

The Aesthetics of Proximity and the Common Good

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Measuring Proximity

American astrophysicist Adam Frank states that we often speak of saving the earth as if it were a little bunny. Our earth does not need our saving. “What Earth’s history does make clear, however, is that if we don’t take the right kind of action soon the biosphere will simply move on without us, creating new versions of itself in the changing climate we’re generating now.”¹ The question, therefore, should not be whether we can save the earth but whether we can save ourselves. The earth can be just fine without humans. Can humans be just fine with one another? In *Naturalizing Africa: Ecological Violence, Agency, and Postcolonial Resistance in African Literature*, Cajetan Iheka poses the same questions in relation to Africa and its environment and suggests that a radical readjustment of the way humans relate to nonhumans can help us save ourselves.

A particular incident in Chinua Achebe’s novel *Arrow of God* seems to capture one of the central impulses in *Naturalizing Africa*. The story is set in Umuaro, and it embodies a pivotal moment of clash between Christianity and the traditional religion. One of the traditional religion’s totems is the royal python, which is revered by the community. Driven by zealotry for the new religion, Oduche, the youngest son of Ezeulu, imprisons the python in a box in the hope that it will suffocate and die.² As Iheka observes, “The conflict surrounding the snake’s ‘arrest’ takes its significance from the indigenous view of the snake as a relational Other.”³ No doubt, Achebe’s fictional depiction of evidently several forms of African people’s perception of the nonhuman as relational Others shaped Iheka’s thinking about the relationship between humans and nonhumans regarding the environment—a thinking that would find expression in his notion of the aesthetics of proximity as a model of interpretation of African fictional narratives. He argues that many African societies “are drawn to an ethics of the earth. In this mode of seeing, certain nonhuman forms, including animals, plants, and so on, are considered viable life forms worthy of respect.”⁴ The ethics of the earth and its implicit perception of reality also covers the unseen, the spirits. Iheka endorses Olakunle George’s reading of D. O. Fagunwa’s *Forest of a Thousand Daemons*, which extends agency to the spirit world. Iheka’s reading of Amos Tutuola’s *The Palm-Wine Drinkard* and *My Life in the Bush of Ghosts* and Ben Okri’s *The Famished Road*—all located in the magic realist genre—“highlights multispecies

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1 Adam Frank, “Earth Will Survive. We May Not.” <https://www.nytimes.com/2018/06/12/opinion/earth-will-survive-we-may-not.html>.

2 Chinua Achebe, *Arrow of God* (London: Heinemann, 1964).

3 Cajetan Iheka, *Naturalizing Africa: Ecological Violence, Agency, and Postcolonial Resistance in African Literature* (Cambridge and New York: Cambridge University Press, 2018), 7–8.

4 Iheka, *Naturalizing Africa*, 7.

presence, interspecies relation, distributed agency, and indistinction between humans and other life forms” as forms of proximity.⁵ The concept of proximity allows us to explore various forms of ethical consideration that focus on common attributes between humans and nonhumans, “including suffering and mortality.”⁶

The notion of aesthetics of proximity is a very useful addition to the vocabulary of African literary discourse, and it has far-reaching implications in our understanding of the relationship between humans and nonhumans on the one hand and between humans among themselves on the other. Perhaps a few questions about the first (humans–nonhumans) could help strengthen our grasp of the important issues that Iheka raises about agency regarding the environment. Raising these questions could also help us gain a better appreciation of the ethical implication of the second (humans–humans). What exactly is the cosmological justification for Africans to regard certain animals as relational Others? Given that in every group in which a nonhuman is considered a relational Other—usually a particular animal, bird, tree, and so on—why are other animals that occupy the same ecosystem considered fair game? To be sure, for some communities, such totems are markers of clan identities, or just deities.⁷ Speaking of the Igbo ethnicity from which the *Arrow of God* example is drawn, one wonders why they would consider animals as relational Others when they treat people of the lower caste as untouchables, or *Osu* (in *Things Fall Apart* and *No Longer at Ease*). Or could it be that they hold the animals (and perhaps ghosts) in respectful awe more than they do their fellow humans? This therefore raises a question about Iheka’s theoretical intervention. Can we derive a reliable theory of interpreting narratives about the human condition based on humans’ relation to nonhumans when the relation between humans is fraught with ethical contradictions?⁸

To the degree that one cannot take the spirits or animals to task for the pollution or care of the environment, speaking of them in relation to agency seems problematic to me. But whereas I am hesitant to attribute agency to nonhumans—given my strict association of agency to concepts such as autonomy, free will, responsibility, guilt, and atonement—I duly recognize Iheka’s profound ethical concern, which hinges on the notion that relating to nonhumans in a symbiotic rather than purely instrumentalist manner not only decenters humans but also improves humans’ relation to self. If Iheka’s emphasis on nonhumans at times sounds like anti-enlightenment Romanticism—as Steven Pinker might put it regarding the age of romanticism in Europe⁹—perhaps it is only because he is robustly against the thick conception of anthropocentrism and its attendant instrumental rationality.¹⁰ The bigger picture, though, is Iheka’s attention to agency conceived in ethical terms, the thrust of which can be captured in these questions: What is the Africa space to Africans? What is the African

5 Iheka, *Naturalizing Africa*, 17–18.

6 Iheka, *Naturalizing Africa*, 23.

7 See John Mbiti, *African Religions and Philosophy* (Oxford: Heinemann International, 1990 [1969]), 102.

8 Nisbert Taringa, “How Environmental Is African Traditional Religion?” *Exchange* 35.2 (2006): 191–214. Taringa argues that the ecological attitude of traditional African religion is based more on fear or respect of ancestral spirits than on respect for nature itself.

9 Steven Pinker, *Enlightenment Now: The Case for Reason, Science, Humanism, and Progress* (New York: Viking, 2018).

10 Iheka, *Naturalizing Africa*, 2, 13.

people's attitude to the entities with which they share the same space and "suffering and mortality"?¹¹ How do they take care of their lives and one another?

Two important strands of thought have inspired my response, as I hope to clarify further: First, Iheka's insightful critique of the Euro-modernist colonialist mind-set that shaped especially the Western relation to Africa, and second, a suggestion of the opposite of this mind-set in African narratives that extol the symbiosis of the human and nonhuman. He therefore sets up a dialectic that can be fruitfully mined for a proactive engagement with the African postcolonial condition. In the remaining part of this essay, I map out the topography of responsibility and care that is implicit in Iheka's dialectic and notion of proximity; I do so within the postcolonial contexts of how others relate to Africa and how Africans should relate to themselves.

Instrumental Rationality and the Common Good

In the colonial/neoliberal construction of Africa, Iheka mentions Lawrence Summers, the chief economist of the World Bank, whose leaked World Bank memo is an example of the instrumentalist enlightenment mode of being that Iheka critiques.¹² In 1991, Summers issued a memo in which he proposes that the industrialized nations should send their dirty industries to the less developed nations. He produces justifications based on pure reason, or the so-called rational choice argument. For him, the industrialized nations have too much pollution, whereas the less developed nations have too little of it; the West has a high life expectancy, whereas the less developed nations have a low life expectancy. Because the Third World has a low life expectancy, sending them dirty industries would not make much (economic) difference, but it would cost much to care for lives in the West, given their high life expectancy. Summers states, " 'Dirty' Industries: Just between you and me, shouldn't the World Bank be encouraging MORE migration of the dirty industries to the LDCs [Less Developed Countries]?"¹³

Summers's memo is one case of the West having little regard for the well-being of the people in developing countries, their erstwhile colonies. José Lutzenberger, the then Brazilian minister of the environment, provided a prompt retort:

Your reasoning is perfectly logical but totally insane . . . Your thoughts [provide] a concrete example of the unbelievable alienation, reductionist thinking, social ruthlessness and the arrogant ignorance of many conventional "economists" concerning the nature of the world we live in.¹⁴

I am drawn to two important issues in Lutzenberger's response, which represents the gem of postcolonial critique of Western imperialism. One is that Summers's thinking is perfectly logical; the other is that it is reductionist and socially ruthless and indicates arrogance toward the nature of the world we live in. Anything can be rational or

11 Iheka, *Naturalizing Africa*, 23.

12 Iheka, *Naturalizing Africa*, 13.

13 The Whirled Bank Group, <http://www.whirledbank.org/ourwords/summers.html> (accessed February 2, 2018).

14 The Whirled Bank Group.

logical depending on the premise—that is, on how one frames the argument. For instance, it is logical that if a country wants to save the West from environmental hazards while ensuring that its industries still produce the much-needed goods, one way to do so is to send its industries to the less developed nations in the name of globalization. Is a concept that is built on perfectly logical reasoning therefore acceptable, even if it is deeply immoral and detrimental to the lives of others? Indeed, most of the world's crimes against humanity have been based on some form of logical reasoning: slavery, colonialism, genocide, the Holocaust. It was also logical, from the Nazi perspective, that in order for Germans to enrich themselves, they had to rob Jews of their possessions and kill millions of them. To understand this aspect of instrumentalist thinking is to grasp Iheka's skepticism about the enlightenment anthropocentrism. The other part of Lutzenberger's response draws attention to the moral framework that necessarily differentiates humans from animals. It is the notion of the common good, without which life would be nasty and poor.

Lawrence Summers displays a particular case of Kurtz syndrome, a trait associated with the supposed superiority of the White colonizers in Africa. "Kurtz syndrome is an anthropological view of how the civilizer becomes the savage that he despises."¹⁵ It is also a condition in which one's moral turpitude rises to the degree of one's power or authority. In *Heart of Darkness*, Marlow sails up the Congo River to meet Mr. Kurtz, an idealistic colonizer who has gone inland in search of ivory. Mr. Kurtz is no longer in control of his vaunted superior moral compass when he begins to rape and kill people and pillage at will. He loses touch with civilization; he loses his mind. Thus, the White man in the Congo is surprised at how easy it is to control a vast number of people. He is a god to them; consequently, he has no regard for them. They become dispensable—hence, the infamous saying "Exterminate all the brutes."¹⁶ Summers's colonialist mind-set is dangerous not only because it might produce death somewhere but because it issues from a particular mind-set that sees others as objects and dispensable.

Reversing the Colonialist Mind-set: In Search of the Common Good

The notion of the common good traces back to Aristotle's conception of the city-state. "Every state is a community of some kind, and every community is established with a view of some good."¹⁷ Dorothea Frede argues that the core of Aristotle's ethics is political, and "ethics is part of politics because the life of an entire community is a higher aim than the life of an individual, has a deeper background."¹⁸ The reverse is also the case. Donald Morrison suggests that the common good can best be understood as a common goal. In other words, "the common good is common benefit, that

15 Richard C. S. Trahair, *From Aristotelian to Reaganomics: A Dictionary of Eponyms with Biographies in the Social Sciences* (Westport, CT: Greenwood, 1994), 343.

16 Sven Lindqvist, "Exterminate All the Brutes": *One Man's Odyssey into the Heart of Darkness and the Origins of European Genocide* (New York: The New Press, 1997).

17 Aristotle, *Politics and Poetics*, trans. Benjamin Jowett and S. H. Butcher, book 1, chapters 1, 5 (New York: The Heritage Press, 1964).

18 Dorothea Frede, "The Political Character of Aristotle's Ethics," in *The Cambridge Companion to Aristotle's Politics*, eds. Marguerite Deslauriers and Pierre Destrée (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013), 14–15.

is common to the members as beneficiaries, and not only, or not primarily, as agents.”¹⁹ Morrison differentiates between common good and public good. Public good as understood by economists “is a good that is equally available to others, and no one can be effectively excluded from use of the good.”²⁰ But that is not common good, understood in the Aristotelian sense. Public good is essential for the pursuit of the common good, which is moral, universal, and permanent. It is in this light that we interpret the environment as a public good and therefore integral to the common good.

Thinking in the Aristotelian tradition of the common good, Iheka expresses concern that “African environments are porous as well as malleable to the toxicity introduced by Western agents and their African collaborators.”²¹ But rather than indulge in blame, he is concerned with what ought to be done. He is “drawn to the seductive charm of the idea of a rehabilitated human.”²² I infer that a rehabilitated human is one who does not outsource his or her agency for the environment. Rather, that person takes his or her responsibility toward the environment seriously in the spirit of the common good. This comes about when that individual opens up “to both human and nonhuman Others [as] an ethical obligation.”²³

I now attempt to articulate the ethical obligation implicit in Iheka’s observation, and I do so by analyzing Wangari Maathai’s meditation on the environment. Given that Iheka has discussed Maathai’s memoir,²⁴ I focus rather on her book of essays, *The Challenge for Africa*, restricting my discussion to what I identify as her cultural philosophy of environment, specifically the interconnection between moral responsibility and political consciousness—much in the tradition of Nelson Mandela and Desmond Tutu.²⁵ In her Nobel Peace Prize address, she states the following:

In the course of history, there comes a time when humanity is called to shift to a new level of consciousness, to reach a higher moral ground. A time when we have to shed our fear and give hope to each other. This time is now . . . there can be no development without sustainable management of the environment in a democratic and peaceful space.²⁶

Maathai speaks of the moral responsibility to think in terms of the common good and which urges the present generation to leave a clean environment behind for the benefit of the coming generations.²⁷

19 Donald Morrison, “The Common Good,” in *The Cambridge Companion to Aristotle’s Politics* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013), 177–78.

20 Donald Morrison, “The Common Good,” 182.

21 Iheka, *Naturalizing Africa*, 159.

22 Iheka, *Naturalizing Africa*, 161.

23 Iheka, *Naturalizing Africa*, 161.

24 Wangari Maathai, *Unbowed: A Memoir* (New York: Anchor Books, 2007).

25 For more on Mandela and Tutu in this regard, see Chielozona Eze, *Race, Decolonization, and Global Citizenship in South Africa* (Rochester, NY: University of Rochester Press, 2018).

26 Wangari Maathai, “Nobel Peace Prize Speech: Nobel Lecture, Oslo, 10 December 2004,” *Meridians: Feminism, Race, Transnationalism* 6.1 (2005): 200.

27 Maathai, “Nobel Peace Prize Speech,” 201.

I locate Maathai's moral capital and importance in African cosmology in her agentic conception of culture. In *The Challenge for Africa*, she makes a strong case for the importance of cultural renaissance for Africa's realignment with its environment. It is important to state from the outset that the phrase *cultural renaissance* has been abused in African discourse. It has been variously appropriated by politicians and ideologues to pursue their conservative political agenda. As Maathai observes, "In many communities in Africa and other regions, women are discriminated against, exploited, and controlled through prevailing cultures, which demand that they act a certain way."²⁸ The rediscovery of Africa's cultural values is far from this conception of culture. Indeed, in Maathai's uses, culture is a liberating force that empowers people to care about themselves, others, and the environment:

Culture gives a people self-identity and character. It allows them to be in harmony with their physical and spiritual environment, to form the basis for their sense of self-fulfillment and personal peace. It enhances their ability to guide themselves, make their own decisions, and protect their interests . . . without culture, a community loses self-awareness and guidance, and grows weak and vulnerable.²⁹

In the tradition of virtue ethics, I interpret the operative words and phrases such as *harmony with the environment* and *character* as traits necessary for a moral attitude toward the environment. I thus reframe the tenor of her argument to imply that regaining pride in one's culture forms the basis of the protection of one's environment. Ideally, one protects what one appreciates. Therefore, culture, which gives us the means to relate to our world, becomes a legitimating force for the imperative to protect and preserve.

In Maathai's understanding, culture enables the individual to be in harmony with the environment. For her, then, culture means establishing an affinity with the world that one inhabits. To be sure, her notion of culture differs from the nineteenth-century conception influenced by Johann Gottfried Herder (1744–1803), one that saw a people's culture as essentially defining those people as autochthonous in their space. The secret of Maathai's notion lies in the Latin root word *cultura*, meaning "to cultivate." Above all, we cultivate character, our relationship to the Other, which the environment most symbolizes.

Another operative word in Maathai's notion of culture is *self-respect*; it is the basis for integrity and moral consciousness. It is, as the philosopher Harry Frankfurt argues, taking oneself seriously, which implies taking others seriously.³⁰ Taking oneself seriously inevitably leads to taking the environment seriously. We thus begin to get a sense of Maathai's planetary thinking, one in which Iheka's notion of the rehabilitated human can best be understood. The concern for our environment leads to the concern for our fellow humans and finally to the well-being of all.

28 Wangari Maathai, *The Challenge for Africa* (New York: Pantheon, 2009), 164.

29 Maathai, *The Challenge for Africa*, 160–61.

30 Harry Frankfurt, *Taking Ourselves Seriously and Getting It Right* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2006).

Maathai grew up in a cashless economy that prized the exchange of livestock as payment for services. She argues that the cash economy is the basis of ruthless profiteering. Even at that, people never reach any level of satisfaction because the love of having increases by having. Unlike in the preindustrial African culture in which she grew up, which did not depend on material goods—even though the culture was not against having as such—value was not placed on things but on the relationship between people. Her search for that original African culture led her to consider what she has in common not only with other Africans alive today but also with the yet-to-be born, with future generations.

Informed by the relationship between culture and care, Maathai “began to listen to rural women speak of their difficulties in obtaining firewood to cook nutritious food and providing clean drinking water and fodder for their animals.”³¹ The contact with these local women showed her “the linkages between poverty and environmental degradation and the loss of culture,”³² and she understood that the recognition of culture was something political, social, and, ultimately, environmental. We understand politics, both in partisan uses and in the form expounded by Hannah Arendt, as the exercise of speech in the polis.³³ If politics is the act of speech, which presupposes freedom and the awareness of right, then reclaiming ownership of one’s culture, in Maathai’s thinking, does no more than give the individual the courage to claim her voice. The absence of that courage has consequences for both humanity and the environment. For example, “[w]hen communities were told that their culture was demonic and primitive, they lost their sense of collective power and responsibility and succumbed, not to the god of love and compassion they knew, but to the gods of commercialism, materialism, and individualism.”³⁴ She was shocked to see the link between being culturally uprooted and the destruction of the environment; people who were uprooted culturally began to uproot trees. The next natural step after uprooting trees would be to uproot humans. This destructive attitude comes about because the person’s sense of care has been destroyed.³⁵

Now with the knowledge that there is a logical connection between being culturally uprooted and disinheriting “future generations,”³⁶ Maathai established seminars that “allow individuals to deepen their sense of self-knowledge and realize that to care for the environment is to take care of themselves and their children—that in healing the earth they are healing themselves.”³⁷ She introduced a Kikuyu concept called *kwimenya*, which means “being responsible oneself.”³⁸ But responsibility for oneself must be coupled with the readiness to hold “leaders responsible as well.”³⁹ Thus, responsibility for oneself is invariably one for society in relation to the common

31 Maathai, *The Challenge for Africa*, 164–65.

32 Maathai, *The Challenge for Africa*, 165.

33 See Hannah Arendt, *The Human Condition* (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 1958).

34 Maathai, *The Challenge for Africa*, 165.

35 Maathai, *The Challenge for Africa*, 166.

36 Maathai, *The Challenge for Africa*, 166.

37 Maathai, *The Challenge for Africa*, 170.

38 Maathai, *The Challenge for Africa*.

39 Maathai, *The Challenge for Africa*, 170–71.

good. It is all about our relation to the others, or what Iheka seeks to express with his notion of aesthetics of proximity.

From *Kwimenya* Back to Proximity

Maathai's cultural philosophy of the environment turns the vicious circle of cultural rootlessness—lack of care for oneself and the environment—into a virtuous circle of care for the same. Thus, meaning is like a circle that runs from culture to personal care, care for the other/society, and care for the next generation. I call it a hermeneutic circle of care that teaches us that responsibility for oneself must be tied to the environment and our fellow humans in order for it to be truly meaningful. The reverse is obviously the case. These three—the self, the other/society, and the environment—are all tied together in the hermeneutic world of the common good. This, I think, is one of the most efficient ways to grasp the notion of rehabilitated humanity. *Kwimenya* is possible only because of the unceasing awareness of one's proximity to others and the impossibility to function meaningfully without them. We thus return to Chinua Achebe, particularly to his favorite Igbo proverb: "Where one thing stands, another thing will stand beside it."⁴⁰ It is more than the notion of complementarity; it is the awareness that the individual is not the center of reality but rather has meaning only in relation to others, now or in the future. This awareness is moral to the degree that we admit the absolute importance of the common good, which makes our individual freedom possible. It also curbs its excesses.

40 For a reading of this proverb, see Biodun Jeyifo, "Where One Thing Stands, Another Thing Will Stand Beside It: Life Expectancy and the HDI." <http://thenationonlineng.net/one-thing-stands-another-thing-will-stand-beside-life-expectancy-hdi/>.