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Coming to Terms with New Ageist Contamination: Cosmopolitanism in Ben Okri's *The Famished Road*

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ABSTRACT

The paper refutes Douglas McCabe's essay "'Higher Realities': New Age Spirituality in Ben Okri's *The Famished Road*" for its injudicious attack on Okri as a New Ageist and "detraditionalizing perennialist" whose novel *The Famished Road* purportedly reinforces cultural imperialism and global capitalism. The paper reveals that McCabe's primary intention is to indict Okri for the latter's supposed misappropriation of the traditional *abiku* narrative and that McCabe's imputation of *The Famished Road* relies on evidence from without, rather than within, the novel itself. The paper goes on to consider Okri's suffusion of spirituality in the novel as a means of imparting an "enchanted" history. It suggests that notions of cosmopolitanism, in Anthony Kwame Appiah's sense, pervade the text and that characters like Dad and the Photographer can offer insight into individual attempts to manage the various, contesting ontological systems at play in an African culture.

In *Provincializing Europe*, Dipesh Chakrabarty explores how the narrator of subaltern history is to manage the presence of the divine or supernatural that is knit into subaltern culture. How, he asks, are we to "render this enchanted world into our disenchanting prose—a rendering required [. . .] in the interest of social justice?" (77). Ben Okri tackles this same question of how to impart an "enchanted" history—the history of his Nigerian home, where the spiritual realm is, by and large, considered as present and as real as is the natural realm; where traditional animist belief systems mingle together with Christianity, Muslim faith, secularism, and other imported ontological systems, as Nigerians grapple with their own sense of *being* in a "glocal" world.¹ Convinced that "the facts of history alone are not enough to give an account of our consciousness and what

we need to do with our age" (Wilkinson 87), Okri eschews disenchanted prose and, instead, liberally infuses his creative writing with enchantment. He imparts his most renowned narrative, *The Famished Road*, through the consciousness of an *abiku* spirit-child narrator, whose mystic focalization thoroughly disrupts any strict secular telling of history.²

Epitomizing just how sensitive a project this attempt to render the spiritual in the real can be, however, Douglas McCabe denounces Okri's work for its purportedly inappropriate suffusion of spirituality. In "'Higher Realities': New Age Spirituality in Ben Okri's *The Famished Road*," McCabe identifies—or, I will argue, *misidentifies*—the central force that drives the narrative of *The Famished Road* as New Age spirituality, a belief system that, he avers, extends from Western modernism and advances a capitalistic and imperialistic ideology. Associating Okri and his writing with New Ageism, McCabe contends that this novel cannot rightly be considered a postcolonial or postmodern text as critics have often asserted. Far more disturbingly, he accuses Okri of cultural imperialism, of poaching on traditional cultural forms to make them amenable for the Western consumer.

While McCabe makes some intriguing observations about rhetoric in Okri that is consistent with New Ageist idiom, his argument is, in the end, untenable. His difficulties originate in his approach: he injudiciously postulates that Okri is a New Ageist and then attempts to fit *The Famished Road* into that single ontological framework. I will side with the numerous critics, including Anthony Kwame Appiah, who take the more fruitful approach of considering the various, competing ontological systems at play in the novel—an approach that reveals the shortcomings of McCabe's argument. I will suggest that notions of cosmopolitanism pervade the text and offer insights into how the individual might—with formidable effort—approach these contesting ontologies.

Particularly given the degree of respect with which previous critics treat Okri and his work, McCabe's attack seems outlandish. When we recognize that this attack extends from a larger grievance that McCabe carries, however, the motive behind his passionate assault becomes evident. He may genuinely take issue with Okri's apparent embrace of New Ageism, but his larger, umbrella irritation is with African writers' supposed misappropriation of the traditional *abiku*—and Azaro, Okri's *abiku* narrator, is a perfect case. In "History of Errancy: Oral Yoruba *Àbíkú* and Soyinka's 'Abiku,'" McCabe launches his first strike, against Soyinka, for his "ahistorical" representation of the *abiku* in the latter's poem "Abiku." McCabe closes the article with a warning against other, similar abuses of the trope:

[W]e might be tempted to appropriate *àbíkú* as a trope for postcolonial hybridity and liminality, for the migrant experience, for the defiant nationalism of decolonization, for 'magical realism,' or for the globally unjust distributions of wealth and power [. . .] At worst, such ahistorical, academic representations of *àbíkú* might come to stand for the indigenous varieties—a problem similar in kind and in urgency to the perennial problem of "metropolitan hybridity" standing for "subalternity." (65)

Regrettably, McCabe refuses to acknowledge that cultural forms can be innovatively and respectfully operated to negotiate the ontologically complex present-day challenges that indigenous peoples face. If Soyinka's representation of the *abiku*

is offensive to McCabe, Okri's is that much more odious. From here, McCabe springboards into his attack on his next perpetrator—Ben Okri.

McCabe finds his arsenal in Anthony Kwame Appiah's 1993 review of Okri's novel, where Appiah distinguishes *Famished* as a "spiritual realist" text in which the "world of spirits" appears to be "more real than the world of the everyday" (147). McCabe fixes on Appiah's complaint that Okri overdoes spirituality in the novel, that Okri too often writes in an "irritatingly pseudomystical New Age mode" (148), and McCabe takes these remarks as Appiah's evaluation of Okri's personal spiritual beliefs. Whatever appraisal Appiah makes of Okri's own spirituality is not clear, nor is it of any import to his final assessment of the novel. McCabe ignores Appiah's next statement, which praises Okri for *not* doing what McCabe accuses Okri of doing—allowing one dimension to overtake his book. But Appiah's approach is antithetical to McCabe's: Appiah examines the "rhetorical complexity" of the text (147), recognizes that the discourse in the "New Age mode" is undercut by other exchanges (148), and so disallows New Ageism as the novel's "predominating force" ("Higher" 2). Considering that Appiah opens his review by labeling *The Famished Road* postmodern, it is strange that McCabe interprets the article to indicate a departure from, even a contradiction of the major critical view that the novel is postmodern and postcolonial.

It is understandable that McCabe would lend Appiah authority, though. Appiah's ideas are certainly provoking and useful for literary analysis. But Appiah's review resonates better with his ideas of "cosmopolitanism," as he outlines them in his most recent work of philosophy by that same name, than they do with any ideas of neo-imperialism or hegemonic ontology, as McCabe would have it. The "tension" that Appiah emphasizes in this review is characteristic of the tension of the cosmopolitan figure, who tries to negotiate his/her identity at the intersection of various worlds. It is not, I contest, a "tension" over how Okri can "press-gang" his personal spiritual beliefs into "an allegory for the nationalist agenda" (2), as McCabe argues. To be clear, I am not suggesting that Appiah posits a cosmopolitan figure that struggles to negotiate between the spirit and the real world; Appiah is unequivocal when he says that he is discussing human relations only. But ontological beliefs are an aspect of all human world views, and the cosmopolitan's negotiation between world views involves a negotiation of those beliefs as well. If Okri presents any "ideal" character in his novel, it is closer to Appiah's cosmopolitan than it is to some New Age guru.

Appiah joins other recent scholars (such as Jessica Schiff Berman, Pheng Cheah, and Amanda Anderson) in reclaiming "cosmopolitanism" of its negative connotations. For Appiah, the term replaces "globalization" and "multiculturalism." Two intertwining strands underlie the notion: one, the individual cosmopolitan has an obligation to others beyond her/his kith, kin, and immediate community—in a word, to the "cosmos"; two, he/she must seriously value the lives of particular humans, which involves taking a personal interest in those practices and beliefs that are significant to them (*Cosmopolitanism* xv). A key point is that these two ideals often clash, and when they do, they produce the kind of tension that Appiah locates in Okri's work—where indigenous and "metropolitan" ideas of spirituality and "reality" meet. And so we come to Appiah's position that there is "a sense in which cosmopolitanism is the name not of the solution but of the challenge" (xv)—a challenge that is ontological in nature: what world is this, and

how are we to be in it? When Okri asks “Isn’t it possible that we are all abikus?” (Wilkinson 84), I cannot agree with McCabe that Okri is proposing that we are all individuals on a narcissistic path to New Ageist self-actualization (“Higher” 13). Rather, I will argue that Okri is suggesting that we are all individuals in a process of transformation, negotiating our identities at the intersections of worlds. The cosmopolitan is she/he who consciously grapples with being in the face of competing ontologies.

This question of how to be in the world, of juggling multiple ontologies, returns us to the subject of postmodernism. McCabe classifies *Famished* as anti-postmodern because, he believes, it promotes one “transcendental signified” (7)—New Ageism. In other words, he sees Okri’s text as founded upon—and founding—one ontological system. Here, Brian McHale’s distinction between modernism and postmodernism is useful—namely, that in modernist fiction, the “dominant” is epistemology, and in postmodern fiction, the “dominant” is ontology: the first asks questions about knowledge; the second, about being in the world. McHale posits that if one pushes ontological questions far enough, they “tip over” into epistemological ones (and vice versa) (11). This is what McCabe seems to be arguing happens in *Famished*: while Okri presents questions about being, they are, ultimately, resolved in the conviction—the knowledge—that the world is organized under one ontological system. McCabe cannot fully substantiate this claim, however, and, ironically, his efforts to demonstrate how Okri’s text endorses one ideology actually work to demonstrate how it does not. Questions of being remain unresolved at the end of the novel, and the tensions inherent to the “abiku world” persist.

In order to plausibly dispute that *Famished* is a nonpostmodern, nonpostcolonial text, then, McCabe has to establish New Ageism as *the* hegemonic ontology that governs the text. But before detailing the characteristics of New Ageism, McCabe immediately hones in on Okri’s anomalous depiction of the *abiku* spirit world and so exposes that *this* is his primary vexation, that he is looking to solidify an indictment against Okri for misappropriating the traditional narrative. His first move is to mark *abiku* heaven as an unequivocally New Age and anti-indigenous concept with which we are intended to identify as our nirvana. Indisputably, the opening description of the *abiku* spirit world is a “pristine vision of eternal love, beauty, and friendship” (“Higher” 2), as McCabe describes it. That this representation of heaven is intended to cultivate “our complex allegiance” to one “certain metanarrative” (2), however, is difficult to prove—particularly when this claim follows on the heels of McCabe’s admission that “the novel works to complicate any simple allegiance to the ‘world of holidays’” (2). So it surely does: complicated and complicating allegiances are exactly the subject of this novel and are precisely why McCabe’s argument collapses underneath itself.

His next contention—that Okri departs from both traditional and modern literary African representations of the *abiku* spirit world—is better supported but does not do much to move forward McCabe’s claims about the overriding spiritual nature of the text. He provides substantial evidence to underscore his point that Okri’s “abiku heaven” appears to be pure invention, with no precedent in indigenous Nigerian belief or literature. We should note, however, that the novel itself never refers to the *abiku* spirit world as “heaven,” a point to which we will return momentarily. The fact that this description of the spirit-children’s

home is anomalous has not been lost on other critics. In *Strategic Transformations in Nigerian Writing*, Ato Quayson, for one, agrees that this “celestial” world’s “kinship to paradise is unmistakable” (137). But McCabe’s accusatory claim—that “to represent abiku heaven as an idyll of serenity and love for which innocent children long is to contest indigenous precursor-texts and contemporaries alike,” that it is “to contradict the forms of religion and views about human spirituality embodied by those indigenous texts, promoting and promulgating instead a theory of the afterlife and of human beings’ relationship to the divine” that is New Ageist (“Higher” 5)—is deeply flawed.

The chief problem is McCabe’s equation of “abiku heaven” with a human “afterlife.” McCabe goes to great lengths to demonstrate how contemporary Nigerian writing continues to depict “abiku heaven” as a spirit realm fraught with anxiety, consistent with the sinister “bush” of the *Ifa* tradition and Amos Tutuola’s *My Life in the Bush of Ghosts*, where *abikus* plot their destructive, insidious plans.³ But Tutuola’s stories portray a forest spirit world that is far from homogeneous; rather, it comprises numerous spirit-realms that are separated by distinct boundaries. His novel *The Palm-Wine Drinkard* plainly illustrates that *abiku* territory is sharply demarcated from the more benevolent realms of the forest. In no way does the *abiku* realm coincide with an “afterlife” for regular humans. The spiritual domain of *Famished* also contains spirit realms of different orders, as Quayson has noted (“Esoteric” 109). So then, Azaro’s idyllic spirit home should not be extended to represent the human “afterlife”: none of the human characters seek entry into his spirit world. Further, its heavenly nature is itself called into question, as is the existence of a “heaven” generally.

Even if the *abiku* spirit world were meant to reflect “human beings’ relationship to the divine,” that depiction is not as particular to New Ageism as McCabe would have us believe. Bolaji Idowu’s Christianized description of the Yoruba Supreme Being in *Olódùmarè: God in Yoruba Belief* bares an affinity to that of the great king of the *abiku* spirit world: “He is conceived as the undying king (Oba Aiku), whose habitation is in the heavens above (Oba Orun) and who is above all divinities and humans; a being whose work is done to perfection (Ase-kan-ma-ku) [. . .] controller of humankind’s destiny” (qtd. in Oladipo 359). It is quite probably not the case that Okri derives the great king from this depiction; the point is that his source is not clear, and it could be as easily be Yoruba as Christian as New Age spirituality—or that, more likely, it is a hybrid creation of any of the above.

Oddly, McCabe does not attempt any exegesis of the concept of “Heaven” where it actually appears in the text. The three-headed spirit introduces the term to Azaro when the latter takes the path towards his spirit home in order to torture his parents for unjustly punishing him. The spirit explains that the strange, dead beings in the valley are perpetually building and re-building a road to another world called Heaven. When Azaro repeatedly asks why it is so named, the spirit reveals, “*Heaven means different things to different people*. They wanted to live, to be more alive. They wanted to know the essence of pain, they wanted to suffer, to feel, to love, to hate, to be greater than hate, to be imperfect in order to always have something to strive toward, which is beauty” (329, emphasis mine). It is inconsequential, the spirit infers, whether Heaven truly exists or not since it is the *road* that “is their soul, the soul of their history” (329); their artistic construction is what brings the workers “an infinity of hope and an eternity of struggles”

(330), and their Sisyphusian effort, like Dad's, is what brings them personal and communal meaning.

In *The Infinite Longing for Home*, David C. L. Lim offers an intriguing Lacanian reading of this impossible pursuit of heaven.⁴ By his account, when the spirit goes on to suggest that the "people will have to become gods" to gain truth (*FR* 332), he does not mean that they will attain perfection—in the way that a New Ageist, at his/her spiritual apex, does. Rather, Lim asserts, becoming a "god" "is about effecting a radical mental and attitudinal shift from misrecognition to recognition of the truth concerning the impossibility of Heaven and the significance of that impossibility" (*Infinite* 71). This last interpretation may swing too far back towards a reading that downplays the significance of the metaphysical in the novel; still, Lim's reading is valuable in its identification of Heaven's function as a construct only.

Along similar lines, Azaro's last and closest approach to the spirit world should make us question if the *abiku* paradise is not as impossible as is this Heaven. If Azaro forgets the exigencies involved in traversing into the spirit world (327), might it also be possible that he has forgotten the actual nature of that world, that he has been conned into a conception of an elysian home by this spirit and others like him?⁵ In his final approach, the nearer he gets to his so-called heaven, the closer he comes to the center of the scorching desert, where his "meadows of flowers with passionate calyxes" are "all ghosts of the vegetation they used to be," where "new music, composed entirely of desert vowels" drenches him with anguish (461). Azaro calls out to his "great king," who seems to have dissolved, or is at least unresponsive. Azaro is denied "the ecstasy of everlasting love" ("Higher" 18) that McCabe sees as the final actualization of the self, the end-point of spiritual hunger and longing (14). Instead, it is Mum who comes to Azaro's rescue, and her first words to him are not insignificant: she tells him that he was dancing like his grandfather before he fell. Whatever hope remains in the world, it is not in some paradisaical fairyland—rather, it is firmly rooted in community, with essential ties to traditional ancestry.

Once McCabe has delineated Okri's "misrepresentation" of the *abiku* spirit world, he returns to what is supposed to be his primary subject matter—New Age spirituality. He outlines New Ageism as "a movement in which salvation and perfection are achieved not by doing good works or obeying divine authority or having faith in a higher power, but by looking inward to the Self and finding ways to free it from the anxieties and hang-ups and perceptual cookie-cutters of the ego" (7). In an attempt to establish this movement as "solidly rooted in modernity," McCabe traces its tenets through from Plato to Augustine and Descartes, to eighteenth-century "expressivism," on to the German and English Romantics, to arrive at Western modernity. Showing it to have issued forth from "a commitment to the life-goods of self-fulfillment and the search for authenticity that peculiarly and centrally characterize the modern identity" (9), McCabe confidently brands New Ageism "profoundly modern rather than postmodern" (9). What he actually demonstrates is a profound misunderstanding of what the "post" in "postmodern" indicates—that postmodernism, too, emerges from modernism, as "logical and historical consequence" (McHale 5). So then, tracing these origins does little to advance McCabe's case that "New Age is a manifestation of Western modernity" ("Higher" 8). What his derivation does do is underscore the typically illogical reasoning of McCabe's argument.

If New Ageism has, in fact, inherited “the culture of narcissism” (8), it cannot be taken as an inevitable evolution out of modernism (as if “modernism” were axiomatically narcissistic!). When McCabe uses the same illogical syllogism to conclude that Okri, as a purported New Ageist, necessarily—however unconsciously— participates in this “culture of narcissism,” he goes one step too far. Here he enters the most vicious stage of his back-handed assault on Okri. The progression of his argument operates by faulty syllogism. First, he takes those who can afford to attend New Age seminars and retreats as representative of all New Agers and equates their pursuit of “competitive advantage” with the “self-centered consumerism” that New Ageists celebrate and sanctify as a “path toward enlightenment or authentic being” (9). He then aligns New Ageists with free market pundits before announcing his damning summation: “In short, the New Age movement, believing that social transformation is effected only through narcissistic spiritual self-pampering, reflects and contributes to the capitalist and individualist features of modernity that are widely held to perpetuate social and political inequality and oppression” (9). That these New Agers are supposedly unconscious of how they maintain “capitalism’s sociopolitical injustices” (9) hardly softens the blow that he is leading up to—that “[o]ne such New Ager is Ben Okri” (10). To add insult to injury, McCabe then files Okri in with “detraditionalizing perennialists” and New Agers who erase “the rich histories and complex present circumstances” of other cultures’ spiritual systems so as to make them more marketable to the “Western consumer” (10). So Okri stands condemned as a cultural imperialist and a global capitalist.

As staggering as this imputation might be, McCabe does regain some ground when he directs our attention to certain striking affinities between Okri’s idiom and that of New Ageism. Curiously, though, McCabe works backwards, locating instances of this idiom in sources written at considerable temporal distance from the novel—Okri’s verse pamphlet *Mental Fight* (1999), his essay collection *A Way of Being Free* (1997), and a radio interview (1994). Even so, McCabe’s point that *Mental Fight* is dedicated “To Humanity in the Aquarian Age,” for instance, is well taken. And he makes a convincing case that “[s]ociocosmic millenarianism, co-creative idealism, loving monism, self-actualization [. . .] are at the heart of Okri’s nonfiction” (10). What McCabe does not substantiate is his inclusion of “detraditionalizing perennialism” in this list. There is no evidence that Okri’s encouragement in *A Way of Being Free* to let go of one’s “certainties” and to struggle towards a “universal golden age” constitutes wiping out indigenous traditional practices and beliefs. On the contrary, Okri’s concomitant urging to “awaken to the wonder of the ‘human mystery’” (10) indicates more of a cosmopolitan desire to respect and attempt to understand the idiosyncratic differences of other cultures.

Similarly, McCabe relies on unqualified conjecture for his valuation of Okri’s interview. What Okri calls “the kingdom, the new wind, and the transcendence of consciousness,” McCabe takes to mean “our inner depths, the hidden dimensions of the human spirit, the semi-divine sides of our nature” (11)—yet the interview, as documented by Ogunsanwo, offers nothing so definitive. Because ellipses precede the phrase, “It’s a new wind that is spreading across the world” (Ogunsanwo 40), it is uncertain to what exactly Okri is referring. If the previous sentence, where Okri speaks of his discovery that others share his belief in the coexistence of spirit and human beings, is any indication,

then the “new wind” has to do with the acknowledgement of a fuller reality that comprises spirit as well as physical beings; or, as Chakrabarty would say, one that accounts for a spiritual world concomitant with the material world. Okri can hardly be branded a “detraditionalist” when he links the “transcendence of consciousness” with ritual and initiation. His persuasion that we need “ritual passages to separate different points of our experience” (40) is not about erasing, but remembering traditional practice: the problem, he says, is that “we went ahead and forgot” (41).⁶ There is no evidence here that Okri is urging us to reconnect with “the semi-divine sides of our nature” (“Higher” 10); that is McCabe’s ornamentation. Agreed, Okri’s aim “to restore the kingdom” does open up space for a New Ageist interpretation, but Ogunsanwo omits Okri’s explanation, and we are left—aptly enough—to equivocate. That Okri is influenced by a New Ageist ontology is not unviable. That Okri ultimately embraces *only* that one ontological system is much more difficult to prove.

Since McCabe first looks for evidence of Okri’s affinity for New Age spirituality in writing external to the primary text at hand, he might have looked for New Ageisms in Okri’s other creative work from the same period as *Famished*. Okri’s verse collection *An African Elegy* (1992) would have been a good starting point—particularly since the poetry shares much of the imagery and idiom of *The Famished Road*. “Lament of the Images” is elucidating in its portrayal of a “new age” that reacts decisively *against* “perennialist, detraditionalizing spiritual practice” (“Higher” 10). There, Okri depicts the colonial violation of native sacred masks and shrines and the subjection of ““Primitive objects”” to “the milk/ Of scientific / Scrutiny” (AE 10). In their place, the indigenous make “Other Images”:

For new seasons
A new god
For a new
Age. (10)

The Western artists who contort the language of the new Images, who purify them “of ritual / Dread” (11) are disparaged as harshly as the original Western exploiters. The poem proceeds to mourn that paltry few can hear the traditional masks anymore:

Hear the terror of their
Chants
Which breed powers
Of ritual darkness
And light
In the centre
Of the mind’s
Regeneration. (11)

The “Regeneration” he speaks of is inextricably linked to the ancestral gods, to the dreams of the ancestral universe. While there is hope of regeneration, it is necessarily accompanied by “terror” and “ritual dread”; and the hope can only be sustained by relearning the old songs (13). This is an obvious affirmation of the value of the traditional culture, and the message is undeniably anti-imperialistic.

When McCabe moves on to treat *Famished*, his reading becomes increasingly forced. If McCabe's argument were implausible before, it moves into the realm of the ludicrous as he posits Azaro as the novel's heroic New Age guide. Azaro is no mere "New Age exemplar," but, he is a "New Age guru," McCabe persists, "[l]ike Shirley Maclaine," "working to coax us into a state of heightened spiritual consciousness similar to his own" ("Higher" 14). While critics tend to agree that many of the peculiarities of the novel's narrative form can be traced to "oral narrative practice" (as Anthonia Kalu calls it),⁷ McCabe attributes the eccentricities of Azaro's narration to a New Ageist perspective: they reflect Azaro's enigmatic spiritual nature and, more importantly, they work to conduct the reader into "an enlightened, liberated, 'true' state of consciousness at home with the mystery of existence" (14). But what reader feels "at home" with these "mysteries"? Even McCabe, by way of avoidance, demonstrates his own discomfort with the full extent of the mystery that Azaro imparts—that in all probability, "no way is ever definitive, no truth ever final" (FR 488). Could a New Age guru who maintains an "un-postmodern faith" in a "transcendental signified *par excellence*" ("Higher" 8) deliver such a final word on the fundamentally uncertain nature of being in the world?⁸ Surely, the novel's unremitting riddles—focalized through Azaro—speak, rather, to a postmodern ambivalence that celebrates possible worlds while calling all such worlds into question.

Besides the question of Azaro's spiritual allegiance, his subjectivity as a spirit child is problematic: a narrator who is not fully human is one with whom the reader can only, with difficulty, even partially relate. No matter how "heightened" our state of "spiritual consciousness" ("Higher" 14), we could never, like Azaro, see "a future history in advance, compacted into a moment" (FR 314) or enter our parents' dreams or a duiker's memory. We must observe with Derek Wright that "[w]hat Azaro sees is of course seen through the eyes of a spirit being, whose peculiar forms of knowledge and mimetic representation the human reader is not admitted to" (19). Or, we might ask, along with Quayson, "How are we to know the principles by which an abiku decodes the spirit potential of things?" (*Strategic* 149). For, as Quayson notes elsewhere, the *abiku* consciousness in *Famished* is so "radically decentered" that not only is it impossible for Azaro to consolidate "a sense of self and identity," but his *abiku* essence that pervades the narrative makes such a consolidation impossible for all who inhabit the *abiku* "arena" ("Esoteric" 153). Further, as several critics have noted, Azaro is too passive and powerless a character to be considered heroic: he functions as a "a presence rather than an agent" (Wright 24), one who is often at the mercy of arbitrary shifts in space ("Esoteric" 153) and who is never able to make use of his spiritual insights in the "real" world (Quayson "Orality" 112). Even after Azaro exercises uncharacteristic volition and rejects the "strangling" *abiku* cycle (Lim 66), he remains a free-floating witness.

McCabe takes a new stance on Azaro's passivity. He argues that it models the "true path to social harmony and inner peace," the New Age "path of quietude, introspection, magical perception and self-realization" (14). But Azaro's passivity makes him vulnerable to spiritual forces invoked by his earthly parents and generated by his spirit companions who try to force his return to their world. By all indications, Azaro would have been ferried into the land of the dead were it not for Dad's intervention. Dad's "stories in songs" about their ancestors, "wondrous tunes" that included tales of "the infinite regions of heavenly beings," offer Azaro

“water and food and new breathing” (FR 336). It is only through Dad’s traditional ritual sacrifice, with the aid of a herbalist, that Azaro recovers in the world of the living. Quayson makes the convincing argument that Azaro, whose role it is to live out the essence of *abiku*, never undergoes the requisite rite of passage of the mythopoeic hero. Instead, his heroic potential is displaced onto Dad (*Strategic* 139–43). If any character can be deemed heroic, then, it is not Azaro, but his earthly father.

At a quick glance, it appears that Dad might even make a credible candidate for a New Age hero. The first passage from *Famished* that McCabe examines is an excerpt from Dad’s closing speech, and it does contain enough New Age idiom to make us reconsider McCabe’s case. Dad is the one to announce, “We have entered a new age,” to claim, “Human beings are gods hidden from themselves,” to preach, “It is more difficult to love than to die. It is not death that human beings are most afraid of, it is love” (498). What is more, it is in following Dad that Azaro learns “that other spheres of higher energies have their justice beyond our understanding” (494). But, strangely, despite his compelling observation that Dad’s “mystical revolutionary dream-vision” near the end of the novel “contains every item on the New Age shopping list” (“Higher” 12), McCabe proceeds to condemn Dad’s “path to betterment” as socialist, “ego-driven,” and “‘inauthentic’ in contrast to Azaro’s” (13). If Okri were promoting New Ageism, and if he meant Dad to be such a contemptible character, why would he allow Dad to deliver the most New Ageist vision of the novel? To my mind, McCabe is right to underscore Dad’s oration as carrying significant philosophical import to the text, but for antithetical reasons: I am persuaded that Dad, more than Azaro, represents the active struggle that Okri holds to be requisite to escaping cycles of social and political destructiveness.

Of course, by reclaiming Dad as heroic, I am not, by extension, reclaiming New Ageism as the dominant ontology of the text. Dad’s final homilies might well be infused with New Age ideology, but they are just as thoroughly steeped in other, interweaving ideologies. We have already noted instances of Dad’s faith in traditional beliefs and practices, and his continual return to that foundation should not be ignored. When he emerges as the legendary Black Tyger and proclaims, “This world is not what it seems. There are mysterious forces everywhere” (FR 388), he acknowledges multiple spiritualities that he could not perceive previously. Still, he attributes his recovery from his boxing match with the Green Leopard to his father—the high-priest of the shrine and the Priest of the Road—whose immense power he recognizes for the first time (406). Maintaining this trust in a traditional ontology does not interfere with his interest in other systems of belief, though, and as the novel nears its end, he ruminates on “the need for world inspiration,” on “priests without shrines [. . .] gods without anyone to believe in them, dreams without dreamers” (445). His eclectic global vision is often at odds with the day-to-day “reality” of his immediate community, so that he smells of “too much energy, too much hope, too much contradiction” (445). The struggle in him is that of the cosmopolitan—to connect with humanity on a global scale and, at the same time, to concern oneself with the particular needs and aspirations of individuals at a local level. To be sure, Dad’s repeated failures do not add up to a McCabean reckoning that he is a self-serving “socialist.” Rather, they reflect the strain involved in acknowledging and respecting the co-existence of different ontologies. And however slow and muddled his path may be, he makes enough progress to leave us with a sense of possibility in the cosmopolitan ideal.⁹

We get the first sense of Dad's cosmopolitan potential from Azaro, who spots the "future incarnation" of Dad's "better self" in the city center: wearing a blue French suit, Dad's "successful double" drives off with a beautiful woman (144). If we follow the French suit motif, though, we see that this path towards metropolitan worldliness is deeply conflicted. The French suit is the garb of corrupt politicians throughout the novel, including the three men in dark sunglasses who hunt down the Photographer. Yet their common dress appropriately reflects the corruption to which Dad is also susceptible in his growth as a revolutionary leader. When he presents himself as the Black Tyger, he is accused of setting himself up as a "Big Man. With no shame" (367), and his own family goes hungry while he gorges himself to satisfy his legendary appetite. Even as he broadcasts the laudable and decidedly cosmopolitan ideal that "every citizen must be completely aware of what is going on in the world, be versed in tribal, national, continental, and international events, history, poetry, and science" (409), he adopts the posture of a megalomaniac, at once promising Christ-like miracles (419) and brutally castigating the "people of the nation" for their "sheep-like philosophy" (420). At this incipient stage, his cosmopolitanism is only offensive, and his society utterly rejects his vision. That "cosmopolitanism" is the not the name of the solution but of the challenge is well illustrated.

Dad persists, though, and pushes forward his own and others' conception of what is possible on a "glocal" scale. He instigates a new sense of inquisitiveness in Azaro: "new things were happening in the world and in our local area. Was I not curious?" (428). Moreover, he confronts his own, personal limitations. It is not without import that when Dad eventually dons a black French suit, it is to wrestle with the man in white. Cooper offers an insightful reading of this fight as Dad's struggle with own his *chi*, his spiritual being and destiny, that when Dad defeats his *chi*, he communicates something "elusive" about the proper bounds of personal ambition (*Magical* 76).¹⁰ I would push her idea further to suggest that when Dad defeats his *chi*, he displays the cosmopolitan imperative to tackle one's own self-imposed and culturally-imposed limitations in order to open up new avenues of understanding. Following this victory, Dad gains profound insight and wisdom from his dreams, where he "live[s] out a whole lifetime in another continent" (*FR* 494). When we recognize that these dreams extend from Dad's earlier dream of setting out "to discover a new continent [. . .]. The Continent of the Hanging Man" (436) and that this vision corresponds exactly to that of the International Photographer, we find Dad allied with the novel's most distinctly cosmopolitan character.

Dad may travel to Europe and America in dream-visions, but the Photographer is the only fully human character in the novel to physically explore the world beyond their African nation. In her thoroughgoing analysis of the Photographer, Barbara Cooper remarks upon his cosmopolitan nature: "Steeped in the modern, he travels the paths of the world, seeking his own freedom and a global understanding" (*Magical* 97). Her conception of cosmopolitanism is at odds with Appiah's, however, in that she believes the cosmopolitan to be opposed to "holistic thinking—to understanding how systems of oppression work" and, as such, susceptible to becoming exploitative him/herself (31). This notion leads her to finally judge Okri's Photographer as "'reductively individualistic,'" where only he, and not the "miserable masses" he attempts to save, is "existentially liberated" (109–10). To the contrary, I believe the Photographer's character is consistent with Appiah's

configuration and, further, that his artistic pursuits could represent Okri's own cosmopolitan, creative ideals.

It is apposite to remark here that we should not expect to find a fully formed, polished cosmopolitan in the novel; Okri's characters are very much works-in-progress, none of whom arrive at complete "self-actualization," all of whom struggle in processes of transformation. In the same way that Dad's cosmopolitanism is hardly ideal, particularly at its emergence, the Photographer's also develops from questionable motives. Like Dad, the Photographer enters "new mythic perceptions of himself" as the hero who brings their "small corner of the great globe" to "prominence" in the newspapers (*FR* 156). The pride that he takes in distorting Mum's beauty into "something wretched and weird" and Dad into a "starving witch-doctor" (157) is inarguably disturbing. If Okri left the Photographer basking in his own Messianic glow, we would, no doubt, have to agree with Cooper's reproach. However, once the Photographer begins to "travel all the roads of the world," visiting other continents, observing foreign ways of being, and taking pictures to display "to the whole world" (262), he and his art change. Azaro notes an alteration in the Photographers eyes, voice, and photography when the artist returns; specifically, the Photographer's "strangest" photograph (263), that of a white bird landing on top of a lynched man's head, marks his move away from profitable sensationalism towards more seriously engaging artistry. By then end of the novel, the Photographer appears only sporadically, often as a silent presence. Far from condoning the abusive appropriation of cultural material, Okri exposes the artist's susceptibility towards becoming as exploitive as those he condemns in "Lament of Images"—and then he conveys the possibility to rise above and beyond that danger.

The significance of the Photographer's cosmopolitan pursuits increases substantially when we recognize that photography functions as a metafictional device in the novel.¹¹ That the Photographer's art is meant to draw attention to this text as a work of art is most evident in the obscure sequence when Azaro and the Photographer, fleeing from thugs, fall down a well together, are bound by their adversaries, and are shut into a glass cabinet. There, "trapped behind glass," Azaro becomes "a photograph that Dad stared at" (174), like the diverse others who have "become real" by grace of the Photographer's "magical instrument" (182). In the same way that the Photographer brings snapshots of "real" life into dialogue with each other in his cabinet to create a variegated representation of history, Okri crafts a text that displays the complex negotiation of the cultural "truths" of a modern-day African nation. Although she does not distinguish Okri's artistry as cosmopolitan (in Appiah's sense), Cooper supports that view when she attests that Okri identifies with the artist "who has the vision to perceive life's multiple dimensions . . . with all its contradictions and intensities" ("A Boat" 68). It should be clear by now that this "vision" that Okri, the Photographer, and Dad share is at a sure remove from a neo-imperialist, New Ageist one.

Similarities between New Ageism and cosmopolitanism make for an understandable confusion, though. Cosmopolitanism, too, could be said to promote "cosmic love" in that its "citizens of the cosmos" act out of caring obligation to those beyond their "kith and kind" (*Cosmopolitanism* xv); and cosmopolitans, like New Ageists, are "jointly responsible for the state of [their] selves, [their] environment and of all life" ("Higher" 6). The two ideologies also share a respect for the

differing practices and beliefs of particular human lives. An important difference, however, is that New Ageism is universalizing and insists that, despite an accepted diversity of religions, all are expressions of one inner reality, whereas cosmopolitanism does not aspire to such consensus but views value terms—religious and otherwise—as “essentially contestable” (*Cosmopolitanism* 59). For the latter, “the struggle is not to agree but just to understand” (47). It is more a commitment to this struggle than a quest for paradisaical harmony that characterizes *Famished*.

The cosmopolitan might also appear to be an enlightenment-seeking individualist akin to McCabe’s “narcissistic,” “self-pampering,” consumerist New Ager. Appiah makes it clear, however, that an individual’s values do not guide him/her alone but guide “people who are trying to share their lives” (27). It is apposite to mention here that notions of individualism are not incommensurate with the “forms of religion” and “human spirituality” that McCabe upbraids Okri for marring. In fact, recent Nigerian philosophy emphasizes the role of the individual in indigenous concepts of spirituality. In “Towards a Theory of Destiny,” Segun Gbadegesin draws connections between individuality and the community in the Yoruba tradition. He clarifies that while one’s destiny (or *ori*) guarantees potentials, the “actualization of a life prospect” depends on individual effort (317). Yet that individual personality only becomes meaningful when one appeals to destiny and to the community (318), where destiny is defined as a person’s “own contribution to the totality of the good in the community in particular, but also in the universe” (318). The affinities between this theory of destiny and the ideals of cosmopolitanism should be obvious. The affinities with New Ageism may remind us that the New Age spirituality is a hybrid creation, developed out of multiple spiritual traditions, including African animist ones.

Another instance from Nigerian philosophy drives home the point that while the New Ageist idea of “individual self-actualization” (“Higher” 7) may demand the “detraditionalization” of indigenous spiritual practices, the cosmopolitan notion of individual ambition is not at odds with, but is even supported by, Nigerian tradition. Nkiru Nzegwu examines the relationship between individual artistic expression and Igbo community interests in “Art and Community: A Social Conception of Beauty and Individuality.” Of particular interest is her attention to the genre of *ikenga* statues, which symbolize “individuality, assertiveness, and the self” and “underscore the importance of personal success and achievement” (415). Nzegwu’s description of how one focuses one’s spirit using the sculpted *ikenga* is remarkably akin to how both Dad and the Photographer sharpen their purpose in *Famished*:

Intently articulating personal goals and focusing on what is willed aligns one’s thoughts with one’s will. The fusion of the two generates intense psychic energy, heightens one’s commitment, and results in the release of one’s creative powers. Articulating one’s goal and meticulously working toward its realization transfigures the self and one’s surroundings, through fostering inner strength, confidence, self-assurance, initiative, and strength of character. (422)

Nzegwu goes on to explicate that such “individual initiative and resourcefulness” is immensely valued in Igbo social arrangements since it proffers the culture esteemed social mobility (422). There is no telling to what degree Okri may have been influenced by this particular spiritual practice (though his mother is of Igbo

origin). What is plain is that this indigenously based notion of individualism is decidedly closer to the one Okri presents in *Famished* than is the neo-imperialist variety that McCabe insists Okri portrays.

McCabe's underlying irritation, as we have seen, is with the mishandling of traditional indigenous forms. He operates upon what Appiah calls 'the logic of cultural patrimony' (*Cosmopolitanism* 129), the insistence that "authentic" culture—or, "Culture™" (128)—must be protected from foreign desecration. But Nigerian culture, like all others, is "made of continuities and changes" (107); "authenticity" is not so easily located. Indigenous cultures are, as Appiah explains, through and through "contaminated" and should be esteemed as such—where "contamination" stands as a "counter-ideal" to the impossible ideal of "cultural purity" (111). How McCabe can ignore the vast scholarship on how such "contamination"—and reappropriation in particular—has long been characteristic of the Nigerian narrative tradition is truly baffling.¹² He denies what Cooper (along with most other critics) sees—that Okri's use of the *abiku* trope is a "meaningful appropriation" (*Magical* 51) of an oral narrative form. More significantly, Okri's "contaminated" version reflects the "contamination" of the "glocal" African nation—a world where the bells of the new African church accompany the calls of the muezzin in discordant concert with chants at the shrine. Okri's ambivalence towards each of the related spiritualities—Christian, Muslim, animist, along with New Age—prevents any one of them ontological governance over the others. Instead, Okri keeps the vying spiritualities in discourse.

Appiah's cosmopolitan seeks out cross-cultural conversations, where "conversation" serves as "a metaphor for engagement with the experience and the ideas of others" (*Cosmopolitanism* 85)—an imaginative engagement that, aptly enough, he compares to that of reading a novel. This is, to my mind, the kind of conversation to which Okri gives us privy in *Famished*. It is one where the characters, but also we, as individual readers, encounter co-existent ontological systems, sometimes the same and often different from our own; and if we cannot immediately learn from them, we might "simply be intrigued by alternative ways of thinking, feeling, and acting" that will lead to the possibility of discovering further things we share, discovering further points of contact (97). It is an imaginative engagement that is taxing, though—especially for the African writer who is torn between "metropolitan" ideals of "individual self-discovery" and commitments to an African "social vision," as Wole Soyinka calls it (Appiah "African Philosophy and African Literature" 542), who always runs the risk of being accused of leaning too far in one direction or the other.

At the end of his offensive, McCabe takes a bewildering hairpin turn and collapses his entire argument. He admits that "[o]ne of the great virtues of *The Famished Road* is [. . .] its intractable heterogeneity" and even concedes that its heterogeneity "frustrates any attempt to unify the novel around a single ideological vector" ("Higher" 17). When he closes with the opinion that this "salutary multiplicity [. . .] is crucially missing from Okri's writing after *The Famished Road*" (17), one wonders why he bothered with *The Famished Road* at all—except that he has *Abíkú*™ to protect. He probably is not aware of the serious danger in cultural patrimony that Appiah highlights—that it "has imperial tendencies of its own" (*Cosmopolitanism* 129), "embracing the sort of hyper-stringent doctrine of property rights [. . .] that we normally associate with international capital" (130). Avoiding

all of these tendencies to imperiousness is the cosmopolitan's arduous task. And the difficulty is compounded for a writer, like Okri, who is attempting to render a culture's enchanted world *and* capture the embroilments of that rendering. The effort to allow the spiritual to exist in equivalence with the real naturally leads to misinterpretations. But these misinterpretations only drive home the point: the esoteric is venerably unfathomable.

NOTES

1. Dieter Riemenschneider uses the term "glocal" to refer to "transglobal multiple exchange of global and local factors" (16).

2. Apart from where it is formatted otherwise in citation, the Yoruba word *àbíkú* will appear italicized and without its accents.

3. Considering McCabe extracts "evidence" from Misty Bastian's historical account of the *ogbaanje* (the Igbo "born-to-die" spirit-child) in popular literature, it is strange that he ignores her discussion of the shift in popular, indigenous representations at the end of the 1980s. At that point, socially and spiritually sensitive *ogbaanjes* emerge alongside the more traditional, socially destructive types. These new *ogbaanjes*, like Azaro, desire the best for themselves and their communities as they negotiate the turbulence of a transitional society (65). Would McCabe also condemn these local reappropriations of the *abiku*, which are intended for an indigenous audience?

4. Lim finds the pursuit of Heaven to "perfectly parallel the Lacanian subject's misrecognition of his constitutive lack and impossible pursuit of himself" (69).

5. Cooper moves towards affirming this: she notes the "decidedly suspect" nature of the three-headed spirit and posits that the "goodness" along the road home "may simply be a mirage" (*Magical* 79).

6. Okri often refers to the problem of forgetting indigenous origins: Dad complains that his generation is "forgetting [the] powers" of the traditional elders (*FR* 70); "Lament of the Images" voices the concern that "The land / Has almost/ Forgotten / To chant its ancient songs" (12); and Okri stresses that Africans "have forgotten about [their] own aesthetic frames"—namely, their "spiritual and aesthetic and mythic internal structures" (Wilkinson 86).

7. J. S. F. Vazquez perhaps puts it most succinctly: Azaro's subjectivity is "cross-bred in nature, as it corresponds to an African ontology which defines itself as a composite of different life principles" (92). See also Cooper, *Magical Realism* 74–86 and "Landscapes, Forests and Borders" 282–86; Quayson, "Fecundities of the Unexpected" 18–19 and "Orality—(Theory)—Textuality" 114; Wright 20.

8. Along these lines, Derek Wright refutes Margaret Cezair-Thompson's contention that the novel's recurrences "express a resolute, indefatigable quest for an inviolable form" (Cezair-Thompson 40–41): he contests that "instability and violability" are the very essence of the novel's "cyclic recurrence" so that "millenarian resolutions" are impossible (24).

9. Not unrelated, Quayson delineates the progressive enrichment of Dad's character, which leads to his "prophetic and humanist mode of understanding the world" (*Strategic* 143).

10. Cooper offers an insightful reading of Dad's fight with the man in white as an allusion to Chinua Achebe's *Morning Yet on Creation Day* (1975), where a proud wrestler challenges his own *chi*, his spiritual being, only to be destroyed by it. Cooper proposes that Okri alters Achebe's cautionary tale, which warns that there are necessary limits to a person's aspirations (*Magical* 76).

11. Referring to Linda Hutcheon's view that photography "can act 'as the paradigm of the postmodern'" (*Magical* 106), Cooper focuses on the degree to which photography in *Famished* communicates postmodern skepticism.

12. In "Orality—(Theory)—Textuality," Quayson draws on Karin Barber's "Multiple Discourses in Yorùbá Oral Literature" to offer a thorough account of the longtime practice of reappropriating cultural forms in Yoruba culture. Cooper acquaints us with the work of Margaret Thompson Drewal and Andrew Apter—who detail the experimental, idiosyncratic ways in which the Yoruba have always incorporated multiplex, new cultural forms into their practices, beliefs, and history—and insists that we acknowledge "the real changes in mindset and philosophy, ideology and language that modernity has brought and which filters quite far down" into indigenous belief and practice (*Magical* 46).

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