; New York: Hogarth, 2019), 13.
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- 44 Han, 125.
- 45 Sarah Shin, 'Interview with Han Kang,' *The White Review*, accessed May 13, 2020, <https://www.thewhitereview.org/feature/interview-with-han-kang>.
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- 51 Abani, 188.
- 52 Abani, 6, 7.
- 53 Abani, 6.
- 54 Abani, 143.
- 55 Abani, 143.
- 56 Abani, 144, 145, 146, 148.
- 57 Abani, 144.
- 58 Karen Tei Yamashita, *Tropic of Orange* (Minneapolis: Coffee House Press, 2017), xv.

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 66 Abani, 291.  
 67 Yamashita, *Tropic of Orange*, 28.  
 68 Yamashita, 30.  
 69 Yamashita, 30.  
 70 Yamashita, 73.  
 71 Yamashita, 119.  
 72 Yamashita, 32.  
 73 Yamashita, 135, 96, 97.  
 74 Yamashita, 97.  
 75 Yamashita, 107.  
 76 Yamashita, 146.  
 77 Yamashita, 146.  
 78 Yamashita, 182.  
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 81 Toni Morrison, *Beloved* (London: Vintage, 1997), 253.  
 82 James Mellis, ‘Continuing Conjure: African-Based Spiritual Traditions in Colson Whitehead’s *The Underground Railroad* and Jesmyn Ward’s *Sing, Unburied, Sing*,’ *Religions* 10, no. 7 (2019): 9.  
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 86 Anna Hartnell, ‘When Cars Become Churches: Jesmyn Ward’s *Disenchanted America*. An Interview,’ *Journal of American Studies* 50, no. 1 (2016): 206.  
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 94 Miller, *Augustown*, 42.  
 95 Miller, 157.  
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 102 See J. M. Coetzee *White Writing*.  
 103 Alexis Wright, *Carpentaria* (New York: Atria Books, 2006), 22, 39–40.  
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 125 Wright, 247.  
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 131 Ghosh, 128, 31.  
 132 Jana Maria Giles, ‘Can the Sublime Be Postcolonial? Aesthetics, Politics, and Environment in Amitav Ghosh’s *The Hungry Tide*,’ *Cambridge Journal of Postcolonial Literary Inquiry* 1, no. 2 (2014): 8.  
 133 Stoekl, ‘“After the Sublime,” after the Apocalypse,’ 46.  
 134 The sublime depiction of nonhuman environments – the synthesis of postcolonial and ecological thinking – offers a means of reading the nonhuman environment as a vital agent in the novel. Both theories share a reliance on the affordances of the sublime and the deployment of metaphors of incomprehensible excess. This postsecular sublime taps into the experience of wonder,

and perhaps even the numinous, in addressing the political and aesthetic questions of climate justice and resilience. Literary representations of ecological and postsecular thought present a productive avenue for further research.

135 Rajender Kaur, “‘Home Is Where the Oracella Are’: Toward a New Paradigm of Transcultural Ecocritical Engagement in Amitav Ghosh’s *The Hungry Tide*,” *Interdisciplinary Studies in Literature and Environment* 14, no. 1 (January 1, 2007): 135, <https://doi.org/10.1093/isle/14.1.125>.

136 Kaur, 126.

137 Ghosh, *The Hungry Tide*, 6.

138 Alessandro Vescovi, ‘The Uncanny and the Secular in Amitav Ghosh’s *The Great Derangement* and *The Hungry Tide*’ 15, no. 17 (November 2017): 216, <https://doi.org/10.17456/SIMPLE-68>.

139 Vescovi, 221.

140 Ghosh, *The Hungry Tide*, 292.

141 Ghosh, 127.

## 5 Coda

The argument developed over the preceding chapters is twofold. First, postsecular literary analysis, which explores the intersections, frictions and mediations of secular and religious experience, is generative in the study of postcolonial literary production from the African continent and its diasporas, in the late-capitalist age. This has been demonstrated through an analysis of fiction that registers postsecular entanglements, or in other words, how texts and their protagonists deal with the imbrication of full or partial religious life, secularism, and modernity. A key facet of this is the character's search for rootedness or meaning initiated, at least in part, by an experience of physical and existential vulnerability. As Martin Hägglund argues, the desire to care and invest attention is motivated by the certain threat of loss: loss of time, of climate stability, of self, of the beloved.<sup>1</sup>

Second, the poetics of postsecular writing integrate the affordances of sacred, ritual and the sublime into the narrative structure. Affordance, a design theory concept, 'used to describe the potential uses or actions latent in materials and design,'<sup>2</sup> is repurposed by Caroline Levine to think through the technologies and possibilities of literary form. Applying affordance to form allows the theorist to consider what potentials lie dormant in the patterning and repetitions of literary, sociopolitical or indeed socio-religious configurations. 'Literature,' Levine notes, 'is not made of the material world it describes or invokes, but of language, which lays claim to its own forms – syntactical, narrative, rhythmic, rhetorical – and its own materiality – the spoken word, printed page.'<sup>3</sup> Through reverential and repeated attention to the body, then, Abani and Vera deploy the differentiation and resignification of ritual. Abani and Mpe each integrate forms of ancestral narration into their fiction, materialising experiences of ancestral communication and lineage. Mpe, Cole and Vladislavić enact pedestrian mapping that relies on the same mechanisms, the same affordances as sacralisation: persistent engagement with space, an interpretive investment and finally a resignification of the space redolent with personal or historical import. Pedestrian mapping, and the excavations of historical and personal urban palimpsests depend upon the forms of the sacred. Coetzee's and van Niekerk's critical responses to the *plaasroman* and its valorisation of settler



ideology figure alternative relations to land and landscape experienced through belonging and sublimity. The sublime is registered in the fictions' form through the disjunction of human and geologic time, and the metaphors used to convey this schism. Simply put, African and postcolonial literary criticism cannot afford to be entirely secular. To this end, I return here, to the issue of postsecular African fictions and the postcolonial, and to the literary characteristics of African postsecularism. While these characteristics help to identify postsecular fiction as a type, postsecularism is also critical lens with which to approach African literatures. This postsecular frame makes visible certain postcolonial and decolonial features of African texts, such as an animist unconscious and ancestral narration.

As Graham Huggan proposes the post in postcolonial is comparable, though not entirely the same as, the post in postsecular. In both instances the prefix is superficially understood as a temporal signifier: after formal colonialism and after the secular age. A more nuanced conception of both terms that emerges from their supposed genesis in poststructuralism and/or postmodernism, construes the post as a sign of contingency, a prefix that signals instability or undecidability. As Huggan avers, whatever the sociological applicability of postsecularism, it 'may be more valuable as a critical methodology – as a specific set of ways of reading narrative.'<sup>4</sup> Like others posts, then, postsecularism is best understood 'as both backward-looking and anticipatory – looking back to the root term it deconstructs, and that can never adequately be reconfigured, but also looking forward to a future society in which the structuring antinomies of our existence may be productively undone.'<sup>5</sup> The deconstruction of religious and secular ideologies and praxis are a persistent feature of African literary postsecularism. Concepts related to the secular – rationalism, modernity, enlightenment – are similarly scrutinised. These categories of knowledge that created and excluded colonised others, are made to expand through postcolonial postsecularism which understands there to be multiple modernities, some of which co-develop with, rather than against, religious traditions.

Huggan identifies a postsecular turn in postcolonial theory and criticism beginning with three monographs about the Indian subcontinent: Debjani Ganguly's *Caste, Colonialism and Counter-Modernity: Notes on a Postcolonial Hermeneutics of Caste*, Arvind Mandair's *Religion and the Specter of the West: Sikhism, India, Postcoloniality, and the Politics of Translation* and Manav Ratti's *The Postsecular Imagination: Postcolonialism, Religion, and Literature*.<sup>6</sup> There is also a burgeoning postsecular turn in African studies, of which this book is a part. There is much in these monographs applicable to African contexts. Ratti's construction of a postsecular humanism, discussed in previous chapters, examines the role of the state in secular and religious politics and how criticism of such hegemonies is represented in fiction to imagine a broader and more plural humanism. Ratti's focus on national context emphasises the importance of local colonial and postcolonial histories. The entanglement of faith and secularism

are evident in British colonialism in India as in Anglophone African countries. While indigenous religions were disregarded as primitive superstition, Christianity and secular bureaucracy entrenched colonial rule. Yet, autochthonous cosmologies persist, resisting such erasures through what Soyinka calls ‘an attitude of philosophical accommodation’ that reconstitutes foreign material into a ‘social armory’ fighting for existence.<sup>7</sup> The epistemologies and technologies of colonial modernity are adapted in postsecular and postcolonial African societies.

Adaptation and translation are vital aspects of postsecularism’s relation to postcolonialism. Mandair asserts that the theoretical relationship between religion and translation is ‘usefully applied to the colonial (and postcolonial) context, where, for example, the concept of religion may not have existed in the lexicon of a particular culture prior to its encounter with European colonialism.’ Religion ‘takes shape in the language of the colonized,’ through a process of linguistic and epistemological translation that imperfectly transfers the colonial separation of faith and governance to natal African communities. Indeed, the return of religious traditions are ‘in some cases [the] only means for articulating life-worlds that were colonized and translated as religion, repressed by secular modernity, but which continue to simultaneously adopt and resist the aporetic space created by the translatability and untranslatability of religion.’<sup>8</sup> Like Soyinka’s idea of accommodation, Mandair’s account of translatability and untranslatability makes room for both the imposition of colonial knowledge systems and resistance to them that creates distinctly postsecular entanglements in African postcolonies.

Indicative of postcolonialism’s influence on postsecularism are the deconstruction of established hierarchies and binaries of religious/traditional and secular/modern modes, skepticism of religious, secular and state, and an understanding of colonialism’s manipulation of faith traditions. Moreover, fiction written in this vein challenges the teleology of secular modernity by insisting on the heterogeneity of modern cultures that necessarily accommodate autochthonous beliefs and practices. This is demonstrated textually through characters that are seen to negotiate secular spheres through African spiritual traditions or modes of ancestral narration. The presence of ancestors, ancestral narration, the inclusion of deities and devotees called to serve, all disrupt and decentre secular constructions of the real, replaced by a reality that accords with African epistemological traditions. Here, the supernatural, the enchanted appear in an always-uneven flux with disenchantment and modernity. Postsecularism offers a means to redress the epistemic and ontological violence of colonialism by centring African mediations of colonial modernity.

While there are many examples across the book, animism is a clear example of how postsecularism foregrounds postcolonial and religio-secular critique. As Caroline Rooney cautions, animism was part of a Eurocentric taxonomy that sought to create a division between natal African traditions and modernity.<sup>9</sup> It was a term that infantilised and denigrated African

epistemologies by aligning them with an earlier stage of human evolution developing from ‘animism or magical thought and practice’ to religion (Christianity) and then science.<sup>10</sup> Colonial modernity constructed a primitive other with no religion save magic and superstition, this view has, of course, been deconstructed through postcolonial critique,<sup>11</sup> and what a postsecular lens further exposes are the ways in which animism manifests the ongoing mediation/accommodation/translation of modernity/secularism and faith/religion. Traditional cultures have appropriated the ‘technology and the instruments and ideologies of the modern world,’ and as Harry Garuba explains this is ‘a manifestation of an *animist unconscious*, which operates through a process that involves... a *continual re-enchantment of the world*.’<sup>12</sup> What Garuba describes as the continual reenchantment of the world accords not only with Soyinka’s philosophy of accommodation, but also with what I have been describing as postsecularism. If animism is ‘a form of collective subjectivity that structures being and consciousness’<sup>13</sup> by accommodating the mechanisms of colonial modernity within or alongside African cosmologies, then it is productively understood through a postsecular lens that foregrounds these intimate mediations.

Postcolonial and postsecular modes of analysis are evidently compatible within and beyond African literary studies, and there is much work to be done here. Another productive avenue of inquiry is to consider the decolonial potential of postsecularism. Walter D. Mignolo explains that coloniality is a ‘conceptual machinery to regulate all areas of human experience with an intervention in all co-existing civilisations to “distort, disfigure and destroy” their past, disturbing the present of the people intervened.’<sup>14</sup> Coloniality describes the ongoing and reactivated epistemic violence of colonial modernity. The imposition of Eurocentric religious and secular frames is part of this coloniality of knowledge. The critical labour of postsecular analysis not only exposes and disrupts these ontological regimes, it also re-centres autochthonous systems of knowledge/spirituality. Postsecularism, therefore, makes legible a decolonial engagement with coloniality/modernity by revealing how African spiritualities persists within the supposedly secular world of the novel. Decoloniality exposes and foregrounds ways of being and knowing that persist despite the imposition of colonial epistemology. Postsecularism, in turn, provides a vocabulary for the overlaps, conflicts and contradictions between religious and secular modes of being, presenting these terms as dialectical rather than oppositional. In light of this postsecular decolonial framework African fictions offer an alternative to the telos of secular modernity by establishing a literary space where enchantment, animism and the sacred are essential to the entanglements of life.

## Notes

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