

Introduction

Writing Back to Self

Since the mid-1980s, African novels have become markedly self-reflexive in the way they rewrite one another and draw attention to their own fictionality. They mark stylistic and thematic departures that deliberately undermine the nationalist and realist impulse that governed earlier writing (Wright 1997; Gaylard 2005). The novels further depart from the tradition of “writing back” to the European colonial center by focusing their gaze on local forms of oppression that are seen to parallel classical colonialism. The hint of interest in gender issues that Neil Lazarus (1990) noted in African novels of the 1970s is developed to a higher level of self-consciousness in the novels of the 1980s. Yet while critics have separately studied gender and self-reflexivity in African texts, the intersection of the two has not been given sufficient attention. Examined here are contemporary African novels that demonstrate perceptible shifts in focus from issues of external colonialism to a more self-reflexive treatment of gender and sexual relations. Although most African languages do not have a word for “gender,” and although some African scholars of relations between male and female subjects such as Oyèrónkẹ Oyewùmi (1997) and Nkiru Nzegwu (2006) have seen “gender” as an invention of Western epistemologies, the indigenous novels studied reflect and refract prevalent socially constructed hierarchies based on sexual practices. The continued search for the appropriate word for “gender” in various African languages (Mugambi 2007) indicates that contemporary Africa recognizes the centrality of female/male power hierarchies and the need to create a balance between the sexes.

In the novels I examine here, resistance to the West may be seen to reside more potently in the texts’ disregard or demotion of the West as the categorical and ineluctable point of reference in the representation and self-fashioning of the Global South; the texts resist the West by erasing it from local discourses on postcolonial cultures, aesthetics, and politics of identity.¹ Staging internal heteroglossia, individual texts are more preoccupied in

writing back to themselves and other local texts to address emerging realities and to express the growing diversity of identities in Africa. I argue that postrealist narrative techniques and realism are not mutually exclusive as the metafictional texts deploy these techniques to depict the material realities in contemporary Africa. It is in the metafictional excursions that some of the novels hint to the reader the extratextual realities upon which they are based. By prioritizing metafictional novels, I am not following John Barth's hierarchy that seems to denigrate realism as a lesser form of artistic expression. As I demonstrate, even realist novels have metafictional moments, and most metafictional novels are grounded in factual material conditions in specific locations in Africa.

A corollary argument here is that we need to reexamine the dominant notion in postcolonial studies that African literature "writes back" to the Western metropolis. Some critics have recently become impatient with the "writing back" tradition of the postcolonial theory. For instance, analyzing indigenous scales of beauty in South African Zakes Mda's novels, *The Heart of Redness* and *Ways of Dying*, Rita Barnard gestures toward the need to abandon the "stale old notion of postcolonial literature as 'empire writing back' and accept that the relationships in the texts are not unidirectional" (Barnard 2006, 121). However, this injunction is rarely observed in practical criticism of African literature, where the literature is presented as dominantly an "anti" art in relation to European literature. By demonstrating that the texts are primarily writing back to themselves and to each other, just as the societies signified examine themselves in order to apprehend their contribution to their own predicament, I argue that the novels offer a corrective to the dominant theory in postcolonial studies that African literature's main preoccupation is to subvert the colonial metropolis. To use a Nietzschean term, African literature in the 1980s is not primarily an art of *ressentiment*, reactively directing grudges and hostility at Europe as the cause of all African frustrations. Rather, it is an art of positive self-affirmation that is also not blind to internal causes of malaise within African societies.

The novels engage in a politics that is more scathing in its attack on wayward Africans than on the imperial West. The texts themselves have theorized their role in nations that need to be made aware of their problems and potentiality, indicating that Africans can contribute to a resolution to their own problems rather than blaming colonialists and outsiders for all of the problems on the continent. I attempt to go beyond the regular complaint that postcolonial criticism ignores locally produced texts and popular culture in favor of canonical texts and diasporic and transnational literature issuing from Western academic and publishing venues. Reading metafictional moments in contemporary African novels from a post-Afrocentric perspective, I seek to explain the novels' reconfiguration of priorities in ways that

illuminate the use of self-reflexive technique to particularly focus on gender and sexuality. In the process, I explain the local nuances the texts generate as they continue critiquing colonialism and other hegemonic practices.

Granted, Ghanaian novelist Ayi Kwei Armah, whose modernist novels are haunted by the figure of the artist, has Solo, his fictional translator aspiring to be an artist in *Why Are We So Blest?* (1972), suggesting that any artistic intervention in Africa outside of the writing-back-to-Europe tradition is an exercise in artistic futility: “Only one issue is worth our time: how to end the oppression of the African, to kill the European beasts of prey, to remake ourselves, the elected servants of Europe and America. Outside that, all is useless” (1972, 230). I argue here that contemporary African literature is primarily neither a “writing back” to Europe nor an endorsement of Euro-American neocolonialism. It is first and foremost about self-perception.

Despite my skepticism toward postcolonial studies as practiced in Western institutions, this book is not a “writing back” to postcolonial theory. The theory has received energetic critique from within its own ranks, although it appears never in a hurry to adopt its own recommendations.² I shall return briefly later in the book to possible reasons the theory would be so obsessed with arguing that cultures of the Global South are “writing back to the West.” But particularly instructive at the outset is Simon Gikandi’s observation in “Globalization and the Claims of Postcolonialism” (2002), that in the era of increased integration of economies and unabated cultural exchanges around the world, analyses of literature in English studies can easily be misapplied to extend Western nationalism to formally colonized regions while invoking the dissolution of African nation-states. Like Revathi Krishnaswamy in “Mythologies of Migrancy” (2005), Gikandi critiques the new focus on cultural production by the relatively comfortable émigré native informants in the West at the expense of the brutal material conditions in the postcolonial nations. A study of locally produced texts, alongside the émigré literature, would help us apprehend the multiple sites of identity formations in Africa.

Given the predominant notion that African literature is about “writing back” to the European canon, my proposal that African arts are primarily writing back to themselves might give the impression that this book is a subversion or parody of Bill Ashcroft, Gareth Griffiths, and Helen Tiffin’s well-argued book *The Empire Writes Back: Theory and Practice in Postcolonial Literatures* (2002). It is not. Rather, I am extending the ideas in Ashcroft and colleagues’ authoritative and seminal analysis in a direction they have indicated, especially in their discussion of how we can rethink postcolonial studies to pay more attention to local texts and contexts. I am particularly attracted to their prognosis toward the end of their book to the effect that the future of postcolonial studies resides in the consideration of local

conditions and the influence of global moments on particular instances and spaces. Noting the shortcomings of postcolonial studies and charting the way forward, they underscore that “as the field has developed over the last decade or so, it becomes clearer that perhaps postcolonial theory needs to be further grounded in specific analyses of the effects of large movements and ideologies on particular localities” (2002, 210). It is in this spirit that I examine local African texts in English and indigenous languages.

In chapter 8 of this book, I critique the usage of the expression “writing back” in postcolonial studies. Suffice it to say here that the express, as introduced to academic literary criticism by Ashcroft and colleagues, acquires different meanings in a practical examination of postcolonial texts. These include intertextuality between imperial texts and art from formerly colonized regions, the use of English in ways that deviate from Standard English, and the reclamation of subjectivity for the formerly colonized people through a celebration of their liberation struggles. My criticisms of postcolonial theory should not be seen as a rejection of its valuable contribution to the explanation of African literature, especially its critique of Eurocentrism and other European ontological traditions that have powered colonial and neocolonial domination of Africa. I am trying to avoid the Western ethics of reading that privileges non-Western literatures in order to give priority to the very European cultures that produced that ethics. I use and extend postcolonial theory to argue that contemporary African novelists resort to self-reflexive devices to signify a state of being in postcolonial African societies rather than to retaliate against, parody, or negate Western discourses.

To examine African literature outside of the “writing back to Europe” paradigm is to appreciate the borrowings and contestations among local texts and to attend to the contradiction raised by Arif Dirlik in “The Postcolonial Aura,” that relations in postcolonial literature are seen as “uniformly between the *postcolonial* and the First World, never, to my knowledge, between one *postcolonial* intellectual and another” (1994, 342, emphases in original). Following Dirlik, I see the need to study not only the contestations between writers in Africa but the internal heteroglossia within individual texts, where self-mimicry and self-critique are figured through bricolage and self-conscious literary forms that help the narrative undermine notions of a stable unitary self without fetishizing fragmentation and chaos. My main objective in considering contemporary African novels is not only to rethink the dominant paradigm of “writing back” to the West but also to examine the emergent issues that these novels present. I demonstrate that the “writing back to the colonial center” paradigm is undermined by the novels’ preoccupation with self-interrogation and by their prioritization of themes other than the relations between the colonizer and the colonized.³

What follows in these chapters, then, is an examination of the treatment of gender and sexuality in texts that deploy metafiction as a strategy of narration and self-representation. While reading the role colonialism plays in African self-fashioning, this book primarily focuses on the use of self-reflexive devices in texts seeking to bring up for public debate issues that are considered taboo or not worthy of serious discussion. The stylistic and thematic inward-looking orientation of the novels is not meant to be taken as a reflection of an Africa that is insulated from the rest of the world—the kind of community Karl Marx controversially described as characterizing non-European modes of production prior to colonialism. Even individual texts written in marginalized African languages underline the desire of African societies to reach out to the rest of the world. But these novels reject the undercurrents in postcolonial theory that suggest that European literature is the proper literature (the father figure) to which African literature writes back.

Expanding Fredric Jameson's caveat in *The Political Unconscious* (1981), that some of the novels read today as realist were not written to fit modern definitions of the term, our discussion of self-reflexive narratives is not limited to texts consciously written to fit into the concept of "metafiction" as it is used in the current theorizing of literature. Although metafiction is associated with nonrealist, postmodern aesthetics, some of the novels I discuss here are on the whole realist and modernist; they use metafiction in certain moments of their narration, sometimes to enhance their realism in a way that renders indeterminate the borderline between metafiction and realism. In responding to such novels, I use a mode of reading indirectly allusive to Roland Barthes's rereading of Balzac's "Sarrasine"—an active and a constitutive aesthetic engagement in which the reader uncovers the divisive and multiple layers behind the unitary and centered codes of a realist classic.

Defining Metafiction in African Contexts

In one of his readings of the experimental Kiswahili novels of the 1990s, Zanzibari novelist and critic Said A. M. Khamis (2001) strategically avoids using the term *metafiction* because, as he suggests in the essay, the postrealist fiction in African languages derives from indigenous oral literature rather than from Western postmodern aesthetics. Khamis is articulating a position held by several postcolonial theorists.⁴ A participant in self-conscious fabulation in his own novels (written under the name Said A. Mohamed), Khamis suggests that African postrealism is an independent genre developed from

indigenous narrative forms. However, it is not lost on the keen reader of his analysis that, although not fully acknowledged, the Western theorization of metafiction forms an important palimpsest in Khamis's readings of Kiswahili novels, including the commentaries on his own writing. For example, in "Fabulation and Politics of the 90s in Kezilahabi's Novel *Nagona*," Khamis describes that novel in terms that echo Patricia Waugh's definition of "metafiction" as "a type of fiction that self-consciously and systematically draws attention to its own status as an artifact in order to pose questions about the relationship between fiction and reality" (Khamis 2001, 124).⁵ In reproducing Waugh's definition of "metafiction" word for word without using the term itself or bibliographically acknowledging Waugh, Khamis indexes the problematic relationship between the conventional theorization of self-reflexivity and the African scholar's wish to ground the concept in homegrown aesthetic practices. Without dismissing the applicability of Western concepts, theorists are reluctant to adopt critical terms wholesale to explain African phenomena.

It is therefore crucial to define the term *metafiction* in relation to postmodernism and African literature, not only because postmodernism has a vexed relationship to indigenous African literature but also because of the various shades of meanings the term *metafiction* takes in different contexts.⁶ Following Dilip Gaonkar's (2001) and Sanjay Subrahmanyam's (1998) questioning of Wallerstein's view of modernity as a Western virus spreading to the rest of the world, I view metafiction not as an exclusively Western phenomenon but as an aesthetic practice that has grown simultaneously in different parts of the world. Metafiction in African literature is situated, interlinked with similar practices across the globe but entailing unique disruptions of Western postmodernisms.⁷ There are, of course, links between the different practices of metafiction, but metafiction in African literature, as in other literatures, is conjectural. It gestures to its own indigenous specific location, even when it is linked to global metafictional productions.

Although seen as an exclusively Western, postmodern term, "metafiction" is what in Kiswahili language would be called *bunilizipiku* (imaginative creation that extends beyond the conventions of fiction, fiction beyond fiction, fiction that outdoes fiction in its fictionality).⁸ It involves *bunilizi rejelevu* (Kiswahili term for fiction that refers back to itself, self-reflexive fiction) and *bunilizi ya kihalisiajabu* (fiction with a surrealist feel, magical realist fiction). When the Gĩkũyũ culture talks about "ng'ano cia magegania" (mind-blowing stories, out-of-this-world narratives) to describe novels such as Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o's *Mũrogi wa Kagogo* (*Wizard of the Crow*), the language is referring to the same phenomenon of literature that challenges the conventions of realism by drawing attention to its fictional status. Therefore, in an African context, I use the term *metafiction* to describe that form of African literature that is self-conscious, self-reflexive, and self-referential.

Larry McCaffery uses the term to refer to “that type of fiction which either directly examines its own construction as it proceeds or which comments or speculates about the forms and language of previous fictions” or fiction that seeks “to examine how *all* fictional systems operate, their methodology, the sources of their appeal, and the dangers of their being dogmatized” (1982: 16–17, emphasis in original). I extend this definition to consider local conventions of self-reflexivity and the specific political and social nuances that moments of self-reflexivity generate. Metafictional moments in a narrative are those where the text displays an awareness of its own textuality as an artistic creation; metafictional literature advertises itself as art and problematizes its relationship with the reality it purports to represent through language. It blurs the distinctions between creative writing and literary theory and between different genres and modes of transmission. The texts comprising this form of literature sometimes treat issues that would be expected in a critical essay, while using literary form innovatively to draw attention to their status as fictions rather than representations of a tangible world outside of the text.

Some novels use metafiction in a pronounced way, especially when they employ the *mise-en-abyme* technique, a tendency of the text to mirror itself as another text by replicating the narrator’s story as happens in David Maillu’s *No!* and *Broken Drum* or Katama Mkangi’s *Mafuta* and Vassanji’s *The Book of Secrets*, in which the novels are replicated by an embedded manuscript. Others foreground the act of writing itself by citing other oral and written texts or presenting the artist as a principal character in a way that undermines realism. Novels such as David Karanja’s *The Girl Was Mine* (1996) and Wairimu Kibugi’s *Painful Tears* (1997) may not be included in this category because although treating the theme of writers and writing, they are transparently realist. The writers bemoan the fate of artists in Africa and celebrate the material success of an artist, but instead of subverting the status quo through metafiction, the novels seem to endorse a writer’s pursuit of a bourgeois lifestyle and eventual assimilation by the mainstream fraternity of writers and political leaders. I exclude the novels of Amos Tutuola and Shaaban Robert because although ideologically subversive and set in a preternatural fantastic world, these writers are too open in trying to recuperate the logicity of their stories and draw attention to their narratives’ isomorphic relationship to an established reality.

Throughout the history of written literature in Africa, novels have commented on their own textuality as works of art, on previous novels, and on the role of art, its producers, and its consumers in society. Although the most intensely metafictional African texts came out in the 1980s, literary self-referentiality precedes this era of tremendous changes in Africa and the world. Sally O’Reilly notes in “Self-Reflexivity” that “metafiction could be said to be as old as the novel itself, as fiction and the act of writing itself

are bound up with self-consciousness and representation so, rather than a subgenre, it is inherent in all writing" (2005, 8). For her part, Linda Hutcheon has noted in *A Poetics of Postmodernism* (1988) that although the term *metafiction* is relatively new, coined by William H. Gass in 1970 to describe a novel's tendency to reflect itself more than an extratextual world, the practice of metafiction is "as old (if not older) than the novel itself" (5). African texts such as Grace Ogot's *Promised Land* (1966), the first novel by a black African woman to be published,⁹ have deployed metafictional techniques to undermine the precapitalist patriarchy in Africa, while Rebeka Njau's *Ripples in the Pool* (1975) uses similar techniques to figure lesbian identities.¹⁰

Indeed, written African literature, at least since Olaudah Equiano's slave narrative *Interesting Narrative of the Life of Olaudah Equiano, or Gustavus Vassa, the African*, first published in 1789, has been marked by self-referentiality and indeterminacies.¹¹ Henry Louis Gates Jr. (1988) relates the deconstructive playfulness of black literature in the Diaspora to vernacular myths from the continent, to modes of self-articulation and self-inscription that the enslaved communities brought with them from the continent. Although it would be wrong and totalizing to argue that the self-referential indeterminacies of black literature have their sources in the Esu-Elegbara of the Yoruba community of West Africa, the influence of orature and local expression has had tremendous effects on the production of metafictional literature.¹² In East Africa, texts in local languages such as Gĩkũyũ and Kiswahili tend to be more self-reflexive than the ones written in English because the texts are more intimate with the local oral literatures.¹³ Esu-Elegbara is just one of the multiple sources of the playfulness and trickster techniques of self-representation in African literatures.

Considering the pervasiveness of metafiction that Gates notes in his study of black discourse—a generality that marks even the earliest African texts such as Olaudah Equiano's slave narrative, which was written at the threshold of the novel as a genre—then what is not metafiction? Is metafiction in the African novel different from metafiction in the Western novel? Mark Currie has warned that "since metafiction concerns itself above all with a reflexive awareness of the conditions of meaning-construction, any typological definition of metafiction rooted in objective characteristics or essences will contradict the linguistic philosophy that it attempts to describe" (1995, 15). The easiest antonym for "metafiction" seems to be "realism," but this opposition is underwritten by the very ontological fixedness that metafiction seeks to disrupt. I propose that we view the concepts for what they are, not according to what they oppose. Metafiction is simply what it is (not a reverse of its supposed opposite)—literary moments that are aware of their own textuality.

There is little to be gained from efforts to differentiate "African metafiction" from "Western metafiction," because metafiction is a technique

of writing; just as it may not be all that useful to differentiate between, for example, British flashback and Indian flashback, American irony and Cambodian irony, or Canadian sarcasm and Yoruba sarcasm, there is no difference between what might be perceived as “African metafiction” and non-African novels that employ the technique. If we were to step out of this bipolar logic that ironically powers theories of hybridity and cross-cultural engagements, then we would see metafiction as a cross-culturally employed technique that varies in application from one text to another depending on the talents of the writer and the historical, political, and social contingencies that the text seeks to signify. Therefore, readers of this book looking for a discussion of “African metafiction” are likely to be disappointed because, contrary to the impression given by Madelyn Jablon’s *Black Metafiction* (1996), no literary technique is specific to any individual or social category. What may be unique is the way a particular literary technique is deployed or constructed through a writer’s peculiar use of language in specific circumstances. Even those who do not demur at Rene Etiemble’s claim that there are “invariables” available to all global literatures or at Northrop Frye’s contention about archetypes shared among all literatures would not avow that certain stylistic devices in themselves belong to a certain set of socially oriented texts. What distinguishes artists and groups of texts from one another is the way they employ a given technique.

In this discussion I argue that even genres such as the epic that are traditionally associated with masculine military exploits have been used in metafictional texts to undermine sexism and militaristic conquest. Therefore, there is no “African metafiction,” just as there is no “Illinois metafiction,” “London metafiction,” “Kawangware metafiction,” “Soweto metafiction,” “Duke metafiction,” or “Paris metafiction”—except perhaps within the politics of naming, hinted at in the preface of Michel Foucault’s *Order of Things*, whereby we give names to phenomena in order to localize their power of contagion, although we know such names do not have any meanings outside of language (1970, xv–xvi). I would not claim that there is anything like “African metafiction” except in the simple and inadequate sense of metafiction written by Africans. Unlike a term such as the “African novel” or “African literature,” where there are fairly discernible systematic characteristics among texts, despite the fact that some texts defy such categorization, the term *metafiction* can only be used to describe a universal literary technique that is, however, variably deployed in specific African novels to express and refigure different social facts. What should be important for us here, then, are the conventions of self-reflexivity evoked and how self-reference is employed in texts to generate certain meanings and aesthetic effects.

Further, the boundary between metafiction and its opposite is highly unstable, as is the distinction between metafiction and realism. What matters is the particular phenomenon a metafictional moment in the narrative

signifies, even if that narrative is not wholly comprised of such moments. That is, metafiction should not be read as an abstraction but as a means of expressing concrete ideas in the narrative, even if the metafictional act signifies abstraction, disfigurement, and incomprehensibility. Although African novels of the 1950s and early 1960s were largely realist in their method of presenting the precolonial, colonial, and neocolonial condition in Africa, they contain metafictional moments that demand to be read in a way that yields different responses from those given them through the privileging of causality and objectivity. Because specific metafictional moments are symptomatic of different social conditions, it is appropriate to depart from the general celebration of unreality, fragmentation, and ambivalence with which metafictional novels are greeted. In the discussion of individual texts, I have tried to focus on how effectively the device has been deployed in order to help readers tease out the repressed social conditions and explain the proliferation of metafiction in African novels since the 1980s. The increased propensity of the device in the 1980s can be accounted for partly by the growing suspicions of the grand narratives of national unity expressed through realist modes in the 1950s, 1960s, and well into the 1970s. But the texts do not disavow nationalism; they seem to be suspicious of the misuse of the claims to nationalism that leave out certain sectors from the national realm.

Teasing African Literature to Define Itself

As a teacher of Anglophone African literature in an American institution, I am perennially haunted by the old question of the definition of African literature: What is African literature? How does it differ from Western literature? These are questions I have also constantly heard in forums on African literature in Africa. The expected answer is a defensive delineation of the differences between the politically conscious African texts and the supposedly disinterested literature of the West.¹⁴ The two questions seem to invariably follow each other. The questions and the sequence in which they are ordered reveal that African literature is still viewed, however unwittingly, in terms of the Lacanian Other—as a not-self or as a surrogate entity that exists only in relation to Western literature.

The project of empowering minority literatures from Africa must start with listening to what those literatures say about art. Various conflicting theories have been offered in an attempt to define African literature as an aesthetic category. Chinweizu and colleagues' notoriously Afrocentric work, *Toward the Decolonization of African Literature* sees African literature as "an autonomous entity separate and apart from all other literatures" (1980, 4).

The authors seem to be more interested in showing the differences between African literature and other literatures and in censuring writers they feel not to be “African” enough for subscribing to supposedly non-African artistic categories. Their critique implies that the critic of African literatures needs to be immersed in non-African cultures to be able to assess the Africanness of texts in terms of how they are different from other categories, especially the Western canon. While Achebe sees no need to be preoccupied with providing clear-cut definitions of the complex and diverse literatures of Africa, or with combining them into a single aesthetic, Ngũgĩ defines African literature as that which is composed and primarily written in an African indigenous language.¹⁵ Again, Ngũgĩ’s argument prioritizes an interest in what is not African literature (Europhone literatures) instead of focusing on the Africanness of the text.

Abiola Irele’s *The African Experience in Literature and Ideology* (1981) demotes indigenous language from its position as the primary criterion of whether a text is African or not. Irele prioritizes style (regardless of the particular national or ethnic language) in addition to historical and sociological factors that he sees as determining the aesthetic mode of expression of the writing. But his later text, *The African Imagination* (2001), notes the centrality of oral discourse in African aesthetics and points to the need to go beyond texts written in African languages. Irele evacuates white writers from the realm of “African imagination,” because they “do not display the sense of connection to an informing spirit of imaginative expression rooted in African tradition,” and because “in a formal sense their works are bound just as much to the European literary tradition as are those of metropolitan writers” (2001, 15). To tie imagination to the color of the skin is, to say the least, quite reductive. But we should not be in a hurry to dismiss Irele as belonging to an aesthetic Neil Lazarus (1990), discussing Ayi Kwei Armah’s *Why Are We So Blest?*, sees as retrogressive because of its racial essentialism; it is apposite to put Irele’s politics of essentialism in context because, I think, he is staging what Spivak memorably called “strategic essentialism,” a political positioning that treats diverse groups as a single body to confront a formidable and silencing force such as white imperialism. Because essentialism in itself is not a bad thing as long as it is not put to unscrupulous ends, Irele’s kind of strategic essentialism in *The African Imagination*—a simplification of phenomena for the sake of struggle—could be seen as regenerative. It is the kind of thinking we see endorsed by minority writers and theorists as diverse as Spivak, Diana Fuss, Toni Morrison, and Dwight McBride.¹⁶

Irele’s definition of “the African imagination” (with a definite article *the*) seems to be ordered by the very Western academy he is criticizing rather than by what African texts view themselves to be. He appears to be responding to the Western academy’s tendency to limit discussions of African

writing to expatriate narratives by explorers and missionaries, postmodernist and diaspora novels, or works by white South African postmodernist and liberal humanist writers who, unlike black writers, have supposedly not been energetic and partisan enough in their opposition to apartheid. Nevertheless, strategic as it is in the Western academy, Irele's restrictive and essentialist typology would encounter opposition in postcolonial Africa because it excludes not only immigrant writers from Asia but also respected African writers of European extraction such as Kenyan Marjorie Oludhe Macgoye, Mozambican Mia Couto, and Angolan Pepetela. In their thematic preoccupations and stylistic choices, these non-black writers do not exhibit the weaknesses Irele uses in his criteria to exclude white writing from his idea of "the African imagination." In other words, there is nothing to mark some non-black writers as different from indigenous writers in an either/or dichotomy. The kind of differences the writers may display from "the African imagination" that Irele prescribes can also be found among indigenous African writers. Indeed, a white writer such as Pepetela is closer to the indigenous novelist Ngũgĩ in style and theme than Ngũgĩ is to his Kikuyu compatriot Meja Mwangi or to Achebe. It is in recognition of this instability of the black/white dichotomy in his theorizing of "the African imagination" that Irele (2001, 15–16) qualifies that some Lusophone white writers such as Castro Soromenho and Luandino Vieira may be considered as part of "the African imagination." It needs to be observed that there are many indigenous writers, even in African languages, who operate outside of the restrictive confines of "the African imagination" that Irele stipulates as the ideal aesthetic for African writing.

In a different context, Amoko (2006) has hinted at the unproductiveness of the prioritized tokenism race and postcoloniality have enjoyed in Western academic venues. It is because of some of its practitioners' uncritical racial essentialism that Irele, in *The African Experience in Literature and Ideology*, accepts the disapproval levied against the negritude movement while at the same time recuperating negritude from its harshest critics:

But though Négritude was a legitimate reaction, it is probably true that today our need is less to press our claim, however justified, to an original difference, than to begin to restate our common involvement with the rest of humanity. It is precisely in this perspective that our modern literature will derive its enduring interest—in the way it throws a vivid light upon an area of human life and experience which, though circumscribed in its immediate reference, has nonetheless a fundamental correspondence to other areas, in other climes and other times. (Irele 1981, 3)

Irele notes the commonality of black people's experience with slavery and colonialism but resists uncritical essentialism. He accepts Soyinka's rejection of the black/white Manichean opposition and negritude approaches to culture that seem to be apologizing for Africa. Both of Irele's books indicate a sympathetic view of negritude and an attempt to define, along Blyden's lines, the quintessential "African personality" that transcends local boundaries to unite transatlantic black communities.

In "Modern African Literature and Cultural Identity," Tanure Ojaide (1992), following Irele's *The African Experience in Literature and Ideology*, downplays the centrality of the language of composition as the prime focus in deciding the Africanness of a text. Ojaide puts particular emphasis on the moral and utilitarian imperatives of African literature, which he defines as any literature written in a language spoken in Africa, regardless of the origin of that language. Both Irele and Ojaide see African literature as distinct, especially with regard to Western and colonial aesthetics. To move beyond these polemical gestures and statements, however, we need to ask: What do the literatures themselves say about what should be considered African literature? The literatures, as Olakunle George asserts, should be treated as "a mode of theory" (2003, 105), and nowhere is this theorizing more poignant than in metafictional texts. Toward the end of this book, I hope to be able to glean from the novels what they assume African literatures to be.

Politics and Formal Analysis

In *Death of a Discipline* (2003), Spivak has emphasized the need to study non-Western literature primarily as artistic texts. In a narratological and deconstructive analysis of Tayeb Salih's (1969) metafictional novel *Season of Migration to the North* via Freudian psychoanalysis, Spivak privileges the undecidable in the novel's unnamed narrator. She urges us not to read peripheral literatures "with foregone conclusions that deny it literariness" (Spivak 2003, 58). But easily overlooked in the study of postcolonial literatures is the question of form beyond the postcolonial texts' deployment of English in a way that deviates from standard language, as if that is not what all literature is supposed to do—avoid the beaten track through the innovative use of linguistic resources. The neglect of the study of form has been read by Rey Chow (2006, 80), among others, as a political gesture by Western institutions of interpretation, which presume that non-Western writing is not literary but sociological, political, or anthropological. Also frequently unattended to in the study of gender in African literature is the relation between African feminisms and stylistics. African feminists pay attention

to form and to the ways textuality is deployed to unmask local patriarchal practices that have encouraged sexism.

Wilson-Tagoe's various gynocritical examinations of Yvonne Vera's fabulist narratives about patriarchy and nationalism in Zimbabwe are exemplary in their historically situated close readings of Vera's layered, intertextual networks, her play with language and orality, and her transgressive cultural translation. According to Wilson-Tagoe, Vera's fiction breaks gender hierarchies, interrogates history from the perspective of marginalized subjects, and reinscribes agency and subjective self-realization for silenced women.¹⁷ Wilson-Tagoe suggests that the fundamentals of the gynocritical approach formulated by Elaine Showalter are applicable to African literatures of the 1980s, especially because Showalter deemphasizes the feminine (emulation of dominant male forms by women writers) and feminist (reactive marginality based on negation of male writing) to focus on the female (women's expression of self). Without attaching as much importance to essence as Showalter did in her politics of representation, and without seeing the feminist as fully divorced from the other three phases of women's self-realization in literature, we see African literature following a similar pattern—the initial imitation of colonial forms, the conscious deconstruction of colonial literature, and the eventual focus on African societies unencumbered by Western expression.

Yet as demonstrated by Rey Chow's and Wilson-Tagoe's stylistic readings, a purely formalistic approach to literature that ignores the sociological and political contingencies ordering the production of art would be untenable in the study of African literature. The literature, to quote Ngũgĩ in *Homecoming*, "does not grow in a vacuum"; it is "given impetus, shape, direction, and even area of concern by social, political, and economic forces in a particular society" (1972, xv). While Ngũgĩ, writing in the 1960s, sees opposition to European imperialism as the major force fueling African literature, new texts show a shift in focus. What emerges from Ngũgĩ's argument is the suggestion that we should pay attention to the extratextual forces that influence the literature or, to use Fredric Jameson's famous phrase in *The Political Unconscious* (1981), to "always historicize" textual strategies in a work of art. Therefore, I follow the example set by Ato Quayson, Olakunle George, Deepika Bahri, Wilson-Tagoe, and Simon Gikandi in their various readings of postcolonial literatures in a way that focuses on form without ignoring the sociological facts circumscribing the production, circulation, and consumption of the literatures. While readings of postcolonial literatures tend to focus on politics and sociological data, these critics have been attentive to the aesthetics of the texts, which they place in their social and political contexts in a manner that illumines both the society and the aesthetic objects.

In searching the embattled emergence of metafiction in African novels, my point of departure is the notion expressed by Russian formalist Victor

Shklovsky, that “art is a way of experiencing the artfulness of an object” ([1917] 2005, 800). For Shklovsky, literary language calls attention to itself in order to estrange the reader from the familiar and offer deeper insights into daily life. As already shown, the notion of defamiliarization is a politically potent concept despite the demonization of formalism as apolitical and inappropriate for the study of politically invested art such as the postcolonial novel. Beyond aesthetic considerations, African writers have used the “unfamiliar,” especially in political novels, to avoid retaliation by the state or to talk about taboo issues without offending someone.

Recent studies have shown that from the very beginning the concept of *ostranenie* (estrangement/defamiliarization), given currency by Shklovsky and suggested by Bertolt Brecht’s *Verfremdungseffekt* (alienation effect/distancing effect), has always been an active part of politics.¹⁸ Despite the formalist insinuation that literature has little to do with reflecting the society from which it comes, I undertake a reading of textuality that locates the forms writers enlist to historiographic and political impulses ubiquitous in African literature. The social implications of the forms that the writers adopt would be important in helping us understand the societies from which that literature comes. Through metafictional devices, the literature itself insists that it is by its very nature historical and political and treats the interplay of art, history, and politics as an intense dialogue between sublime creativity and mundane social conditions. The texts raise questions about the relationship between literature and social consciousness, especially in the way they thematize the institutions and protocols of literary interpretation and meaning-production.

I allude indirectly to Shklovsky’s notion of estrangement throughout the study not only because it structures much of the contemporary theorizing of literature but also because metafiction is a form of proliferated defamiliarization. In the search for a genealogy of metafiction in African novels, I also consider Ngũgĩ wa Thiong’o’s and Fredric Jameson’s separate reminders that all literature is political, not the least texts and stylistic elements that appear to be apolitical. Metafiction as a technical device has been used in different ways to defamiliarize and consequently demystify African social experience and to serve as a forum for political intervention.

African historical and political contingencies shape the way metafiction is applied in the novels. Unlike other linguistic and paralinguistic structures that writers employ to engender defamiliarization, metafiction defamiliarizes the world as we know it by radically undermining the illusion of reality and advertising the means by which it is undermining realism. Here I see metafiction as a means of replenishing the way we perceive Africa through its arts. The delay of perception created by metafiction and other devices of defamiliarization helps us see the world more clearly than if it was directly rendered. In other words, in the African novel, form and political content

are inseparable. Stephen Slemon has pointed out that despite its tendency to align itself with postmodern aesthetics, a postcolonial text “retains a recuperative impulse towards the structure of ‘history’” (1990, 6). This point is also taken up by Elleke Boehmer, who argues in *Colonial and Postcolonial Literature: Migrant Metaphors* that—“notwithstanding the confluence between postmodernism and postcolonialism in their critique of Enlightenment and their production of texts that display fragmentation, playfulness, self-consciousness, and ambivalence—postcolonial art “emerges out of the grit and rank specificity of a local culture or cultures, history or histories” (2005a, 238). For Slemon, even utopian texts from formerly colonized regions would be better read as “grounded in reference” (1990, 6).¹⁹ By using Slemon’s endorsement of the referential imperative of nonreferential postcolonial texts while removing from it his suggestion that the postmodern elements in postcolonial texts counter the surplus of imperial ideology in Western literary traditions, the current discussion aims to contextualize literary form within wider sociopolitical concerns that often lie outside of the colonial-anticolonial dialectic, which masks multiple other constructions of the self. I would like to claim metafiction as a politically invested textual practice central to a wide range of thematic and formal issues in African literature.

I find particularly useful Frederic Jameson’s observation in “Third World Literature in the Era of Multinational Capitalism” (1986), that non-Western literature constitutes allegories of the state of the nation. While departing from Jameson’s prioritization of allegory and nation as the key components of African literature, it is nevertheless productive to read literature as Jameson does—as the interpenetration of the individual self and the much wider collective consciousness.²⁰ An individual character’s experience can be read as symbolic of the events taking place at a national level. This is why the allegorical elements that Jameson notes in his comparison of Western and “Third World” literatures in the era of global capital have become preeminent in the African novel. However, the well-forged isomorphic correspondence between contemporary African art and reality that Jameson’s juxtaposition of the terms *allegory* and *nationalism* suggests is absent in metafiction; nor is metafictional literature as didactic and homiletic, in conformity with mainstream national morality, as Jameson’s terms imply. It is ironic that, written in the mid-1980s at the height of feminism and poststructuralism, Jameson’s misinterpretation of African literature arises mainly from his limited focus on foundational male socialist-realist authors, disregarding emergent women artists and writers operating outside of anti-Western socialism.

Buchanan (2006) has done an exemplary job of recuperating Jameson’s notion of national allegory, indicating that Jameson is talking about a national aesthetic form as opposed to a nationalist ideology. Buchanan rightly disputes the idea that the proposition that non-Western writers are

nationalistic lies at the center of Jameson's argument. While Jameson seems to be holding up the "Third World" writer's engagement in politics as a good example for the supposedly genteel and politics-averse Western artists and critics, he suggests that the writers deliberately occlude Western readers through the use of ideal readers that would be in radical variance with them. The ideal audience for Jameson's essay comprises Western theorists who collectively feel their (Western) canon is being written back to by an insular anti-Western literature. Contrary to Jameson's insinuation, however, some African literature is transnational in spirit, constantly questioning the validity of national boundaries and forging new alliances with categories that would be viewed as adversaries in nationalist and realist fiction.

The writers seem to be bending backwards to retain non-African audiences; for example, the move to call Ugandan words (Luganda language words, to be precise) "African words" in a glossary appended at the beginning of Moses Isegawa's national allegory *Abyssinian Chronicles* (2001) to explain the non-English words in the novel indicates that it is presuming not a non-Ugandan audience or Ugandan readers not conversant with the language spoken in the Buganda region but non-African readers. This is a novel that mocks the very notion of the nation, although it is set in a particular African nation and reproduces dates that serve as milestones in the construction of the Ugandan nation. Thus we might agree with Jean Franco who, in a study of South American literature, argues that the self-referential literature parodies and pillories the nation; for Franco, in a situation where modernity and repression are mutually enhancing, as in some of the nations governed by autocrats, the nation disappears as the "inevitable framework for either political or cultural projects" (1997, 130). The African metafictional novels, while inspired by specific national histories, are less likely to uphold parochial nationalism.

We should keep within our sights the overwhelming exceptions to Jameson's typology but also consider his view about the political imperative of African literature, which is purposely composed to interpret a certain reality, even if that reality does not conform to any nationalist ideology and does not have to be unitary. Jameson's emphasis on the centrality of form in the definition of African texts is pertinent despite the predominance of political and thematic readings of the African novel at the expense of aesthetics (ostensibly because African literature does not subscribe to art for art's sake). Although metafictional forms are not exclusively African, they have been used in African texts to generate meanings that relate to debates and conditions among the African peoples.

The same argument would apply to postmodernist texts; we should read them in terms of how they relate to and problematize the reality they evoke in their stylistic playfulness. As South African novelist and Nobel

laureate Nadine Gordimer argues, even the most modernist and postmodernist art cannot be exempted from politics. In her 1988 essay “Three in a Bed: Fiction, Morals, and Politics,” Gordimer sees the inevitability of a relationship between politics and literature:

When, overtly or implicitly, could writers avoid politics? Even those writers who have seen fiction as the pure exploration of language, as music is the exploration of sound, the babbling of Dada and the page-shuffling of Burroughs have been in reaction to what each revolted against in the politically imposed spirit of their respective times; theirs were literary movements that were an act—however far-out—of acknowledgement of a relationship between politics and fiction . . . it seems there is no getting out of the relationship. (1999, 8)

For Gordimer, then, playful self-reflexive fiction (“fiction as the pure exploration of language”) is in itself political. Gordimer’s novels that use metafictional devices—beginning with her first novel *The Lying Days* (1953)—are intensely political in their self-reflexivity and play with language and in their references to the mechanics of artistic production and reception. The best metafictional novels from Africa use playful language to signify political conditions in society.

Stirling Grant also warns us against the minimalist pathologization of metafiction as mere narcissistic exercises in the “turning back of the self upon itself” (2000, 80). Grant wants us to see metafiction as more than an obsession with self; it is a form of defamiliarization that foregrounds the realities narrators inspire readers to recognize beyond the narrative. Postrealism has been seen as the staple of minority discourse and associated with nonlinear narratives by women writers and postcolonial subjects; it is regarded as a liberatory mode that disrupts the oppressive logic of realism. Persuasive as this argument may appear, it is hard to see a technique, in itself, as emancipatory. In the course of the discussion, I will demonstrate instances of metafictional excursions that would aid in entrenching stereotypes. What matters is the context in which metafictional techniques are employed.

In a deconstructive analysis of African artistic expression, Nigerian theorist Adélékè Adéèkó (1998) concludes that “irony, self-reflexivity, metafiction, strategic uses of conventions, the conventionality of strategies, and cultural hybridity are rhetorical apparatuses” (1998, 131). Adéèkó demonstrates that these modes of articulation are crucial markers and avenues of the political will in diverse African discourses. In this book I demonstrate that the narratives in African fiction pose the theoretical question of the relationship between fiction and reality in order to affirm at times

protean and unfixed identity. Patricia Waugh's definition of metafiction is significant because it seeks to explain the social dimension of metafiction; to her, metafiction is "a fictional form that is culturally relevant and comprehensible to contemporary readers" (1984, 18). It can be best engaged by working out the historical and political circumstances that it signifies and that have given it impetus.

Nadine Gordimer (1999) has stated that even when art has to be political, it is not tendentious. She contends that "the transformation of the imagination must never 'belong' to any establishment, however just, fought for and longed-for" (1999, 15). Metafiction, as a transformed aesthetics, should be judged as an exercise in the kind of regenerative indirection that is expected in all sublime art. Novels that do not meet this criterion, however metafictional they may be, should be viewed as deficient as works of art. This seems to be the argument that Rey Chow presents in her discussion of nonrealist artistic projects in *The Age of the World Target* (2006), in which she draws upon a tradition within Marxism that goes back to Marx and Engel's distinction between art and propaganda in order to underscore the centrality of subtlety even to radical literature and aesthetics. In distinguishing artistic statement from political pronouncements, Marx and Engels startlingly insist on indirection as the key component of revolutionary art. Chow observes that in literature "the *modus operandi* is not to speak about something expressly even when one feels one must—[but to speak] in a manner quite opposite the clarity and forthrightness of rational argumentation" (2006, 54–55). The argument is not lost on the reader, despite the circumlocution that metafiction generates.

I read metafiction, then, as serving the intrinsic unpredictability of art championed by Chow and, in African literary theory, by Karen Press in "Building a National Culture in South Africa" (1990) and Njabulo Ndebele in *Rediscovery of the Ordinary* (1991). Press and Ndebele variously aver that contemporary African art's reluctance to follow a clearly realist mode or to serve an overt political program does not detract from its forcefulness as a political object. That is, the use of nonrealist modes is not a call for the abandonment of political engagement in favor of hermetic aestheticism. Ndebele underlines that "technique does not mean a rarefied, formal, and disembodied attempt at innovation for its own sake" (1991, 72). The artistic mode is a means of provoking the reader to reassess his or her experience of the world. Critical of fascism in all of its manifestations, Ndebele seems to agree with Walter Benjamin's "The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction" ([1936] 1992), that the forcefulness of a work of art resides less in the overt revolutionary message than in the way it reconfigures form to offer an aesthetic means of staging a new politics. In fact, African literature's departure from the habitualized modes of

self-presentation, coupled with a stylistic search for self-renewal, makes it more effective in challenging society to view life from different perspectives. It is not the kind of figural experimentalism that Mario Sironi, an Italian painter and theorist under Mussolini's fascism, calls for in the "The Manifesto of Muralism" (2005). For Sironi, the avant-garde art would be used to support the populist government in power; in contrast, metafictional experimentation in African novels is largely used to demystify fascist and patriarchal projects. African writers are suspicious of government projects, and they conjure up a grassroots resistance against monolithic authorities via montage and artistic forms that blur established boundaries. Further, stylistic innovation does not disqualify self-reflexive art from a reader's materialist and revolutionary critique if the reader deems that to be the best way to engage the fiction. Indeed, the novels provoke, through their very structure, a politically engaged materialist reading.

Toward Post-Afrocentrism: Beyond an Edenic Africa

The argument that African literature writes back to itself in order to address issues of gender and sexuality calls for a transdisciplinary and an eclectic approach that can be termed *post-Afrocentric*. This is a form of discourse envisaged by Tejumola Olaniyan in *Scars of Conquest/Masks of Resistance* (1995) in which colonialism and imperialism are repudiated without precolonial Africa being romanticized as a site of perfection. Straddling Western traditions and African cultural practices in his study of theatre by artists of African descent, Olaniyan not only rejects the Eurocentric approaches to African theatre that denigrate cultural production from non-Western societies but also an Afrocentric position that sees "black aesthetics" as opposed to "white aesthetics." Echoing Bhabha, Olaniyan forges a third space that recognizes the inevitable interimplication between European and African forms and that sees literary production as a process that does not fossilize African literature into a static entity with a supposed culturalist leverage over other social categories. For Olaniyan, post-Afrocentricity distinguishes itself as "a singular insistence on unscrambling and supplanting the excessive Manichaism that both constitutes the Eurocentric and undermines the subversive potential of the Afrocentric, while both affirming instead the foundational premise of an irreversible imbrication of histories, and therefore cultures and cultural forms" (1995, 4). This is to say that post-Afrocentricity occupies an in-between space in the opposed discourses while remaining vigilant against moves that would dehumanize Africa as a marginalized racial, political, and social category.