

Antisocial Soyinka

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By entitling my paper “Antisocial Soyinka,” I allude, of course, to the author’s reputation for both political insubordination and contumacious posturing which has, on occasion, been deployed to critique his writing as unforgiving and self-indulgent. If I exploit Soyinka’s “bad press” here, I do so in order to underscore a certain negativity in his writing, hoping, in this way, to challenge a predominant but, I think, myopic critical defense of his work as “communalist” and/or “regenerative.” Although Soyinka’s own occasional romanticist utterances have not escaped critique, attempts to deal with the problems posed by critical romanticism as it has evolved in relation to his oeuvre have hardly challenged the pastoral appeal of romanticism itself. While the author has been held to task—notably by Kwame Anthony Appiah (1994)—for idealizing his “oral” heritage and implicitly generalizing the Yoruba tradition to all of Africa, especially in his aesthetic treatise Myth Literature and the African World (1977), Ato Quayson’s more recent influential reading of Soyinka’s work, in Strategic Transformations in Nigerian Writing (1997), locates its Yoruba intertexts within a “relational” (69) framework of thought, emphasizing the extensibility of Soyinka’s model of Yoruba culture and its potential for growth, inclusiveness and survival. By rendering the difficult and contradictory elements of Soyinka’s writing legible as multiculturalist pluralism, Quayson disavows the author’s refusal of Western humanism and negates the textual authority Soyinka derives from

his unapologetic resort to the antiromantic—indeed, antihumanist—elements of the Yoruba cultural resource base.

Take, for example, Quayson’s reading of Soyinka’s celebrated masterpiece Death and the King’s Horseman. This well-known drama is a tragedy within which the act of ritual suicide repudiated by the horseman, Elesin, upon the death of his king, is undertaken in Elesin’s place by his son, Olunde. While frequently read as an affirmation of endogenous culture in the face of an encroaching colonial modernity, Quayson—taking Olunde’s self-substitution for his father as an inscription of Derridean “supplementarity” (94) within the play—describes the son’s gesture as a traditionally authorized “hint of new models of agency for the culture” (94). If, for Quayson, the substitution of the son for his father underscores the interchangeable and overlapping qualities of Yoruba deities, it also affirms “the availability of Ogun-essence” (94) or, of Yoruba cultural authority, to those who do not directly inherit it. Reading the play in the context of evolving nationalist and post-nationalist politics in Nigeria, Quayson argues that it detaches Yoruba cultural elements “from their ritual contexts of circulation” (77) and makes these elements available for fortifying the international discourses of Yoruba, Nigerian and African identity.

What Quayson’s reading overlooks is the similarity between the model of national and postnational Yoruba culture he describes as inhering in Soyinka’s drama and the cultural modalities of neo-liberal globalization. Whether the attribute of diasporic extensibility—through the modes of graphemic detachment and re-attachment—that Quayson finds in Soyinka’s version of the Yoruba tragic order might clash with or simply replicate a colonialism rehabilitated under the rubric of neo-liberal humanism remains a mute point. Quayson suggests, for example, that the substitution of Olunde for Elesin represents a “simultaneous relativization and

affirmation of the traditional mode of tragic agency” (Quayson 94) but this supposed affirmation only reinforces the critic’s prior reading of the play within an essentially humanist framework that finds there different (that is, alternatively Yoruba or British) but related modalities of identity competing for recognition and influence. Like other readers of “oral” intertexts in Soyinka’s writing, Quayson foresees only a future of extension and flourishing for the Yoruba cultural order in the African literary text. But if this implicit concession to humanism would preclude the “negative predicate” (Copjec 224) of suicide inscribed by Soyinka within the drama, what other than the competition for cultural “space” might be at stake in the apparent division established by the play between colonial and Yoruba symbolic systems?

Approaching the challenges posed not only by Soyinka’s disavowal of the theme of culture clash represented in his drama in its preface but also by the suicidal act it affirms might entail further exploration of the apparent continuity evinced by the play—taken as a performance—between “oral” and “written” texts.¹ In order to counteract a prevalent indifference to the modalities of African “oral” cultures within the criticism, Quayson attends to a specifically Yoruba capacity evinced by the play for cultural receptiveness, flexibility and exchange.² But when he claims that the substitution of Elesin by Olunde inscribes within Soyinka’s script the fluid and interchangeable attributes of the Yoruba pantheon—and therefore the flexibility of the “oral” cultural resource base itself—he does not deconstruct but only reverses the force of a Western, rationalist and historicist esteem for specificity and closure often connected with the written text. In Quayson’s reading, that is, “fluidity” and “interchangeability” are not values in and of themselves but only assume value, paradoxically, by virtue of their capacity to specify Yoruba culture, to represent disparity and, perhaps, in this way, to motivate the culture clash he reads in Soyinka’s

work. Yet if the enactment of substitution inscribes within Soyinka's play the particularized "incoherence" of the pantheon, might it not also inscribe there the constitutive incoherence of the Yoruba order itself?

Let me be clear that by "constitutive incoherence," I refer not to the state of flux within which the orisha are imagined to reside within the tradition but to the incoherence of the symbolic system which promises, for Quayson, the orderly extension of the culture into a future time and space. To address the question of incoherence and disorder in the terms of the drama, we might recognize that while Quayson reads Olunde as a liminal figure, Elesin is equally positioned as standing both inside and outside the culture. And if Olunde as son is situated by Quayson in a place where nothing appears to inhibit the capacity of the Yoruba order not only to extend but perhaps, also, to totalize the field of meaning, Elesin represents an exception to the logic of extensibility and a challenge to the notion of totality. In disrupting the ritual self-annihilation that represents not just the simultaneous destruction of the self and the world but also the unity of self and world that gives rise to the universal subject, Elesin represents a kind of internal limit to the Yoruba order. So, although, as Quayson insightfully suggests, the example of Olunde—and the break in the chain of inheritance within the play— "frees" the Yoruba order from the regulative force of biological realism and, thus, from the limiting proscriptions of biological categories like "ethnicity" and "race," Elesin curtails its universal application. If the example of Elesin, thus, renders the Yoruba order's scope not so much infinite as indeterminate,³ it interrupts the process whereby a Yoruba capacity to accommodate other cultural paradigms might approximate neo-liberal humanism by naturalizing the Yoruba order as "universal." That Quayson views indeterminacy as a historically specific and particular characteristic of the "oral" Yoruba order

ignores the allegorical force of that indeterminacy within Soyinka's drama as a comment on the indeterminate character of sociality itself. If Quayson postulates an endlessly extensible and inclusive "Yoruba" nation impervious to fantasies of "race" and kind, Soyinka's drama guarantees neither the kindness of the nation's subjects nor of the structures of subjection it imposes.

To say that Elesin represents an internal limit to the Yoruba order is also, ironically—given his status as one who exhibits the will to live—to suggest that he embodies the antisocial force of the death drive, a force which while constitutive of any symbolic order has been associated, as Lee Edelman has argued in No Future (2004), with the figure of the homosexual within heteronormative discourses. Since Elesin shirks his role as horseman to enact the death of the king and, in this way, potentially obstructs the passage of the patrimony to the next generation, he threatens the continuity of the culture and is marred by accusations of self-indulgence and self-compromise. If, early in the drama, for example, Elesin is lauded by Iyaloja as "a man of honour" (15) and "not one who eats and leaves nothing on his plate for children" (15), later Olunde disowns Elesin, castigating his father as an "eater of leftovers" (50), and, therefore, as one who threatens the survival of his children and the future of his community. The threat Olunde perceives Elesin as posing to his children is, thus, very like that perceived to be posed—within right-wing discourses in the West—to the family by "the queer" who theoretically refuses the burden of reproduction. When, in order to disavow death, the figure of the child becomes the sign of immortality within heteronormative imaginaries, "the queer," Edelman claims, is correspondingly represented as an unregenerate and self-indulgent figure tainted with death, as one who opposes sociality and the collective "good."

Precisely such fantasies of queer antisociality litter the criticism on Soyinka's The Interpreters, a novel within which the African American homosexual character, Joe Golder, has been repeatedly read as degenerate, grotesque and murderous.⁴ A self-confessed advocate of "the cult of black beauty" (196), Golder is often depicted within the critical literature as a foil for Soyinka's critique of Négritude. Since the journalist Sagoe associates Golder's predilection for dark-skinned African men with a form of "self-love" (195) which "sickens [him]" (196)—what readers might readily identify as the egoic kind of narcissism often attributed by heteronormative discourses to gay men in the West—the novel has appeared to combine a critique of Négritudinist romanticism with an attack on same sex desire. It has, thereby, seemed to affirm the disappointing conclusions of Chris Dunton's original and comprehensive survey of homosexuality in African fiction (undertaken in 1989) which claimed that postcolonial African novels largely disavow even the traditional and specialized roles of homosexuals in African cultures, attributing contemporary homosexual practices on the continent exclusively to "the detrimental impact made[...]by the West" (422).

Golder is a liminal figure—both "a light-skinned black man capable of passing as a white man and a homosexual capable of passing as straight" (Desai 123)—whose behavior, like that of Elesin, often seems selfish and hedonistic to his cohorts. When Golder's sexual advances appear to cause the suicide of the youth Noah, the threat of his deportation from Nigeria further highlights his liminal status. Neither Golder's place in the painting by his friend, the interpreter Kola, of the Yoruba pantheon as the model for the intersexual orisha, Er/Inle, nor the attention to man-made borders invoked by the threat of deportation have led to a re-evaluation of the critical position which reads Golder as an alienated and dispossessed figure. Even Guarav Desai, who

challenges homophobia in the criticism by querying Golder's culpability in Noah's death, does not dispute the character's homelessness.

While Desai compares the scene of Noah's suicide to the Marabar caves scene in E.M. Forster's A Passage to India (1924), successfully depicting the suicide as "the effect of a larger social imaginary than of an actual sexual offense" (123), his sympathy for Golder also stems from the character's grave efforts to negotiate cultural nationalist models of racial and sexual identity. Since Golder carries a copy of James Baldwin's novel Another Country (1962) with him to Nigeria, Desai ultimately affiliates the character with African American writers including Baldwin and W.E.B. Du Bois who sought refuge from racism outside the United States. Arguing that Golder is not just "some singular oddity" (124) but a character with a social legacy, Desai extends the theme of "homelessness" (124) in the novel by connecting African American estrangement to "the predicament of a postcolonial nation-state in Africa" (124). He, thus, reads Golder's situation allegorically as a metaphor for the psychological destitution of the postcolonial Nigerian intelligentsia.

This reading, while providing a welcome and necessary challenge to homophobia in the criticism, achieves two contrary results. First, under the paradigm of homelessness, Desai integrates Golder into a postcolonial paradigm making him "at home" within the discourse of nationalist mourning.⁵ Second, by implicitly endorsing the notion that the nation-state, while "alien" to Africa, may be "at home" elsewhere, Desai affirms Eurocentric models of modernity and organicist models of nationalism. His reading does not, then, ultimately challenge the heteronormative status of endogenous (specifically Yoruba) cultural elements in the novel as the sign of what is "regenerative," "natural," and "good for" the citizens of Nigeria. In seeking to

assimilate Golder into the postcolonialist cultural order within the novel, Desai also ignores the allegorical function of his “lethal” Negritudinism.

Further attention to Golder’s role in Kola’s painting as the orisha Er/Inle may allow us to identify him not as an alienated character but as one who figures the constitutive antagonism of the Yoruba tragic order or of the non-identity of the order with itself (which I have argued is represented in Death and the King’s Horseman by Elesin). Furthermore, if, upon Noah’s death, Golder immediately recognizes that his sexuality will mitigate against him in any potential legal proceedings, the force of fatality which he fetishistically bears as a homosexual man is returned in the novel to the neo-traditional nation-state as the arbiter of “Nigerian,” or “Pan-African,” nativity. By highlighting the symbolic rather than natural mechanisms underlying identity, the diasporic character of Golder de-naturalizes the Yoruba elements in the novel.

Golder’s antagonistic yet internal status within the Yoruba schema of the novel may be especially evinced by his symbolic relationship to the interpreter Egbo. As Biodun Jeyifo points out, each of the novel’s central protagonists has been identified with one or more artists or writers of Lagos’s Mbari group (formed in the early sixties)—the bureaucrat Egbo with Soyinka himself.⁶ The character, therefore, allows us to perceive in this early text the beginnings of what Jeyifo describes as Soyinka’s artistic self-invention through the Ogun archetype in an attempt to forge a “representative self” (26) or “a self which aspires to speak and act in defense of a whole culture or tradition” (26). Since the character of Egbo is structured through the Ogun motifs, which represent for Jeyifo “ideal symbolic constructions[...]of artistic identity and authority” (27) within the novel, Egbo assumes centrality within its mythopoeic Yoruba metatext.

His structural and thematic centrality is, at the same time, mitigated by the interchangeable and overlapping facets of the entire group of interpreters. As Kofi Owusu notes, no character is ever “subordinated to a single, definite art or vocation” (187) but all engage, instead, in a range of different activities. The transposable facets of the different group members thematize, for Owusu—as those of the Yoruba pantheon do for Quayson—“the dynamism of the Yoruba culture” (191) and its “versatility” (191) in accommodating other cultural paradigms, including Greek and Christian mythologies. Yet although Owusu deploys the structural dynamism of the interpreters to stress the plurality rather than oneness of the godhead,⁷ he is mistaken, I would argue, to read plurality, or cultural pluralism, as the teleological outcome of the narrative. Rather, by forming links between Egbo and Golder, the novel invites us to read plurality and oneness together. More specifically, it invites us to recognize the non-identity of the one with itself, or to recognize, that is, the ineradicability of a mechanical, non-natural principle within any communal structure.

To begin with, Kola notes, early in his work on the canvas of the Yoruba pantheon, how “Golder fell in place as Erinle only less obviously than Egbo as Ogun” (102). By connecting the characters more closely through the modes of Oedipal myth, including motifs of blindness and guilt for patricide, the novel abjures a humanist model of Yoruba agency.⁸ The title of Golder’s Baldwin novel, Another Country, especially complicates, for instance, the naturalized and neo-traditional status of Egbo’s blind, yet, we are told, “virile” (11), rural grandfather in the pastoral role of “father” of a progenerative Yoruba/Nigerian nation.

Sagoe spells out the pun Baldwin makes in the title of his novel by saying “I spell it Another Cuntry, C-U-N-T” (200). That Sagoe, apparently oblivious of Baldwin’s purchase on the pun, uses the novel’s title to disparage it expresses a

“knowing” and ironic perspective in The Interpreters in relation to its heteronormative and “regenerative” Yoruba intertext. Like Death and the King’s Horseman, Baldwin’s texts investigate the barriers to relationality presented by international configurations of social power. While the novel primarily critiques a pre-civil rights movement United States of America, it also excludes the possibility that another nation-state could provide the conditions required for the unmediated relational intimacy its characters seem to desire. In France, for example, a temporary partnership between Eric, an African American, and Yves, a French man of African descent, fails to establish France as the potential “other country” where intimacy might co-exist with nationality. Yves disparages France as “a wretched mausoleum of a country” (185), hoping instead to find a more promising future in America. But Eric, for whom the journey to America forebodes the end of their relationship, warns Yves, close to the time of their departure for New York, that they “cannot go on forever” (186).

Significantly, Eric’s reluctance to continue his partnership with Yves reflects his underlying unwillingness to succumb to the allure of youth, prosperity and futurity proffered by “America.” As Eric watches Yves swimming, he interpolates Yves’s youthful fantasy of “America” into a black nationalist imaginary by figuratively transforming Yves’s kitten into a panther⁹: “Yves’ tiny black-and-white kitten stalked the garden as though it were in Africa crouching beneath the mimosas like a panther and leaping into the air” (183). If Eric’s perception of the kitten conveys a patronizing view of Yves, it also reflects an ironic perspective on black nationalist desire. For the Africa where panthers crouch like kittens under mimosa trees is the timeless Africa of colonial mimicry, an Africa that mocks Eric’s longing for an unmediated, pastoral experience of love.

When The Interpreters reminds its readers of Baldwin's desire for "another c(o)untry"—a desire figured both by "Africa" and by homosexual desire—it draws attention to the power of the social order to regulate desire. Since the name of Baldwin instantiates in The Interpreters an alternative black and modern tradition extending from the ancestral figure of the slave, it disrupts the organicist reproduction and transmission of Yoruba cultural authority as a "natural" phenomenon. Against the narcissism of the neo-traditional, extensible, ostensibly "communal" and "regenerative" nation, the figure of Golder instantiates an antagonistic, unregenerate, supplementary *ethnos*, which interrupts the reproduction and transmission of a "relativized," diasporic or post-national "Yoruba" nation such as that which Quayson postulates as a consequence of Soyinka's innovations within the Yoruba tradition. If Golder's negativity, like that of Elesin, interrupts the process of the totalization of human experience whether under a "Yoruba" or neo-liberal social order, it is to such figures I would invite readers to turn as they search in Soyinka's texts for resistances to the exclusions performed by modernity.

Notes

¹We might turn our attention for a moment from the content of Quayson's arguments about Soyinka to the critical context within which he makes them. While indebted to Abiola Irele's pioneering essay "Tradition and the Yoruba Writer: D.O. Fagunwa, Amos Tutuola and Wole Soyinka," Quayson questions "the notion of literary influence" (7) girding that essay by reading the line of artistic filiation it establishes as the product of conscious choices and acts rather than of any implicit inheritance. This judicious re-formulation of the tradition is informed by the Derridean theory of the supplement which shapes Quayson's reading of Olunde. Significantly, in its insistence on the emptiness rather than inherent meaning of the sign, the theory of the supplement also recalls Derrida's early work on the relationships between "orality" and "writing." In "Différance" (1968, first English translation 1972), for instance, the philosopher endeavored to dispel the notion that the spoken word is invested with presence and a power of intent associated with the inflections of the voice and with embodiment. Looking at the homophones *difference* ("difference") and *différance*—with an "a"—(often translated as "differal"), Derrida postulated what might be described as a disembodied, "oral" text preceding vocalization and subject to the semantic instability of writing. In doing so, he deconstructed the distinction between "oral" and "written" texts so reductively and perniciously deployed by colonial anthropologists to distinguish "Western" from "non-Western" cultural practices. What critics who seek to deploy Derridean insights in African literary criticism have often failed to observe is that the fantasy of presence associated with embodiment takes a related form in printed discourses when the material form of the printed word becomes a metonymy for physicality, concreteness and, thus, presence. When the fantasy of presence is sustained in writing by related

fantasies of fixity and legibility, spoken texts lose the power of presence associated with embodiment and become devalued as amorphous, transient and incoherent.⁴²

²See Quayson (1997), especially pp. 12-15.

³For a discussion of the consequences of the “internal limit” in psychoanalytic and Kantian terms, see Copjec (1995), pp. 201-236.

⁴See, for example, Femi Ojo-Ade, who objects to the inclusion of Golder in the band of the novel’s Nigerian protagonists. “Despite his inadequacies” (749), Ojo-Ade remarks, “Golder is accepted in the company of Kola, Bandele, and their extra-university friends, who protect him even after he has harassed the truant thief turned Christian, Noah, into jumping to his death” (749). Acceptance of Golder as a friend provides a strong indication for Ojo-Ade that “Sagoe and his friends are contributors to the decadence of the whole society” (749). See also Obiechina, p.110, who includes Golder among a group of characters in the novel who are characterized by caricature and grotesquery.

⁵For a discussion of postcolonial nationalisms of mourning, see Brennan, especially p.100.

⁶See Jeyifo, p. 173.

⁷See especially Owusu, p.193.

⁸While Egbo’s grandfather, like Oedipus, is blind, Golder, like Oedipus, blames himself for his father’s death, claiming that his shame upon the discovery that his father, who passed for white, was “half negro” (188) drove the latter to suicide. Although Golder’s sense of responsibility for the death of his father must certainly be mitigated by the broader social circumstances in which the grief and guilt incurred by “passing” manifest,⁴⁸ he, nonetheless, bears the central Oedipal psychological

characteristic of the patriarchal subject of guilt for patricide. For discussions of racial passing in the United States, see, for example, Harper and Wald.

⁹Eric's metonymic association of Yves with the kitten seems, for instance, to reflect Anderson's proposal in Imagined Communities, that the nation—and, thus, the nationalist future—is typically “birthed” by idealistic “young men.” In the case of Mas Marco Kartodikromo's novel Semarang Hitam, Anderson notes, for example, the importance of the hero's youth as a signifier of the nationalist community's nascent potential: “If in the jocular-sophisticated fiction of eighteenth- and nineteenth-century Europe the trope ‘our hero’ merely underlines an authorial play with a(ny) reader, Marco's ‘our young man,’ not least in its novelty, *means* a young man who belongs to the collective body of readers of *Indonesian*, and thus, implicitly an embryonic Indonesian ‘imagined community’ [his italics]” (32).

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