INTRODUCTION

Negotiating the Era of Decolonization

In 1965, Nigerian poet and publisher Christopher Okigbo wrote a poem to mark the centenary of W. B. Yeats's birth. Having cultivated a modernist style for half a decade, he chose to experiment further by modeling this poem, "Lament of the Masks," after Yoruba *oríkì* or praise poems.[1] Thus Okigbo's poem addresses Yeats as a Yoruba "big man," declaring that "*the time has come O Poet, / To descant your praise-names* . . . ."[2] A native speaker of Igbo from eastern Nigeria, Okigbo had been exposed to *oríkì* – and other Yoruba genres – through English translations published in western Nigeria. The poet's turn to a Yoruba poetic repertoire implies his commitment to a cultural nationalism that aims to transcend ethnic divisions calcified by colonial policies, even if his access to this repertoire must be mediated by the colonial language of English. Here he draws on at least three specific *oríkì* that belonged to the *Tìmì* or king of a town named Ede.[3] A close friend of Okigbo who was involved with the composition of the poem, Ben Obumselu, believes that it "keeps unusually close, for Okigbo, to the original Yoruba model and so raises the question whether he was creatively free in the *oríkì* tradition."[4] Alternately, Okigbo's assemblage of a new text out of existing fragments may redefine what creative freedom entails. The foremost scholar of *oríkì*, Karin Barber, observes that when performers collocate already available elements, "they do not seek to make these materials 'their own' or to speak predominantly or exclusively from their own subject position."[5] Insofar as Okigbo's Yoruba source materials are *not* conformed to the poet's subject position, then, "Lament of the Masks" pays homage to the textuality of *oríkì*, and in so doing, indicates that creatively negotiating received forms could be as much a feature of Afro-modernist as of Anglo-formalist poetry. Okigbo also departs from the typical live performance of *oríkì*, however, not only by composing in English but also by addressing an absent – and deceased – person in print.

Part of what print enables Okigbo to do is to syncretize Yoruba materials both with motifs from classical literature and with allusions to the Yeatsian oeuvre. As an undergraduate studying Latin in the 1950s, Okigbo's greatest literary ambition had been to compose a new translation of Virgil's *Aeneid* into English, and his first published poem adapted Virgil's first Eclogue.[6] Becoming a poet in his own right in the 1960s, he still saw himself as part of a lineage stretching back to classical poets. A striking list of poets that he drew up in the mid-1960s begins with Homer and Virgil, continues with figures like Dante and Shakespeare, and names Yeats alongside other modernists before culminating with Congolese poet Tchicaya U Tam'si and Okigbo himself.[7] The first section of "Lament of the Masks" evokes the importance of *Fama* or Rumor in Virgil's Latin poetry, as "the rumour awakens / Like smell of wet earth after rain" (xiii). Yet this first section also incorporates a Yoruba phrase, which can be translated as "[t]he throat of an accuser pours forth javelins and spears," when the speaker pronounces:[8]

> In bird-masks –
> Unlike accusing tones that issue forth javelins –
> Bring, O Poet,
>
> Panegyrics for the arch-priest of the sanctuary . . . (xiii)

This title would surely have flattered Yeats's occult inclinations, while the "bird-masks" recall the presence of birdlike creatures in some of Yeats's most famous poems, from "Sailing to Byzantium" to "Cuchulain Comforted," not to mention his persistent interest in notions of the mask. Even the invocation of classical "panegyrics" contains an echo of Yeats's "gyres." In the second section of the poem, epithets reminiscent of *oríkì* continue to layer classical and specifically Yeatsian motifs. Addressing Yeats as "WAGGONER of the great Dawn," for instance, the poet alludes at once to Helios driving the chariot of the sun and to Yeats's role as a driving force behind the Hermetic Order of the Golden Dawn (xiii). In this way, Okigbo remakes *oríkì* into an anglophone, print text that incorporates the canon of the colonial university.

At the same time, Okigbo, who had inherited the role of "priest of the sanctuary" to his hometown's river deity, remakes Yeats in his own image. Okigbo neither praises the Irish poet's nationalism nor deplores his flirtation with fascism, but rather transports him into an African poetic idiom and setting. The poem's third section addresses Yeats as a tireless hunter who never ceased "pursuing the white elephant" of poetry: "You who . . . stripped him of his horns, and made them your own – / You who fashioned

his horns into ivory trumpets – " (xiv). Following Okigbo, we might imagine Yeats as one who "fashioned" the Victorian poetics of an Arnold or Tennyson into his own *fin-de-siècle* and modernist idiom. As Jahan Ramazani points out, Okigbo "reterritorializes Yeats, Africanizing him as an elephant hunter, his masks as ritual objects, while deterritorializing the praise song, centering it on a European subject."[9] In the following lines, Yeats is lauded for having "split the thatch" and "burst the mould" (xiv). The brief final section of the poem seems to suggest, though, that the quest for stylistic innovation is now Okigbo's to carry on. The proverbial lines – "BUT WILL a flutist never stop to wipe his nose? / Two arms can never alone encircle a giant iroko." – imply that no solitary artist's powers will last forever or prove adequate to every challenge (xv). Alluding to the final quatrain of "Among School Children," Yeats's great poem of aging, "Lament of the Masks" concludes with an unrhymed couplet: "Night breezes drum on the plantain leaf: / Let the plantain leaf take over the dance . . ." (xv). In place of Yeats's "chestnut tree, great rooted blossomer," and dancing "body swayed to music," Okigbo presents himself, more appropriately for West Africa, as the "plantain leaf" who will carry forward the dance, which is to say take up his place as the next in a line of vital poets.[10]

Ever since Chinua Achebe adopted the phrase *Things Fall Apart* for his first novel from Yeats's "The Second Coming," anglophone African literature has often been framed by publishers and critics as a response to Euro-modernist texts. Okigbo's poetry, which incorporates modernist techniques from T. S. Eliot and Ezra Pound as well as Yeats, is no exception. In Obumselu's suggestive phrase, "Okigbo was looking all the time outside himself for the material of his own being."[11] Yet diachronic comparison, even if it emphasizes postcolonial writers' critical and selective appropriation of Euro-modernist texts, runs the risk of implying that writers from the global South belatedly inherit a modernity proper to the global North.[12] Treating the global South as heir to processes begun elsewhere tends to distort actual patterns of transnational cultural, economic, and political traffic, including the impact of writers from the global South on their contemporaries from the global North. More than three decades ago, Johannes Fabian confronted anthropology's own deleterious ideology of time with the term "denial of coevalness," arguing instead for "cotemporality as the condition for truly dialectical confrontation between persons as well as societies."[13] In the spirit of Fabian, this book makes the case for the need to attend not only to diachronic literary influences, but also to synchronic

relationships across continental and racial lines. It underscores mutual, productive confrontations among African writers, European writers, and those identified with other parts of the world.

In the case of Okigbo's "Lament of the Masks," one step toward acknowledging not only Okigbo's glance backward to Yeats, but also his involvement with a contemporary world is to look at where it appeared in print: in a volume of essays about Yeats published in 1965 by Nigeria's University of Ibadan. Co-edited by an Irish professor and a Palestinian lecturer who were both teaching English in Ibadan, this centenary volume includes essays by American, Egyptian, and European academics. It also includes two poems by writers besides Okigbo. The first, South African–born Laurence Lerner, had lectured in English at the University College of the Gold Coast (present-day Ghana) and Queen's University Belfast, where Seamus Heaney was among his students, before taking up a post in England. The second, James Simmons, grew up in Northern Ireland and became friends with Wole Soyinka – like Heaney, a future Nobel laureate – while they were both at university in Leeds. Having followed Soyinka and another university friend, northern English poet Tony Harrison, to Nigeria, Simmons was teaching English at Ahmadu Bello University in Zaria during the mid-1960s. The speakers of Simmons's contribution, "A Famous Poet," present themselves as among the few admirers who value Yeats for his poetic voice rather than as a national literary saint to be commodified or worshipped. Still, the poem, in cross-rhymed pentameter quatrains, subjects Yeats to Simmons's characteristically flippant treatment:

> Let strangers, out of Yeats and his affairs,
> Make souvenirs for sale, relics to hoard.
> We will not save or split the poet's hairs
> But read his poems, skipping when we're bored.[14]

Correspondence between Simmons and the volume's Irish editor, Desmond Maxwell, indicates that the poet was asked to revise his work because it satirized two leading Yeats scholars, Richard Ellmann and A. N. Jeffares, the latter of whom provided the volume's Foreword. In the end, Simmons wrote six stanzas and Maxwell planned to use four of them, but only two appeared in the volume.[15] Although neither Simmons's nor Lerner's poem is as innovative or substantial as Okigbo's, reading them alongside each other makes "Lament of the Masks" look less like evidence of a postcolonial African writer's debt to European innovation than part of a lively conversation about Yeats's legacy among anglophone poets from various nonmetropolitan locations.[16]

Furthermore, these poems' co-presence in this volume suggests how literary texts that are rarely considered together today circulated alongside each other at the time through a configuration of cultural institutions. Assembled under colonial rule, this configuration was rechristened, come decolonization, under the sign of the Commonwealth – a "rebranding" of the late British Empire and then an afterimage of it. Although it is an intergovernmental association, the Commonwealth of Nations has arguably had a greater effect in the cultural than the political realm, with informal ties and nongovernmental associations generating worldwide networks for higher education, literary study, and publishing, among other concerns. One standard liberal take on these networks presents them as fostering possibilities for cross-cultural understanding. An alternate, more radical interpretation views them as an accessory to – and alibi for – ongoing neocolonial oppression.[17] In a telling coincidence, an ad for the Yeats centenary volume that trumpets the Irish poet's "universal appeal" in a liberal key appeared in the *Times Literary Supplement* alongside an ad for Ghanaian president Kwame Nkrumah's *Neo-Colonialism*, described as "a searing analysis of the economic hold still exercised by the old colonial powers . . . on African countries." Nkrumah's argument might suggest that Yeats became "universal" by being foisted on a colonial-turned-Commonwealth educational system, his argument about economic inequality ironically underscored by the fact that it relies for its print existence on a British publisher, Nelson, that profited from the colonial educational market.[18] A poem by Tony Harrison from around the same time, "The Death of the PWD Man," draws attention to the material substrate of Commonwealth connections: the poem's narrator, a Leeds man on his way back to Britain after working in northern Nigeria, recalls spotting "HUNSLET (LEEDS) in iron on an engine up at Jos."[19] Clearly, Leeds and Jos are linked by British industrialism and by the demand colonialism created for British goods as much as by rhetoric about the Commonwealth family. For understanding literary circulation, however, the concept of neocolonialism remains a blunt instrument, one that does not account for the situated agency of writers in dominated positions.

"Where cultural processes and discursive formations are concerned, our understanding of agency is at its richest," writes Olakunle George, "if we work with the hindsight of history and context."[20] This book examines how nonmetropolitan poets took advantage of what was, in hindsight, a compromised midcentury configuration in order to address publics broader than their own political units of origin. I conceive of the

transnational literary world in which these poets operated, a world constituted and constrained by institutional networks that they in turn remade, as neither inherently "universal" nor wholly in the service of a colonizing elite, but rather "a *space of possibles*" to be negotiated.[21] Attending to the print circulation of poetry in this era, I join a growing number of critics who insist that while twentieth-century literature has often seen itself – and been seen by critics – as a domain of freedom from economic and institutional constraints, it is better understood as a practice of engaging productively with such constraints.[22] For the poets on whom I focus, such engagement sometimes took the shape of strategic affiliation with modernist poetics as institutionalized in the mid-twentieth century. Okigbo's affiliation with the academic industry surrounding Yeats, whose poetry he reportedly "could not stand or swallow" when first introduced to it, earned him the approbation of the *Times Literary Supplement*; when this bastion of literary gatekeeping reviewed *W. B. Yeats, 1865–1965* as part of a flurry of Yeats centenary items, the reviewer singled out "a very fine commemorative poem by one of the most brilliant of West African poets now writing in English, Mr. Christopher Okigbo."[23] Here Okigbo appears not as a national or a global writer, but as a transnational figure: a border-crossing "West African" networked into the London literary establishment through Commonwealth-sponsored academic and publishing circuits.[24]

Okigbo's too-brief career crystallizes some of the challenges for interpreting nonmetropolitan poets consecrated by London, whom critics have tended either to praise for their feats of aesthetic inventiveness or to pan for their lack of political commitment. In addition to Okigbo, I consider such well-known poets as Seamus Heaney from Northern Ireland and Derek Walcott from Saint Lucia, while making the case for the need to read them alongside their less prominent contemporaries. Each was born during the 1930s, educated in his home region at a university with a colonially inflected curriculum, and published in London in the 1960s while maintaining a critical distance from London. Their poetry extends across a wide aesthetic spectrum, from Okigbo's mesmerizing fusion of classical, modernist, and African-language idioms to Heaney's reworking of the English lyric to make it accommodate the physicality of Irish farm life. What holds together these figures is not so much similarity of style or taste as their common participation in the anglophone literary world from similarly dominated positions. Singular as they have become, they were not always accomplished poets; they made poetic careers amidst the patrons, friends, and rivals of their respective milieux. I am less interested in praising or criticizing them than in testing Pierre Bourdieu's claim that the fullest

grasp of a writer's position in the "*space of possibles*" – and of a specific work's formal logic – can be reached only by "reconstructing the perceived situation, the subjectively experienced problematic" that a writer faces at a given juncture.[25]

The crucial decolonization-era problematic for these university-educated poets from "peripheral" locations is their struggle to convoke transnational publics in print without expatriating themselves literally or culturally. By "publics," I have in mind Michael Warner's sense of virtual social entities "created" among strangers "by the reflexive circulation of discourse."[26] The strategies available to poets to create publics are at once social and textual. Through their stylistic choices, self-descriptions in essays or interviews, and involvement with particular literary institutions, the poets I consider register a multilayered set of ethical and political commitments, by turns local, national, regional, and transnational.[27] At the same time, their efforts to key their work to varied communities – "to envision (and accommodate) several reading publics with different orientations at the same time" – generate remarkable new literary forms, including, though not limited to, the "postcolonial modernism" exemplified by Okigbo's poetry.[28] Without a hard look at the institutional and material mediation of poetry, however, these commitments remain partially obscured – the social meanings of these forms liable to be misrecognized.

The transnational turn in modernist studies has expanded the term "modernist" to texts arising from a wide range of geographic areas, historical periods, philosophical positions, and stylistic priorities.[29] This expansion has many benefits, but one drawback is that it tends to downplay the diversity of cultural-aesthetic positions within a single historical milieu. Both culturalist and materialist lines of criticism, those that insist modernity is multiple and those that insist it is singular, increasingly take "modernism" to entail aesthetic engagement with "modernity." Given this assumption, a non-Eurocentric account of modernity seems to necessitate approaching any text produced during the past two hundred years – five hundred, in some accounts, and even further back in others – as potentially modernist. But is there such a period as modernity? Africanist historian Frederick Cooper poses a series of probing questions: "is modernity a *condition* . . . [o]r is it a *representation*," and if, as some maintain, modernity is both, "is the concept helping us distinguish anything from anything else?"[30] His response is to avoid treating modernity as an analytic category and instead try "to listen to what people are saying when – and if – they talk about being modern."[31] Tsitsi Jaji mobilizes a similar approach to the term "modernism," which she

uses as "a simple heuristic device for indexing aesthetic choices that reflect self-conscious performances of 'being modern.'"[32] This pragmatic identification of modernism with writers' claims to belong to the present deflects many of the problems that dog efforts to define it as a period. I refer to modernist poetics in an even more specific sense. As so-called high modernism was being retroactively constituted by postwar intellectuals, postcolonial poets were re-animating formal strategies of interwar modernism, like those of "modernist bricolage," in new situations.[33] Rather than identifying all midcentury texts that are of interest as modernist, I use the term to indicate a formal repertoire available to poets in a period that also had avowedly nonmodernist schools of poetry.

What is at stake for me in constellating poets from Nigeria, Northern Ireland, the Caribbean, and other locations is the goal not only of recognizing the coevalness of African literature, but also of bringing Irish literature into conversations about postcoloniality without relying on the diachronic analogies between early twentieth-century Ireland and later twentieth-century decolonizing states that the rubric of modernism tends to encourage. When Heaney produces undergraduate poems in the idiom of Anglo-Welsh poet Gerard Manley Hopkins, whom he first read in an anthology at St. Columb's College in Northern Ireland, or writes an elegy based on an Igbo folktale for the Nigerian man who published those first poems at Queen's University Belfast, he is not necessarily a postcolonial modernist. These poems *are* traces, nevertheless, of another side of the colonial-turned-Commonwealth configuration that gave rise to Okigbo's "Lament of the Masks."

Homi Bhabha has written about "the difficult, transnational world" – through which people and poetry circulate according to itineraries that are historically contingent and vulnerable to interruption.[34] The metaphor of circulation, which draws on the body's cardiovascular system, implies that a healthy literary system involves the constant movement of texts among different sites in that system. But literary systems are also "difficult," marked by hierarchies, discontinuities, and deferrals as much as lateral flows. Whatever their places of origin, writers' agency emerges in and through, not despite, their confrontation with such "difficulty" – at times distilled in the kind of aesthetic or intellectual "difficulty" commonly associated with poetry. This book pays attention to the particular hierarchies, discontinuities, and deferrals that ambitious poets navigated during the era of decolonization in order to discover in what ways the difficult, mediated process of circulation may be integral to difficult, rewarding texts.

Poetry in the Era of Decolonization

The Second World War precipitated a decolonizing process that brought international attention to individual writers and entire bodies of literatures from the decolonizing world; the war also hastened a process of cultural and political devolution within the United Kingdom that continues to unfold today. Nearly all of the remaining British Empire gained formal independence during the two decades that followed the Second World War. As one literary historian puts it, "At the start of the twentieth century, Britain had ruled 13 million square miles and 400 million subjects overseas: by the mid-1960s, only a scattering of fragments and islands remained."[35] Historians of empire observe that colonial nationalism, domestic British politics, and international Cold War diplomacy came together to produce this wave of decolonization.[36] In 1947, British India was partitioned into the independent countries of India and Pakistan. The Suez Crisis of 1956, when American pressure led the British government to withdraw its forces from Egypt, is widely seen as the decisive blow to Britain's imperial designs and a signal of the growing global power of the United States. The following year, 1957, Ghana became the first British colony in Africa to gain independence under black majority rule. Then, beginning with Prime Minister Harold Macmillan's 1960 "Wind of Change" speech in Cape Town and the independence of Britain's most populous colony, Nigeria, the 1960s witnessed the formal decolonization of much of the remaining empire. Still, neither the timeline by which independence arrived nor the political forms that it took were inevitable.[37]

Although sometimes depicted as a series of face-offs between imperial Britain and individual nationalist movements, decolonization involved a complex set of relays throughout the Commonwealth. Stirrings of independence in Africa helped to inspire the 1958 formation of the Federation of the West Indies. This federation fractured before achieving the political sovereignty for which its founders had hoped, but its existence encouraged pan–West Indian ideals among figures including Derek Walcott. In the ensuing years, decolonization in eastern and southern Africa exacerbated political tensions in Northern Ireland, as "Britain's willingness to grant independence to its colonies and thus 'abandon' white settlers contributed to anxieties within the unionist community that Westminster might at some point sacrifice them to majority rule in Ireland."[38] Without glossing over what differentiates postwar writers from Nigeria and Northern Ireland, Saint Lucia and England, I explore the

extent to which – and the terms on which – they participated in overlapping political, as well as literary, fields.

One of the premises of this book is that poetry had a surprisingly prominent role in cultural institutions during an era commonly associated with nation-building and the novel. On the one hand, poetry's typical concision meant that it could be composed more quickly than long-form fiction and reprinted more widely, whether in little magazines, weekly papers, or mass-print anthologies. On the other hand, poets continued to accrue symbolic capital – to enjoy honor and prestige – insofar as poetry was still thought of as one of the "purer," more serious forms of art, in contrast, for example, with best-selling novelists whose writing mostly garnered them economic capital. With the postwar extension of schooling and of English as an academic discipline, familiarity with anglophone poetry also became recognizable to more and more people as cultural capital.[39] At the same time, poetic and dramatic forms enjoyed a closer association with indigenous performance cultures than the novel did, so that postcolonial poets could present themselves as continuing indigenous traditions even while writing in English.

In order to bring to light poetry's central role in reconfiguring English-language literature amidst anticolonial struggles, Cold War politics, and civil conflicts, this book foregrounds the materiality of poetry in print. Following N. Katherine Hayles in defining materiality as "an emergent property created through dynamic interactions between physical characteristics and signifying strategies," I also draw substantially on unpublished archival data to analyze the dynamic interactions between postwar poetry and cultural institutions.[40] In my account, such institutions, glossed by one critic as "the specific social structures that mediate between works and publics," include universities, festivals, publishing houses, and periodicals.[41] As I explore how and why the texts of midcentury anglophone poetry are published, I bring into view not only the social structures, but also the cultural gatekeepers – teachers, publishers, and editors – who mediate poetry's appearance in print. Existing modes of materialist criticism have accorded only fitful attention to publishing history or "the diverse technologies for the reproduction of text" that have come to be identified as print.[42] My method, by contrast, treats writers' strategies for publication as inseparable from the negotiations with dominant regimes of value effected at the level of their texts' form and content.

Even as London lost political power over much of Britain's former empire, it continued to hold sway as a cultural, economic, and publishing capital. I aim, then, to track the consequences of decolonization and