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Re-Narrating the Post-Global

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This essay is a brief response to Tejumola Olaniyan's article titled "African Literature in the Post-Global Age: Provocations on Field Commonsense." Taking up the concept of the "post-global" advanced in Olaniyan's article, this essay argues for the continued relevance of the concept of postcoloniality *as it emerged in literary and cultural criticism in the 1990s.*

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Tejumola Olaniyan's "African Literature in the Post-Global Age: Provocations on Field Commonsense" grew out of his presentation at the African Literature Association conference in Bayreuth, Germany, in June 2015.[1] Its burden is to think through perspectives that should inform our critical approaches to African literature and criticism in the contemporary moment. Olaniyan is speaking to a dual discursive context: African literary studies on one hand and the ascendance of various "posts-" as analytical categories on the other. The article reflects on the dashed hopes of the decolonization era and moves us beyond the temptation of nostalgia and resentment. Instead of seeing the global moment as the end of something that came before, he poses it as the threshold of a precarious future that we should strive to better understand. In the contemporary climate of globalization, the essay frames the challenges to African humanities as, at once, the sharp edge of historical unfolding and threshold of potentially creative rededication.

This double maneuver is timely and bracing. Olaniyan offers a distillation of the contemporary moment in world history and the theoretical implications that scholars of African literature should take seriously. He proposes the category of "post-global" as a starting point for grasping the macroeconomic, geopolitical, and theoretical conditions for the production of literature and criticism at the present time—on and off the continent. Beginning with the concept as derived from the Italian economist Mario Deaglio, Olaniyan follows its path into cultural criticism by way of Alfred J. López's reading of Monica Ali's 2003 novel *Brick Lane*, a novel that in López's account "heralds the emergence of a new postglobal literature" (quoted in Olaniyan, 389). Olaniyan is careful not to demarcate points of social, political, or epistemic break too neatly: the old is always present as residue and contaminant in what seeks to crystallize

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1 Tejumola Olaniyan, "African Literature in the Post-Global Age: Provocations on Field Commonsense," *Cambridge Journal of Postcolonial Literary Inquiry* 3.3 (September 2016): 387–96.

as the new. And as he notes, it is impossible not to see in the idea of "post-global" a version of familiar arguments regarding modernity, late modernity, and post-modernity in their mutual imbrication. Nonetheless, he sees some value in adopting the concept to understand the continent's challenges and formulate critical approaches that would be adequate to the situation. For him, the post-global is "a boastful provocation for the critical imagination to think simultaneously in broad strokes and fine-grained refinements about the present and the future" (389). Post-global "does not mean that we are 'beyond' the global age"; rather, it is "a way of describing quantitative and qualitative changes that introduce elements of the new, the different, and perhaps the puzzling into the familiar experience of social life. The existing formation is still recognizable, but it has also frayed the dominant protocols of recognition in profound ways" (389).

Olaniyan outlines four broad "spoken or implied assumptions of what constitutes the Africanness of African literature and literary studies" (393). He calls these assumptions "tests"—as in language test, geographical test, corporeal test, and ideological test (393–95). He concludes: "Of all the tests I discussed, it seems only the ideological test is better equipped to successfully weather the storm of the post-global, though that itself would be profoundly remodeled and refined by the storm. . . . But a reformed ideological test would compel us to know the comparative relationship of *objective* and the *subjective* and not conflate the two" (395–96). What Olaniyan calls "tests" I prefer to call "themes" in the discourse of African literary and cultural criticism. It is not only the "ideological" theme that is ideological; the others also are. Each is an angle of vision that invites contestation and outright rejection or qualification or expansion. I agree with Olaniyan's insight that the explicitly ideological theme—for him, exemplified by Marxist and feminist approaches—points us in a good direction because of its procedural self-reflexiveness. I favor that direction because it promises stronger worldly results at the level of interpretation. In what follows, I want to follow the path of ideological engagement that Olaniyan proposes.

We might begin by asking after the value—or, more prosaically, the *point*—of the enterprise we call literary studies. Why is it socially useful to write poems or analyze and conduct debates about poems? How does any analysis, be it ever so productively ideological in Olaniyan's sense, serve society? These basic questions remain fresh precisely in our digital age, where movies and music have greater popular impact than literature ever can (even cell phone novels require literate readers). This is not just an African challenge: as theorists like Theodor Adorno or Fredric Jameson well know, modernity's technologies have made musical and visual media more socially impactful than novels ever were or can be. There are many possible answers to the question of the *point* of literary studies. The one I wish to explore proceeds from a pedagogical perspective. Analyses of African literature do nothing to "improve" Africa's sorry conditions if by that we mean having an impact beyond the disagreements scholars have with each other in books and articles. An interesting path emerges, however, if the discussion is framed in relation to the existential demand of the students we teach and the minds we can affect within the economic class limits of literary studies and pedagogy. It would be wrong to assume that the culture wars of the 1980s and 1990s—the moment of various forms of literary theory and ideology critique—are behind us and we can turn now to globalism or post-globalism as analytical paths

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beyond cultural nationalism. The knowledge we generate as readers of culture might be given soulful intersubjective reach by equipping students—of whatever race, class, or gender—to critically recognize something of themselves and their milieu through African literature. This is especially so in a context of globalized technocracy where those in power, in Africa and elsewhere, often show aggressive anti-intellectual tendencies and the oppressed buy the charade by demonizing imagined enemies (other ethnicities, nationalities, sexualities, religions, and so on).

In representing the world to our students through imaginative literature and the thinking it makes possible, we might enrich the concept of post-global with that of coeval postcoloniality. Formulated differently: globalism or post-globalism cannot validly displace—or substitute for—the earlier discursive vector that goes by the name of postcoloniality. Any conceptualization of post-global that strays too far from the conceptual singularity of postcoloniality leaves out much that might ground African literature. In an essay from the 1990s, Stuart Hall describes the postcolonial as a periodization and an analytical frame.[2] For Hall, postcolonial periodization is a "re-narrativisation" that "displaces the 'story' of capitalist modernity from its European centering to its dispersed 'peripheries'; from peaceful evolution to imposed violence" (250). Hall's claim is that postcoloniality is useful because it "marks a critical interruption into that whole grand historiographical narrative which, in liberal historiography and Weberian historical sociology, as much as in the dominant traditions of Western Marxism, gave this global dimension a subordinate presence in a story which could essentially be told from within its Western parameters" (250). For African studies, the implication of Hall's claim is that the continent's colonial experience immanently recasts the story of modernity and its afterlives in globalization. Alongside the modern/postmodern, or the global/post-global, I would argue for the continued relevance of postcoloniality as an epistemic event.

In current criticism, the turn to paradigms of globalism and world literature is a response to the realities of the digital age, characterized as much by the information revolution as by new forms of warfare and human displacements.[3] These large developments show up in African literature in the passage from the 1960s generation to our current transnational (and so-called "Afropolitan") artistes. Where once we had, say, Ayi Kwei Armah, Dambudzo Marechera, Ama Ata Aidoo, or Mariama Bâ, we now also have Taiye Selasi, NoViolet Bulawayo, and Chris Abani. These writers share the globalized world with other artistes across the boundaries of nations in a way that differs from the immediate post-independence era. The project of national consolidation and "development" that characterized the 1960s and 1970s is complicated now by reassessments of the anthropocene.

2 Stuart Hall, "When Was 'The Post-Colonial'? Thinking at the Limit," *The Post-Colonial Question*, eds. Ian Chambers and Lidia Curti (London: Verso, 1996), 242–60.

3 For a sampling of currently ongoing arguments on the limits or promises of the paradigm of "world literature" as a productive direction for literary studies in the global age, see the following: Jonathan Arac, "Anglo-Globalism?" *New Left Review* 16 (July-August 2002): 35–45; Emily Apter, *The Translation Zone: A New Comparative Literature* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2006); Peter Hitchcock, *The Long Space: Transnationalism and Postcolonial Form* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2010); Gayatri Spivak, *Death of a Discipline* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2003); and Ngugi wa Thiong'o, *Globalectics: Theory and the Politics of Knowing* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2012).

Taking off from Olaniyan's concerns and Hall's defense of the postcolonial rubric from the 1990s, I want to consider the following question: How might the temporality of modernity as it emerges in African literature allow us to offer our students a slant on the post-global age beyond familiar Western perspectives?

I return to *Things Fall Apart*, perhaps the most widely read and translated African novel.[4] Yes, the novel is about an African community in the late nineteenth century, in its first encounter with British colonialism. Yes, Achebe's intention typifies the cultural-nationalist moment of African literature. It would be commonsensical, therefore, to say that with *Things Fall Apart* we are not dealing with the postcolonial, still less the post-global. But such is the power of good stories that this 1958 novel might yet be teased to tell us something about our post-global, postcolonial, moment. Specifically, I want to illustrate how the re-narrativization theorized by Hall—the interaction of language, temporality, and cross-cultural encounter—plays out in the Yoruba translation of the novel by Wale Ogunyemi as *Ìgbésí Ayé Okonkwo* (1997).[5]

Ogunyemi (1939–2001) is an accomplished Nigerian writer and dramatist. His translation of *Things Fall Apart* —almost forty years after the novel's publication —comes upon an epistemic challenge that no translation can resolve because the novel is itself an event of the challenge. We will remember the much-discussed closing paragraph of the novel, where the District Commissioner contemplates writing a book to be entitled *The Pacification of the Primitive Tribes of the Lower Niger*. The key words in Achebe's fictional title are: *pacification*, *primitive*, and *Niger* (a reference to the Niger River). Each of these testifies to the colonial encounter. Pacification indexes the distortion whereby colonial violence is rechristened as a civilizing effort to stop tribal wars. The idea of "the primitive" derives from an anthropological temporality that connotes both anteriority and backwardness. And "lower Niger" refers us to exploratory river expeditions of West Africa in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. Ogunyemi translates *The Pacification of the Primitive Tribes of the Lower Niger* as "Ìlàlójú àwọn 'kògbédè' apá Ìsàlẹ̀ Odò Ọya."[6] In this translation, *pacification* is rendered as "Ìlàlójú," *primitive tribes* is "àwọn 'kògbédè'" (with scare quotes), and the Niger River is "Odò Ọya."

Ìlàlójú means opening of eyes or enlightenment. It derives from the concept of *ọ̀làjú*, a concept that designates the transition the Yoruba saw themselves as undergoing with the imposition of modernization. This is interesting in its own way, but I want to concentrate on Ogunyemi's choices for *primitive* and *Niger*.[7] *Odò Ọya* is the standard Yoruba name for the Niger: it simply means "Ọya's river." Ọya is a revered Yoruba goddess, consort of Sango, a fierce potentate of the old Oyo empire who is associated with thunder and lightning. In mythic accounts Ọya is believed to have committed suicide in a place called Ira (her natal town), and the Niger River is sacred to her. In this sense, Odò Ọya is the local name and re-narrativization of a river to be encountered in the European archive as the Niger. It also signifies differently from the European naming. A part of the region's ecosystem and its mythic resources, the river

4 Chinua Achebe, *Things Fall Apart* (London: Heinemann, 1996).
5 Wale Ogunyemi, *Ìgbésí Ayé Okonkwo* (Ibadan: New Horn Press, 1997).
6 Achebe, *Things Fall Apart*, 148; Ogunyemi, *Ìgbésí Ayé Okonkwo*, 132.
7 On the concept of *ọ̀làjú*, see J. D. Y. Peel, "Olaju: A Yoruba Concept of Development," *The Journal of Development Studies* 14 (January 1978): 139–65.

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is in Yoruba a body of water that bears witness to Ọya's status as other-worldly force as well as protagonist in a story of sacrifice and power.[8]

Ogunyemi's rendering of primitive as "*kògbédè*" (with scare quotes) immediately calls attention to itself. The word is a contraction of the phrasal verb *gbọ́ èdè*, which means to know language: so, *kògbédè* is "one who does not understand language." Let us note the narcissism whereby language as such is presumed to be Yoruba language. *Èdè* (language) involves much more than the linguistic. To "know language" (*gbọ́ èdè*) is to possess the learned skills of multiple levels of social participation: from oratorical competence to cultural knowledge of an exclusive kind. To be classified as one who knows language is to be credentialed in the culture's conventions of mature participation. By contrast, to be called *kògbédè* is to be positioned outside that community. The pejorative word rests on the assumption of a cadre of persons who are seen as belonging or not belonging. The hierarchy is not racial: it is endogenous and sociologically dynamic, not metaphysical. The presumption is that non-Yoruba speakers are by definition *kògbédè*, but anyone who acquires the know-how to reproduce the culture's performance of itself leaves the ranks of the *kògbédè*. Likewise, a native Yoruba speaker who is deemed to fall short of the codes of participation will also be called *kògbédè*. In translating "primitive" as *kògbédè*, Ogunyemi finds himself using a word that designates difference and prejudice *within* Yoruba monologic system, outside of the colonial racial hierarchy. The classification is not implacably fixed, still less is it teleological in the sense that undergirds the Euro-centric idea of the primitive. All of these complications may explain why Ogunyemi chooses to translate primitive as "*kògbédè*" with the metacommentary of scare quotes. He seems to acknowledge that *kògbédè* is a mistranslation of "primitive," but could not find anything closer.

Other issues are highlighted in Ogunyemi's translation that I cannot explore here. For our purposes, what the translation demonstrates is deeper than the truism that something will always get lost when we translate. What we have here is a situation where the historicity of the words is shared by participants, but shared *differentially*: where, in other words, so-called primitives cannot logically identify themselves as primitives, and the river that sustains them is necessarily named from the interiority of their local narratives and memory.[9] Teaching this drama of translation to our

8 See Rev. Samuel Crowther, *A Vocabulary of the Yoruba Language* (London: Seeleys, 1852), 242; Rev. Samuel Johnson, *The History of the Yorubas* (London: Routledge, 1921), 36–37 and 149–52. For a recent ethnographic discussion of some mythological narratives surrounding Ọya, see Oyeronke Olajubu, *Women in the Yoruba Religious Sphere* (Albany, NY: SUNY Press, 2003), 65–92.

9 Of course, this reinforces the critical consensus that the meaning of Achebe's novel is indissociable from the history and language of European colonial adventure in Africa. In translations of the novel into Afrikaans and French, for instance, the translators do not face the kind of linguistic tangle that Ogunyemi confronts in seeking to render the words a British colonial administrator might use in official language. Chris Barnard's 1966 Afrikaans translation renders the title as "Die Pasifikasie van die Primitiewe Stamme van die Laer-Niger" and Michel Ligny's French makes it "La Pacification des Tribus primitives du Bas-Niger." See *'n Pad loop Dood* (Johannesburg: Afrikaanse Pers-Boekhandel, 1966) and *Le Monde S'Effondre* (Paris: Présence Africaine, 1972). In these renditions, "primitive" and "Niger" have clear epistemic reference and linguistic cognates in a fictional colonial administrator's interior monologue. The examples of Afrikaans and French are particularly relevant because both are by now African languages, too. Ogunyemi's negotiation of the nexus/disjunction between "primitive" and "kògbédè" points to a productive direction that African studies might take in our transnational moment: namely, to continue to work against mystifications of language as innocent repository of stable identity.

students—an overwhelming number of whom will know English or French as opposed to Yoruba—allows us to illuminate how an Anglophone novel, where Igbo culture has been creatively imagined in English prose, becomes in its translation into another Nigerian language an unraveling of monologic naming as such. In Ogunyemi's translation, the world of Achebe's novel becomes the world as it presents itself in a language that is "African" but not Igbo. Here, Yoruba language furnishes the ground of thought and denomination, a site of re-narrativization. But precisely in doing so, Ogunyemi's translation performs a critique of Euro-centric as well as Yoruba-centric naming.

Ogunyemi's effort demonstrates that the epistemological intervention of texts like *Things Fall Apart* cannot be contained within singular national, cultural, or linguistic boundaries. Novels of postcoloniality have always been global in this sense—in terms of the historicity they dramatize and the epistemic event they mark. This is before the global trauma of September 11 and before globalism became an important new direction in literary studies. As we teach Zadie Smith or Monica Ali as innovative figures of the post-global, then, it is worthwhile also to teach them as continuators of the re-narrativization in the earlier moment of, say, Achebe and Lamming, or Erna Brodber and Yvonne Vera. To sum up: In thinking with the idea of post-global, we do well to think the postcolonial as its coeval iteration. The postcolonial needs to be brought forth when the post-global is presented as conjunctural moment, as much in modern history as in the time of critical thought. A concept of historical process and the disciplinary knowledge that seeks to understand it, the post-global (like the global) acquires robust meaning only in the depth of its entanglement with the postcolonial. The postcoloniality of Africa's modernity offers an opening to alternative trajectories of thought and differing experiences of shared history. Our vision, ultimately, is to equip our students with thinking tools for the good cause of global justice, which is necessarily also postcolonial justice.

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