1 African Literature and the Aesthetics of Proximity

In the Introduction, I showed how Enlightenment principles embedded in the project of modernity undermined, if not severed, the relationship between human and more-than-human worlds in many African societies. These African communities take seriously Marisol de la Cadena's point that we appreciate and respect the full spectrum of "earth beings," which she alternatively terms "Other-than-humans includ[ing] animals, plants, and the landscape."[1] The notion of earth beings speaks to the vitality of nonhuman forms and emphasizes the ways they are always implicated in human activities and actions. Although de la Cadena writes of indigenous communities in Latin America, her notion of earth beings is relevant for African extrapolation because of shared beliefs in the force of nature and the inseparability of human from nonhuman nature. Joni Adamson and Harry Garuba, in their work on the Americas and Africa, respectively, have also captured this shared value. According to Adamson, "specific indigenous movements have long formed around the notion of the earth as a sentient being" and as a site "where human and other-than-humans coexist."[2] Garuba on his part reports on the "animist unconscious" in many parts of Africa, which primarily entails the "continual re-enchantment of the world."[3] Like de la Cadena and Adamson, Garuba illustrates that this animist sensibility is a spiritual phenomenon that is equally "embedded within the processes of material, economic activities and then reproduces itself within the sphere of culture and social life."[4]

Although the spread of Christianity and capitalist objectification of every imaginable thing has marginalized this animist sensibility, the mindset endures in the cultural practices of African societies to varying degrees. In this scheme of things, nonhumans can be considered important members of the biosphere worth human respect even when they seem nonresponsive like the mountains in Adamson's quote. De la Cadena in fact adds that these earth beings insert themselves into politics in ways that call for the reconfiguration of an anthropocentric sense of politics. It should be clear from the foregoing argument that the need to respect

nonhuman beings, both biotic and abiotic, is at the core of the interventions of thinkers like Adamson and de la Cadena. These scholars join a broader conversation on multispecies networks, a conversation interested in redefining human relationships to Others with whom they share certain characteristics as well as the world.

Following the works of these scholars, this chapter investigates the ways African literary expressive cultures articulate the coexistence and imbrication of human and nonhuman lives. In other words, if colonial modernity elevated the human as the avatar, the center of the universe, often to the detriment of the nonhuman worlds, both seen and unseen, how has African literature reinstated the nonhuman in relation to the human? How does the pluriverse–the agglomeration of worlds, human and nonhuman–appear in African literature? In answering these questions, I claim that alongside those African literary works that relegate the nonhuman world to mere backdrop or setting for human exploration, there exists another body of literature characterized by an *aesthetics of proximity*.

Defining Proximity

Proximity has two connotations here: namely, a spatial sense of nearness as well as a form of proximity brought about by similarities and shared characteristics. To understand the first form of proximity being charted here is to consider the narrative structures that allow the blurring of spatial distances in the texts under scrutiny. At one level, humans share their environment with plants, animals, and other material forms. Moreover, although the supernatural world is generally understood as the "great beyond," outside the reach of humans, many of the texts in this chapter problematize this distance by bringing both material and immaterial worlds closely together. Relying on the genre of magical realism, which juxtaposes the real and the supernatural in ways that dissolve or obfuscate the barriers between them and thereby rewrites the conventions of the social realist script (often solely focused on humans), the authors I discuss in this chapter show that existing closely alongside humans in African environments are ordinary nonhuman and supernatural entities demanding recognition of their interconnectivity in our reading practices.

If spatiality is critical to the first notion of proximity, the second form of nearness is predicated on similar or shared attributes that bring humans closer to other components of the ecosystem. For most humanistic and social science disciplines, human beings have always been the primary object of inquiry because of the classification of this species as distinct, capable of ethics, and imbued with political and creative capabilities

unlike other life forms often relegated to the status of Agamben's "bare life"–without rights, intellect, and other superior endowments.[5] The second notion of proximity puts pressure on the ideas of human exceptionalism and absolute distinctions from other forms of life. This ethic of multispecies entanglement is particularly attentive to the ways African literary and cultural practices stage the enmeshment of human and nonhuman lives and the implications of said enmeshment for ecological justice. So rather than foreground the differences between a human and an animal–say, a man named John and a dog named Jane–the concept of proximity allows us to focus not on their peculiarities but on their common attributes, including suffering and mortality. Dwelling on these common characteristics does not eclipse the differences between the components of the ecosystem; it instantiates parallels that problematize the kind of strong anthropocentrism under critique in this book. Focusing on the vulnerabilities of death in both humans and other animals, for instance, allows for contemplating the human body in relation to other bodies easily commodified and disposable.

Taken together, aesthetics of proximity refers to the processes by which African literary artifacts depict the interconnectedness of human lives with Others in the environment. The narratives here insist that we cannot separate human beings from their environments and that a complex engagement with these texts should be attentive to the closeness and similarities among the different aspects of the ecological community. This aesthetic practice insists on pondering the place of the nonhuman in African literature more seriously and on examining the possibilities for the alternative sustainable world these texts often embody.

That said, I now come to the four dimensions that proximity takes in African literature. Through their genre, diction, narrative voice, and thematic preoccupation, the narratives demonstrate (1) multispecies presence, (2) interspecies relationship, (3) distributed agency, and, ultimately, (4) indistinction between human and nonhuman entities. Of these four headings under which we can understand the aesthetics of proximity, multispecies presence illuminates the spatial sense of nearness. Distributed agency as well as the strategy of indistinction, that is, blurring differences between humans and other beings, fall primarily within the ambit of the second notion of proximity, precisely the notion that there are shared characteristics between humans and nonhumans. The point is not to undermine differences but to problematize the idea that humans are the locus of existence and should occupy the center of literary and cultural analysis. Straddling both notions of proximity is the strategy of interspecies interaction that on the one hand is steeped in the spatial sense

of proximity but that also exhibits instances of shared attributes such as communicative traits.

It is also important to note the overlapping tendencies of the previously mentioned dimensions of proximity and therefore understand them as conceptual categories that allow for bringing together human and nonhuman worlds rather than treat them as discrete entities. Why is this idea of proximity important? The aesthetic practice I elaborate is useful for rethinking our approach to African literature and the accents on human concerns in the critical engagement with these texts. The idea of proximity encourages us to read African literary texts in innovative ways with attention to the fact that nonhuman forms are often implicated in the concerns of the text even when they are not explicitly stated.

Furthermore, the idea of aesthetics is clearly elaborated in politics. Whether it is in the texts I examine in some detail–Amos Tutuola's *The Palmwine Drinkard*[6] and *My Life in the Bush of Ghosts*,[7] Ben Okri's *The Famished Road*,[8] and Zakes Mda's *The Whale Caller*[9]–or the ones I explore more briefly, such as Patrice Nganang's *Dog Days*[10] and Katie Kitamura's *Gone to the Forest*,[11] the emphasis is on inserting nonhuman concerns into politics and ultimately projecting alternative lifeworlds critical of human exploitation of the environment. The narratives under study are preoccupied with nonhuman otherness and are attentive to the claims and rights of and obligations to these Others even as they are invested in intimate interspecies relations with resonances for broader conversations on the state of the environment in Africa and elsewhere. Given the concerns over global warming and climate change, there is no more urgent task than to consider human imbrications with fellow travelers in the ecological sphere, especially in an African context where the matrix of elite failure and the forces of neocolonialism and globalization continue to subjugate its inhabitants–read broadly to include human beings and nonhumans alike.

In elucidating the aesthetics of proximity, I complicate the dominant interpretation of representations of nonhumans in African literature. Scholars often ignore these Others to focus on the human characters; or where they do engage these other life forms, especially nonhuman animals, it is primarily to demonstrate how they function as symbols for humans–especially subordinate or oppressed ones. The problem with such a critical approach, as Laura Wright, among others, has pointed out, is that it "refuses to acknowledge the animal as deserving of the same kinds of respect human beings *should* grant to other humans."[12] Take the instance of *Dog Days* by Patrice Nganang, a narrative analyzed later in the chapter. Nganang's novel was published in the early years of the twenty-first century, an era characterized by heightened awareness of not just

human rights but also the plight of animals and the larger environment. Moreover, its title and its mode of narration (the narrator-protagonist Mboudjak is a dog) invite a consideration of the novel's uniqueness, its singular mode of expanding the space of the political in Cameroon to include animals like Mboudjak. Yet most readings of the novel have primarily focused on the human dimensions of the text.[13]

There is no problem with such readings if we remain tied to the unacknowledged anthropocentric logic that subtends most African literary criticism. But once we open the critical space to embrace an ecological angle of vision, it becomes possible to accommodate the perspective of Mboudjak in Nganang's novel, where the dog demonstrates signs of resistance and showcases, again and again, parallels between the oppression of the human masses by the elites and the exploitation of animals by their human "masters." My goal here is less about censuring a way of reading and more about offering an alternative to the usual treatment of animals as allegories for humans in African literary criticism.

The dominant form of anthropocentric analysis raises a fundamental question: can we conceive of the dog–dogs, animals, or other life forms–as full beings in our reading and writing practices? As I will show later when I engage with Nganang's novel and throughout this book, we can do so without reducing nonhuman presences to symbols and metaphors that merely shed light on the human world. This mode of reading is significant because it does not obviate nonhuman beings or block what Neel Ahuja describes as the "transspecies relations underlying representation."[14] By recognizing that the human body is only one component of the ecosystem and that the nonhuman can indeed suffer, I suggest that we transcend the strong forms of anthropocentrism predominant in African literary criticism and embrace a more inclusive view of our environment.

Accordingly, the rest of this chapter, divided into four sections, one for each, develops the four dimensions or strategies of proximity. The first section, devoted to multispecies presence, discusses the ecological composition of African literature. Here African literary texts make central the presence of nonhuman life forms–material and supernatural–as important constituents of Africa's ecosystems. My reading reinstates the nonhuman as an integral component of Africa's ecologies and as a key player in the narrative movement of the texts. In the second section, I build on the preceding discussion by examining the relationship between humans and nonhumans in Africa's ecologies, highlighting in the process both benign forms of interspecies interaction and the more prevalent exploitative relationships often at the expense of nonhumans. When humans interact with nonhumans around them as is clear from the second section, agency and production of effects are not restricted to

humans even if our anthropocentric orientation limits our perception of nonhuman agency. The third section accentuates the agency shared by both humans and nonhumans in African literary texts. While the first three sections highlight the similarities between humans and other members of the environment, the distinctions between them are very much intact. What we find in the final segment of the chapter are those moments when differences are obfuscated or blurred to achieve the highest point of proximity.

Multispecies Presence

Amos Tutuola's *The Palmwine Drinkard* and *My Life in the Bush of Ghosts* provide a fine starting point for discussing multispecies presence as one dimension of the aesthetics of proximity. *The Palmwine Drinkard* instantiates a multispecies world, where humans share the environment with nonhumans, a world teeming with various life forms that are as important as the human. As such, Tutuola's writing has been compared to D. O. Fagunwa's work, especially the well-known *Forest of a Thousand Daemons*, whose fame outside a Yoruba readership is owed largely to Wole Soyinka's English translation.[15] Throughout *The Palmwine Drinkard*, Tutuola's narrator is conscious of the different species that populate his world. As he leaves the Unreturnable Heaven, for instance, he narrates the appearance of different creatures drawn to the extraordinary musical accomplishment of Drum, Song, and Dance. In this moment and at other points in the text, we are drawn to a pluriverse of creatures, plants and animals, human and nonhuman, secular and spiritual. As Achille Mbembe describes it, Tutuola's writing is a "spectacle of a world in motion, ever reborn, made of fold upon fold, of landscapes and topographies, figures, circles, spirals and fractures, colors, sounds, and noises."[16]

In short, the narrative's uniqueness is a result of Tutuola's departure from the anthropocentrism that often characterizes the "rational," realist novel. While these realist accounts insist on sociocultural human challenges and zooms in on human characters, Tutuola's narrative shows an ecological community where the nonhuman is always present and visible with the human. Chris Dunton has noted that Tutuola's oeuvre stages the "fragility" of the human condition and the ways supernatural forces are implicated in the affairs of humans.[17] The limitations that Dunton identifies in Tutuola's account of the human condition speak to the author's repudiation of the notion of a self-sufficient human subjectivity and his insistence on human entanglement with more-than-human presences. A fine illustration can be found in the major activity of the narrative: palmwine drinking. Readers familiar with the text will recall that its

journey motif arises because of the Drinkard's quest to find his dead palmwine tapper. Palmwine, of course, is a product of the palm tree, a nonhuman life form. Therefore, the narrative is already orienting readers to the nonhuman world as early as its first page. The text's central problem thus arises when the tapster is unavailable to provide the fine wine, and as the Drinkard embarks on the quest to find his tapster, the reader is introduced to multiple worlds that are apart yet close to one another, to different creatures that permeate these worlds, and to the different shapes and forms these creatures take.

Tutuola's account is particularly significant if we consider the time of its publication in Nigerian history: amid the fervent nationalist striving for independence of the 1950s. The text was published in 1952, a year before the irrepressible nationalist Anthony Enahoro first moved the failed motion for independence. The agitation for independence was driven by the assertion of self-government abilities and of the mastery of the accoutrements of modern life. As Quayson explains it, Tutuola's writing was enraging "for an African intelligentsia poised for self-rule and eager to express their capacity for rationalistic engagement with the problems of the real world."[18] Yet Tutuola's narrative emerges at this moment to foreground that which is elided in the emphasis on human subjectivity–a mode of being that foregrounds human imbrication with the nonhuman. At a time when the modern subject was keen to convince the colonial authorities of his or her distance from nature, it is no wonder that the narrative generated controversy over its language and subject matter among Nigerians ashamed of its supposed exoticism. Bernth Lindfors has written about how the narrative was received as a "local embarrassment" by Nigerians despite the enthusiasm of Western critics.[19] The language, as has been rightly described, introduced a tinge of local color to the nationalist question. Yet it is Tutuola's subject that raised the greatest challenge to the modernist vision of the 1950s. Tutuola is invoking a Yoruba cosmology consisting of the worlds of the living, the dead, the unborn, and the transitional abyss.[20] By taking on the vision of his Yoruba pluriverse, Tutuola challenges the human-centricity of his time.

One great achievement of Tutuola's narrative is that it reinstates an ecosystem receding in the secular imagination of the Enlightenment-inspired modernity that colonialism brought to Africa. If African traditional societies were largely attuned to a relationship between humans and nonhumans, a worldview threatened by colonialist modernity, it makes sense to argue that *The Palmwine Drinkard*'s anticolonial resistance resides precisely in naturalizing Africa, by yoking together the human and nonhuman worlds threatened by colonialist, rational ideology. Tutuola's text foregrounds other rationalities by depicting a world attentive to a myriad of species.

The narrative shows that the quest for human progress cannot be divorced from broader ecological considerations, even as it exposes the different Yoruba lifeworlds–the living (human and nonhuman), dead, unborn, and transitional.

Like *The Palmwine Drinkard* before it, Tutuola's *My Life in the Bush of Ghosts* exhibits different species characterized by spatial closeness. It is remarkable that very early in the text, as the narrator begins the journey into the bush of ghosts, he exposes the different creatures present in the town:

> So when we could not bear it [gunfire from the war] then we left our mother's room for the veranda, but we met nobody there, and then we ran from there to the portico of the house, but the town was also empty except the domestic animals as sheep, pigs, goats and fowls and also some of the bush animals as monkeys, wolves, deer and lions who were driven from the bush that surrounded the town to the town by the fearful noises of the enemies' guns.[21]

The narrator describes the chaos surrounding the outbreak of war and the desertion of the town by the human community. Even in this chaos, however, he is mindful of the different animals. Notice the attention to the heterogeneity of the nonhuman animals; there is an effort at taxonomical classification as the animals are deemed as either domestic or "bush." As we follow the specific listing across two lines, we are led to imagine a multispecies scene. Clearly it is easy to see how the narrative stages the displacement of the young boys by war; nevertheless, the passage insists the reader also pay attention to other life forms equally displaced by the conflict. The narrator and his brother are not privileged by this passage, which asks us to imagine a desolate town, "the domestic animals," and "the bush animals" as among the war victims.[22]

The introduction of the bush in this passage foreshadows the narrator's engagement with different living beings in the text, but it also opens the word "bush" for unpacking to reveal the different lifeworlds it encompasses. In a reading of Mahasweta Devi's "Dhowli," Jennifer Wenzel refers to "the forest as a thoroughly and self-consciously cultural space," as a place that has "always been peopled by lovers, misfits, and fantastic creatures."[23] Wenzel's work is relevant because her theorization of the forest space as culturally inscribed applies directly to Tutuola's bush, where in addition to the different animals the narrator mentions, we also find a variety of plants, shrubs, and trees. Beyond the ordinary, material components, Tutuola's forest is also littered with extraordinary ghosts, or "fantastic creatures" as Wenzel describes them. Although *My Life* follows the narrator's journeys, which makes it seem like a text focused on the human condition, the protagonist's limitations and the complexity of the forest with which he engages reveal the extent to which

the narrative is less about a personal journey and more of an exposé of ecologies, a treatise of the way that humans are co-inhabitants of the world. Tutuola's narrative is not only a place where "memory is destabilized," as Mbembe has argued; it is also a place where multiple worlds intersect and destabilize.[24]

The exciting journey the narrator embarks upon brings closer the material and spiritual planes of existence. The Yoruba cosmology from which Tutuola's oeuvre draws significance is particular about the transitions between the world of the living, dead, and unborn, but it is also specific about the gaps between them; that is, the separation critical to maintain a cosmic whole. It is no wonder that Chinua Achebe writes about boundaries as an important theme in Tutuola's *The Palmwine Drinkard*.[25] But *My Life* is also about crossing boundaries to stage connections and proximities. That is why the narrator can enter the bush of ghosts forbidden to humans, relate with the ghosts, whom Quayson has aptly described as "a species of supernatural denizens of the other world," and even marry twice therein.[26] By so doing, he physicalizes even the immaterial realm that is always beyond human comprehension. As a text demonstrating a spatial form of proximity, Tutuola's *My Life*, like *The Palmwine Drinkard* before it, brings the different planes of existence together so close that we can see the composition of Tutuola's Yoruba ecologies.

Interspecies Relationships

If the previous section enlarges the angle of vision of African literary texts by adumbrating the significant presence of nonhuman life forms and their spatial closeness to humans, it leaves unaddressed the question of the kind of relationships that ensue between them. This section explores the question of interspecies relationship that occurs when species are brought close together, such as in the Tutuola narratives discussed earlier. Different species inhabiting the African world do not exist in isolation, since they are always in relation to others. Here, I am interested in the ways that these narratives dramatize the relationship of humans with nonhumans, especially since the sites of such interactions provide a contact zone for proximity or closeness.[27] Furthermore, these interactive moments provide opportunities for contrasting various forms of the human relationship to the nonhuman world. A benign relationship that is mutual and reciprocal in nature is quite rare because of the prevailing exploitative thrust of human relations with the nonhuman world; however, a non-exploitative model of behavior could exist side by side with an exploitative relationship, which is often portrayed in such a way as to call

for ethical reflection on the part of humans regarding their obligations to the Other(s), broadly conceived. Depictions of exploitative relationships provide avenues for critiquing the abuse of the nonhuman worlds as well as amplifying such abuse for the reading public. It is to the way these interactions play out in African literary texts that I now turn in a reading of Okri's *The Famished Road*, Mda's *The Whale Caller*, and Nganang's *Dog Days*.

Ben Okri's *The Famished Road*, like Tutuola's works, is steeped in a Yoruba cosmological vision; it parades before readers different realms of existence including the living, the dead, the unborn, and the transitional abyss. In his reading of the novel, Quayson rightly points to the fact that "the real world and that of spirits is explored . . . in not an either/or framework."[28] For Erin James, Azaro, the novel's child protagonist, has the "ability to dissolve ontological boundaries" between the worlds of the living and of the spirits.[29] I agree with these scholars on the boundless movements and possibilities in Okri's novel but will add an additional claim: the intermingling of different realms serves an ecological function in the novel, namely to explicate the interactions of different species. In these interactions, Okri stages multispecies presence but also the interrelationship at the heart of this segment.

Azaro is an *Abiku* child, meaning he remains connected to the spirit world, which haunts him throughout the novel. As Douglas McCabe explains it, the concept refers to "children who have secret plans to die at a certain time in their upbringing, only to be born again soon afterwards, repeating this itinerary of death and birth."[30] For the love of his mother, the *Abiku* child refuses to die despite the taunting of colleagues from the spirit world who constantly visit him. In other words, the novel's disclosure of the permeability of the worlds of the living and of the spirits suggests their closeness, a kind of fractious intimacy that is always already there. As the narrator tells us early in the text, "In that land of beginnings spirits mingled with the unborn. We could assume numerous forms. Many of us were birds. We knew no boundaries . . . And we sorrowed much because there were always those amongst us who had just returned from the world of the Living."[31]

The passage depicts movements and connections that transcend boundaries; it also permits proximity. One feature of the novel, as McCabe points out in an essay wherein he offers a new ageist interpretation of the novel, is "its intractable heterogeneity;"[32] this multiplicity, I believe, is operative in the way spirits, humans, animals, plants, and yet-to-be-formed humans are bound together in a web of connectivity and flux. But more importantly, the *Abiku* child constitutes the nodal point of