

## “Let Us All Mutate Together”: Cracking the Code in Laing’s *Big Bishop Roko and the Altar Gangsters*

Ian P. MacDonald

*Both Derek Wright and Francis Ngaboh-Smart have interpreted Laing’s Major Gentl and the Achimota Wars (1992) as an allegory for the emergence of the Internet. In that novel, a future Africa has been digitally erased from the Web archive, and the story follows a civil war aimed at reintegrating the continent into the global scene. Beginning from this reading, I approach Laing’s next work, Big Bishop Roko and the Altar Gangsters (2006), as a formal sequel to Major Gentl, investigating the changing landscape of global digital access and its potential as a site of resistance over the decade that separates their publication. If, in Major Gentl, West Africans have been exiled from the Web, the eponymous protagonist in Roko uses networked access to interrupt neoliberal economic and social engineering underway in the global North. Through experiments in “genetic mutation”—a metaphor for cyborgian transformation from biological to networked existence—Roko hacks the evolutionary process and forces Africa’s voice into the digital sphere in an attempt to remedy that technology’s unequal distribution. In both novels, Laing indigenizes science fiction using a technique I refer to as jujutech—a hybrid of science fiction and African folk traditions. The resulting style identifies the ways the genre itself mutates and evolves as it escapes the gravity of its Euro-American roots. Laing’s decision to publish Roko electronically further points to form following function, highlighting new avenues for the dissemination of experimental African works in underrepresented genres.*

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In science fiction we have “mutation”—not so much a new life as a new species, a new nature.

—Raymond Williams, *Problems in Materialism and Culture*

After the metaphysic of being and appearance, after that of energy and determination, comes that of indeterminacy and the code. Cybernetic control, generation from model,

Ian MacDonald is an assistant professor of English at Wittenberg University in Springfield, Ohio. He also has work published in *Research in African Literatures*. He was the 2016 chair of the Modern Language Association’s forum on speculative fiction. (Email: macdonaldi@wittenberg.edu.)

differential modulation, feed-back, question/answer, etc.: such is the new *operational* configuration. . . . Digitality is its metaphysical principle . . . and DNA is its prophet . . . A.D.N. + Adonai!

—Jean Baudrillard, Simulations

The hallucinogenic environments, animism, anthropomorphism, and fabulism in Kojo Laing's fourth novel, *Big Bishop Roko and the Altar Gangsters* (2006), make any detailed summary difficult. Like a palimpsest, the narrative seems constantly to overwrite itself.<sup>1</sup> In its broadest strokes, the novel follows the Anglican bishop of "Gold Coast city," Bishop Roko Yam, who has hired a local griot known only as the Wordman to chronicle his attempts to fight wars on two fronts. The first of these, the Renaissance War, pits Roko against a motley crew of local evangelical sects led by the gold smuggler, stock market trader, and ersatz priest, Zigzag Zala. In the second, the Canterbury War, Roko attempts to stop the Archbishop of Canterbury and the Pope from enacting "change beyond change" in the post-industrialized world—the novel's code for cyber-genetic transformations that would auto-evolve those affected into a different species, one no longer capable of communication with now-merely-human Africans. Although Laing appears to differentiate between local and foreign forces here, the two wars are eventually shown to be mirror images, with actors in one war consistently affecting the progress of the other. In the world of *Big Bishop Roko*, local and global spaces nearly always overlap.

Laing indicates as much in a prefatory note to *Major Gentl and the Achimota Wars* (1992),<sup>2</sup> where he heralds his desire to "internationalise" English by incorporating words "from Akan and Ga and sometimes Hausa," as well as those he has simply made up, in line with "the [universal] idea . . . to create one gigantic language." In *Big Bishop Roko*, Laing reprints a variation on this front matter, suggesting that he has chosen not to italicize *Ghanaisms* in the novel as leaving them "unmarked" lends "an exotic freshness to the utterance." These pocket-sized manifestos point in the direction of a universal creole, one that serves as a template for other amalgams in the novels—not an erasure of one or the other of seemingly incompatible couplets, but a synthesis. As Moussa Issifou argues in the context of *Woman of the Aeroplanes* (1988), Laing "substitute[s] the debate of exclusivity with the debate of inclusivity, for he believes, there are no self-sufficient languages, but complementary languages."<sup>3</sup> Laing's desire to obscure the dividing line between languages (even invented ones) highlights parallel slippage in the fields of space and time in his novels as well as, in *Big Bishop Roko*, the dissolution of the boundary between science and magic.

1 Kojo Laing, *Big Bishop Roko and the Altar Gangsters* (Accra: Woeli, 2006). This goes so far as to have events and claims recur in nearly identical language at several spots in the novel as if the text were "rebooting" to this earlier moment. This occurs, for example, with the description of Bishop Bender's arrival on pages 181 and 242, as well as with the Wordman's mediations regarding the beginning of the universe on pages 158 and 225.

2 Kojo Laing, *Major Gentl and the Achimota Wars* (Oxford: Heinemann, 1992).

3 Moussa Issifou, "Beyond the Language Debate in Postcolonial Literature: Linguistic Hybridity in Kojo B. Laing's *Woman of the Aeroplanes*," *Journal of Pan African Studies* 6.5 (2013), accessed November 20, 2015.

I approach *Big Big Bishop Roko* as a formal sequel to *Major Gentl*, a continuation of the latter's investigation into the changing landscape of global digital access and the Internet's potential as (anti)liberatory space. In both works, "postcolonial societies" have been "caught in the fold of a modern technological maze,"<sup>4</sup> and *Big Bishop Roko* continues, in increasingly surreal ways, *Major Gentl*'s meditation upon the dangers of uneven technological dissemination and the necessary codependence between ethics and scientific advancement. But if, in *Major Gentl*, West Africans have been exiled from the Web and thus abandoned by history, the eponymous protagonist in *Roko* exploits networked access to interrupt the neoliberal economic and social engineering emanating from the global North. Through experiments in "genetic mutation"—the novel's metaphor for a cyborgian transformation from biological to networked existence, the conflation of the digital and the genetic—Roko stages an intervention into the evolutionary process and forces Africa's voice into the realm of cyberspace in an attempt to remedy that technology's unequal distribution.

*Big Bishop Roko* rejects both revolutionary militarism and nostalgic traditionalism, elements that have often set the tone for early examples of anticolonial African literature. Bishop Roko Yam, the hero and ethical core of the novel, laments, "[T]here was nothing sadder than seeing [Gold Coasters] trying in vain to uphold their unbroken consciousness in groups. . . . The greatest lump of tragedy in the city was the communalistic show of mob togetherness (unity as opposed to creativity!)" (98).<sup>5</sup> As to "the pastoral epistemics" of the local traditionalists, he feels they are "wrong" (187) and wonders, "What was the value of rituals that took you backwards towards an old humanity . . . rather than forwards, towards the new humanity of a new cosmology?" (323). Neither, though, does Laing uncritically accede to progress for mere progress's sake. Instead, Roko's aim over the course of the novel involves arbitrating an ethical stance from which to assess and access global transformations: ones that—in the wake of cloning, virtual reality, and genetic engineering at the turn of the twenty-first century—rattle the most jaded of imaginations even outside the estranging conceits of science fiction (SF); and *Big Bishop Roko* is SF, if conducted in a novel way. As with *Major Gentl*, which opens in the year 2020, *Big Bishop Roko* presents a world filled with "analogical tufts of lightyear phrasing" that Laing's protagonists seek to "iron[ize]" (6).

In *Big Bishop Roko*, Laing meditates on the dystopian and utopian possibilities of cyberspace and its effects on locations far removed from its production centers. By evacuating the unconscious realms of his characters into the "material" world of the novel, Laing creates what he calls an "internet of dreams" (1) wherein Western technology fuses with religion and African-coded fabulism to form what I refer to throughout this article as *jujutech*: a style of SF in which the fabulism of writers such as Amos Tutuola, Syl Cheney-Coker, and Ben Okri absorbs hyper-technological paradigms with the result that, as Brenda Cooper explains, "technology is magical and . . . magical inventions are scientific."<sup>6</sup> *Juju* has, over the years, taken on stereotypical or negative connotations, so its adoption in this context is not without its problems,

4 Francis Ngaboh-Smart, *Beyond Empire and Nation: Postnational Arguments in the Fiction of Nuruddin Farah and B. Koko Laing*. (Amsterdam: Rodopi, 2004), 144.

5 All in-text paginations come from Koko Laing, *Big Bishop Roko and the Altar Gangsters*.

6 Brenda Cooper, *Magical Realism in West African Fiction: Seeing with a Third Eye* (New York: Routledge, 1998), 205.

but Laing enthusiastically embraces the term, evoking the Tutuolan caprice but without the kind of commitment to established folklore that helped the latter construct his abstract journeys through the ghostly woods. Rather, throughout *Big Bishop Roko*, Laing juxtaposes Christian religious doctrine, the jargon of genetics and evolution, and elements West African mythical performance to orchestrate an admixture of otherwise disjointed systems of signification.

Francis Ngaboh-Smart suggests that Laing's experimentation reflects the ways in which the "tenets of [his] precursors"—the structuring metanarratives of origins, identity, nation, and so forth—have "become increasingly unsuitable for dealing with the problems of presenting the individual and society in the age of increasing technological transformation";<sup>7</sup> and, to be sure, as M. E. Kropp Dakubu has noted, Laing makes "very few concessions to the reader's previous literary experience."<sup>8</sup> Laing's solution to Paul Zeleza's query in *Science and Technology in Africa*, "Can Africa be similar without being assimilated?" involves embracing the very postmodernity that Zeleza quickly rejects.<sup>9</sup> Ideational metanarratives can, after all, delineate realms of defensive posture and therefore invite assault. In Laing's world, therefore, there is no time, no space, no nation, no origins, no identity, no history—at least none that register as familiar. It is "an atonal, pentatonic post-modern African [symphony]" (292), a text that becomes, like the Internet itself, a rhizomatic medium of displacement and interrelatedness, a free-floating network of intersections that repeat, recall, connect, and mediate the twenty-first-century crises Laing symbolically investigates throughout the novel. It is folklore represented not as symbol, nor as practice, but as simulacrum.

### The Word as World: A Wordman's Manifesto

Tell the truth but tell it slant.

—Emily Dickinson

*Big Bishop Roko* is Laing's only novel written in the first-person point-of-view, and it is also the first to provide an encoded autobiographical proviso within the introductory pages that effectively establishes the Wordman as Laing's textual alter ego. Laing accomplishes this in part by having the Wordman respond to criticism of Laing's previous work as well as by reiterating the artistic rationale behind his commitment to a progressively hermetic, experimental style:

There was something not quite right about the city of Adabraka, but they drove me out of it all the same. Was it some lively ghost town? Or dwarf town more like it, since they accused me of using stories with the help of dwarfs? It was like having adabracadabra forcibly put into the bishop's life. But the real reason was that it was thought my ancestry,

7 Ngaboh-Smart, *Beyond Empire and Nation*, 146.

8 M. E. Kropp Dakubu, "Representations Transformations in the Fiction of Kojo Laing: The 'Language of Authentic Being' Revisited." *Connotations* 8.3 (1998/1999): 358.

9 Paul Zeleza. *Science and Technology in Africa* (Trenton, NJ: Africa World Press, 2003), 2.

spanning two continents, was far too obstinate and odd to produce a normal wordman beloved of ancestral narratives, fables, and parables. I didn't fit into their one mouth. . . . I was accused of . . . refereeing football matches among the various prophets of the ages. . . . My reservations were proved right: as I had been thinking I inhabited the city of Adabraka, I discovered that I had really been living in a real city called Gold Coast city. . . . I therefore had to move into the real city—depending on your definition of the “real.” (4)

Laing opens by eliciting a crisis of exile, with the Wordman being “driven out” of Adabraka, an actual suburb of Accra. The narrator identifies accusations, densely coded in metaphor and allusion, that he was “using stories with the help of dwarves,” experimenting with magical forces in the construction of his literary worlds. (“Adabracadabra”—Adabraka + abracadabra, osmosing magic into the real—represents the kinds of portmanteau Laing frequently uses to navigate the permeable boundaries of diverse signifying systems.) The Wordman has been cast out because his history “span[s] two continents”; he is unapologetically transnational—like Laing himself—in his history, his art, and his cultural affinities. In his implication that this affirmative multi-nationalism prevents him from being a “normal wordman,” Laing suggests that the sustenance of “ancestral narratives” and “fables” in African literature, rekindling traditions of orature, may have fossilized into a kind of prescriptive performance, his version being unable to “fit into” Ghana’s delimiting “one mouth.” The message appears to be that incorporating the magical into the African novel succeeds only insofar as it acts as a kind of cultural repository, and, as Derek Wright indicates, Laing’s novels actively resist this as they “do not effect any form of closure around exclusivist and traditional models of African identity or notions of a pre-colonial African sensibility.”<sup>10</sup> Instead, from the start of *Big Bishop Roko*, the Wordman does not “consider what [he] was doing for or against literature anyway” (154); instead, he attempts to “vapourize” his protagonist’s “other qualities into the ante/anti-words, post-words, and the new words no-words of his story” (154, 224). Laing is invested more in a space of play that allows him to work in styles outside those commonly ascribed to African authors, styles that are “askew, askance, and aslant” (349).

Laing’s willingness to “look ridiculous” and remain “not conventionally powerful enough to be feared and not mad enough in the outer to be completely ignored” (342) appears in scenes akin to the “football matches” to which he alludes. Laing likely refers in this case to the extended soccer game between Pogo Forr and Torro that takes up a good portion of the middle of *Major Gentl* and that at least one published scholar—bemoaning a regrettable dearth of dignity in a writer tasked to be serious about serious issues—considers “tiresome” and “slapstick.”<sup>11</sup> Laing’s characters, especially in his last two books, loom larger than life. If he refers to them as “prophets of the ages,” this is

10 Derek Wright, “Returning Voyagers: The Ghanaian Novel in the Nineties,” *Journal of Modern African Studies* 34 (Spring 1996): 187.

11 Arlene Elder, *Narrative Shapeshifting: Myth, Humor, and History in the Fiction of Ben Okri, B. Koko Laing, and Yvonne Vera*. (Martlesham, Suffolk: James Curry, 2009), 88. It is not clear just who has decided that African authors are ethically mandated to remain serious on the subject matter of Africa’s postcolonial challenges, but we can presume that such a prescription comes from Arlene Elder herself. This form of “policing” native performance recalls Roger Berger’s rejection of similar complaints in the

in part because Laing's settings condense large populations into a discrete rogue's gallery of "spiritual supermen" (121) who stand in as representatives for far larger cohorts.<sup>12</sup>

Instead of the recognizable suburbs of Adabraka, or Achimota in *Major Gentl*, Laing abandons the last real-world locations in his novels and transitions into a fully virtual Africa. "I was trying to avoid the cartographic rats," the Wordman suggests, "which ate all sorts of maps by the city limits . . . they were trying to spoil my story by first eating the universe out of it" (1). Jean Baudrillard, following Borges, defines the beginnings of postmodern abstraction as the "generation by models of a real without origin or reality" where "[the] map . . . precedes the territory."<sup>13</sup> As the Wordman explains, in the context of locating Roko's old divinity school, "Anything that didn't exist in its extension state . . . didn't exist at all. No map, no college" (26). Rather than representing a space in the world, the Wordman himself maps the new boundaries of the "real," borders that are always under the threat of obsolescence even as he composes them.

The narrator's awareness of "Gold Coast city" begins when the bishop sneaks in during the night and "put[s] vicious contact lenses on [him] while [he] slept" (4). The Wordman sees "the original Gold Coast city" reflected through the lenses onto the "duplicate city of Adabraka." As Salman Rushdie does in *Shame*, Laing creates "two countries, real and fictional, occupying the same space."<sup>14</sup> What the Wordman sees through the jujutech lenses provided him by Roko is that Ghana threatens to return to artificial colonial-era assessments of difference as anachronistic distance, a gesture toward the hierarchies of global influence earlier folded into issues of naming: that is, the reduction of colonized regions to their commodity functions (the Gold Coast, the Ivory Coast, the Spice Islands, and so on).<sup>15</sup> Understanding this in the context of the evolutionary language that suffuses the novel, language that itself refers to

context of *Petals of Blood* and *Devil on the Cross* in "Ngugi's Comic Vision," *Research in African Literatures* 20.1 (1989): 1–25.

12 Although it cannot make up a significant portion of this treatment, there is a way to see Laing's characterization in his most recent novels as indirectly partaking in the para-SF genre of the superhero. Roko's specific access to jujutech and the iconic and hyperbolic nature of his adversaries (the Pope, Zala, the Archbishop, Bender, Solo, and so forth, each with their own access to alternative magics and technologies) call to mind the pantheon of (anti-) heroes that populate the worlds of publishing entities like DC or Marvel, beings whose powers are, like Roko's, also often the result of genetic mutation. In the same way that Gotham serves as an extension of Batman, or Superman embodies Metropolis, "Gold Coast city," the Vatican, and "Canterbury city" operate more as home hunting grounds for their super (naturally)-powered protectors than as actually existing spaces. This could very well be read as an ironic response to early representations of the political in African literature—like *A Man of the People* (1966) or *Season of Anomy* (1973)—which in turn, as Ngaboh-Smart argues, "may easily lead to a redemptive politics and the belief that somewhere there is a superhuman being that would free the masses from the gloom and apathy of politics" (92).

13 Jean Baudrillard, *Simulations and Simulacra*, trans. Sheila Faria Glaswer (Ann Arbor, MI: University of Michigan Ppress, 1994), 2.

14 Salman Rushdie, *Shame* (Toronto: Vintage Canada, 1983), 22.

15 The name Ghana, too, has its historical complications—arising to honor an empire located north and inland from the country that later adopted its name, chosen in part to resuture the newly independent country into a history outside the traumatic intercession of Europe, pointing to the fraught intersection of history and nomenclature. To be sure, throughout Laing's work, the theme of (re-)locating lost geographies plays an important role.

technological advancement in the global North, suggests that failing to ameliorate the impact of the global digital divide may effectively reinstitute stadial paradigms of development that figure contemporary Africans as “less evolved” than their Westernized counterparts.<sup>16</sup>

The perversion of the evolutionary narrative extends to the novel’s geography. In Einsteinian fashion, Laing collapses space and time—colonial, precolonial, and post-colonial—into a single, dynamically static “year.” The eternal 1986 that Bishop Roko initiates represents a “bloated sack-like ingestion of the other years before and after it . . . [having] the chronology of everything, including the vomit of compressed time” (43). It is a “barrier year,” a fixed moment transformed by Roko, “the first African saint of science” (155), into what is essentially a dimension of pure space. This is not to say that events do not continue to occur, with “smaller units of time” being “graciously allowed to pass up to the appropriate ticking boundaries” before being “recycled back into the closed system” (58). As opposed to a linear model, 1986 represents a temporal-gravitational black hole, sucking in other historical periods while simultaneously “stop[ping] all motion in the universe until further notice” (17). This helps to justify—to the extent that such justification is demanded or desired by Laing’s novel—the colonial-era naming of the city, the occasional appearances by figures like the biblical Noah (115), and the presence of fauna from the dinosaur period (65) alongside technological anachronisms like “cell phones” (13) and combat “lasers” (321).

The novel’s temporization in part satirizes the post-industrialized drama involved in the buildup to the millennial turnover, namely the fracas surrounding Y2K (Laing was composing *Big Bishop Roko* throughout 1998–1999<sup>17</sup>) in which the threat of a reset of the world’s clocks to the beginning of the twentieth century functioned as a kind of return of the repressed, staging technology as its own agent of chronological subversion. Because evolution (in this case the evolutionary genetic experiments undergone by the Pope and the Archbishop in the novel) requires geological time as a necessary condition of possibility, Roko seeks to frustrate it by establishing this zone of stasis. His fellow inhabitants of Gold Coast city, however, are not all pleased with this turn of events (or, as it were, turning away from events). ZigZag Zala, whose very name indicates frenetic energy as well as crooked intentions (200), hopes to ingratiate himself with the powers-that-be in the global North, aiming to join in the planned mutation. He forms a gang that attempts to undo Roko’s technological spell. Zala’s gang of “chronocidalists,” whom the Wordman calls “illegal time-breakers,” has “stretched the year to 1986.86 on a continuing basis” and harasses the bishop with “decimals of time.” These “renaissance brigands . . . would flash their decimal points for show and warn the bishop that they would soon be up to 1986.89, from where the time to drag him down was almost within reach” (56). Beyond the pun that serves as the conceit of these remarks (the time “within reach,” in this case, being the time when time begins again), the move aims to explain that even though Roko

16 Johannes Fabian, *Time and the Other: How Anthropology Makes Its Object* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1983), 16–31.

17 Kojo Laing, “This Is Not a Paper,” *Anglophonia-Caliban: French Journal of English Studies*, textes réunis par C. Fiouppou (Toulouse: Presses Universitaires du Mirail, 2000), 105.

has managed to slow the process, the mutations in the global North continue to unfold with the active assistance of those in Gold Coast city most likely to be detrimentally affected by them, thereby increasing the urgency of Roko's finding another, more effective countermeasure: in this case, the "God gene" that, through its power to manipulate life at the genetic level, can reverse the process set in motion by the Pope and the Archbishop.

The longer passage that opens this section, therefore, acts as a key to deciphering Laing's methodology and attitude toward the West African writer's location within postmodern culture. He wishes to be "free enough of cities to write his story yet to write it within a city" (5). Like Tutuola's "Bush of Ghosts," the virtual space of *Big Bishop Roko* functions as a space-clearing gesture, allowing his characters to navigate beyond and between dichotomies of orature and literature, of fabulism and empiricism, present and past, and present and future that frequently approach one another from agonistic extremes.

### Technology at the Intersection of Nature and Religion

Laing organizes his world almost entirely around representatives of Western religious sects but immerses them in folkloric language and settings and coopts them into a more localized mythic environment. As with his creolizing gestures surrounding language and (meta-) physics—his interest in the fusion and subtle interpenetration of separate spheres—Laing subsumes non-endogenous religion under the auspices of West African discourse. Near the end of each chapter, a verse from the Anglican Bible appears that, in more or less explicit fashion, maps the novel within a larger Christian eschatology (e.g., the first chapters cite Genesis and the closing chapters Revelation with an uneven movement in the middle that effectively represents the novel's disjointed chronology). But the marks that separate the verses from the Wordman's own text are Adinkra symbols. The one preceding the biblical verses is the *duafo* (𐤀𐤃𐤆), which represents abstract qualities of feminine beauty and goodness. The one that follows the verses is the *nsoromma* (\*), meaning a child of the sky (i.e., star), a symbol of guardianship, a representative of a father figure looking down from the heavens. In this way, the foreign register of the Christian Bible is muted, mediated, and contextualized within the regionalized cultural semiotics of the "Gold Coast" area, embraced like a child between the respective gendered poles of traditional inscription.

Rather than, like Tutuola, locating the fabulist dimension in the "bush" into which the Palm Wine Drinkard journeys, or, like Okri in *The Famished Road*, narrating an invasion of an expanding urban space by those same forest forces via the mediating link of the *abiku*, Laing subsumes the entire planet under the aegis of the techno-magical. The Pope has the ability to punch people through telephones and builds giant jujutech crucifixes, which he sends as threats to Roko, and the Archbishop of Canterbury, according to the Wordman, likely has juju of his own (117). Furthering comparisons across the metaphysical divide, Anthony Appiah suggests—following Horton, Kuhn, and Lévi-Strauss—that the "religious beliefs of traditional peoples constitute explanatory theories," that "traditional religious actions are reasonable attempts to pursue goals in the light of these beliefs—attempts, in other words, at



prediction and control of the world,” later adding that, “the explanatory function of religious beliefs in traditional Europe seems to me to be identical in its logic with that of scientific theory also.”<sup>18</sup> So, akin to the ways in which Laing postulates a “universal” language in his front matter, the so-called sacred spaces of the novel can be similarly seen as creolized, sewing together scientific and spiritual language in what Appiah might identify as an example of the “new, unpredictable fusions” of interlocking traditions likely to emerge from the many cultural intersections in twentieth-century, and by extension twenty-first-century, Africa.

Laing consistently “embodies” technology by “link[ing] biology with electronics (electrobiolgy)” (263). Roko’s experimental subjects are most often animals, through which the catalyst for technological superiority (the silver shark sperm and its God gene, say) is derived. If Roko’s helicopters are “carnivorous” (suggesting both ingestion and intent) (59), his animals are “nanotechnological” and “dermo-metallo” (22). In line with such relentless rejections of ontological and epistemological boundary building, Laing does not necessarily apply any ethical anathema to the integration of the human and the machine. One might even conclude, for Laing’s purposes, that to the extent to which many Africans—especially in urban areas—have already acceded to technologies like the cell phone and the Internet, such fusion is already a *fait accompli*. Roko, the “part-modern part-barbaric” bishop (185), acts through access to jujutech inventions—in part through his “research ponds” and his “research station for sharks” (7); in part through his access to metaphysical powers, which stem from his being a “gigantic juju bishop” (109); and in part, too, from his complicity in the very genetic evolution he attempts to quell in Canterbury. In order to stop time, Roko utilizes “many centres of chronology” including “his silver shark sperm mixed with electronics” (186). Hence, biological elements regularly serve as the containers for the mechanical inventions he creates, machines that often function in a manner far closer to African folklore than SF gadgetry. This muddling of the separating space that marks the binary difference of the biological and the mechanical reflects many of the complex debates current at the time of the novel’s writing (cloning, gene mapping, GMOs, virtual reality, nanotechnology) and informs the satire behind such novelties in the story as “alternate corn” (8), “digital biscuits” (24), and “mutant gari” (138): the now-routine interpenetration of the industrial and the agricultural, of the technological and the biological, between the real (“depending on your definition of the ‘real’”) and the simulation.

One such hybrid space in the human context is represented by Canon Creem, a functionary of the Archbishop of Canterbury who has been tasked with “find[ing] out for the Archbishop whether Bishop Yam had really achieved the final prize of ultimate mutability: the discovery of a single substance (seen or unseen) as a paradox to change on change, but which was the source of all change” (142): in other words, whether Roko had chemically created his “silver shark sperm” and isolated the “God gene,” and, thus, was in a position to compete with the Pope and the Archbishop in the sphere of “theotronics.” Creem is the first experimental product of the Archbishop’s proposed jujutech transformation; Canterbury has implanted a “silicon

18 Anthony Appiah, *In My Father’s House: Africa in the Philosophy of Culture* (Oxford: Oxford University Press), 120–21.

bio-chip” in his head so that he is simultaneously human as well as the harbinger of the “next phase of human evolution” (111). Creem, with his “experimental micro chip above his theological shoulder” (104) represents a controversial counterpoint to the heralding of the critical opportunities reflected by transhumanism and the figure of the cyborg as discussed alternatively by theorists such as Donna Haraway and (a later, somewhat less neoconservative) Francis Fukuyama. The “fraudulence” of the Archbishop’s forthcoming evolution lies in the fact that humans in this instance are genetically auto-evolving, what Fukuyama in *Our Posthuman Future*—citing geneticist Lee Silver—wonders could “be used to create a class of genetically superior people.” Silver “paints a scenario in which a class called the GenRich steadily improve the cognitive abilities of their children to the point that they break off from the rest of the human race to form a separate species,”<sup>19</sup> the precise scenario in Laing’s novel.

To wit, the “shady genetic deals” Roko has discovered in Canterbury would initiate “change beyond change itself, to go beyond the spiritual body” (52), leading members of the global North to become a cyborgian fusion of man and machine that threatens to push those so changed beyond the merely human, leaving religion and theological inquiry behind in a “pre-evolutionary” historical-cultural space in a way that would “make it impossible for certain groups of human beings to mate or even to communicate” (52, 55). The Wordman wonders, “Were the poor going to become biological slaves? . . . Who controlled the process? The ultimate goal of the rich was outer space, but shouldn’t we all have a say in the billions spent?” (160). The redundancy inherent in the formation of “biological slaves” (what other kinds *are there?*<sup>20</sup>) exposes the dangers involved in technology invading the boundaries of the human body without the inclusivity of universal consent. Africans, the Wordman realizes, face the threat of once again becoming functionally *reduced* to their biology, of becoming slaves precisely because they are merely “biological” as opposed to “networked”: what William Gibson in *Neuromancer* (1984) describes, in the context of a world in which the dimension of cyberspace represents the real staging ground for economic growth and productive human activity, as falling “into the prison of [one’s] own flesh.”<sup>21</sup> Canon Creem, seen from another, more celebratory, perspective, invites comparison to Haraway’s cyborg: a metaphor of “escap[ing] from earth, from the body, from the limits of *merely* biological evolution,” its perceived ability to make “man . . . his own invention” with “biological evolution fulfill[ing] itself in the evolution of technology.”<sup>22</sup> It is, in fact, precisely through this enfolding of the biological into the technological via the discursive frame of evolution that Laing structures the novel’s religious “cosmology”: he makes of such techno-genetically spiritual transformations something ultimately sacred.

19 Francis Fukuyama, *Our Posthuman Future: Consequences of the Biotechnology Revolution* (New York: Picador, 2002), 153–54.

20 One might, I presume, respond with “robot” or “android” slaves, the notion of machines as slaves informing such SF classics as Dick’s *Do Androids Dream of Electric Sheep* (1968) and Asimov’s *I, Robot* (1950). But such an example begs the question: in order for the concept of slavery to truly apply, the cyborgs in question must have self-reflection and consciousness. They stand in for, rather than supplant, the original labor-bearing body of the African slave.

21 William Gibson, *Neuromancer* (New York: Ace, 1984), 6.

22 Donna Haraway, *The Haraway Reader* (New York: Routledge, 2004), 299.

Early in the novel, the Wordman finds himself in a flight of fancy wherein he begins to see a vision that, like most dreams in Laing's Gold Coast city, eventually erupts into the novel's "reality"<sup>23</sup>:

The first thing I saw up there was a stone camera with salt. You could lick the lens and it would still give you a clear salty picture. . . . The film was the heat from your hands . . . this electronic stone-age oceanographic lens-piece was a paracamera that claimed it once took pictures of the origin of the universe and the birth of the first spiritual energy of the world . . . it often, indeed usually, elongated itself and looked more like an unbearably sad old tablet than a cool and haughty camera. Change on change and mutability took so many forms and was most apparent to human beings in celestial visions. . . . But we all shrank from it as it expanded into the Jesus tablet. (46–47)

In line with the competing themes of both apocalypse and evolution that frame the "Canterbury War," there is a developmental process in this passage beginning with a stone camera—its "lithic" construction indicating an outdated, Stone Age technology—that moves through allusions to the Hubble telescope (a camera that "[takes] pictures of the origin of the universe"), and eventually becomes the "Jesus tablet," a gateway for the birth of "the Deputy Jesus": alternatively, a fourth prong of the Holy Trinity marking the prophesied Second Coming; Jesus's older—more African—brother; or the Jesus tablet itself, with the Deputy Jesus representing a kind of holographic projection from this electric stone palimpsest.

Ultimately, the "Jesus Tablet" serves as a symbol for the computer and its related technologies. The Wordman describes the Deputy Jesus as having "wise glass installed in [his] forehead" (61) in which words materialize. The Wordman later discovers that "the Deputy Jesus was a charged robot (I discovered this when he bared his shoulders to pray and I saw the wires and the metal there)" (68). Elsewhere, he identifies the Deputy Jesus' "robot-like legs" (61). Juxtaposing the signs of the Rapture with digital space, the Wordman describes how:

The Jesus tablet served as a cosmological amplifier for the city: it insisted on mocking the scientists that there were different types and functions of light in different parts of the cosmos; and that it would even be possible to measure a type of ecumenical light that was both marginally faster and marginally slower than the speed of current light. It substantiated this apparently silly point by measuring different difficulties of light in different minifiers of light (penetrable black holes as it were). And the stone papyrus itself was turning into a blackboard with holes in it through which serious equations were lost and astronomy lost its two 'O's like zero falling into nothing. (91)

Thinking of the Deputy Jesus's arrival in apocalyptic terms—as an unveiling, as the liminal point between one history and another, as the moment when "there should be

23 Consider the following passage, which incorporates the realms of the subconscious into the empirical space of the laboratory: "Roko believed that after his discovery of the God-gene in a dream (a well-researched dream) the scientists in Canterbury were now saying it didn't exist. Fine, dreams didn't exist either, in the same narrow emotional terms of doing science" (44).

time no longer” (KJV Rev. 10:6)<sup>24</sup>—then the computer in this instance takes on the role of the savior and the digital space it opens, the New Jerusalem. This is, in its own way, paradoxical because the idea of revelatory unveiling is to present the real beyond the illusion while the function of digitality, if we follow Baudrillard, is to reduce the real to illusion. The unveiling owed to modernity in this instance is, then, its own revealing under the auspices of the third-order simulacrum of “indeterminacy and the code,” wherein “[d]igitality” is the “metaphysical principle” and “DNA its prophet.”<sup>25</sup> The Deputy Jesus functions as an intervention between the competing historical narratives that separate evolution and the creationism of a certain Christian eschatological literalism. Here, the return of Jesus is *essential* to the evolutionary process, and vice-versa: Laing submits a technological invention, a camera—coincidentally a means by which one freezes time (in the figure of the photograph)—to the transitions proper to biological evolution that then culminate in messianic return.

The main thrust both of the arrival of the Deputy Jesus and the attention to technological change comes down to the novel’s consideration of the cyborgian potential of such new technologies to which Laing wishes to attach, in line with his concept of “theotronics,” a spiritual/ethical dimension. In this sense, the religious eschatology of the thousand-year reign of Christ (Rev. 20:3–8)<sup>26</sup> and the technological *telos* of Western technological progress coopt each other—the secularization of the sacred prophecy meets the sanctification of secular humanism. As Derrida argues in *Spectres of Marx*, the secular treatment of the neoliberal market has always itself been a form of eschatology,<sup>27</sup> but by framing the global South’s savior as himself (and occasionally herself)<sup>28</sup> a robot, Laing performs the inverse as well; he computerizes the Second Coming.

### The Internet Gene

Although the central themes in *Big Bishop Roko* surround genetics and evolution, Laing continuously presents these concepts as metaphoric replacements despite the Wordman’s insistence that there is “no symbolism involved whatsoever” in Roko’s story (1). The novel does occasionally treat evolution in its biological context, although given the vagaries of Gold Coast city’s temporality and its aforementioned conflation of the fields of myth, religion, and science, the “small scattering of natural mutation” there occurs outside the kind of cosmic time that disseminates genetic change across tens of millennia, simultaneously escaping to discursive theaters outside empiricism. The Wordman can see the physical evidence of genetic transformations occurring all around him, such as the Gold Coasters’ “longer eyelashes,” but immediately after, he

24 Consider this in terms of Roko’s 1986; the novel literally initiates an end-of-days moment that, at the novel’s close, breaks open into what might be considered a new historical paradigm (339).

25 Jean Baudrillard, *Simulations*, trans. Paul Foss, Paul Patton, and Philip Beitchman (New York: Semiotext[e], 1983): 103.

26 “And I saw thrones, and they sat upon them, and judgment was given unto them . . . and they lived and reigned with Christ a thousand years. But the rest of the dead lived not again until the thousand years were finished. This is the first resurrection” (KJV Rev. 20:3–4).

27 Jacques Derrida. *Spectres of Marx* (New York: Routledge, 2006): 80ff.

28 The Deputy Jesus frequently shifts between races, ethnicities, and genders, as for example on pages 49, 61, 148, and 189.

notices also that their “mouths . . . were ecclesiastically bigger than they first were,” once more re-folding the ecological back into the ecumenical (203). The new “evolution” proposed by the Archbishop of Canterbury represents the “logical” application of technological advances in genetics. The Wordman recounts:

These small changes of living and unliving things were, of course, part of the big evolutions that certainly had a mother and a father. The unseen hand could either be explained in bold stratifications (bold was the problem), or in triumphant metaphysics (watch the triumph). An even bigger problem was that cheats like the bishop, sebi, and myself wanted all alternatives; and in fact the minds of most people appropriated the designer option. (55)

The Wordman adopts the language of evolutionary theory, large variations being composed of incremental adaptations, alongside economics, the “unseen hand” of the market guiding the development of human beings, juxtaposing the natural dimension inherent in the discussion of evolution with the artificiality of the global economic system and suggesting the extent to which both discourses have been historically adopted in order to defend the political influence of the global North (science versus traditional belief; developed versus developing economies). The representatives of the global South want other possibilities, although the range of such possibilities is replaced in the popular consciousness here with a distinctly consumerist vision: the term *designer* recalling branding rather than actual development, evacuating innovation into the empty signifier of the logo. Distinct from this, however, is the result of having the citizens of the global North *embody* what were formerly artificially conceived differences. Rather than a culture of racism that anxiously tells itself “they are different from us,” the global South becomes the repository for a suddenly antiquated, primitive mode of being: that of being human.

In spite of the danger posed by this “artificial” evolution, Laing is no Luddite denouncing the rise of new technologies. On the contrary, the Wordman reports:

I got the shock of my life when I was told by the bishop that he himself had mutated naturally already and was now doing two things: trying to stop an unnatural mutation and trying to guide all humanity into a single theologically justiciable evolution. Different levels of mutation would create a biological apartheid. (227)

The relevance of the term *unnatural* in this context is only that the technological innovation is exclusionary. Roko rejects twinning the evolutionary and economic discourses at stake in Archbishop Beal’s desired transformation and instead locates such evolution at the intersection of social justice and liberation theology. The “natural,” whether it is the naturally occurring evolutionary process or the scientific examination of the world, is placed in opposition to the “artificial,” represented by economic and geographical segregation. Roko himself seeks to tender a deal whereby all can mutate together, but Archbishop Beal’s counteroffer is that “the least developed areas of the world (leastus developus) would be the last to be allowed to jump the fraudulent mutation bar” (305), the Latinate parenthetical subsuming enforced inequality under the “neutral” aegis of zoological determinism.

On its surface, this element of the plot rehearses the “natural is good”/“artificial is bad” binary that haunts many early postcolonial approaches to traditionalism, but complicating matters is the intervention of a jujutech deity that is in part an artifact of technological innovation. The Wordman struggles with the slippage between the natural, artificial, and theological, asking, “But how did you distinguish between mutation/evolution and divine trickery from the likes of the Deputy Jesus of the Jesus papyrus?” (203). Divinity is here inscribed with a trickster quality that straddles the natural and the technological, inserting itself like a rogue mutation or a Trojan horse into both genetic *and* computer codes. The evolutionary construct previously explored reaches its apex when the Wordman realizes “Roko Yam’s secret: he had acquired ultimate mutability through the genetic manipulation of the single-substance Jesus tablet. . . . I hadn’t guessed that he was secretly ingesting this single material with its infinite papyrus transformations” (320). The tablet, simultaneously divine and technological, single and infinite, becomes the means by which Roko is able to challenge Canterbury, and it is only by consuming the computer—internalizing it, absorbing it (“Take, eat; this is my body.” Bible KJV Matt. 26:26)—that Roko “evolves” to the point where he can compete with, and undermine, the exclusionary plans of his Western antagonists. Genetics and electronics become code for identical processes in the world of *Big Bishop Roko*, and both of them, as we shall see, refer to something else.

In addition to pausing historical progress, Roko draws global ire by implanting his own name into all of the religious texts in the world. In the Wordman’s description:

[Roko] gently faxed his name into all the Bibles and holy books of the world. This was a stupendous heretical achievement (of love), forcing millions of altarmen and shrinemen and women all over the world to, first, trace the source of this miraculously inserted name (Roko in the holy books, in the printing appropriate to each language) and second, to try desperately but without success to expunge it from these books. Roko appeared in all colours before and after the verbs, after pronouns, before and after articles and adjectives and alone in exclamations and infinitives. Apart from God, the trinity, and other holy prophets, you had never met a heavier word. (20)

Sites like Wikipedia already mark the first time in history that encyclopedias may be altered remotely—theoretically democratizing knowledge but, importantly, only for those with access to the Web. Due to uneven access, however, the global North retains its standing as the arbiter of available knowledge. Roko’s jujutech faxing resists this by reinserting an African name in advance of its erasure from history, refusing attempts like those preceding the events of *Major Gentl* to render African history back into the aporia of the Western gaze. Humorously, Roko’s act of reinscription takes place via fax, an already-antiquated piece of technology by the time of publication, so the act rests anxiously at the ambivalent divide between the technophilic and the technophobic.

Such ambivalence can be accounted for by the results of artificial evolution, wherein “The new mutated being under evolutionary manipulation abroad was to be an amoral self-interested thing; anything personal to it . . . would immediately become universal” (119). In these pejorative terms, Laing anticipates the effects of social media

culture, increasingly shown to intensify narcissism,<sup>29</sup> through the personal being mistaken for the universal, the characteristic of understanding the world only as one's mirror with anything that does not conform to this assumption relegated to the status of less-than-human. In addition to this, the Archbishop's mutation after undergoing the transformation near the novel's end echoes the nervous impatience that constitutes the relationship between the eye and the digital screen, leaving him "a rather truncated human being, his eyes never focusing on one thing for long, his inner almost gone, any little spectacle taken for profundity" (343). On the flip side of the world-as-mirror is the complete evacuation of any individual content in the context of the networked world. The Archbishop's mutation reflects an inability to concentrate indicating an engagement only at the level of the meme.

Laing contrasts the genetically networked body of the Archbishop with the African body, which, with the introduction of the artificial mutation in the global North having begun, threatens to become *only* a body. The Wordman remarks:

[I]f the mutation must continue (and it mustn't) then keep the thousands of thinkers in the poor tropical areas whole and still ethically functioning, and with real power equal to those mutating overseas, so that at least for a millennium or two there would be a reference point for human value; rather than large biologically elitist journeys of the cosmically mad, floating through the universe with the terrible narrowness that was ludicrously evident even through the infinite information base linked to a narcissistic self-referential power. (259)

The function of the networked "narcissistic" body with its connection to an "infinite information base" is here correlated to a Borg-esque shared consciousness by which practical morality and ethics are annihilated through total shared access to the same information. Rather than the democratizing role ascribed to the Internet by the early champions of cyberspace, Laing emphasizes the homogenizing and exclusive aspects of a "global village" in a cyberspace that still excludes most of the planet's population.

### **"Let Us All Mutate Together": A Call for Technohumanism**

Early in the novel, the Wordman registers a "massive nostalgia" for the seemingly obsolete detritus of a former agro-industrial paradigm. He thinks longingly of all the "dead machines. Disused harvesters, tractors half-buried, half-eaten in anthills, weeds over rusty escalators, motors of an old lift surrounded by dog shit, bent double-cutting capels and former famine aluminum bowls" (16). He outlines his concern that a sudden focus on the information technologies of the twenty-first century functionally erodes former developmental impulses involved with agrarian revitalization on the continent. The struggle after Web space must, by necessity, draw attention away from the unfinished (and perhaps, given the motives of global capital, structurally unfinishable) task of Africa's "catching up," and as such, reemphasizes the existing

29 Tracy Packiam Alloway, "Selfies, Facebook and Narcissism: What's the Link?" *Psychology Today Online*, May 11, 2014. Web. Accessed July 10, 2014.

global division of labor that largely shunts so-called peripheral economies to the lower rungs of the productivity ladder.

By effacing the political gravity of geographic centers and relocating agential power to a cadre of spiritualized totems, Laing attempts to speak back to a trope (evolution, globalization, religious evangelism, cybernetics, and information technology) rather than to an institution (the IMF, the World Bank, the WTO, etc.). When Roko tells Beal, following the end of the Renaissance War, “Let all human beings mutate together, let us be genetically equitable,” he pleads for a leveling of the speed of cultural transition, identifying disproportional increases in digitalization as leading to a reinscription of historical differentials of access and power—not because there is an evil genius somewhere scheming for such an outcome, but because “mutation,” as Roko declares, “wait[s] for no one” (215). In the end, Laing accedes to the postmodern inevitability of the simulacrum: if the world has been transformed into Disney, he appears to argue, at least grant us all the right to buy a ticket; if the Deity has been reduced to robotics and panes of “wise glass,” let us all, like Roko, partake of the Eucharist and taste of its body.

I wish to close on the subject of publication given the nature of Big Bishop Roko’s medium of distribution. Although his three earlier novels were published through Heinemann’s African Writers Series, Laing published his fourth novel locally, at Woeli Publishing Services in Accra, and it is available abroad mostly on a pay-to-print basis through digital booksellers such as Amazon, e-Bay, and AbeBooks. It remains unclear whether this arose from necessity or, like Ayi Kwei Armah with Per Ankh Press, from a desire to circumnavigate international publishers’ desire to temper African authors’ styles so as to make them palatable for “global,” that is, Western, audiences. Either way, Laing’s choice of the digital medium suggests form following function. If Bishop Roko’s war aims to incorporate Africans into the globally interconnected environment of cyberspace, Laing’s choice to market his text within that same setting is compelling. It is in just such a way that we can read Bishop Roko Yam’s “inveterate faxing” as a parallel example of Africa, and specifically African SF, putting its mark upon the online world of text, forcing an African presence into systems designed, by virtue of their strategies of access, to exclude it. That sub-Saharan Africa still remained near the bottom of Internet diffusion rates at the time of the novel’s publication—around 2.7 per 100 people in Ghana in 2006<sup>30</sup>—makes the concept of the digital divide one that had, and still has, practical value as a rallying point for global justice under the aegis of right to access, one that motivates the resistance of Laing’s protagonists to the novel’s own “change beyond change” that serves as its allegorical double.

30 World Bank, “Internet Users per 100 People: Ghana 2006.” *Worldbank.org*. N.d. Web. Accessed March 3, 2016; Linnet Taylor, “Inside the Black Box of Internet Adoption,” *Policy & Internet*, April 19, 2015. Web. Accessed June 19, 2015, doi: 10.1002/poi3.87 (2015); Menzie Chinn and Robert Farlie, “The Determinants of the Global Digital Divide: A Cross-Country Analysis of Computer and Internet Penetration,” Economic Growth Center Discussion Paper No. 881 (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2004); Christian Fuchs and Eva Horak, “Africa and the Digital Divide,” *Telematics and Informatics* 25 (2008): 99–116; Banji Oyeleran-Oyeyinka and Kaushalesh Lal, “Internet Diffusion in Sub-Saharan Africa: A Cross-Country Analysis,” *Telecommunications Policy* 29 (2005): 507–27.