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NARRATIVES OF AFRICAN IMPROVEMENT:

MISSIONS, HUMANITARIANISM, AND THE NOVEL

By

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ABSTRACT OF THE DISSERTATION

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Dissertation Director:

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"Narratives of African Improvement: Missions, Humanitarianism, and the Novel"

explores the relationship between narrative and international development, analyzing

literature's contribution to debates about religious and humanitarian missions and

drawing humanitarian discourse into conversation with postcolonial critique.

International plans for improving Africa consistently operate on the basis of what I call

the Mission narrative, the optimistic story of benevolent Westerners offering salvation to

supposedly benighted Africans. In resistance to that narrative, the claim that missions are

the benign mask of imperial violence has become academic orthodoxy, often leading to

their quick dismissal. This has been a necessary argument, yet it also obscures the

remarkably complex history of African interactions with Christian institutions and

deflects the urgency of the questions confronted by humanitarianism today, albeit in

dreadfully insufficient ways. Drawing on sociopolitical critiques, this dissertation begins

from the premise that many of the dangers and disasters that characterize humanitarian action are directly related to the narrative through which it frames its task. If narrative is the problem, I ask what role the novel—that extended, complicated, multifaceted form of narrative—might take in imagining and articulating (ethically, conceptually, and pragmatically) better narratives of African improvement. I thus turn to a body of literature which dismantles the pretensions of the grand Mission narrative while also reorienting the terms and tropes of humanitarianism, offering new ways of theorizing global inequity and resource (re)distribution through the third sector. This dissertation builds a transnational, problem-based literary history, which brings together African, British, and U.S. writers typically read within separate traditions, including Joseph Conrad, Chinua Achebe, Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o, Bessie Head, Tstitsi Dangarembga, Barbara Kingsolver, Philip Caputo, Nuruddin Farah, and Zakes Mda. These novelists demystify and reinvent the vocabulary of benevolence, situate "ethical" interventions within a political network of social relations, and negotiate the tension between utopian desire and real world necessity, cultivating points of resonance with non-ideal allies for non-ideal times. Humanitarian thought and action have been hindered by various fictions—the fictions of African darkness, Western enlightenment, inevitable progress, and spectacular salvation—all posing as truth. Ironically, fiction itself may hold the most sophisticated alternatives.

For my father,

who laid the foundation.

J. Andrew Cole

1953-2004

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wonderful source of encouragement—I must single out my father, J. Andrew Cole, who lived out the complexities of transnational belonging and who encouraged me to be a thinker early on, and my mother, Lynn Cole, whose support has been infinitely creative and infinitely energetic. And finally, my affectionate thanks to Dan Paustian, who has lived beside me day in and day out and who, throughout this process, has been a partner in the finest sense of the word. For his sensitivity, his kindness, his intelligence, and his good humor, which got me through, I am profoundly grateful.

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Introduction:
The Mission Narrative and the Critical Mission Novel

Our ideals can be compromised by the words we use to express them,
just as our deeds can in turn betray our words.
– David Kennedy

Narratives . . . are always immersed in history and never innocent. Whether we can unmake
development and perhaps even bid farewell to the Third World will equally depend on
the social invention of new narratives, new ways of thinking and doing.
– Arturo Escobar

Still I think that behind it all is a desire to make our experience in the world better,
to make our passage through life easier.
Once you talk about making things better, you're talking about politics.
– Chinua Achebe

Of Narratives and Novelists

In an essay entitled "Africa is People," Chinua Achebe offers insight into the relationship

between the novelist and the global humanitarian community. The essay is itself a story,

recounting a time when he was invited to participate in an international conference on

poverty with the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD).

Achebe describes an initial sense of puzzlement about his role there as a writer of

literature, "an African novelist among predominantly Western bankers and economists; a

guest, as it were, from the world's poverty-stricken provinces at a gathering of the rich

and powerful in the metropolis" (*Education* 155). Soon enough he realizes that his

presence is actually quite fitting and his particular kind of expertise, necessary: "what

was going on before me was a *fiction workshop*" (156-57), the spinning of theories—

narratives essentially—to be tested out on the vague space of Africa on the promise of

improving it. The novelist offers a very different kind of expertise than those bankers and

economists, but I argue that this expertise is essential to the discussion of global poverty

for its sensitivity to narratives and their ethical, political, and material implications. In

this dissertation, I will think about debates over humanitarian development in the way

Achebe suggests, as a kind of fiction workshop—a honing of narratives—and I will ask

how the novel participates in that work, evaluating existing altruistic narratives and

articulating a more ethical brand of international responsibility.

When he recognizes the significance of his role within this discussion of global

poverty, Achebe responds as both an interpreter and teller of stories. He draws the

group's attention first to the way that narratives respond to and actively shape reality and

then to the assumptions that misdirect the particular narratives they are spinning.

Narratives of African improvement—the stuff of that glorified fiction workshop—are

based on "a particular way of looking (or, rather, not looking) at Africa and Africans"

(*Education* 79). "I have news for you," he tells the group, "Africa is not fiction. Africa is

people, real people. Have you thought of that? You are brilliant people, world experts.

You may even have the very best intentions. But have you thought, *really* thought, of

Africa as people?" (157). Achebe's grievance is not with fiction itself but with the

relationship between narratives and the realities which they represent and influence. The

lack of thought Achebe diagnoses allows unacceptable narratives to get by—narratives

which expect African people to wait for the stalled promises of development to

miraculously come to fruition. The best intentions, when channeled through a

problematic narrative, do not produce the best interventions. Words betray ideals.

While narrative will always be, in some sense, fictional—always a representation

of reality that does not match the reality itself—Achebe's ethics of storytelling demands

an awareness of and sensitivity to the very real world into which they speak, an ethics which has always shaped his own fiction. As he explains elsewhere, "there are fictions that help and fictions that hinder," beneficent and malignant fictions ("Truth" 107). An understanding of fiction and its relationship to reality is urgently necessary if those world "experts" are to construct narratives of "humane conscience": "What distinguishes beneficent fictions from such malignant cousins as racism," and, in this context, various narratives of African development, "is that the first never forgets that it is a fiction and the other never knows that it is" ("Truth" 111). As such, fiction is capable of speaking the truth, and thus Achebe affirms "the truth of fiction." At the OECD conference, he attempts to force his listeners out of the realm of fairy tales by telling other stories—truer fictions—which, in their representation of African people restore their humanity and individuality, the fullness and hardship of daily life, and the urgency of needs that will not wait for an economic hypothesis to be tested. Even as he qualifies his role at the conference, he insists on his authority to intervene: "I cannot presume to tell world bankers anything about public finance or economics and the rest. I have told you stories. Now let me make a couple of suggestions" (*Education* 163). Public finance and economics do not suffice, and the novelist, well-versed in the art of narrative, has a rich contribution to make. Achebe doesn't write off international development altogether, but suggests that it would benefit from looking at Africa differently and weaving its narratives accordingly.

Gatherings of international "experts" are not the sole provenance of this discussion, and this project considers narratives of African improvement to be a powerful cultural force. We are living in an age of Africa interest, an era in which thousands of

students on college campuses across the United States organize on behalf of child soldiers in Uganda, when cameras follow celebrities to Sudan and Somaliland to draw international attention to violence and human rights abuses, when rock concerts raise funds for victims of famine and AIDS, and proceeds from bottled water sales fund wells for villages across the continent. We are witnessing a proliferation of good intentions toward Africa though not typically to good effect. Humanitarian missions to Africa have taken on a certain Hollywood glamour, and the discourse of the mission is thus circulating widely in American popular culture. Narratives of African improvement are on everyone's lips.

For the humanitarian organizations that have exploded onto the scene within the last decade, stories have been at the heart of their success. Take, for example, the Save Darfur campaign, a movement that has gained a great deal of cultural currency in recent years by channeling a powerful narrative through the resonant voices of international celebrities. We have been told by George Clooney and Bono that we must "Save Darfur." Implied in the title of this movement is a narrative in miniature, concise yet wide-reaching which says that what Africa needs is a savior and that *we,* the international community—which Mahmood Mamdani calls "a post-Cold War nom de guerre for the Western powers" (*Saviors* 12)—must save it. Mamdani has argued that it is this opportunity for Americans to take on the role of savior that has led to the runaway success of the Save Darfur advocacy campaign when so many humanitarian crises in Africa have roused little American interest. In his aptly titled book, *Saviors and Survivors*, Mamdani contrasts the public outcry over Darfur with the minimal public

response to the wars in Angola and the Congo where death rates and human rights violations have been no less staggering:

> Congo, like Angola, is the norm. Darfur is the exception. With Darfur, media reports on Africa entered the arena of *grand narratives*. What used to be seen as meaningless anarchy—in which men, sometimes women, and increasingly, children, fight without aim or memory; in which wars can go on endlessly, even for decades; in which there are no clear stakes and no discernible outcomes; and in which it is difficult even to distinguish among *protagonists*—has now become invested with an *epic* significance. Why the contrast between the relative silence that greets most African wars and the global publicity boom around the carnage in Darfur? (21, my emphasis)

Notice the literary language Mamdani uses here. He suggests it is the power of the grand narrative—of heroic protagonists and epic goals—that has mobilized so much interest around Darfur. It seems that Save Darfur has seized on precisely the kind of story Westerners love to tell about themselves and love to tell about Africa.

While the bulk of Mamdani's critique addresses the actual work of the organization,[1] my purposes are literary and thus my interest in the example of Save Darfur is primarily for the story it tells, captured by its name, a story which has found incredible resonance among Americans. It is a familiar story, rooted in missionary history but long dispersed into secular realms, told again and again in different versions and through different media—we see it on TV, in movies, in fiction, and in news reports. We see it in contexts ranging from church bulletins to political speeches to the discourse of humanitarian aid. I call this narrative of benevolent foreigners traveling into Africa to

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[1] One distinction Mamdani makes between Save Darfur's approach and that of other humanitarian organizations, which is crucial to his argument, is that "the movement to save Darfur—like the War on Terror—is *not* a peace movement: it calls for a military intervention rather than political reconciliation, punishment rather than peace" (16). Numerous critics are emphasizing the current militarization of humanitarian discourse and action.

save it *the Mission narrative*[2] and argue that it provides a framework through which Africa is understood at an individual level and through which policy is determined at an international level. To borrow the words of Edward Said, Africa is "not a free subject of thought or action" (*Orientalism* 3), bound, as Achebe suggests, by malignant fictions.[3] "Narratives of African Improvement" explores how the place of Africa within the Western imagination has been molded by the story of the benevolent mission and how writers, both African and Western, have responded. The continent does indeed face compounded crises of poverty, inadequate infrastructure, corruption, and violence, but what does it mean when the international response is so consistently framed in terms of salvation? How do words—and stories—betray altruistic ideals?

Each of the novels I will be reading insists that beneficent intentions often produce malignant fictions. This issue reached a high point of visibility with the recent Kony 2012 campaign. In March of 2012, Invisible Children, Inc., a U.S.-based organization, which "exists to bring an end to LRA [Lord's Resistance Army] atrocities" (invisiblechildren.com), released a video which quickly made viral history. Within a

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[2] A point of clarification: I capitalize "Mission" in much the same way Lyotard capitalizes "Enlightenment narrative" (xxiii) or Marlow of *Heart of Darkness* capitalizes "Workers" (which I will address in chapter 1). The point is that "Mission" in this case isn't functioning as an adjective or a modifier of "narrative"— the term isn't meant as short-hand for "narratives about missions." Instead it refers to a specific category of narrative, in much the same way that "West" is capitalized only when we refer to a specific location and concept ("the West") and not when we use it as a direction (as in "go west") or as a modifier (as in "the west side of town"). Thus a "mission novel" (with mission as a modifier here) does not necessarily subscribe to the capital-M Mission narrative, though it certainly can.

[3] Part of this problem lies in the tendency to speak of "Africa" as a singular whole when really, as Achille Mbembe reminds us, it is "first and foremost a geographical accident" containing a vast range of diversity which is belied by that singular designation ("Power of the False" 631). At the same time, Mbembe distinguishes between the "sphere of geography" and the "sphere of representation" in which "this accident is subsequently invested with a multitude of significations, diverse imaginary contents, or even fantasies, which, by force of repetition, end up becoming authoritative narratives" (631-32). My own project lies within that sphere of representation, and I am responding to a set of authoritative narratives that do indeed think of Africa as a whole and that have produced a shared set of problems for Africa. See also Ferguson, *Global Shadows,* 5, and Appiah, chapter 1, "The Invention of Africa."

week of its release it had generated over 70 million views and a groundswell of altruistic

enthusiasm. Much like Save Darfur, its narrative had struck a chord. Critics came out

fiercely on a number of fronts—the video's misleading and incomplete history, an

organizational strategy invested most heavily in marketing rather than in work on the

ground, and particularly the organization's call for increased militarization in the area,

including the mobilization of U.S. troops. Ugandan voices were key to that critical

response, including that of Mamdani who warns that through its militaristic strategy, "this

well-intentioned but unsuspecting army of children will be responsible for magnifying

the very crisis to which they claim to be the solution" ("What Jason didn't tell" np).

Much of the critique was leveled directly at the story the video told, arguing, for example,

that its focus "takes away attention from existing problems where the conflict festered for

22 year. . . . It also emotionalizes and dignifies the white man's burden in its simplistic

construction angering Ugandans and Africans in general" (Izama). The narrative

misdirects our attention, produces the wrong goals, glorifies white heroes, and flattens

African victims. TMS Ruge, Ugandan social entrepreneur and co-founder of the Diaspora

Project, articulates the consequences of that simplistic construction:

> Here, the voice of the marginalized is minimized, and their agency to
> determine the course of their future is stripped. They become bit players in their
> own story with an occasional appearance. In this case, one organization set the
> goals and put a huge effort behind simplifying the message for mass adoption—
> and that audience bit into it hook, line and sinker.
> The scary part of this campaign is that it raises expectations too high. "If you
> care enough to send $30 and wear this here bracelet, we will go and get rid of this
> evil for you. Trust us," it says. The world isn't that simple or easy to fix.

Kony 2012 thus became the subject of a kind of global fiction workshop, bringing the

hazards of such narratives to new levels of public consciousness. It is a prime

contemporary example of the Mission narrative form and its power to engage a mass of followers while also provoking the ire of critics.

The story begins with Jason Russell, the co-founder of Invisible Children, Inc., recounting the birth of his son. This narrative of African improvement begins and ends in the United States. Russell is the story's hero who promises Jacob, a Ugandan boy mourning the loss of his brother to Kony's troops, that "we're going to stop them." The film is about the journey to make good on that bold promise. In order to convey the situation to viewers, Russell explains it to his five-year-old son who thinks his father's job is to "stop bad guys from being mean." It is indeed a simple story about good guys, bad guys, and deceptively simple solutions. The film declares that the answer to stopping Kony lies in their "mission to make him famous." The simplistic narrative and the call to action are mutually reinforcing. Among critics of humanitarianism, this is an iteration of an already familiar story. Alex de Waal calls it a "fairy story," in essence a fiction,

> consisting of a helpless victim in distress, a villain (until recently this role was usually played by the weather) and a saviour (preferably a white nurse). The story gives the comforting illusion that a solution is at hand, and that the reader or viewer is (or can be) part of it. Each component involves distortion and exaggeration. The journalist typically selects the worst cases of child malnutrition in the worst feeding shelters, giving the misleading impression that they are all like that. The role of the 'villain' is grossly simplified. The 'saviour', a foreign relief agency, is not subjected to any form of analysis. (*Famine* 83)

The evidence is abundant: humanitarianism has a narratological problem on its hands. Critics keep coming back to this problem, and I am interested in exploring how novelists—experts in narrative—have intervened in this debate.

With all the flaws and oversimplifications of the Kony 2012 campaign, I don't want to oversimplify it in turn. Too often supporters and detractors of such movements end up talking past one another. The film does articulate ideas that are, in and of

themselves, compelling to people far outside the circle of Kony 2012 enthusiasts. It claims that "a better world is coming"—a world of greater equity and justice—dependent on "turning the system [of power and influence] upside-down." "We built a community," Russell tells us, "around the idea that where you live shouldn't determine if you live." To submit to scrutiny the narrative through which Invisible Children has attempted to mobilize that idea is not to disregard the idea itself. It is indeed compelling. In fact, it shares certain points of resonance with African writers who have long been committed to opposing colonial and neo-colonial inequities through storytelling. They too want to transform the system, and "Narratives of African Improvement" takes that point of resonance seriously without sidelining the contentious debates which it also opens up. My purpose is not to critique humanitarian responsibility writ large but to understand, through narrative analysis, how it might be better expressed and practiced. My sense is that the intentions behind Kony 2012 were genuinely good, but the narrative was dangerously misled. I take the whole debacle as evidence for the need to be critical consumers and producers of humanitarian narrative, and thus I want to explore how those aims for equity and justice might be better served by a different kind of storytelling.

African writers have been keenly attentive to this problem within the context of their own commitments to improving the continent, their "desire to make our experience in the world better" (Achebe, *Country* 58). African literature has consistently been invested in the idea of making the world better through stories, challenging and overcoming malignant fictions. Commenting on the social role and responsibility of the author, Achebe describes "beneficent fiction" as a longstanding category of African storytelling, a tradition with roots reaching far beyond the relatively recent development

of published literature. He explains that this notion is "simply one of defining storytelling as a creative component of human experience, human life. It is something griots have done in Africa from the dawn of time—pass down stories that have a positive purpose and a use for society, from generation to generation" (*Country* 57). This model of storytelling has political and moral implications: "I do think that decency and civilization would insist that the writer take sides with the powerless. Clearly there is no moral obligation to write in any particular way. But there is a moral obligation, I think, not to ally oneself with power against the powerless" (*Country* 58). Debates within African writing have often been over how to best achieve that alliance with the powerless—or at least the disempowered, since these debates include interrogations of the very category of powerlessness. Should African novels be written in colonial languages or indigenous ones? What is the appropriate style of committed literature—realist or modernist, accessible or experimental, modeled on Western literary traditions or African oral traditions—and where is its appropriate audience? Is it more effective to represent extraordinary scenes of injustice or ordinary African life?[4] Through the language of beneficence, decency, civilization, moral obligation, and advocacy, Achebe links this literary discussion to the vocabulary of humanitarianism, which defines its own loyalties in much the same way: "The humanitarian politics of life is based on an entrenched standpoint in favor of the 'side of the victims.' The world order, it supposes, is made up of the powerful and the weak. Humanitarian action takes place in the space between the two, being deployed among the weak as it denounces the powerful" (Fassin 511). For Achebe, the best fiction performs a kind of humanitarian work, but despite a shared

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[4] For classic examples of these debates, see Ngũgĩ, *Decolonising the Mind*; Chinweizu, Jemie, and Madubuike, *Toward the Decolonization of African Literature*; and Ndebele, *Rediscovery of the Ordinary.*

orientation, humanitarianism often generates very problematic narratives, the kinds of narratives that these novelists have worked so hard to refute. I take this commitment to the powerless, then, as a complex node of connection—a place of conflict but also potential alliance.

If narrative is the problem, I ask what role the novel—that extended, complicated, multifaceted form of narrative—might take in imagining and articulating better alternatives, better narratives of African improvement. In order to address that question, this dissertation charts the transnational unfolding of a micro-genre I have termed the *critical mission novel* (a form of literary response to the Mission narrative), linking British, African, and U.S. writers who are typically read within separate traditions. I view transnational literary study as a valuable approach to problems that are by definition transnational. These writers are thoroughly transnational themselves, and their own lives map onto the network of missions in various ways. Western writers including Joseph Conrad, Barbara Kingsolver, Norman Rush, and Paul Theroux have spent extended periods of time in Africa. The anglophone African authors I address, including Chinua Achebe, Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o, Bessie Head, Nuruddin Farah, and Zakes Mda—have written about their homelands from exile, at least for large portions of their careers. These writers offer what are, in some ways, a very disparate set of texts written within various moments across the span of the twentieth century and from various places on that mission network. But their novels share a number of features in the way they integrate and dismantle the grand Mission narrative while also negotiating its vexed attractions. In its numerous iterations, the critical mission novel explores the relationship between the worldly and otherworldly, the compelling yet problematic notion of development through

altruism, the entanglement of benevolence and power, and the risks and possibilities of (secular and religious) faith, its displacement, and loss.

By building a problem-based literary history, which maps onto the global network of missions themselves, "Narratives of African Improvement" views a shared problem-space (a term I borrow from David Scott) from various angles.[5] Whereas Western writers ranging from Joseph Conrad to Barbara Kingsolver have formally dismantled the grand Mission narrative, replacing its confidence and triumph with tragedy and doubt, anglophone African writers such as Chinua Achebe, Tstitsi Dangarembga, and Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o have re-situated the mission as a central yet problematic figure in Africa's own narratives of improvement—a channel for cultural domination but also an access-point to ideas of freedom, rebellion, and human rights. In the postcolonial era, the problem of the poverty line has brought the relationship between missions and material life to the forefront. Novelists such as Bessie Head, Phillip Caputo, and Nuruddin Farah critique humanitarian aid for the unequal relationships it cultivates (racially and economically, nationally and interpersonally) while also re-orienting its terms in order to envision a more ethical version of international responsibility, motivated by sufficiency rather than salvation and based on mutual obligation rather than sacrifice and dependency. Drawing on their models of critical commitment, I argue for the role of the novelist as an interlocutor for policy makers, development experts, and aid workers. The critical mission novel offers rhetorical strategies and visionary resources, which could reinvigorate a humanitarian discourse that continues to imagine Africa and its

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[5] Whereas my focus will be on the mission network's intersections with Africa, this approach could also be extended to include other continents, since missions are a truly global phenomenon. "Africa" takes on its own particular set of meanings within the mission imagination, and this project thus attends to its unique positioning.

improvement in religiously inflected, imperialist ways with aims that are often betrayed by the language in which they are articulated. It is a discourse in need of a fiction workshop.

Missions in the Long View

In some ways this high tide of global concern is new. The network of global connections is denser and faster than it has ever been before. International organizations like the United Nations have taken governance beyond the boundaries of the state and non-governmental organizations (NGOs) have proliferated, offering both emergency relief and regular social services for ongoing needs.[6] International humanitarianism's expansion in the 80s and 90s is related to state decline in the neo-liberal era, bringing about a phenomenon Alex de Waal describes as the internationalization of social welfare.[7] Leading up to this period, the state had been viewed as the primary guarantor of rights and standards of living, but state sovereignty now takes a back seat to the sovereignty of humanity, allowing international organizations to circumvent state rights in the name of human rights.[8] Within this globalized framework of responsibility, Africa's problems are, in some sense, everyone's, and narratives of African improvement circulate far beyond the continent itself as a subject of intense public enthusiasm and thus a trope within popular culture. This Africa interest takes a variety of forms including advocacy and giving as well as products for consumption which range in use and intent from the

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[6] On the rise of NGOs, see Barrow and Jennings, *The Charitable Impulse: NGOs and Development in East and Northeast Africa* and Dibie, *Non-Governmental Organizations (NGOs) and Sustainable Development in Africa.*

[7] See *Famine Crimes* as well as Leonard and Straus, *Africa's Stalled Development.*

[8] Samuel Moyn argues that universal human rights became the "last utopia" as a "moral alternative to bankrupt political utopias" (5), displacing nationalism and attempting to guarantee rights not through the aegis of the state but by transcending its authority. See *The Last Utopia.*

educational to the purely entertaining. An industry of popular non-fiction has also emerged with texts such as Dave Eggers's *What is the What* (2006), Ishmael Beah's *A Long Way Gone: Memoirs of a Boy Soldier* (2007), Faith McDonnell and Grace Akallo's *Girl Soldier: A Story of Hope for Northern Uganda's Children* (2007), and Sam Childers's *Another Man's War: The True Story of One Man's Battle to Save Children in the Sudan* (2009), which has also been made into a movie, *Machine Gun Preacher* (2011).

In other ways, the narrative energy around Africa isn't new at all. The stories which get built up around humanitarians today have been developing since the high period of missionary enthusiasm in the nineteenth century. I thus seek to understand contemporary humanitarianism through the historical framework of Christian missions, revealing the influence of religious thought on secular institutions and discourse. Achille Mbembe is one among a number of Africanist and postcolonialist scholars who are turning to the significance of religion in order understand contemporary Africa and its history as well as modernity at large.[9] Mbembe suggests that we be more "mindful of the limits of the secular fictions that have come to colonize our understanding of our own modernity and our profane world" ("Religion, Politics, Theology" 152). "Narratives of African Improvement" is, in part, a contribution to that emergent discussion. Critical mission writers from Joseph Conrad to Graham Greene to Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o to Bessie Head insist that the religious cannot be disarticulated from the secular history of

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[9] Others include David Attwell, Jean and John Comaroff, Birgit Meyer, Paul Gifford, Gauri Viswanathan, Catherine Hall, and Wole Soyinka. Charles Piot's *Nostalgia for the Future* is of particular relevance within the context of this project. In this study of post-Cold War west Africa, he argues that both the church and NGOs have become dominant forces in African configurations of the late postcolonial present and imaginings of the future.

international benevolence. Secular scholars of humanitarianism also find that, "[i]t is impossible to study [the subject] without being impressed by the importance of religion. Religious agencies can take credit for pouring the foundations for humanitarianism. Religious discourses continue to motivate, shape, and define various dimensions of humanitarianism" (Barnett 17).Thus in order to understand the narrative which underwrites humanitarian action, it is necessary to trace its religious roots. Contrary to theories which claim we have moved beyond modernity and its legitimating metanarratives, the popular discourse around Africa and its relation to the First World suggests that grand narratives of emancipation are very much alive, as are the religious frameworks which informed missionary tales of the nineteenth century. Even as Bono has replaced Livingstone as celebrity spokesman, the project of saving lives has usurped that of saving souls, and the ontological discourse of "savage" and "civilized" has become the mere underside of a materialist discourse of the "powerful" and "powerless," the narrative framework of missions has remained strikingly the same, a continuity to which literature has been particularly sensitive.[10]

This grand narrative of Africa's salvation provides a way of describing, understanding and structuring the relationship between Africa and the West. The Mission narrative can be understood as a subcategory of Lyotard's concept of master narrative— particularly the grand narrative of emancipation. Master narratives are vast, even

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[10] Even if missionaries have fallen out of fashion since the Victorian era, they continue to maintain a following. In fact, there are more missionaries at work in the world today than ever before in history, and they continue to wield a massive support network and following (see Pettifer and Bradley). There is also a whole industry of Christian publishing with a keen interest in humanitarian work but all in the name of God, including texts written by and about Americans in Africa, such as *Another Man's War,* and co-authored books by African survivors and Western advocates such as *Girl Soldier.* Religious strands of humanitarianism continue to exist alongside what has become a predominantly secular discourse, yet a discourse that grew out of and is still shaped by a religious history.

universal in their reach, providing an explanation for history and the workings of the world through the trajectory of progress, modernization, or emancipation. They serve to legitimate the way things are and the way their disseminators want things to be—they can legitimate the status quo as well as projects of transformation. "The important thing," Lyotard tells us, "is not, or not only, to legitimate denotative utterances pertaining to truth, such as 'The earth revolves around the sun,' but rather to legitimate prescriptive utterances pertaining to justice, such as 'Carthage must be destroyed' or 'The minimum wage must be set at x dollars'" (36). Or, we might add, "Africa must be saved by the West."

The Mission narrative as a subcategory of the grand narrative of emancipation shares its faith in the inevitable force of progress and its tendency to force-fit the world into its own image. It too is characterized by "its great hero, its great dangers, its great voyages, its great goal" (Lyotard xxiv), specifically the missionary, the African wilderness, the journey into the "heart of darkness," and the goal of saving the "benighted" African. Drawing on and extending Lyotard's definition of the grand narrative of emancipation, we could break the Mission narrative down into five key components. First, the missionary, or some secular version of him, serves as narrative's great hero; he is noble, self-sacrificing, even holy, often taking on the role of a kind of god. Second is the great and dangerous voyage, essential to the mission plot. These are adventure stories about the journey into Africa and about the risks of residing in remote and mysterious corners of the earth. Third, the great goal is improvement of that remote and dangerous place and its ever "benighted" people. While that has often taken the more specific form of religious conversion, I will be thinking primarily about the larger (and

more flexibly defined) goal of "improvement" since there have been many means to that

end, even among religious missionaries. At the same time, the concept of conversion can

be understood in a much broader sense when improving Africa is believed to require

fundamentally transforming (or converting) it.[11] According to the Mission narrative, that

transformation is necessary, inevitable, and always successful. Mission heroes aim to

improve Africans in diverse ways and save them from diverse threats, and they correctly

anticipate their good intentions being carried out. Thus the plot essentially matches the

goal—the narrative is one of inevitable progress, and glorious ends can potentially justify

all means. That brings us to the fourth component: the certainty associated with such an

optimistic trajectory. A sense of heavenly ordination prompts an unquestioned and

unquestioning confidence. And, finally, the narrative speaks in language that matches its

content. Its tone is authoritative and unwavering in its commitment to the great goal. Its

rhetoric is powerful and soaring, and its optimistic imagination, enormously compelling

as it envisions the potential of "unbounded good" (Conrad 61). It is founded on a

structure of contrasts—light and dark, high and low, white and black, visible and

invisible, powerful and powerless—and it seeks always to redeem the latter, bringing it

into the enlightened glow of the former. While these contrasts take different forms and

vocabularies, the contrast at the heart of the Mission narrative is consistent; the

distinction between good and evil is self-evident, and the path of the "do-gooder" is thus

clear.

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[11] I have in mind V. Y. Mudimbe's definition of conversion when he argues that Christian and colonial intentions for Africa did not conflict because both aimed for "the conversion of African minds and space" (47).

The critical mission novel will throw all that into question. There is an illustrative scene in Graham Greene's *The Heart of the Matter* (1948) in which the Mission narrative is read but read against the grain. Its reader, Scobie, takes a book from the stuffy shelves of a missionary woman who insists that she is "not teaching the children here [in colonial West Africa] to read in order that they shall read—well, novels" (110). (A character who distrusts novels is typically, in the hands of a novelist, not one to be trusted.) Despite her slim pickings, Scobie selects a volume in hopes of entertaining an ailing child. The boy quickly voices his desire for a murder story and asks what the title of this one is. Scobie sets about the task of introducing the disappointingly pious book at hand:

> Scobie said dubiously, "*A Bishop Among the Bantus.*"
> "What does that mean?"
> Scobie drew a long breath. "Well, you see, Bishop is the name of the hero."
> "But you said *a* Bishop."
> "Yes. His name was Arthur."
> "It's a soppy name."
> "Yes, but he's a soppy hero. [….] The real heroes are the Bantus." (111-12)

Scobie begins to improvise and opens up a new reading of the bishop through a recasting of missionary heroism. He goes on to describe the way Arthur Bishop ("a bishop" has been transformed from a noun to a proper name) pursues these Bantu pirates as a secret agent of the British Government, discovering all their secrets "so that he can betray them when the time is right." "He sounds a bit of a swine," the boy concludes, and Scobie agrees (112). Moving to the first page of the book, he makes a quick decision about how to approach it: "Scobie found his eyes fixed on an opening paragraph which stated, *I shall never forget my first glimpse of the continent where I was to labour for thirty of the best years of my life.*" In spite of the words on the page "[h]e said slowly, 'From the moment that they left Bermuda the low lean rakehelly craft had followed in their wake...'" (112-

13). In this scene of generous improvisation, Scobie misreads the Mission narrative, giving it a new and unsanctioned form, a form of which the missionary who lent him the book would surely disapprove. In this autobiographical narrative as it is written on the page, the bishop is the great hero; the first line alone foretells a story of hard work and reward, but Scobie reads the character differently, recasting him as a dissolute, creeping spy, the agent of a devious British power. This missionary, he suggests, is a soppy hero at best, and actually the story's real heroism lies with the African characters. He imparts this new version of a mission story to a young British boy, representative of an upcoming generation of Europeans arriving in Africa. This scene itself is a brief narrative of benevolence, a scene of helping a person in need, and it is contingent on a narrative transformation. The success of Scobie's altruism depends on that transformation, and with it, the boy is greatly cheered. His reading suggests that the Mission narrative is worn out and a new story is required.

I recount this anecdote for the questions it raises. The careful misreading Scobie offers leads us to ask, what are the implications of telling the story of missions differently? What if the heroes, perspectives, and outcomes were switched, and what might it reveal to see a missionary bishop as a "soppy hero" and really "a bit of a swine"? What is at stake in this kind of revision and what ethical possibilities might it contain? These are precisely the kinds of questions the critical strand of the mission novel takes up. It works through both exposure and sabotage, revealing the troubling ways in which the Mission narrative functions, undermining its great heroes and grand plans, and endorsing new versions and vocabularies of care and assistance.

One of the central problems of international projects of improvement—and a central concern of this literature—is that they are deployed across sharply uneven positions of power, positions reinforced by the rhetoric of salvation. "Saving" Africa consolidates and extends the authority of the "savior," and it is a pattern which encompasses giving relationships more generally. Thus, in the short story "Ma Kamanda's Latrine" by Marla Kay Houghteling, when a Sierra Leonean woman builds a latrine for a Peace Corps volunteer and writes into the cement "A GIFT TO THE U.S. GOVERNMENT FROM THE PEOPLE OF PUNUMBA," it is a remarkably disruptive moment for the static structure of assistance—who gives and who receives, who is a donor and who is in debt, who is powerful and who is weak. The incongruity of this statement points to entrenchment of the Mission narrative while also revealing that the reality of giving and receiving is far more complex than the narrative allows.

The relationship between discourse and authority, which is at stake in this scene, has been articulated most famously by Edward Said who insists that transnational interaction always unfolds on a political field, a field in which the dominant discourse and narratives for understanding the relationship between the West and the Orient (or in this case Africa) serve Western interests. Projects of benevolence, Said insists, are no exception. I am particularly interested in how missions have engaged with questions of authority and inclusion, and, as the novels I read will show, both the discourse and the results of missions have often been fraught with contradiction. As humanitarianism secularized in the first half of the twentieth century, the higher purpose for which benevolent travelers labored shifted from God to humanity, and yet the notion of

universal humanity was rooted in the Christian worldview all along.[12] That inclusive

concept has been fundamental to humanitarianism and has been essential in extending

rights and protections to an expanding circle of people who were not previously viewed

as such.[13] In spite of that "civilized" and "savage" rhetoric that infuses mission literature

of the nineteenth century, missionaries often articulated a concept of humanity in

surprisingly progressive terms which these novels pick up on. Chinua Achebe, for

example, uses David Livingstone as an example of "wise, inclusive humanity [that]

eluded Conrad" (*Education* 90).[14] Even as this universal discourse has cultivated genuine

concern for others, it has also produced paternalism and hierarchy and not within

religious missions alone.

Whereas the humanitarian rhetoric of the powerful and the powerless is more

ethically palatable than that of civilizational difference, it can perpetuate problematic

divisions between humanitarian agents and their supposed beneficiaries. This discourse

takes for granted the humanity of the populations it serves and acknowledges the uneven

distribution of privilege across the globe, yet it can also reproduce hierarchies of its own.

The novels I will explore ask us to think about those positions of power and how they

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[12] See Barnett, 75.

[13] See Barnett, chapter 3, and Hall, chapters 2 and 5.

[14] Livingstone's own autobiography is indeed more nuanced than the heroic Mission narrative that gets attached to him. He expresses the deep ambivalence of an agent who is at once inside and outside of empire, and he has the double role of critic and apologist for both colonizers and native populations. He speaks indigenous languages and lives alongside the African men who travel with him, often understanding interactions that, he suggests, colonial officers would not: "I, being more of a native, and familiar with their customs, knew this shabby present was an insult to us" (Livingstone 80). Even as he participates in the rhetoric of civilization, he allows his readers to glimpse the view of the "civilized" from the perspective of the "heathen," a move that introduces productive, destabilizing reversals. He does this by relaying what he hears from Africans—for example, the fear that "white men were cannibals" (402)—and by framing himself from their perspective: "My wretched appearance must have excited [Chief Cypriano's] compassion" (395). He thus aligns himself with African people in ways that begin to contest colonial assumptions about them, and that is what Achebe affirms, citing Livingstone's conclusion that Africans "are just a strange mixture of good and evil as men everywhere else are" (qtd. in *Education* 90).

come to define travel and social engagement upon arrival. One moves about in the world

largely on the basis of what James Ferguson has called one's "place-in-the-world" which

involves "both a location in space and a rank in a system of social categories (as in the

expression 'knowing your place')" (*Global Shadows* 6).[15] The benevolent and the

benighted have become distinct places-in-the-world attached to Westerners and Africans

respectively. Even movements like Kony 2012 that aim to transform those positions can

ultimately reinforce them by channeling that aim into the structure of the Mission

narrative. One could argue that the difference in status is even more pronounced between

secular humanitarians and local populations than it was for religious missionaries.

Contemporary humanitarian organizations bring in large numbers of expatriate aid

workers who are regularly moved from place to place. In contrast, "the missionary tended

to stay in one place for years at a time, which compelled them to learn local languages

and customs, which in turn could foster a genuine appreciation of local ways of knowing

and doing" (Barnett 236). Thus in *Acts of Faith*, for example, a novel critical of both

humanitarian and religious missions, Caputo offers progressive immigrant missionaries

as a positive alternative to the elitist employees of the UN. The critical mission novel is

often surprising, opening up new angles on the conversation about missions which

neither the celebratory nor the critical discourse anticipate. This tension around the place

of African people within the Mission narrative and the mode of humanitarian action it

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[15] Africa, as a place-in-the-world, "is nowadays nearly synonymous with failure and poverty" (*Global Shadows* 5). Ferguson describes Africa as a category which is "historically and socially constructed (indeed, in some sense arbitrary), but also a category that is 'real,' that is imposed with force, that has a mandatory quality; a category within which, and according to which, people must live" (5). The Mission narrative, we will see, describes Africa in this categorical way.

generates is a concern that runs throughout this literature and thus a theme running throughout this project.

This tension is often articulated in terms of empire. In both secular and religious varieties, missions have born uneasy relationships to imperial state power, developing on an entangled yet separate track as they follow something akin to the biblical injunction to be in the world but not of it.[16] Caputo has described UN workers as the "new colonials," bringing about "the recolonization of Africa by the imperialism of good intentions" (*Acts* 14, 263). Missionaries have been viewed through the same lens as constitutive of the benevolent and self-justifying branch of colonialism. Jean-François Bayart has claimed that the non-governmental organizations (NGOs) of globalization may be "new actors, but in many ways they follow the footsteps of . . . the missions" (96). Moreover, Ngũgĩ's most recent novel suggests that "NGOs will do what missionary charities did in the past"; they will work to "own and reshape the Third World in the image of the west" (*Wizard* 746). At the same time, missionaries and humanitarian aid workers do operate on a separate track and consistently think of their work as being independent from state authority, placing their affiliation—in language like Achebe's—on the side of the powerless. In contemporary forms, in both life and literature, humanitarians contest self-interested state power, either calling their governments to live up to their own humanitarian rhetoric or working against their failure to do so: "Activists typically see themselves outside the centers of power in global affairs, and seek to speak to those powers—to advocate—in the name of humanitarian ideas and causes. . . . They seek, in

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[16] See Porter, *Religion versus Empire?* A number of scholars including J.D.Y. Peel, David Atwell, Brian Stanley, and Norman Etherington have also been complicating now standard accounts of missions' relationship to empire, an issue I will take up in more detail in chapter 2.

short, *to speak as truth to power*" (Kennedy xvi). These figures are celebrated, in part, for their detachment from imperialist interests. The institutions which claim to take the side of the powerless are far more deeply entangled in power than this would suggest, but the novels I analyze prevent us from fully reversing that claim as some critics have done. I understand these texts as novels of the third sector, about international travelers who are at least nominally external to governmental and for-profit sectors, working as missionaries and volunteers to "improve" Africa in some way. These novels raise important questions about the expectations and effects of "independent" altruistic travel and nuance our understandings of empire as well as that which is supposedly, and indeed partially, outside of it.

The Postcolonial Critique & the Critical Mission Novel

The grand Mission narrative has not gone unchallenged, and its entanglement with empire has been a prime subject of interrogation and counter-narration. As Edward Said puts it, "stories are at the heart of what explorers and novelists say about strange regions of the world; they also become the method colonized people use to assert their own identity and the existence of their own history" (*Culture* xii). The debate over missions, then, is in part a debate over stories. With the rise of anticolonial discourse in the mid-century, new counter-narratives emerged, essentially anti-mission narratives, which turn the story of African salvation by Western heroes on its head. Postcolonial studies has followed suit, applying this critique to both religious and humanitarian missions, again dramatizing the continuity between them. There is a kind of critical consensus that missions of both varieties are a benign mask for imperial violence—that they promise

emancipation and in fact enable domination, that they offer progress and in fact produce destruction.[17] This response has provided a necessary retort to the triumphalist Mission narrative, yet it can also obscure the remarkably complex history of African interactions with Christian institutions as well as the urgency of the questions confronted by humanitarianism, albeit in dreadfully insufficient ways.

"Narratives of African Improvement" is not refuting the radical critique but supplementing it by drawing out the more nuanced story that literature is telling us. The critical mission novel, even as it dismantles the grand Mission narrative, also reflects a deep ambivalence regarding the mixed offerings of missions. The novels on which I will focus narrate missions at the impasse, at the breaking point between desire and reality, grappling with a mix of attraction and repulsion, both ideological and material. Critical mission novels are ambivalent to varying degrees, often invested in preserving some aspect of the mission impulse—that impulse to assist across differences of culture and color, power and privilege—while also holding onto the radical critique that so thoroughly problematizes it. These writers fold that critical consciousness into their desire for an ethics of global care. Missions, they show, have indeed been complicit with imperialism, but they have also been complicit with anticolonial, equalizing projects which imperialists have resisted and feared. This "both-and" perspective is found particularly among the African writers who are deeply committed to addressing the very real problems of the African present and who are also very attuned to the limitation of choices in the midst of non-ideal situations. In these novels, assistance—be it in the form of mission education or material aid—comes at a time of poverty and dispossession

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[17] Chapter 2 offers a more detailed review of this argument and the surrounding debates, including the arguments of critics who have sought to nuance the analysis.

produced by the colonial and neo-colonial orders. In this context, strategic alliances with missions offer a way of surviving and even subverting imperial violence. Not reducible to an easy equation with empire, religious and humanitarian missions have therefore been a vexed site of contestation not only between Africans and supposedly altruistic foreigners but among Africans themselves. Confronting missions has meant grappling with their oppressive, imperialist elements alongside their promises of social transformation. "Narratives of African Improvement" foregrounds the material context in which choices about missions have been made, never in a vacuum of idealism but in the flux of the non-ideal realities of African life in a colonial and neo-colonial world. These texts highlight what novelistic discourse is so adept at—unsettling things. Indeed, they overturn the celebratory Mission narrative while also inviting us to rethink the outright rejection of international "benevolence." By complicating the story of Western intervention and African engagement, these writers ask us to think about humanitarianism not as a clear project to be accepted or rejected but as a churning site of dilemma. Humanitarianism is, for better or worse, actively shaping the terrain of international politics, and this body of literature models a way to critically engage with it, mobilizing postcolonial insights and humanitarian commitments, which may seem irreconcilable.

Humanitarian and religious missions' grand narrative of universal reach is naturally at odds with postcolonial theory, which, in its use of poststructuralism, has made the critique of master narrative and the related discourse of universalism a key component of its work. In resistance to claims for knowing and acting on behalf of the world as a whole, postcolonial discourse has depicted a world textured by difference— social, cultural, racial, ethnic, sexual, geographical, historical. In the face of such

diversity, any one-size-fits-all agenda (most notably colonialism itself) inevitably fails to

fit all and thus ignores, buries, and obliterates those "roadblocks" in the name of

progress. With its critique of universal development discourse and its loyalty to

difference, postcolonial theory often doesn't account for the fact that, for much of the

Third World, the problem isn't figured in terms of too much sameness, but not enough.

As an Angolan friend, Adriano Huambo, once told me, "The world is too different." He

didn't mean that Angola needs more Western culture or that Angolans need to be more

like Americans. He was referring instead to a Michigan apple orchard, with trees so full

of apples that they were dropping and wasting away on the ground while he, during the

time of war, nearly starved. The world is indeed too different because the world is

radically unequal. Equality is, after all, a version of sameness. James Ferguson argues

that celebrating the declared end of development is not politically or intellectually

adequate because it fails to understand that distinction: "The much-celebrated end of the

universalizing project of modernity has meant an end to the prospect of African equality

and the re-establishment of a global color bar blocking access from the 'First Class'

world" ("Global Disconnect" 14). He adds that

> if the modernist story of development has lost credibility, the most pressing
> question would appear to be not whether this fact is to be lamented or celebrated,
> but rather how the intellectual field can be reconfigured in such a way as to
> restore global inequity to its status as 'problem' without reintroducing the
> teleologies and ethnocentrisms of the development metanarrative. (14)

The question is, in other words and within the context of this project, how do we

dismantle the Mission narrative without dismissing the questions uneasily provoked by

missions—questions of equality in a global system that places people in drastically

different positions?

Concerns over the limitations of dismantling master narratives (and the universalisms that often accompany them) have been central to the field of postcolonial theory itself, forming a vein of tension between the critique and the goal, between discursive analysis and political efficacy—a tension which lies at the heart of this dissertation. Politically minded scholars of various stripes have critiqued postcolonialism for "paralysis and inconsequentiality," talking endlessly about power but leaving "actual power relations" untouched (San Juan 221, 223). David Scott puts the problem this way: the "failure to address itself to the impasses that mark our *political* modernity is at least one aspect of what we might call the predicament of postcolonial criticism. It suffers, like many other kindred orientations within the fields of contemporary cultural theory, from a loss of discernible political objects" (*Refashioning Futures* 133). This is due in part to the fact that it has "privileged the 'responsibility to otherness' over the 'responsibility to act'" (135). This too has been discussed in terms of narrative, particularly as it relates to the concept of improvement itself, problematic for a body of theory that rejects the teleological concepts of progress, modernity, and development.[18] Some critics have claimed that postcolonialism's affinity for deconstructing master narratives of progress and universal modernity amounts to an acceptance of the status quo, since social transformation requires a belief in progress and equity depends on universals. Aijaz Ahmad's critique has been one of the most provocative, yet it conveys a frustration with the field that is not uncommon, particularly within African studies.[19] He sums up the

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[18] For a classic example, see Anne McClintock's "Postcolonialism and the Angel of Progress." In it, she explains that her "book is dedicated to challenging both the idea of progress and that of the Family of Man, and is written in sympathy with Walter Benjamin's injunction to 'drive out any trace of "development" from the image of 'history' and to overcome the 'ideology of progress...in all its aspects'" (10).

[19] For a mediating response to this tension, see Tejumola Olaniyan's "Postmodernity, Postcoloniality, and African Studies."

position of the related set of "post" theories (postmodernist, poststructuralist,

postcolonialist) in this way:

> politics as such has undergone remarkable degrees of diminution. Any attempt to *know* the world as a whole, or to hold that it is open to rational comprehension, let alone the desire to change it, was to be dismissed as a contemptible attempt to construct 'grand narratives' and 'totalizing (totalitarian?) knowledges'. . . . the main business of radicalism came to reside in the rejection of rationalism itself (the Enlightenment project, as it came to be called). (69)

According to this line of argument, postcolonialism's focus on discourse and the undoing

of grand narratives first displaces the political agenda—the death of the subject and of

grand narratives, Ahmad claims, amount to the near death of "politics as such" (69)—and

second, it distracts attention from the material realities which, with most of the world in

poverty, are supremely urgent. In resistance to that "diminution," Ahmad calls for an

active politics that is "global and universalist in character—not human*ist* in the bourgeois

sense, surely; but, equally surely, encompassing humanity in general" (316).[20] Although

humanitarianism is not the alternative Ahmad is looking for—he is calling for

socialism—it is relevant to this debate as today's dominant discourse of encompassing

humanity in general.

Humanitarian thought resonates with—although it does not match—many of

these provocations to postcolonial theory, and thus it touches on anxieties within the field

even as it provokes strident criticism. Humanitarianism privileges the responsibility to act

over attention to difference. Its motivations lie not in otherness but in universality. It

offers grand narratives of progress in response to poverty. And while it does take global

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[20] In chapter 3, I will address the fact that this pushback against postcolonialism's anti-universalism and anti-humanism has also come from within the field itself, even from its prime deconstructionist, Gayatri Spivak. Olaniyan's essay, cited in the note above, is again relevant as it argues for "a historically informed, socially conscious version" of what he calls "earnest or critical postmodernism" (namely the dismantling of grand narratives and the decentering of the subject) (644). "[I]t is possible," he submits, "to reject grand narratives and still be anti-imperialist" (640).

inequity as an urgent problem, it also "reintroduc[es] the teleologies and ethnocentrisms" that are the corollaries of metanarrative. It thus forms a logical and necessary subject of postcolonial critique. Postcolonial theory provides the necessary tools for a critique of humanitarianism's narratological and discursive dangers, tools which this project will mobilize.

On the other hand, as much as postcolonial and humanitarian discourses conflict, they also share a key point of resonance in their commitment to the disempowered, the marginalized, and the dispossessed.[21] Both insist, in their very different ways, that lives which have been pushed to the periphery are worth thinking about. I argue that these are points of alliance worth cultivating. Each discourse is a kind of irritant to the other, but the provocations they make are worth pursuing—each capable of enriching and strengthening the other. Their points of most intense disagreement force the questions that each field needs to ask. "Narratives of African Improvement" takes this ambivalent and often uneasy mode of alliance to be richly generative. The conversation strikes me as a necessary one if we are to "restore global inequity to its status as 'problem' without reintroducing the teleologies and ethnocentrisms of the development narrative" (Ferguson, "Global Disconnect" 14). This is the kind of alliance I see forming in the

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[21] I take my understanding of resonance from William Connolly's *Capitalism and Christianity, American Style.* Connolly uses the concept to explain the assemblage of distinct schools of thought, such as evangelical Christianity and "cowboy capitalism," which cannot be explained by a common creed. He describes a situation "in which heretofore unconnected or loosely associated elements *fold, bend, blend, emulsify, and resolve incompletely into each other,* forging a qualitative assemblage resistant to classical models of explanation" and generative of new energy (40). I am interested in drawing that energy from what I see as a resonance between humanitarian ethics and postcolonial theory. Methodologically, this leads me to a practice of what Edward Said has called contrapuntal reading—a practice of reading across space and time and between separate bodies of literature in order "to think through and interpret together experiences that are discrepant, each with its particular agenda and pace of development, its own internal formations, its internal coherence and system of external relationships, all of them coexisting and interacting with others" (*Culture* 32). I am interested in the complex assemblage that might be formed between humanitarian practice and postcolonial theory.

critical mission novel, which dismantles the grand Mission narrative but also takes seriously the compelling questions it raises about the ethics of global concern, inequity, and human interconnectedness, exploring how missions themselves might attend to these questions more effectively and more ethically.

The critical mission novel carves a path through postcolonial theory's political impasse with narratives of transnational human connection and assistance that incorporate the lessons of radical critique without losing sight of the horizon of improvement. This is not an easy balance to strike and the novels often provide more questions than answers. They leave loose ends and take us into the mess as the place from which to start. These writers suggest that in order to better address the fundamental inequities which are part of the Mission narrative's structure (and a theme of the chapters that follow) it is necessary to change the terms of the humanitarian encounter. By "terms" I mean its language as well as the terms on which it is carried out—who makes decisions and holds authority, who is benevolent and who is indebted, who sacrifices and who merely survives. Each chapter focuses on a problematic node within the Mission narrative—the manifestation of faith, emancipation through foreign sources, the concept of universal humanity, and the politics of giving—exploring how a set of novels critiques and rethinks it. Each of these nodes is deeply fraught, on the one hand easy to critique and the other intensely compelling, thus opening up a mixed field of rejection and attraction. Each chapter traces a literary negotiation of that tension, finding that authors typically leave it productively unresolved.

The opening chapter, "Disenchanting the Gang of Virtue," explores the problematics of faith in the Mission narrative by tracing the emergence of the Western

critical mission novel. To clarify the mode of faith that is at stake, I begin by defining the Mission narrative's key tropes and formal elements through an historical lens, describing its uptake in nineteenth-century biographical and fictional writing. The literature of the twentieth century turns that celebratory tide, insisting that when benevolence gets channeled across differences of culture, race, and status, the results can range from unintended damage to murderous destruction. I resituate Joseph Conrad's *Heart of Darkness* as a missionary text, arguing that its 1899 publication inaugurated the Western branch the critical mission novel, a tradition I flesh out through its late twentieth-century manifestations in Barbara Kingsolver's *The Poisonwood Bible* and, more briefly, Phillip Caputo's *Acts of Faith*. These texts work to dismantle the grand Mission narrative, deflating its unwavering confidence through thematic and formal transformations of its standard elements, recommending and aesthetically cultivating an ethics of doubt. Transnational altruism, these authors suggest, would be less glamorous—but also less dangerous—if it were to replace its inflated march with a humble, tentative step. These novels produce a generative crisis of humanitarian faith which clears the ground for new, unorthodox practices of faith explored in later chapters.

In "A Real Heaven on Their Own Earth," I then follow the religious history into the period of decolonization, looking at African novelists whose personal histories are closely entangled with missions. Their responses to missions offer greater range and subtlety and seem, perhaps surprisingly, even more ambivalent toward missions than their Western counterparts. Drawing on both the early novels and recently published autobiographical writings of Chinua Achebe and Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o, this chapter demonstrates that, although missions have played a role in the story of colonial

domination, they have also been central to African writers' own narratives of anticolonial improvement. Through a focus on education and literacy, this chapter uncovers the ways in which missions, as put to work by African subjects, enabled new practices of freedom, making Christianity the ambiguous ally of anticolonial movements. It thus provides historical grounding for a mode of thinking about and drawing on missions which continues to have relevance in the postcolonial humanitarian era.

One of the issues of particularly intense ambivalence which emerges in chapter 2 is the Christian ethic of universal humanism. This also becomes the theoretical and moral grounding for humanitarian action. The concept of universal humanity—the idea that human beings are, in some ways, all the same, possessing the same needs and rights—underpins the grand Mission narrative and produces its imperialist tendencies. It is thus rejected within postcolonial studies, yet it is a point of ambivalence within the critical mission novel, particularly among African writers. Chapter 3, "The Fiction of the International Community," is thus an attempt to work through that ambivalence in the novels of Zakes Mda and Bessie Head, both exiles from South Africa, who are thinking about apartheid's organization of humanity from a remove. Writing in the U.S. and Botswana respectively, Mda and Head are themselves participants in articulating an international network of concern. In this chapter, I address the hollowness of existing models of international community and analyze the fiction which re-imagines it as a legitimately inclusive foundation from which to confront global inequity. Mda's *The Heart of Redness* sets the stage for the problem of thinking in terms of everyone, depicting the challenges and risks of identification across differentials of power and privilege alongside the pull of universal standards for equality. In *When Rain Clouds*

Gather and *A Question of Power*, Bessie Head combines a thoroughgoing critique of universal humanism with an insistence on its necessity in a critical, decentered form. An effective international response to African poverty, she suggests, must be based not on the rhetoric of salvation but on an ethics of sufficiency. Her theorization of postcolonial, critical humanism could re-orient the ethical compass of humanitarians as well as their critics.

The fourth and final chapter, "The Power of Giving," shifts from the theoretical question of the international community to the question of how that idea corresponds to an actual system of material distribution. Put differently, what does the internationalization of concern actually mean for social welfare globally? This chapter brings together novelists from the U.S., Zimbabwe, and Somalia—Phillip Caputo, Tsitsi Dangarembga, and Nurrudin Farah—who grapple with the insufficient and often destructive ways in which humanitarian aid has addressed the problem of poverty, teasing out the knotty relationships between giving and receiving, dependency and self-sufficiency, domination and emancipation. In response to the dramatic shortcomings of existing humanitarianism, their work reimagines the aid relationship, offering new ways of theorizing inequity and resource (re)distribution.

Perhaps these critical mission writers retain a mission impulse of their own; they work to produce a crisis of faith for humanitarianism and they offer new, albeit partial, faiths to fill the void.[22] For Achebe, after all, when he stood before the leaders and "international experts" of global development, he thought it worthwhile to make some recommendations—to offer his own expertise as a writer of narratives—to a group that

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[22] I draw the idea of "partial faiths" from John McClure's book of that title.

might indeed "have the very best intentions" (157) but that desperately needs an expert in narratives to steer their workshop in the direction of humane improvement. To read humanitarianism as thoroughly, irreversibly imperial does not leave space for that. But if it is both a neocolonial and anti-neocolonial, racist and antiracist, dominating and emancipating force, then the task is to tip it toward the latter—or, more accurately, to convert it.

While this account is rooted in colonial history, its stakes ultimately lie in rethinking postcolonial futures and the politics of improvement. The central ethical problem "Narratives of African Improvement" takes up lies in the idea of improving a people and a place that is distant in terms of location, culture, and status in the world. By tracing the literary treatment of missions from the turn of the twentieth century to the present through a series of dilemmas—questions opened up by religious missions that continue to animate debates about humanitarian missions today—this project brings literary analysis to bear on contentious debates over modernity, human rights, and international assistance. It also speaks to questions of cultural imperialism and adaptation beyond the mission, to the way Africans define their relations to the West and all its various gods. This is significant for both American and African studies, and I will argue that it is critical for understanding the relationship between these places and how that relationship affects the future of global poverty and development. It is in its grappling with questions of the third sector—the non-profit, non-governmental sector—that the literature of religious missions maintains so much relevance in the postcolonial present when missionaries have lost their position in the popular imagination only to be replaced by other transnational agents and salvation of different kinds. Considering the popular

resurgence of grand mission narratives and their role in shaping intervention and aid, the critical perspectives of literature speak directly to what David Scott has called the "problem-space" of the postcolonial present and offer crucial insights into how the relationship between Africa and the so-called international community may shape possible futures. Humanitarian thought and action have been hindered by various fictions—the fictions of African darkness, Western enlightenment, inevitable progress, and spectacular salvation—all posing as truth. Ironically, fiction itself may hold the most sophisticated alternatives.

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Disenchanting the Gang of Virtue:
The Mission Narrative and the Western Novel of Africa

"I thank our Father in heaven, with all my heart, that He has guided me to this island,
and made me the instrument of saving you."
– R.M. Ballantyne, *The Coral Island*

Each flight was an act of faith, in Providence, in luck, in the *rightness* of the mission,
and because self-dramatization is necessary if one is to continue taking such risks,
the exhausted crews began to look upon themselves as embodiments of the company's logo:
airborne knights, rescuing the peasants from the twin dragons of starvation and war.
– Phillip Caputo, *Acts of Faith*

Missions are fundamentally concerned with the relationship between belief and practice. To embark on a mission is an act of faith—faith in some higher purpose, be it God or humanity. The Mission narrative functions not only to document such acts of faith but to call others to put ideals into practice, to show themselves to be true believers. In its call to action, the Mission narrative thus aims to instill faith on multiple levels—in declared ideals, in mission leaders and the path they have set out, in the relationship between good intentions and good outcomes, and in one's own capacity to understand and improve the world. Confidence, certainty, and resoluteness characterize the tone of the Mission narrative and the valued qualities of the mission hero. Doubt becomes a kind of enemy. As a missionary character in the Broadway comedy, *The Book of Mormon,* tells himself: "Now I must be completely devout / I can't have even one shred of doubt." He is following the tested advice of missionaries who came before him: "When you start to get confused because of thoughts in your head…Turn it off." According to the Mission narrative, to hesitate or to waver—to even sense confusion—is failure in and of itself, revealing a lack of faith. Doubt is something best switched off.

On the one hand, the Mission narrative is invested in the idea of moving beyond oneself, of carrying out a higher calling not for the sake of personal gain but on behalf of others. Yet that supposedly God-given opportunity to save or rescue, generates an even deeper investment in the faithful self, the compelling and heroic figure on whom the narrative is centered. The protagonist of the Mission narrative is meant to provide inspiration by cultivating confidence, certainty, and faith within the context of a foreign place that is largely unknown to the reader (and often to the missionary himself). Celebrating altruism and celebrating the altruist turn out to be one and the same. To think about the ideals of these narratives, it is thus necessary to think about their heroic advocates.

For a current example, take Greg Mortenson, founder of the charity Central Asia Institute, who, through his autobiographical account of building schools in the Middle East (an account which has since been attacked for fictionalization) has built up a cult of the humanitarian personality. The heroic qualities ascribed to him grow directly from the tradition of missionary heroism. The sound bites from reviews printed in the front of the book under the heading "Praise for *Three Cups of Tea*" focus not on the merits of the book itself but on those of its "protagonist who clearly deserves to be called a hero" (*People*): "Mortenson's mission is admirable, his conviction unassailable, his territory exotic and his timing excellent" (*The Washington Post*). This sensibility is inscribed even within the book's subtitle, *One Man's Mission to Promote Peace…One School at a Time*. It saturates the narrative itself as well as the introduction in which Mortenson is described by his coauthor, David Oliver Relin, as a kind of magnetic force: "Everyone who has had the privilege of watching Greg Mortenson operate in Pakistan is amazed by how

encyclopedically well he has come to know one of the world's most remote regions. And many of them find themselves, almost against their will, pulled into his orbit" (3). He even manages to convert members of the Taliban, positioned as the ultimate "barbarians" of our time: "Former Taliban fighters renounced violence and the oppression of women after meeting Mortenson and went to work with him peacefully building schools for girls. He has drawn volunteers and admirers from every stratum of Pakistan's society and from all the warring sects of Islam" (3). Readers, too, are supposed to be "pulled into his orbit," and indeed they have been. He raised millions through the book's popularity in a practice critic Jon Krakauer has described as the "rigorous promotion of the Greg Mortenson brand" (2). His introductory description in Krakauer's *Three Cups of Deceit* brings to mind the massive popularity David Livingstone experienced in his day: "As he walked onto the stage in the sold-out arena, more than two thousand men, women, and children leapt to their feet to express their admiration with cheers, whistles, and deafening applause" (2). Afterward he is met by "hundreds of fans" hoping for an autograph in the book, which had spent over four years as a *New York Times* paperback nonfiction best seller (2). The compelling idea pulls many into the orbit of the one who articulates it and (supposedly) lives it out.

This chapter will explore the history of that kind of compelling idea—namely the impulse to improve the world through mission, to assist others across the boundaries of race, culture, and nation—and will consider how the faith it instills has been figured within British and American literature. Beginning from its uptake in nineteenth-century biographical and fictional missionary writing, I will chart the shifting place of the Mission narrative in literary history, exploring how it has been expressed and contested,

reversed and revised, with a focus on the faith of the virtuous traveler.[1] This account

revolves around Joseph Conrad's *Heart of Darkness* (1899) which, I argue, represents a

watershed moment in the literary history of missions, providing the foundation on which

a critical tradition was built, aimed at the formal and thematic dismantling of the Mission

narrative. The work of this chapter is then to define the terms and tropes which developed

over the course of twentieth century and coalesced to constitute a micro-genre of travel

literature which I call the Western critical mission novel.

At this point, one might interject that *Heart of Darkness* is not missionary

literature. True, it was not written by or about a missionary, yet I submit that *Heart of*

Darkness is a missionary novel that has yet to be analyzed as such. Instead it has been

positioned primarily within discussions of modernism and imperialism, and logically so.

Numerous critics have read *Heart of Darkness* as a response to colonial modernity and its

violent expansion.[2] While some have praised its early anti-imperial stance, others have

critiqued its racism, focusing on how it perpetuates images of Africans as savages, almost

but not quite human.[3] Another area of criticism has focused on how the text is situated

within literary history, breaking away from nineteenth-century formal practices and

serving as foundational text of modernism, challenging readers to take up new practices

of looking at and interrogating the world.[4] *Heart of Darkness* does all of these things. Yet

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[1] The African literary response to missions has been rich and extensive, and it too is essential to this discussion. However, since it constitutes a related but distinct body of literature which would take us in a different direction than the Western response, I save its analysis for the following chapter.

[2] These include Eloise Knapp Hay in *The Political Novels of Joseph Conrad* (1963)*, J. Hillis Miller in *Poets of Reality* (1965), Hunt Hawkins in "Conrad's Critique of Imperialism in *Heart of Darkness*" (1979), John McClure in *Kipling and Conrad: the Colonial Fictions* (1981), Benita Parry in *Conrad and Imperialism: Ideological Boundaries and Visionary Frontiers* (1983), Andrea White in "Conrad and Imperialism" (1996)*, and Ian Watt in "Conrad's *Heart of Darkness* and the Critics" (2000).

[3] Most famous is Achebe's scathing critique, "An Image of Africa.

[4] For a positioning of Conrad in relation to nineteenth-century literary traditions and within modernism, see Kenneth Graham's essay, "Conrad and Modernism." He argues that *Heart of Darkness* can be understood

while much has been said about Conrad as travel writer, modernist writer, imperial writer, anti-imperial writer, Polish-born English writer, and so forth, his position as a mission writer within a religious textual tradition has escaped comment. My argument builds upon the existing framework but tilts it, insisting that *Heart of Darkness* constitutes a direct response to missionary narratives. I will clarify why shortly, but for now, suffice it to say that Conrad was intervening in the tradition of nineteenth-century missionary heroism. Although it takes them to new ends, *Heart of Darkness* incorporates the primary features of the Mission narrative: its great hero in the form of Kurtz with his god-like confidence and god-like plans to fundamentally remake his subjects; the perilous journey into mysterious territory with its dramatic excitements and setbacks; the discourse of darkness and light, civilized and savage, enlightened and benighted; even the celebratory ending, in which the late traveler is remembered and mourned as a martyr. It is thus participating within that religious narrative tradition in a way that would have been recognizable to Conrad's contemporaries. Of course the final interpretation of Kurtz's martyrdom by his Intended is merely a "great and saving illusion" as is the entire altruistic plot. The "noble enterprise" is here submitted to modernist style and sensibility, opening it up to irony, complication, and critique. By embedding the elements of the Mission narrative, Conrad simultaneously withers its power and reveals the secular expansion of its terrain.

Heart of Darkness came to set a new precedent for literature about missions, inaugurating what would become the Western tradition of the critical mission novel.

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as "an early manifesto of modernism" and uses the tensions within it to define modernism at the beginning of the twentieth century. Susan Stanford Friedman, on the other hand, has used *Heart of Darkness* within the context of debates over redefining modernism at the end of the century. She argues for the continued centrality of *Heart of Darkness* in defining the spatial and temporal scope of modernism and the expansion of colonial modernity.

Across the twentieth century and into the twenty-first, writers of mission novels have

returned to Conrad's iconic novella in order to extend it, to challenge it, to echo it, to test

new versions of its characters, and to confront new forms of "darkness" alongside new

"emissaries of light." To unpack this post-Conradian tradition, I will focus on Barbara

Kingsolver's *The Poisonwood Bible* (1998) which, though published almost exactly a

century after *Heart of Darkness,* was written deliberately in its wake.[5] *The Poisonwood*

Bible, like *Heart of Darkness,* is a story of travel into the Congolese jungle to an outlying

village at a river's edge, this time following a family of American missionaries—a Kurtz-

like preacher, dragging his wife and three daughters—who become subject to horrors of

their own making. The mad preacher never makes it out. Conradian tropes and language

are woven throughout, constantly making his presence felt in the form of echoes.

Kingsolver even cites *Heart of Darkness* among the bibliographic sources in the back of

the book. I use *The Poisonwood Bible* to illustrate what is actually a much broader

phenomenon; *Heart of Darkness* became an anchor text for numerous others including

Graham Greene, Saul Bellow, Paul Theroux, and Philip Caputo, launching a critique of

the Mission narrative which transformed the way the Western novel narrated the journey

to Africa.[6]

 The critical mission novel works to dismantle the triumphalist expectations of the

Mission narrative, showing that Western models of development have often ranged from

ineffective to intolerably destructive. In place of the romantic narrative, these authors

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[5] Kingsolver's personal history, like Conrad's own, is entangled with the Congo. Though her home base has always been in the United States, she spent much time abroad as a child, including one year in a remote Congolese village where her father volunteered as a physician.

[6] In an interview given at the time he was writing *Acts of Faith* (a novel I will address in some detail), Caputo acknowledged "the writer I'm most conscious of, the one who I sometimes, if I read him, can hear him speaking, actually talking to me, is Conrad" (Michaels 9).

write tragic tales of missionary intervention. Rather than representing the best of humanity, missionaries come to embody the very worst; altruism becomes complicated by impulses toward greed and violence; tragic endings replace triumphant ones. In effect, this micro-genre undermines the Mission narrative's inflated confidence and recommends instead an ethics of doubt. Moreover, situating Conrad's text within a religious tradition dramatizes the relationship between Christian missions and seemingly secular approaches to modernization and development. I argue that *Heart of Darkness* bears witness to the secularization of the mission impulse and anticipates the continuity between colonial Christian missions and postcolonial humanitarian ones, also prefiguring critiques of those missions that would emerge in the years of decolonization. A focus on missionary texts thus has relevance not only for the relatively narrow field of mission studies, but for pressing contemporary debates over humanitarianism and its dramatic discontents. The sophisticated interrogation of transnational altruism, the hallmark of the critical mission novel, has never been more urgently needed.

The Mission Narrative and the Globalization of Benevolence

> In the eighteenth century the British Empire had been, at best, amoral. The Georgians had grabbed power in Asia, land in America and slaves in Africa. Native peoples were either taxed, robbed or wiped out. But paradoxically their cultures were largely tolerated; in some cases, even studied and admired. The Victorians had more elevated aspirations. They dreamt not just of ruling the world, but of *redeeming it*. It was no longer enough for them to exploit other races; now the aim became *to improve them*. (N. Ferguson 93, my emphasis)

The Mission narrative grew and flourished at the crux of abolitionism, evangelicalism, and imperial expansion. In the latter half of the eighteenth century, religious revival coincident with the rise of the British abolition movement led to a shift in the tone of imperial rhetoric with blatant mercenary aims being replaced by missionary claims; of

course those claims did not preclude the realities of mercenary motivation, but the tone of this expansionist rhetoric was indeed distinct. In "Victorians and Africans: The Genealogy of the Myth of the Dark Continent," Patrick Brantlinger argues that at the beginning of the nineteenth century when the British abolished the slave trade, they "began to see themselves less and less as perpetrators of the slave trade and more and more as *the potential saviors of the African*" (229, my emphasis). Brantlinger goes on to describe how this sentiment grew over the course of the nineteenth century, culminating in the Berlin Conference and Scramble for Africa in its final years. By this time, the view of Africa as a global apex of evil which the British had the "duty to exorcise" had become dominant (Brantlinger, "Victorians and Africans" 175): "Africans might be backward and superstitious, but to this new generation of British Evangelicals, they also seemed capable of being 'civilized' " (N. Ferguson 98). In *Heart of Darkness* this transition is figured in the map of Africa as it evolves within the European imagination: "It had ceased to be a blank space of delightful mystery—a white patch for a boy to dream gloriously over. It had become a place of darkness" (9). Missionaries were just the right types to traverse this darkened map. Missions offered a new plot structure for describing European presence in Africa, with new characters and possibilities for their development. The shift, then, was a narratological one—the story changed, and the Mission narrative came into its own.

In the Victorian era, the purveyors of this story were primarily religious missionaries themselves, who served as the benevolent voice of European expansion. As I suggested earlier and will show through readings of critical mission novels of the twentieth century, this narrative would extend into secularized terrain, particularly that of

humanitarian intervention, but its roots are thoroughly religious. While my aim is

ultimately to move beyond this narrowly conceived concept of mission to include secular

manifestations, humanitarian missions can be better understood through an analysis

grounded in the missionary tradition from which they emerge. In the nineteenth century,

the influence of this literature was pervasive and its reading public, massive, extending

far beyond those directly involved in missions. No travel writer was more famous than

the missionary-explorer and autobiographer, David Livingstone. Livingstone's

Missionary Travels and Researches in South Africa was a runaway success, selling more

than 70,000 copies just within the first few months of its release. Over the course of his

career, this Scottish missionary of humble origins came to occupy the station of British

national hero and saint.

Imperial Britain had developed a great taste for stories of goodwilled adventure,

of forging out through the unknown world in order to improve it, and while Livingstone

was the most widely celebrated and known of such adventurers, he was one among many

textual heroes. Publishing prolifically for recruitment and fundraising, mission societies

became the central disseminators of this new, magisterial story of travel to Africa.

Missionaries were prolific writers of diaries, letters, reports, histories, memoirs,

ethnographies, novels and children's books, filling vast archives with tales of the world

abroad.[7] The mission societies controlled considerable wealth, enabling the frequent

publication of magazines and books which painted a romantic picture of missionaries and

their work. Titles like *Pioneer Days in Darkest Africa, A Hero of the Dark Continent,* and

The Romance of Missionary Heroism: True Stories of the Intrepid Bravery, and Stirring

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[7] See Johnston's *Missionary Writing and Empire, 1800-1860,* for an extensive, archival account of the forms of missionary writing. Her focus is on the London Missionary Society and missionaries to India, Polynesia, and Australia. On missionary journals in the Nigerian context, see Peel, chapter 1.

Adventures of Missionaries with Uncivilized Man, Wild Beasts, and the Forces of Nature in All Parts of the World (yes, that's all one title) are suggestive in and of themselves of the tone and message of these narratives.[8] As the author of the latter text, John Crisholm Lambert, explains in the introduction, he hopes that "some of those into whose hands this book may become will be induced by what they read to make fuller acquaintance with the lives and aims of our missionary heroes, and so will catch something of that spirit which led them to face innumerable dangers, toils, and trials among heathen and often savage peoples" (8). The stories contained therein are as adventurous as the title promises, and it seems they were indeed effective. In a study of missionaries' accounts of their "call" to the mission field, Ruth Rouse finds that the Bible was hardly ever mentioned but that literary and biographical tales of missionary heroes were frequently cited as pivotal influences (Pettifer and Bradley 23). The aims of missionary publications were to raise support and engage new potential missionaries, so, as Anna Johnston has argued, they tended to conform closely to a set of conventions built for that purpose. Missionary writing consistently emphasized the positive while the failures and extreme trials that were the reality of the experience went unrecorded. Missionaries who "went native" fell out of historical documentation. The heroes of these narratives did not experience doubt, compromise, or failure. Nor did their writers: "[b]y its nature, missionary literature is hardly ever self-critical. Even today, it is still as self-serving as a trade journal or a school magazine. Quite unashamedly, its intention is to raise morale, money and manpower" (Pettifer and Bradley 22). J.D.Y. Peel explains that, "Mission was intended to be governed by a script, ultimately derived from Scripture, but it also had to respond to practical contingencies that could not be controlled. The reassertion of discursive control

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[8] See Pettifer and Bradley (20-23).

in the narratives served to restore faith in mission itself" (19). Therefore, in order to

account for failure and hardship, missionary journals "sought to redeem them through

narratives of being tested by suffering, of errors corrected, of the precedents for hope and

perseverance and so forth" (Peel 17). Romantic images of piety, nobility and rousing

success glossed over the difficult and disappointing realities of mission life, reframing

and controlling through narration.[9]

The story of Alexander Mackay, "The Hero of Uganda," a chapter in Lambert's

The Romance of Missionary Heroism, is exemplary. Published in 1907, this global

collection of missionary stories follows in the footsteps of its Victorian predecessors. The

bulk of Mackay's story documents feats of skill, bravery, and unwavering faith, from the

"demonstration of the white man's mechanical power," which wins him the reputation of

a great spirit (110), to the defiance of a local king who massacres thousands of people in

random acts of blood lust (109). The greater the trials he encounters, the greater the

reward he reaps:

> Then began a time of fiery trial for the mission. Mackay and his companions were daily threatened with death, and death was made the penalty of listening to their teaching or even of reading the Bible in secret. Many of Mackay's pupils and converts were tortured and burnt to death; but in Uganda as elsewhere the old saying came true that 'the blood of the martyrs is the seed of the Church.' Inquirers became far more numerous than ever; men stole into the houses of missionaries by night and begged to be baptized; and there were cases when bolder ones went openly to the court and proclaimed that they were Christians, though they knew that their confession would immediately be followed by a cruel death. . . . Certain it was that it was by the tearful sowing of Mackay and his companions in those gloomy days that there was brought about that time of plentiful and joyful reaping which came in Uganda by and by. (111)

Even when Mackay succumbs to malarial fever, the author turns his death toward a

vision of glory, closing with an image of a church service witnessed after his death in

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[9] See Johnston (6-8) and Pettifer and Bradley (81-87).

which thousands of Ugandans gather to worship, overflowing the church building and bearing witness to his heroic success. Missionary biography thus becomes a form of hagiography, an idealized account of the life of a saint.

While the popularity of such narratives crystallized around biographical and autobiographical missionary accounts, these romantic images of the Christian mission found their place in novels as well. Surely it isn't difficult to see how the dramatic characters of missionary autobiography could be adapted to heroic fiction. In *Victorian Literature and Postcolonial Studies,* Patrick Brantlinger surveys nineteenth century novels featuring missionaries and discovers a strong tendency toward hero-worship (22). His examples range from the historical romance of Sydney Owenson's *The Missionary,* to the youthful adventure fiction of Robert Ballantyne in *The Coral Island*, *The Gorilla Hunters*, and *Jarwin and Cuffy*. In Charlotte Yonge's *the Daisy Chain* (1856), "Ethel calls becoming a missionary 'the most glorious thing a man can do!' (517), and many Victorians agreed" (Brantlinger, *Victorian* 23).[10] In *The Coral Island,* Ballantyne affirms that sentiment. The youthful castaways witness incredible transformations wrought by Christian missions, a "convincing proof that Christianity is of God!" (288). They (and the pirates with whom they sail) determine landing spots on the basis of Christianization to avoid the risk of being "captured by the ill-disposed tribes" and potentially "roasted alive and eaten" (284). When they are indeed captured, it is a British missionary who arrives just in time to save them physically and the idolatrous villagers spiritually. In the nineteenth century the missionary had a proud place at the forefront of both the popular and the literary imagination.

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[10] Yonge also donated proceeds from *The Heir of Radcliffe* in order to commission a missionary ship.

While many of these texts are unfamiliar today, the glorified literary missionary has also taken more enduring forms. Perhaps the most memorable example comes from Charlotte Bronte's *Jane Eyre* (1847). Bronte's final word goes to the missionary St. John Rivers. Although Jane has rejected his proposal to become a missionary's wife and the novel exposes his imperial cast of mind, it also treats him with great respect. Jane's closing narration offers a glowing assessment of the character:

> As to St. John Rivers, he left England: he went to India. He entered on the path he had marked for himself; he pursues it still. A more resolute, indefatigable pioneer never wrought amidst rocks and dangers. Firm, faithful, and devoted; full of energy, and zeal, and truth, he labours for his race: he clears their painful way to improvement; he hews down like a giant the prejudices of creed and caste that encumber it. He may be stern; he may be exacting; he may be ambitious yet; but his is the sternness of the warrior Greatheart, who guards his pilgrim-convoy from the onslaught of Apollyon. His is the exaction of the apostle, who speaks but for Christ, when he says—'Whosoever will come after me, let him deny himself, and take up his cross and follow me.' (531)

Although *Jane Eyre* is not a mission novel per se, St. John enters the scene with the key characteristics of the Mission narrative attached to him. He is a character of allegorical proportions. In this scene, the missionary is superhuman, comparable to Greatheart of *Pilgrim's Progress* who protects Christiana against the pagan Apollyon as he blocks the advance of the Christian pilgrims. The missionary is thus the supposed vehicle of progress and its prime defender against the pagan forces that hinder it. Although St. John's strand of the narrative never actually follows him to India, it doesn't have to. The Western Mission narrative isn't really about the land to which one travels. Rather it is about the "indefatigable pioneer," the mythic figure, the faithful apostle forging ahead on the "painful way to improvement."

Here we see all the core tropes of the Mission narrative reiterated in literary form: the missionary hero sacrificing his all "amidst rocks and dangers," the high-minded goal of improvement and the triumphant tale of its quest, the confidence of being on God's side, and the elevated language of lofty pursuits. Yet we can also begin to see the risks of such unwavering zeal; this commitment to improvement contains a destructive edge. St. John's work is more about clearing away, hewing down, and defending against than it is about giving or supplementing or building anything up. And for all his self-denying, he is quite a dominating self. As the final line suggests, following Christ becomes contingent on following the human leader who speaks on his behalf.

My larger point here—which applies both to the specific history of missionaries and to my argument as a whole—is that the Western consciousness of Africa has been profoundly shaped by missionary voices. Their tales of romantic adventure brought the missionary hero who saves and civilizes into literary prominence along with his heroic narrative trajectory which instills optimism in the ultimate triumph of the mission, even as the hero endures awful trials in "the dark places of the earth" (Conrad 5). This narrative form and cluster of tropes did not die out with the end of the Victorian era. They continued to appear in missionary publications, political discourse, and popular culture, but alongside the development of modernism, serious literature began incorporating such narratives only to submit them to serious scrutiny. A figure like Kurtz in *Heart of Darkness* will share that resolution, zeal and the role of heavenly envoy, but the seeds of destruction and domination buried in Bronte will find explosive growth in Conrad's narrative. These core tropes will show up again in the critical mission novel, but no longer imbued with Bronte's enthusiasm; the vocabulary of the pioneer and the apostle

will come to signify quite differently. By the end of the century the critical mission storyline—a tale of disastrous imposition—would become nearly as recognizable as its celebratory predecessor.

Thinking Through and Beyond the Missionary: The Literature of the Third Sector

In 1899, the mission novel went critical. While the Mission narrative had its critics in the nineteenth century including, most famously, Charles Dickens, the critical mission novel became a tradition unto itself at the turn of the century with Joseph Conrad's publication of *Heart of Darkness*.[11] I will read this novella as the foundational text for that tradition, emerging within the incipient moment of literary modernism. In what follows, I will begin to chart the terrain of this counter-mission tradition, highlighting a cluster of tropes and techniques established by Conrad and echoed in later works.

Within the context of nineteenth-century precedents, it becomes clear that *Heart of Darkness* is participating in the missionary tradition, albeit not in a traditional sense. Like the Mission narrative itself, *Heart of Darkness* tells of the white man's adventure in the "dark places of the earth" (Conrad 5) unreached by "civilization"; it follows a captivating mission figure in the brave pursuit a noble idea and his afterlife as a martyr, an example of "goodness shown in every act" (95). Like the missionary hero, destined to save Africa, Kurtz is a man of deep and unwavering faith who also inspires the "faith" (94) and "devotion" (69) of others who seem to be "pulled into his orbit" (Mortenson 3): "He had faith—don't you see?—he had the faith. He could get himself to believe

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[11] I don't mean to say that *Heart of Darkness* was the first novel to be critical of missions; a full account of their critique would need to explore precedents. Criticism of missions wasn't new with *Heart of Darkness*; what *was* new was the dismantling of the Mission narrative as narrative through both formal and thematic strategies of narration. Also significant is the way in which Conrad's approach to missions (which I outline below) became a literary dominant.

anything—anything," a journalist explains to Marlow (Conrad 90). Kurtz's faith isn't exactly in God, but in himself and his ideas of virtuous action. His faith lies in his own narrative of African improvement. He insists, as he is taken away from his station, "I'll carry my ideas out yet—I will return. I'll show you what can be done" (77). His Mission narrative gets interrupted, and in the following section, I will explore how Conrad reinterprets that missionary hero and his grand ideas. For now, I want to consider what Conrad is able to achieve by writing his characters into a missionary tradition. By embedding the Mission narrative—its setting, its heroes, its rhetoric, its expectations— into a larger story, Conrad asks us to think beyond it in a double sense. Demonstrating how the religious continues to inform supposedly secular narratives of progress, the text works to break the Mission narrative's hold on the global imagination while also anticipating the secular movement that is emerging from the missionary framework and which will gain strength over the course of the twentieth century.

   With Kurtz and Marlow, both members of "the new gang—the gang of virtue" (Conrad 30), we witness the dispersion of the Mission narrative beyond the religious missionary. On the one hand, the "new gang" marks a contrast to the gang of vice; it points to the introduction of benevolent motivations or at least rationale (the benevolence being undercut even within the name "gang"). But this new gang, I want to suggest, also marks a transition in the role of the "virtuous traveler," anticipating the humanitarian developer's outgrowth from the role of the religious missionary. As Michael Barnett has explained, colonial humanitarianism was the task of missionaries, but around the turn of the century, when Conrad was writing, humanitarianism's religious discourse was becoming increasingly blurred with the secular; what would then distinguish the "new

global institutions of care in the twentieth century" was "the apparent willingness of individuals to cite humanity and not God as their reason for caring for the welfare of others" (Barnett 75). We can better understand Kurtz and Marlow and the discourse surrounding them by situating them within this transitional moment. They are not actual missionaries, yet they exist within a missionary-saturated framework. They are understood within British imperial culture through Christian terms and images, much like those ascribed to Bronte's St. John. We are introduced to this religiously-infused rhetoric by Marlow's aunt who, through her connections, has secured him a position with the Company. When Marlow goes to say good-bye to her before his departure, he finds her "triumphant": "It appeared," according to her description, "that I was also one of the Workers, with a capital—you know. Something like an emissary of light, something like a lower sort of apostle. . . . She talked about 'weaning those ignorant millions from their horrid ways,' till, upon my word, she made me quite uncomfortable" (Conrad 14). The Mission narrative appears to have taken firm hold beyond its initial provenance; Marlow is understood by his aunt and others within the structure of this narrative as a missionary hero—as one of God's "Workers" with a capital W, carrying light into the darkness. In other words, the story that gets built up around him is the religious Mission narrative.

Yet in contrast to the celebratory missionary accounts described above, this one is being filtered through the unbelieving voice of a narrator who does not accept its terms. Marlow introduces the critique of his aunt's triumphant attitude, pointing out that "[t]here had been a lot of such rot let loose in print and talk just about that time, and the excellent woman, living right in the rush of all that humbug, got carried off her feet" (14). While he will pawn off her misconception to "how out of touch with truth women are," this remark

suggests that it is actually a much deeper cultural phenomenon. These stories—or "rot"—are circulating widely and infiltrating the way that travel to Africa is understood, regardless of actual motives. The British populace is relating itself to Africa through the lens of the holy mission. Conrad suggests that modernity—not necessarily within Europe but in its spread to other shores—is mission-minded in a specifically (though weakly) religious way, thus requiring a critique which takes that religious framework into account.

This "rot," as Marlow describes it, comprises a language spoken not only on the home front, but by the travelers who seek to define their own roles in relation to Africa. Kurtz takes this discourse to the Congo and more firmly into the terrain of transnational development. The secularized Mission narrative receives its fullest articulation in Kurtz's report for the International Society for the Suppression of Savage Customs, which, like reports written by missionaries in the field, explains that "[e]ach station should be like a beacon on the road towards better things, a centre for trade of course, but also for humanizing, improving, instructing" (40). His language and expectations are those of a missionary. The fact that the station is for trade is a given, but its almost parenthetical acknowledgment here (in the form of a brief clause interrupting the real content of his sentence about the "road towards better things") suggests that it isn't Kurtz's prime goal or interest; through that center for trade, his real goals (or what he claims as his real goals)—the higher aims of humanizing, improving and instructing—become possible. Trade may be his vocation, but the betterment of Africa, he implies, is his calling. He is a kind of humanitarian, at least by his own estimation, and the troubling ambiguities of that position will come to characterize humanitarianism at large.

At first this appears to replace the religious calling with a secular one, an intellectual and ethical salvation displacing the spiritual form, but the religious does not in fact drop out. Kurtz's rhetoric of modernization and development, like the aunt's, is punctuated with Christian reference. His report, as summarized by Marlow, weds the languages of development and religion, infusing it with spiritual authority and prefiguring the discourse of contemporary humanitarianism: "He began with the argument that we whites, from the point of development we had arrived at, 'must necessarily appear to them [savages] in the nature of supernatural beings—we approach them with the might as of a deity,' and so on, and so on. 'By the simple exercise of our will we can exert a power for good practically unbounded,' etc., etc." (61, brackets in original). For Kurtz, development is next to godliness and it has created an ontological gulf between white Europeans and black Africans, the former becoming superhuman ("supernatural") and the latter, subhuman ("savages"). The onus is thus on "we whites" to bring "them" up to scratch. As was the case with St. John, following the deity and following the white man become one and the same. While modernization is typically understood in terms of secularization, Conrad suggests a more complicated narrative. It is in the travel narrative, in the story of European modernity encountering its "primitive" other, that this relationship becomes most evident. The role of missions in modernity is more visible when modernity is viewed from Africa as is, reciprocally, the centrality of modernity in missions.

Part of the problem that emerges here is that European improvement or modernization of Africa (variously understood in terms of material aid, industrial development, cultural conversion, and philosophical enlightenment) comes to be seen as

a mission sanctioned by God and goodwill. The white man in this structure, the developer, becomes God's emissary; the West, accordingly, becomes not only a political authority in the world, but a spiritual one. If development is next to godliness, then whiteness and Westernness are right there with it. In other words, the power of the West gets deified along with its emissaries.

While this can be applied to colonialism and its justificatory "civilizing mission," with Kurtz, Conrad is also getting at a more specific phenomenon—a set of whites, exemplified by the figure of the missionary, who are in Africa not in the name of country or commerce, but in the name of virtue itself. *Heart of Darkness* asks us to think about the sham of colonial benevolence generally but also more specifically about those who travel to Africa like Kurtz, "equipped with moral ideas" (37), a group that gets separated in name (though not necessarily in action) from those who aim merely to "tear treasure out of the bowels of the land . . . with no more moral purpose at the back of it than there is in a burglars breaking into a safe" (36). Although the outcomes for mercenary and missionary types become remarkably similar in *Heart of Darkness* and the novels which take up its method, these actors emerge from different frameworks and thus it is beneficial to think about Kurtz specifically within this category of "special" whites, travelers with "moral purpose" irrespective of moral practice.[12] Conrad asks us to think about how good intentions travel, how dangerous points of ambivalence emerge when

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[12] Greene's *The Heart of the Matter* might help clarify the distinction. It too is a novel about the goodwilled Westerner in Africa, and while it has similarities to the critical mission novel—most notably the tragic end for Scobie, that goodwilled traveler—I would classify it differently because Scobie is a colonial police officer. He is internal to the state, and the focus of the critical mission novel as I am defining it is on the third sector. On the other hand, we might also claim that Scobie is, in fact, external to the state to the extent that he is estranged from other colonial administrators for his kindness to Africans. (See the opening scene of the novel.) We could compare him to Kurtz who is once internal to the for-profit Company and outside it. In contrast to Kurtz however, Scobie never claims that his purpose for being in Africa is benevolence— thus he is not positioning himself in the third sector in the way that Kurtz does, an element important to my definition of the mission traveler.

seemingly benevolent projects are carried out across differences of location, culture, status, and power, and how violence gets appended to the seemingly unimpeachable discourse of faith in a higher idea. Kurtz is set apart not merely by his own rhetoric but by that of other whites in the Congo. His own success within the Company is suggestive of the popular rise of the virtuous discourse; he has personally profited from speaking it well, gaining a position as chief of the best ivory station. He is described by the envious manager of a lower station as an "emissary of pity, and science, and progress, and devil knows what else" (30). The "devil knows what else" is here a mark of the speaker's irritation, but it will resonate far more deeply when we discover its perspicacity. The fact that Kurtz has become a kind of "special being" in the Company, rewarded over the straightforward materialists is suggestive of the growing power of missionary discourse in defining international development after the Scramble for Africa. It is his special status as traveler with "moral purpose" that makes him particularly dangerous. [13]

This framework clarifies the text's relevance beyond colonial history, revealing that it speaks powerfully to humanitarian history and debates about humanitarianism today. With its own sense of "moral ownership" of suffering (De Waal, *Famine* xvi), it too often positions itself "beyond criticism" (Rieff 67), the gang of virtue in contrast to the gang of vice. Humanitarians' narratives about their own faith occupy a position very much like that which Kurtz articulates; they act on "a belief that God is on their side; that they represent the best of humanity; that they have the expertise because of their experience and education; and that a victim's lack of resources or education indicates that he might not know what is in his best interests" (Barnett 37). The Mission narrative, as a

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[13] This special status of "virtuous" travelers is noted by African writers as well. In Tsitsi Dangarembga's *Nervous Conditions,* for example, the narrator depicts the position of power missionaries come to occupy through the denial of the selfish motivations. I deal with this issue in chapter 4.

sanctification of international action on the basis of "moral purpose"—as opposed to power or profit—reinforces that insularity. Its self-perpetuating quality justifies the mission's existence and enables its ongoing presence, often in spite of its effects.

Heart of Darkness is not merely addressing the civilizing mission of the colonial state; it is getting at something that is related but distinct from it, namely the emergence of international development through the third sector. Named "third" to mark its separation from the public sector (government-owned agencies and services) and the private sector (for-profit enterprise, not controlled by the state), the term refers to the body of organizations that are non-governmental and non-profit. Also known as the voluntary sector, it includes international NGOs (non-governmental organizations), charitable, and civic organizations, both secular and faith-based. *Heart of Darkness* prefigures the emergence of a third-sector impulse within a profit-oriented, quasi-governmental setting, growing out of the framework of religious missions. This direction in Conrad will be picked up on by the later authors who echo his ideas and images. In the colonial era, the missionary was a kind of third figure—not exactly an agent of colonial government or of international trade, although those lines are murkier than the distinction suggests.[14] The critical mission novel, I argue, takes up the figure of the missionary, extending beyond his strictly religious manifestation, in order to look at international actors whose roles are external to the state—enabled by it absolutely, but external nonetheless. Reading Kurtz not only as imperialist but as missionary opens up new frameworks for situating Conrad and the writers who follow him.

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[14] For another example of the "third figure" position of the missionary, see Mark Twain's political tract, *King Leopold's Soliloquy.*

Critical mission novels explore global expansion that occurs beyond the aegis of government or profit, all the while showing the ways this third sector is indeed entangled with both. Kurtz and Marlow are partially political outsiders—Brits in the Belgian Congo, yet still with all the advantages of being European in colonial Africa. Their relation to the for-profit sector also consists of a mixed insider/outsider status. Marlow travels, admittedly although his aunt thinks otherwise, as part of a for-profit company, but Kurtz (an employee of the same company) defines himself as more of a volunteer. Regardless of their divergent self-definitions, the other employees tend to place Kurtz and Marlow together in a camp separate from their own. The language of virtue comes from another Company employee who tells Marlow, "You are of the new gang—the gang of virtue" (30). This separation tends to maintain greater legitimacy in less critical mission novels. In John Le Carré's *The Constant Gardener* (2001), for example, the humanitarian character, working on behalf of the poor who are being used as disposable lives for drug testing, is viewed as a threat to both state and business interests whose advocates thus organize to kill her. In Dave Donelson's mission thriller, *Heart of Diamonds* (2008), a book which deliberately but weakly references Conrad, a humanitarian health worker and benevolent journalist join forces to take down a diamond profiteering plot which is backed by the U.S. president. There is a sense within these novels that international agents working on behalf of humanity can be clearly distinguished from the self-interested advocates of government and commerce who may speak the language of humanity but only with blatant hypocrisy. In critical mission novels that is not so. Sharper accounts like that in *Heart of Darkness* break down the distinction, revealing the "moral purpose" of third sector characters to be fully bankrupt

or at least radically compromised. I will address Kurtz's greed and violence in more detail shortly, but my point for now is that his "gang of virtue" represents an emergent impulse toward international projects of improvement following a "third" path, the path of the missionary as a deliberate, if not entirely accurate, contrast to those of the colonialist and the trader.[15] Although dissolution of that distinction is a central feature of these novels, it is important to be aware of its existence, since different narratives get attached to those who are independent of government and profit, even if only in name.

Whereas Conrad was responding to the popular tales of religious missionaries specific to his day, writers throughout the century will continue returning to *Heart of Darkness* as a framework for thinking about nominally virtuous travel and the evolution of the Mission narrative in their own times. These novels explore what it means for Westerners in Africa to act on the basis of conviction and belief, showing the noble ideas upon which these characters act to be enormously compelling—as is Kurtz for Marlow—but also enormously dangerous. In these novels, faith in one's cause, in oneself, in one's grand idea is thrown into question as a mode of being in the world and a sensibility for guiding international action. This literature opens up a consideration of the unintended consequences and complex dilemmas which characterize contemporary humanitarianism as well as its missionary history.

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[15] David Livingstone's own autobiography demonstrates the position of missionaries on a separate but overlapping track with empire. For Livingstone, the deep ambivalence of an agent who is at once inside and outside of empire demonstrates itself in his double role as critic and apologist for both colonizers and native populations. This ambivalence is also apparent in the movement he documents. Even as he maps the land, providing a service to the colonial project, his relation to that project becomes ambiguous as he crosses boundaries of colonial jurisdiction. This movement between colonial borders and even beyond areas of European penetration or control becomes a spatial metaphor for his figurative movement within and even beyond the limits of colonial complicity. Yet, while there are moments that begin to get outside of it, the narrative always comes back to "civilization."

The Narrative of Good Intentions Gone Horribly, Horribly Wrong

The critical turn has made the mission novel of the twentieth century look very different

than its Victorian predecessor. *Heart of Darkness* undercuts the Mission narrative, its

great heroes and high-flown rhetoric by using its narrative expectations, characters and

discourse not in order to praise them, but to expose their hypocrisies and critique their

shortcomings. First, these characters, heroic in the Mission narrative and its literary

expressions, become catastrophic failures in the critical novel. It is not that authors set

these characters aside—they remain the central players—but they are subject to a vastly

different treatment. A British teacher in Paul Theroux's *Girls at Play* asks, "Who wants

to live in Africa, what white people? Only cranks, fools, failures…" (248). Her phrase

nicely articulates the stock of characters from which these writers draw, throwing into

relief the indefatigable pioneer, devout laborer, and ambitious warrior we saw in *Jane*

Eyre. Characters of the celebratory Mission narrative go to Africa in a grand gesture of

faith, foregoing good circumstances at home to do God's work abroad. Mackay of "The

Hero of Uganda," for example, is highly educated and highly skilled: "So marked were

his constructive talents that one of his employers offered him a partnership in a large

engineering concern; but what would have seemed a tempting opportunity to most men

was no temptation to him. Already his heart was in the mission field" (Lambert 104).

James Hannington, "The Lion-Hearted Bishop" of the same collection, also leaves a very

good life behind in England where he is "happily settled" with a role in the church and "a

wife and young children to whom he was passionately attached. But the call he heard was

one to which he could give no denial. For Christ and for Africa he felt that he must be

willing to suffer the loss of all things" (Lambert 119).

In contrast, characters of the critical mission novel go to Africa often because there isn't much else for them; they are seeking to fill the holes in their own lives through claiming to do just that for others. Kurtz, for example, is confined by class in England and hopes that in Africa he can supersede it. Marlow recalls that he "had given me some reason to infer that it was his impatience of comparative poverty that drove him out there" (Conrad 94). His engagement "had been disapproved by [his Intended's] people. He wasn't rich enough or something" (93). It is by going to the Congo that he builds his own "ascendency" (72). Declared intentions for the "good" of others, then, are layered with all kinds of intentions for the missionary's own betterment. For Nathan Price, the domineering missionary of *The Poisonwood Bible,* it is not about class but ego. Despite hesitation on the part of the church, Nathan is compelled to compensate for "a suspicion of his own cowardice" developed during WWII, and he thus forces himself upon the Congo "without the entire blessing of the Mission League, and bullie[s] or finagle[s] his way into [a] lesser stipend" in order to gain their tentative support (Kingsolver 197, 69). Eventually they cut off even his minimal compensation. It is no longer implied that missionary figures are the West's finest stock. These characters go to Africa hoping to achieve levels of success and glory which are out of their grasp at home, jumping on board with the Mission narrative to do so. They aim to become the heroes they have read about.

Around such characters the critical mission novel weaves a plot that fails the expectations of the Mission narrative—the narrative on which these characters have based their own expectations—turning its trajectory, romance, and triumphalism inside out. If their beginnings are humble, their endings are much worse. These are stories of

declared good intentions gone horribly wrong. Heroes paired with grand outcomes in the Mission narrative are replaced by failures with catastrophic ends. In Kurtz, we see a particularly dangerous kind of relationship between declared goodwill and good results. His Mission narrative assumes a happy ending and a happy ending which demands very little of the beginning and the middle: the "*simple* exercise of our will" is supposedly enough to produce "good practically unbounded." This oversimplification, the critical mission novel suggests, is one of the key pitfalls of the Mission narrative. Through Kurtz's rhetorical imagination, combined with his dismal outcome, Conrad highlights the Mission narrative's problematic faith in the equation of good intentions and good results, opening up a critique of this mission-minded, third sector modernization and forcing readers to look more closely at its soaring discourse. Instead of saving anyone from "savage customs" as he intends to do, Kurtz turns savage himself, adorning the pathway to his house with heads on stakes. "Power for good practically unbounded" becomes unbounded power and a deeply corrupting power at that. The mission hero becomes a self-deluded wreck; his mission of improvement self-destructs, and anticipated glory becomes actual horror.

Later novels will return again and again to this violent contrast between publicly stated intentions and actual outcomes, triumphant expectations and tragic plots. The American protagonist of Saul Bellow's *Henderson the Rain King* is struck by the overwhelming compulsion to make improvements while in Africa, but his solution to a plague of frogs in a water cistern creates an explosion which blows the whole cistern to bits. In *The Poisonwood Bible,* Nathan turns into a mad wanderer, forcing unsolicited baptisms on children and ultimately getting burned to death by local people after

effectively dismantling his own family and losing his youngest daughter to a poisonous snakebite. Her death is not an accident of nature, but a result of his own unwavering will: the snake is planted by a witch doctor after Nathan refuses to heed numerous warnings to leave. Even the missionary of Tim Jeal's *For God and Glory*—the most positive mission figure from any of these novels—sparks conflict and civil war, leading to his own death as well as that of his most prized convert.[16] In these novels would-be heroes of good intentions produce personal and public destruction. The mission impulse proves— sometimes literally—explosive. As a result, the movement "straight from [a] divinely inspired beginning to [a] terrible end" becomes the prototypical plot of the critical mission novel (Kingsolver 9). Rather than replicating God's kingdom on earth, as they expect to do, these missionaries, the religious and the secular, raise hell.

The heroics and successful plot of the triumphant Mission narrative are essential to the confidence that gets attached to it. It is a narrative which enables good intentions to stand alone and to be equated with the common good, fostering a wildly premature sense of celebration. Nathan's daughter, Leah, remarks early on in *The Poisonwood Bible* that "[t]he grace of our good intentions made me feel wise, blessed, and safe from snakes" (36). Those expectations are radically disrupted by the end, good intentions divorced from good outcomes. The plot of the critical mission novel is incongruent with the goal characters set out to reach, undercutting the confidence and certainty which defines the Mission narrative and makes it so compelling. The Mission narrative requires its glorious ends to justify any means. Those ends have been lost. The critical mission novel is still

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[16] Jeal is better known as a biographer than novelist, most notably for his biographies of Livingstone and Stanley. This investment in the history of nineteenth century missions is evident in *For God and Glory* (also published as *The Missionary's Wife*) which reads very much as an historian's novel. Jeal looks more favorably on missionaries than the other novelists I deal with, but he writes with the historical hindsight that necessarily brings scrutiny to their projects, no matter how noble their intentions may have been.

about the same goal, but changing the story that surrounds it creates a whole new framework for thinking about that goal and its implementation. The critical mission novel thus builds into its very structure the demand for scrutiny that the Mission narrative lacks, showing altruism to be far messier than it seems.

This is not merely a critique of unintended consequences; missions are more deeply compromised by their entanglement with profit and power. In these narratives of devastation, written against preceding narratives of glory, heroes are replaced with anti-heroes and emissaries of light become priests of darkness. Kurtz's dying words—"The horror! The horror!" (Conrad 86)—serve as a summing up of his dark reign on earth and could be applied to other cranks, fools, and failures who follow him to Africa as the judgment made by the critical mission novel; it is the phrase which captures the sorry lives of those who travel for glory. They turn out to be misled, insensitive, hypocritical, dictatorial, and often violent. In *Heart of Darkness,* the language of "heavenly mission" has "Exterminate all the brutes!" appended to it (8, 62). The darkness discovered within such travelers overrules any light they fancied themselves to possess.

Through these narratives of good intentions gone wrong, authors ask us to think through the relationship between benevolent goals and brutal realities, between "good practically unbounded" and "exterminate all the brutes." They chip away at the easy acceptance with which good intentions are so often met and chasten the expectation of positive ends. *Heart of Darkness* and the novels which follow in its footsteps point to the entanglement of altruism, profit-seeking and violence. These writers are looking toward the third sector, the nominally non-profit sector, and finding that it is often problematically compromised. The "gang of virtue" becomes less and less

distinguishable from "the gang of greed" (Kaplan 67).[17] First off, Kurtz isn't actually a

career altruist. He is an ivory trader and is therefore in the Congo primarily for material

reasons, even if his own descriptions suggest the contrary. In Kurtz we have two kinds of

international travelers rolled into one—the missionary and the mercenary. In other

novels, these figures cross paths and blur into one another in more partial ways, but

however it gets expressed, they are consistently linked within this body of texts. In *The*

Poisonwood Bible, for another example, the only regular visitor to the Price's home is the

South African mercenary pilot Eeben Axelroot who ends up marrying the preacher's

eldest daughter. Nathan and Axelroot share their self-focus, plowing over whoever gets in

the way, whether the goal is riches of the earthly or the heavenly variety. Douglas

Brathwaite, of Caputo's *Acts of Faith* starts out as a missionary-type if not a missionary

by title, risking his life flying aid into Sudan to help the displaced and dispossessed of

war. For the first part of the novel his good intentions contrast with those of his partner

Wesley Dare who, defined as a mercenary in Caputo's "Cast of Characters," never denies

that he is in Africa for the money. Over the course of the novel, however, the distinction

between these characters' motives becomes increasingly blurred and eventually we

discover that Douglas is the most radically self-serving of the two. As his business grows

more and more profitable he becomes an "aid entrepreneur" (261) and eventually a gun-

runner and war profiteer, in the end orchestrating the murder of several characters in

order to cover up these illicit operations and a related embezzlement scheme. After the

killing successfully prevents his plot from being revealed, he and his partner continue

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[17] Kaplan, in noting the breakdown of binaries throughout the text, claims that "the gang of virtue is indistinguishable from the gang of greed" (67). While I find that parallelism she makes between the "gang of virtue" and the "gang of greed" useful, the claim I want to make is a bit different, essentially that they are *almost* indistinguishable, but the difference of designation is indeed significant, since it the narratives that get attached to them have consequences.

"using the delivery of humanitarian aid to conceal their 'criminal activities,' " namely

supplying arms to a rebel army (659). Much like Kurtz, the difference between good and

evil becomes indistinguishable for the character himself:

> He was like an actor who had become the role he was playing, but with this
> difference: The self-deception was not artful but as natural and unconscious as the
> feathers on the birds he observed. It was the absence of craft that granted him the
> power to deceive others. In his attractive costumes—the successful entrepreneur
> of aviation, the man of compassion, the crusading idealist—the murderer was
> invisible. So were the naked appetites and ambition that had driven him. And this
> was hidden too: the derangement wrought by his *faith in the rightness of his
> actions*. (648, my emphasis)

It is faith in the "*rightness* of the mission" that enables him to take the risk of flying aid

to those in need, to view himself as one of the "airborne knights, rescuing the peasants"

(270), and ultimately to carry out extreme violence while still believing his own

performance as "the man of compassion, the crusading idealist."

The desolation of the desert (or the jungle) seems to foster this extremist faith.

The missionary is a figure who circulates beyond the reach of other travelers and the

outposts of the state. The only white people who show up in such places are risk-takers

and "do-gooders" as Fitzhugh Martin, a Kenyan narrator in *Acts of Faith,* will call them.

These places are difficult, even dangerous, to access and are poorly supplied. Profit and

philanthropy, greed and altruism, these novelists suggest, are the two motivations which

consistently drive people into these contexts of discomfort and disconnection, but the

former tends to override the latter. Those who start off as do-gooders ultimately advance

the most perversely self-serving agendas, and the disintegrating line between missionary

and mercenary becomes a standard trope of the critical mission novel.[18] We get the sense

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[18] In the aftermath of *Three Cups of Tea*'s success, the Greg Mortenson story has taken a similar, though
non-fictional, turn. In 2011, he was asked by the watchdog group, American Institute of Philanthropy, to
step down from his position at the head of the Central Asia Institute on the basis of reports of false

that these are in fact related and overlapping types of global actors—wandering misfits in

pursuit of self-serving ends of which, like profit, one can never have enough.

The extreme self-interest we see in these novels quickly slips toward violence,

anticipating arguments that foreign aid does more damage than good and ultimately

inflicts its own kind of violence. In the words of J. Hillis Miller,

> [w]hat begins as greed, the desire for ivory, and as altruism, the desire to carry the torch of civilization to the jungle, becomes the longing to "wring the heart" of the wilderness and "exterminate all the brutes." The benign project of civilizing the dark places of the world becomes the conscious desire to annihilate everything which opposes man's absolute will. (6)

These characters become more and more willing to do whatever it takes to protect their

own interests, particularly as they see their plots frustrated and resisted. This too is a

manifestation of faith. In *Horn of Africa,* Caputo presents the danger thus:

> It was the gleam of something darker than madness—belief, an absolute belief in the rightness of one's religion or political dogma or personal destiny, the faith that creates saints and demons alike, that inspires both the martyr and the murdering bigot, that gives a man the power to destroy others because he is willing to risk his own destruction in its name. (66)

Here, the resoluteness of a St. John gets pushed to its logical extreme. Nathan Price, for

example, will continue to insist on river baptism, even after finding out that the river is

infested with crocodiles that have killed children. The remote location which brings

missionaries and mercenaries together also contributes to these murderous potentialities,

less available in spaces with greater accountability. These isolated places, beyond the

paths of almost all other whites, serve as a release from all bounds of civility. Characters

like Kurtz—an Englishman in a colony not his own—live far beyond communities

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representation of the schools he had built and the use of donor funds for his own personal enrichment. In *Three Cups of Deceit,* John Krakauer, adventure writer and disillusioned former supporter of Mortenson's organization quotes the former treasurer of its board of directors explaining that "Greg regards CAI as his personal ATM" (7). It is an instance that reveals the critical mission novel's basis in reality.

familiar to them, and the detachment this creates is not amended by any genuine

connection in their destinations. Neighbors considered less human to any degree are

surely not arbiters of accountability. In such isolation, one lives with "no external

checks" (Conrad 26), facing "the archetypal temptation of the colonial wilderness"

(McClure, "Rhetoric" 310); this enables characters like Kurtz to unleash the most violent

impulses, and their presence in Africa is thus not only unhelpful, but outrageously

destructive. Instead of the enlightened minds he promised, we find, on the path to Kurtz's

house, heads on stakes. The postscript to his "moving appeal to every altruistic

sentiment" reads "Exterminate all the brutes!" (Conrad 62). Quinette, an evangelical

Christian who goes to Sudan on a project to free slaves in *Acts of Faith*, ultimately sends

a woman into slavery out of jealousy, but even when she is supposedly doing good, it

contains a darker edge: "The emergency had summoned all the discordant strains in her

nature to play in concert: her egoism and her desire for self-sacrifice; her need to be of

service and also at the center of attention; her pity for the victimized and her pride in

being their savior; and the lead violinist in this symphony of motives was her jealousy"

(547). All her work on behalf of others turns out to be targeted at her own needs and

insecurities. Altruism becomes a kind of perversion, and the difference between helping

and hurting becomes irreversibly confused. Good intentions in these novels give way to

accidental destruction at best and murderous rage at worst. The end of altruism can be

genocide when the missionary mentality succumbs to its own violent potential. These

novels ask if "exterminate the brutes" was somehow a part of it all along. Is it always the

sordid underside of projects of good intentions? Is it the predictable result of plans that

will meet the inevitable resistance and challenges of being carried out in environments unfamiliar to their creators?

Emerging from this discussion are two concentrated nodes of ambivalence in the missionary mentality. The first is the tension between self-sacrifice and self-serving. The second has to do with the relationship between benevolent care and violence. While these are two separate relationships, they are also part of a shared spectrum. The violence that is the potential end in these novels has to do specifically with how mission travelers view African people. These novels think about assistance across racial and cultural boundaries, about holding good intentions for a place one can simultaneously view as the "heart of darkness." With goals that depend on changing people, the missionary mentality inherently risks hatred of those people, especially when they resist transformation. V.Y. Mudimbe's description of the terms of African conversion clarifies that this risk of violence is inherent in the totalizing faith which the Mission narrative espouses: "a person whose ideas and mission come from and are sustained by God is rightly entitled to the use of all possible means, even violence, to achieve his objectives" (47-8). On the one hand, missionary-types have been in positions to interact with local people on a more intimate level than colonialists and traders, but threaded through this interaction is a vein of tension between human sympathy and explosive racism, between a desire to help and a desire to kill whether it manifests itself in actual violence as is the case with Kurtz or violence of more personal and symbolic strands. Conversion, whether it means souls to Christianity, minds to enlightenment, or African lands to colonial property, always involves a wiping away or "hewing down" (to use Bronte's words) of the previous order. In this sense, the impulse toward making converts represents a problematic kind of

modernist impulse, a wiping out of tradition to usher in the new.[19] A narrative of improvement dependent on conversion implies a basis of destruction.

African Adventure and the Temptation of the Tragic

While the dramatic transformation of the mission novel in the twentieth century should be evident by now, I must still acknowledge the ways in which it is not so different after all. The elements of risk and adventure are a point of continuity between the celebratory mission novel and the critical form, and their shared tendency toward popularity is not unrelated. These are novels which continue to satisfy some of the same desires for African adventure catered to by the grand Mission narrative. Contemporary novelists like Philip Caputo, Paul Theroux, and Barbara Kingsolver are more familiar to national best-seller lists than they are to literary academics, and their success, I would suggest, has something to do with the Western taste for African adventure, even when it deviates from the expectations of the Mission narrative.

In Paul Theroux's *Girls at Play,* B.J. Lebow claims "Africa's the sexiest place in the world" (223). What she discovers is that it is not; in fact its dullness is the greatest shock to her expectations. Part of what novels like *Girls at Play* and *The Poisonwood Bible* document is boredom—the domestic banality of everyday life in Africa. Africa is, in this sense, normal—as ennui-inducing as home—but then we must also recognize that ultimately, in these novels, it isn't. Kurtz wouldn't have decorated a London home with

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[19] We might call this a form of mission modernism—a label I would also give to the critical mission novel, though each represents a mission modernism of a very different variety. I use the term "modernism" here not to refer to a specific literary movement but capture a range of "attempt[s] by modern men and women to become subjects as well as objects of modernization, to get a grip on the modern world and make themselves at home in it"—this definition comes from Marshall Berman's *All that is Solid Melts into Air* (5). Missions can thus be seen as a response to modernity—an impulse to convert "primitives" into "moderns," spreading the transformations of modernity globally.

heads on stakes. B.J. wouldn't have been murdered by her boyfriend. Ruth May of *The Poisonwood Bible* wouldn't have died of a snakebite. Romance is turned into tragedy, but tragedy on African soil is just as titillating. What Africa provides the Western imagination shifts from the romantic adventure of progress to the tragic adventure of regression, destruction, and violence. That is Africa's new "sexiness," cultivated by Western critical mission writing. I do not mean to say that this is the intent, but it is indeed an effect.

B.J. of *Girls at Play* derives her expectation of Africa's "sexiness" partly from *Heart of Darkness* itself, based not on a close analysis of the novel but its role as a kind of cultural signifier. It gets folded into her Hollywood education on Africa. The role of *Heart of Darkness* for B.J. illustrates a tendency for critical mission novels to get repositioned within the uncritical discourse. When B.J. decides to go home it is because Kenya, as it turns out, holds none of "the exotic, the mysterious" which had filled her imagination, an imagination populated by "Mistah Kurtz, Allnut and Rose, [...] Stanley and Livingstone" (274); "Hollywood was a shortish drive up the freeway [from her California home] and that is where most of Africa was" she concludes (275). As B.J. imagines her own role as a Peace Corps volunteer, she folds Conrad's Kurtz in with the heroism of Victorian missionary exploration and the glamour of Humphrey Bogart and Katharine Hepburn who play Allnut and Rose, the romantic protagonists of *The African Queen*, a film about a British missionary spinster finding love with an uncouth Canadian boat captain in the African jungle. Kurtz is right there in Hollywood with "most of Africa." This Africa of the American imagination embodies both the romantic and the tragic. *Heart of Darkness* in this formulation isn't a refutation of Western narratives

about Africa. Instead it is a vehicle of the mission imagination itself, reinforcing that

quintessential image of Africa—the "Africa" that Westerners do not often realize is an

imagined Africa, distinct from the continent itself. As Chinua Achebe suggests of *Heart*

of Darkness, the critical mission narrative can reinforce "a particular way of looking (or,

rather, not looking) at Africa" (*Education* 79) as a dark and degraded place. With all its

emphasis on seeing (which I will address in the following section), it can introduce new

blind spots and perpetuate old ones.

       Thus, while *Heart of Darkness* is the founding instance of the counter-mission

tradition, it must also be ambiguously situated within pro-mission discourse. [20] The text

has become a vessel for the preservation of important parts of Mission narrative rather

than its thoroughgoing critique; its afterlife exceeds its contents. Its meaning in terms of

how it has functioned culturally is not to be found within the text itself, but in the aura

around it, the echo it has left behind primarily resonating through its title. As Rob Nixon

explains,

> *Heart of Darkness* has exerted a centripetal pull over Western representations of
> Africa unequaled in this century by the way of any other text over the portrayal of
> any single continent. Journalists, historians, novelists, anthropologists,
> filmmakers, advertising hacks, and, most conspicuously, travel writers have
> drawn so routinely and with such license on the novella that the figure of Africa
> as a heart of darkness has become intelligible even to people who have never read
> any Conrad. The trope has accrued, in the process, a rhetorical force only distantly
> dependent on the context and form of its initial usage. ("Preparations" 90)

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[20] *Heart of Darkness* has also been a catalyst for African writers who have critiqued the text along with the
pro-mission discursive tradition. It thus functions as a watershed in a second sense. Chinua Achebe, in
particular, has emphasized the ways in which *Heart of Darkness* fails to sufficiently break away from racist
representation of African people that characterized the imperialist rhetoric of his day as well as the
anglophone African author's need to write against it.

Heart of Darkness might not make the best-seller list for its difficulty and modernist style but it has certainly lived on in popular culture, read or not.[21] Kurtz's degeneration into violence, illness, and a sexual relationship with an African woman violates the triumphalist expectations of the mission narrative, and yet it also embodies the fears lurking around the edges of such narratives. Patrick Brantlinger argues that the "myth of the Dark Continent" which has provided the fuel for so much mission discourse "contains the submerged fear of falling out of the light, down the long coal chute of social and moral regression" ("Victorians and Africans" 196), and of course that fall is a prominent trope within Christian narratives more generally. Kurtz models that story, and to an adventurous character like B.J. Lebow, there is something very "sexy" about it. The Western critical mission novel thus has a dual effect—at once undermining the foundations of the Mission narrative and functioning partially in its service as a kind of cautionary tale. While they are radically different kinds of texts, this remains a point of uneasy overlap.

The critique of Western intervention thus remains remarkably satisfying to Western tastes, partly because of its tragic form. In *No Longer at Ease,* Chinua Achebe's protagonist suggests that *The Heart of the Matter* "was nearly ruined" by the suicide at the end. Suicide, he suggests, "ruins a tragedy. . . . Real tragedy is never resolved. It goes on hopelessly forever. Conventional tragedy is too easy. The hero dies and we feel a purging of the emotions" (45-6). The catharsis provided by tragic endings risks offering too easy a resolution to the thorny problems these novels take up. One could also argue that characters' individual tragedies abstract from the far more consequential social

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[21] See also Inga Clendinnen's essay in which she argues that the heart of darkness "trope has *infiltrated so deeply into Western consciousness* that the phrase 'heart of darkness' resonates for people who have read no Conrad at all" (3, my emphasis).

tragedy visited upon Africa through the intervention of foreigners. It is a limitation of this literary tradition. Although it is heavily invested in critical consciousness about African travel, it often gets coopted into something too enjoyable and too easy. It is partly for that reason that critical attention to these novels can be so productive for drawing out the complexities that can be quickly overrun by the simpler pleasures of adventure and catharsis.

While the tragedies of the Western critical mission novel may become coopted with the romantic stories of missionary and Hollywood adventure, we need not read them in this limited way. The transformation of the characters, plot, and tone of the mission novel creates a transformation of our expectations, conditioning us—if we take up their call—to read the Mission narrative as critics rather than consumers, skeptics rather than believers. Their novels breed a skepticism which, they suggest, is necessary for dealing with the knotty realities of benevolence. They go so far as to raise the question: if altruistic international action turns out so tragically, is it worth attempting at all? Or is it safer to reject benevolence altogether? What I would suggest is that while authors' responses to these questions vary, ranging from an overwhelming sense of pessimism in Conrad to a chastened sense of possibility in writers like Caputo and Kingsolver, they each contribute to the conversation around benevolent goals rather than simply shutting it down. I am interested in how we might think of them then not as external detractors, but as internal irritants to the discourse of missions—how can they complicate it, disrupt its singularity, its confidence and optimism? How might they generate a productive crisis of faith? If we do read these critical texts, as B.J. does, not to the exclusion of romantic, triumphalist narratives but alongside them, what might we learn about the ways

benevolence gets narrated and the possibilities for narrating it differently? We might then think of this critical literary tradition as a supplement to the optimistic narrative of good intentions rather than its opposite. These authors are still interested in the altruistic goal,[22] in life practices based in caring for others, but if there is to be any hope for such a goal, the narrative around it needs to be radically altered.

Cultivating an Ethics of Doubt

That transformation, these writers suggest, will depend on a practice of doubt. With doubt, a benevolent goal can be held within the context of a very different narrative, accompanied by a very different way of thinking about oneself in relation to that goal and to the people one aims to assist. Through altering the Mission narrative, these novels enact a dramatic dwindling of confidence. The problem of confidence, they suggest, is not only about faulty expectation of what will happen, but about the way that expectation is founded on certainty of one's view of the world and in one's capacity to fully grasp it. It is also confidence in the mission that allows one to carry on in the face of numerous signs not to. When Quinette in *Acts of Faith* receives insightful criticism from her family back in the U.S., "she grasp[s] for her conviction that God had summoned her . . . , that He was leading her to something, step by step, and she cl[ings] to that belief tightly, lest it slip away. Without it, she could not carry on in the face of so much criticism" (499). In contrast to the Mission narrative, which seeks to bolster faith in the face of obstacles, these novels aim to chasten it.

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[22] I do not mean to say that these authors are ambivalent about religious conversion. The point of ambivalence here is less about the actual content than it is about the concept of travel on the basis of non-profit, non-governmental motivations—traveling for the good of others, with widely ranging definitions of what that good actually is.

There is much to say about the cultivation of doubt in *Heart of Darkness* both

formally through techniques like multiple narrative frames, meandering syntax and lack

of referents and thematically as the sailors squint unseeingly through the thick vegetation

of the shore. Conrad's style of uncertainty is already well-known and well-documented.[23]

The point I want to make about it here is that this famously ambiguous style responds

specifically to the religious Mission narrative and the missionary texts which disseminate

it, formally refuting its stylistic certainty. Conrad's murkiness and unreadability force the

reader into an experience of doubt, of having to circle back, reread and rethink in order to

follow along. Progressing through the novel is a non-linear experience. One must grope

carefully through Conrad's Congo; his style makes it impossible to march through with

the confident cadence of the Mission narrative. Rather, it produces a sense of knowing

that one does not know Africa, let alone how to save it.

This is not only a critique of missionary confidence, but a positive alternative to

it. One image stands out as a crystallization of this idea. Before meeting Kurtz, Marlow

discovers one of his paintings, quite emblematic of his character, in the form of "a small

sketch in oils, on a panel, representing a woman, draped and blindfolded, carrying a

lighted torch. The background was somber—almost black. The movement of the woman

was stately, and the effect of the torch-light on the face was sinister" (Conrad 29-30). As

a torch-bearer in darkness, she mirrors the position of the "emissary of light," but in this

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[23] On the modernist aesthetics of paradox, ambiguity and uncertainty in Conrad's text, see Göbel. On the uncertainties produced through the dense narrative layers of the novella, see Brooks, "An Unreadable Report: Conrad's *Heart of Darkness.*" The unknowable quality of Conrad's Congo stands in contrast to popular mission narratives which combined missionary work with exploration and information gathering. Livingstone's epic of travel literature was also a text of ethnography, geography and tropical disease pathology. A large part of his task was to map the uncharted places of the earth. He was a collector of knowledge and as such was a key player in the work of imperial expansion. Bringing "light" to the "dark" places of the earth has been a project for the mapmaker as well as the missionary. Bringing the gospel abroad also meant bringing home knowledge of those locations.

image, Kurtzian self-delusion (a phrase I borrow from Pericles Lewis) is literalized: this emissary of light is blind. Notwithstanding the inability to see, she moves ahead with dignified confidence, as if unaware of her own blindness. It is an act of faith. Despite her stately pose, the overall tone of the image is sinister; her comfortable confidence, it seems, is misplaced. The precarious nature of this movement—simultaneously confident and blind—comes to characterize the emissary of light in the critical mission novel. It is also significant that she is blindfolded, not actually blind; her blinders can potentially be removed. Part of the work of the critical mission novels is—through the aesthetics and thematics of doubt—to cultivate a fuller and more accurate vision. Conrad calls for a much closer examination of the mission discourse and the jump that is made from declared intentions to an easy sense of triumph. The first step toward more vision, however, is in fact less; seeing the fact that one does not fully see is essential.[24]

Kingsolver handles this limitation and complication of vision through a multi-perspectival narrative form. Nathan's story is told through the voices of his wife and four daughters who offer external positions as women and children who are in the Congo not by their own choice but through the cooptation of Nathan's grand plan. In Caputo's *Acts of Faith,* the perspectives of missionary-types are mere fragments in a story that also occupies the perspectives of several others, including both locals and foreigners. This technique breaks the singularity of the Mission narrative, the sense that the story is an absolute truth that can be told and is worth telling in only one way. It also slows the

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[24] For another take on the concept of vision in *Heart of Darkness* and the strategy of "excessive examination," see Walkowitz. She argues that for Conrad, "indifference is disrupted . . . by the critical pressure of excessive examination . . . only by looking 'too much,' only by looking more avidly than is necessary or required, can one assess or even discern the conditions of political complacence" (43).

narrative down and thickens it with repetitions and multiple angles, ambiguities and
contradictions.

Aesthetic techniques and thematic arguments in the critical mission novel posit
uncertainty as a more ethical (or at least less dangerous) mode of being in the world. As a
character in Caputo's *Acts of Faith* will tell us, "conviction will blind you if it is not
shaded by doubt" (663). This could be taken as the mantra of the narrative tradition.
Hopeful alternatives, if they are presented at all, replace absolute confidence with the
self-conscious practice of doubt. Recall that Kurtz's only moment which even approaches
"moral victory" is in the ultimate declaration of self-doubt in his final words, "the horror,
the horror" (Conrad 86). In Kingsolver, this auto-critical practice is more expansive than
the momentary Kurtzian aporia. Brother Fowles, a missionary who came before Nathan
and was removed by the mission society on the basis of his "unconventional alliances"
with locals, most notably his marriage to a Congolese woman, is a figure of theological
uncertainty, suggesting the possibility of a more ethical mission impulse dependent on
doubt. That is not to say he is a non-believer. Kingsolver is careful to show that he isn't
theologically tepid; his biblical knowledge is vast and he pulls up passages by memory at
least as easily as Nathan, but he gives most attention to the places he has "always been a
little perplexed by" (Kingsolver 251). Nathan quickly jumps at the opportunity to prove
himself an authority over what he sees as the weakness of confusion:

> "The American Translation might clear that up for you. It says, 'washed their
> wounds.' " Father sounded like the know-it-all kid in the class you just want to
> strangulate.
> "It does, yes," replied Brother Fowles, slowly. "And yet I wonder, who
> translated this? During my years here in the Congo I've heard so many errors of

translation, even quite comical ones. So you'll forgive me if I'm skeptical, Brother Price." (251)[25]

Nathan is incapable of dealing with such subtlety or the kind of questioning Brother Fowles represents. We would never hear Nathan saying an open-ended "And yet I wonder…." It is a language foreign to his character, as his reaction shows: "Sir, I offer you my condolences. Personally I've never been troubled by any such difficulties with interpreting God's word." "Indeed, I see that," Brother Fowles responds, "[b]ut I assure you it is no trouble to me. It can be quite a grand way to pass an afternoon, really" (251). Through Brother Fowles, the novel endorses a style of being which lives comfortably within the uncertain space of knowing what one does not know.

Subscribing to the Mission narrative, Kingsolver shows, produces a certain mode of inhabiting the world. One's place within the narrative determines how one situates oneself in relation to others, particularly those one has come to assist. It determines who talks and who listens, who accepts advice/criticism/help and who offers it. It determines who has a voice in decision making, whose vote counts and how much. Nathan's uncompromising narrative enables him to believe God is always firmly on his side and that any real conversation with local people would compromise his mission. Like Kurtz, Nathan is an orator and not a listener. Kurtz's preacherly speech is defined by its "resistance to interruption": as his Russian disciple says of him "You don't talk to that man—you listen to him" (McClure, "Restraint" 312). Nathan is characterized by a similar

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[25] It is Nathan's mistranslation which gives the novel its title. He repeatedly proclaims in his limited Kikongo "Jesus is poisonwood" instead of "Jesus is holy." This mistranslation isn't technically dependent on knowledge—he does have the letters in the word correct—but on an ability to manage the subtleties of the language. A small change in tone transforms the word entirely, but understanding that would require careful, self-conscious listening.

resistance.[26] When he attempts to plant an American style Kentucky Wonder Bean

garden—an act of cultivation emblematic of his whole vision—Mama Tataba, a local

woman who helps around his house, jumps in to correct his technique. She points to his

"flat-as-Kansas" beds (63) and instructs him to mound the dirt into hills (40). He

arrogantly refuses the Congolese method and after she reshapes the dirt on her own, he

goes back to flatten it. Not surprisingly, she turns out to be right. The torrential rain

washes the seeds away, and he finds himself back in the garden again "revising the

earth": "Our father had been influenced by Africa" (63), his daughter notes, and it is

exactly that kind of influence—that interruption in his own narrative—which he will soon

steel himself against:

> Nathan would accept no more compromises. God was testing him like Job, he
> declared, and the point of that particular parable was that Job had done no wrong
> to begin with. Nathan felt it had been a mistake to bend his will, in any way, to
> Africa. To reshape his garden into mounds; to submit to Tata Ndu on the subject
> of river baptism; to listen at all to Tata Ndu or even the rantings of Mama
> Tataba.… He would not fail again. (97)

This moment is a reaffirmation of absolute faith. Nathan is in the Congo specifically to

reshape the Congolese, to make them submit, to make them listen, not the reverse. He

seeks to transform Africa utterly without a dent to his own person. For this mission

narrator, failure is any violation of the Mission narrative's singular trajectory.

Conversion, in a broad sense, is here intended to be a heavily policed, one-way street.

Yet what Nathan sees as failure, the novel takes as vital opportunity and opens

itself up to be "influenced by Africa," integrating the voices of African writers and

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[26] V.Y. Mudimbe has argued that resistance to dialogue is definitive of missionary discourse. Coming from
the "authority of truth," from a "speech that is always predetermined, pre-regulated, let us say *colonized*, …
the missionary does not enter into dialogue with pagans and 'savages' but must impose the law of God that
he incarnates" (47). This is the religious strand of what Mudimbe calls "epistemological ethnocentrism":
"the belief that scientifically there is nothing to be learned from 'them' unless it is already 'ours' or comes
from 'us'" (15). For more on the speech of the missionary and African adaptations see Mudimbe's third
chapter, "The Power of Speech."

anticolonialist leaders, such as Chinua Achebe and Patrice Lumumba. Nathan's resolute

statement comes at the beginning of the novel's second book, "The Revelation,"

essentially the beginning of the end, the crux at which things begin to fall apart. Nathan

will be asked to compromise and will even get democratically voted out of the church,

but he will continually struggle to force that unruly reality into the strictures of his own

narrative. Of particular issue for Kingsolver is the ethnocentric monologism (single-

voicedness) of the mission-based approach to the world. Kurtz was as deaf to others as

Nathan, but Conrad dramatized that in relation to other foreign travelers; Kingsolver sets

this up as a specific rejection of African interruption. Nathan doesn't listen to white

people either, but it is his refusal to listen to the Congolese that will be of greatest

consequence. When Mama Tataba walks away it is all downhill from there.

The novel takes the opposite tack. As much as Kingsolver draws on *Heart of*

Darkness as a precursor to her own novel, she also writes in the wake of Chinua Achebe

whose field-changing intervention with *Things Fall Apart* (also a critical mission novel)

was at least as powerful as Conrad's.[27] She mentions *Things Fall Apart* in the "Author's

Note" at the front of the book within the short list of texts most crucial to her own writing

and research. The presence of the Nigerian text is also felt in echoes—in the conflict

around the growth of the church, the related concerns of chief Tata Ndu, and in the

congregation of outcasts (those who have birthed twins who had to be abandoned

according to custom and those who, like Okonkwo of *Things Fall Apart*, had accidentally

killed a clansman or child) (212). In addition to specific allusions, *The Poisonwood Bible*

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[27] Conrad criticism post-1975 (the year of Achebe's lecture which condemned Conrad as a "bloody racist") is also always written *after* Achebe. Criticism on *Heart of Darkness* has been described in terms of "two epochal phases: before and after Achebe" (see Tredell, "Things Fall Apart: Challenges to 'Heart of Darkness' in the 1970s," 71).

is shaped by Achebe on a higher level in its attitude toward missionaries, toward African

history and tradition, and toward the claims of independence and the voices of its

advocates. This is in itself a formal refutation of the Mission narrative's monologic form.

Kingsolver tests this idea through characterization as well. One could argue that

Brother Fowles, the novel's "bad" missionary, is as much a rewriting of Kurtz as Nathan

is, but what we have with Fowles is a revised model of "going native"[28]—of yielding to

the village environment (which is in this case not defined by darkness) as a way of

becoming a more ethical version of foreign presence. He too is a sincere believer, but

through being influenced or "interrupted" by local voices, he becomes far more genuinely

altruistic than the preacher; his own "conversion" to local tastes and practices makes for a

different model of altruism altogether, based on mutual affection and kindness rather than

one-sided benevolence. He is a dialogic missionary, as opposed to Nathan's monologic

one. He too disagrees with the practice of polygamy, for example, but his approach takes

the form of spending "'many afternoons with a calabash of palm wine between [himself

and Tata Ndu], debating the merits of treating a wife kindly'" (257). This isn't merely a

strategy for effective proselytizing; Fowles actually likes the Congo and Congolese

people, a shock to Nathan's sensibilities. For Kingsolver, he is a better man by being a

bad missionary. If the ideal missionary is the hero of the Mission narrative, the bad

missionary is one who has no interest in that narrative or in fulfilling its expectations.

Against the singularity of the missionary mentality, Brother Fowles recommends that

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[28] Kurtz's transformation has often been described in terms of "going native," partly on the basis of
Marlow's own description, but John McClure has shown that this "theory of reversion" is highly
problematic, both for the blame it places on African cultures for violence, thus failing to place the
appropriate responsibility in European "civilization," and for what it fails to see in the text itself—
Marlow's own attribution of blame wavers. See *Kipling and Conrad,* especially 131-136. Kingsolver also
helps us to see the problem of that assumption of "going native" through this character who is indeed
transformed by native influences but to the opposite ends of Kurtz's vile transformation.

Nathan actually go to Tata Ndu for help—in other words, that he reveal his vulnerability, his uncertainty, his dependence on locals: "*We* are the branch that's grafted on here, sharing in the richness of these African roots," Fowles explains.[29] Notice how different the concept of grafting is from the "hewing down" we saw earlier. Furthermore, a graft can be rejected. Fowles sees himself less as a benefactor than beneficiary of the Congolese, and unlike Nathan, he survives the era of independence.

While the novel is written mostly in the vein of critique, Kingsolver's use of this minor character offers a glimpse of alternative possibility, nuancing our understanding of missions. There is potential for transnational engagement in a tempered spirit of improvement and on the basis of a different kind of narrative about a far less heroic kind of faith. Brother Fowles manages to be a missionary and traveling altruist without inhabiting the Mission narrative or its discourse. He doesn't speak the language of enlightenment and his Congo is no heart of darkness. Brother Fowles represents an imagining beyond the Mission narrative as well as beyond the potentially dehumanizing confines of its Western critique, and it is all rooted in his "unconventional alliances," in the ways that the Congolese have "interrupted" the Mission narrative to mold it into something new. This sensibility is echoed in the final section of Leah's narration, she concludes, "I am the un-missionary . . . beginning each day on my knees, asking to be converted. Forgive me, Africa, according to the multitudes of thy mercies" (525). Her father would have seen this humbling move as surrender, but the novel takes it as the only hope for the American altruist in Africa. Although drawn from a different context, the words of Teju Cole are apt: for "a well-meaning American [to] 'help' a place like

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[29] For a reading of Brother Fowles' attraction to this kind of biblical nature imagery and his mixture of Christianity and pantheism see Purcell, "The Gospel According to Barbara Kingsolver."

Uganda today, [i]t begins, I believe, with some humility with regards to the people in those places. It begins with some respect for the agency of the people of Uganda in their own lives" (2).

These manifestations of chastened faith, weak faith according to Mission narrative standards, are crucial to a better model of international assistance. Nathan has many qualities of the missionary hero—he is devout and unwavering; he has the resolution of a St. John, braving the dangers of the decolonizing Congo even when others flee; he is willing to "hew down" all kinds of things, and he is utterly confident in his own actions and in God's backing. But, for Kingsolver, these are the very qualities that make him dangerous. The preacher's "frightful confidence in himself" (94) will be his tragic flaw and central sin which breeds all others. Alternatively, characters of any positive potential in these novels are those like Fowles and Marlow who are wavering and ambivalent and quick to doubt. The better missionary-type in these novels is consistently a rather bad missionary: Marlow denies the role entirely and Brother Fowles is ousted from the mission society. Malachy, the better missionary in *Acts of Faith,* is similarly unorthodox. Ethical travel, for these authors, only begins to become possible when the Mission narrative—along with its dangerous confidence—is suspended. For Conrad it is an issue of doing less damage, but this doesn't leave any positive space for missions. Kingsolver and Caputo, on the other hand, recuperate the possibility of doing some good through their versions of the bad missionary.

These "bad missionary" characters have a capacity for vision that is nonexistent in the unquestioning missionary figures. The critical mission novel suggests that great destruction is wrought through the blindness produced by confidence and certainty. It

logically follows that if the traveler is aware of his limited vision, he will tread more carefully, and thus doubt is essential to the ethics of travel and of mission itself. Real vision requires the capacity to see what one cannot see and to exist comfortably with those grey areas. If the woman of Kurtz's painting understood her blindness, her walk would take the form of a cautious groping rather than a stately advance. Transnational altruism would be less glamorous but also less dangerous if it were to replace its inflated march with a humble, tentative step.

Mobilizing a Crisis of Humanitarian Faith

> Faith in an idea, a theory or a god is not easily surrendered when confronted by facts that embarrass it; and the greater one's investment in it, the more difficult to surrender. (Caputo, *Acts* 515)

As these critical mission novels attest, humanitarianism is indeed a practice of faith, often a faith which goes too far. Critics of humanitarianism including David Kennedy, David Rieff, Alex de Waal, and Michael Barnett point to the way its high-minded discourse tends to position aid as something "beyond criticism" (Rieff 67). It has a remarkable capacity to "absorb criticism, not reform itself, and yet emerge strengthened" (de Waal, *Famine* xvi). This comes at a cost in terms of actual outcomes: "the accepted narrative protects the virtue of humanitarianism, but at the expense of a fuller, and decidedly more complicated, picture of its lived ethics" (Barnett 6). In this chapter and those which follow, my goal is to flesh out that more complex picture of the dilemmas and incongruities and paradoxes of humanitarianism's noble idea as it is actually carried out in the messiness of the world.

Although "[h]umanitarianism tempts us to hubris, to an idolatry about our

intentions and routines, to the conviction that we know more than we do about what

justice can be" (Kennedy xviii), the critical mission novel confronts this overzealous faith

with an array of embarrassments. In doing so, I have argued, it works to dislodge that

faith, to open it up to the more pliable (and also less breakable) ethics of doubt. In *The

Dark Sides of Virtue,* David Kennedy claims that this kind of chastening, or

"disenchanting" as he calls it, is necessary for the renewal of humanitarian work in a time

when it is confronted with an overwhelming record of unintended consequence,

compromise, and failure. He proposes that we embrace "a posture or sensibility for

humanitarian work" that would "recognize and engage the dark sides," which are

inevitably entangled with the most noble "humanitarian yearnings" (xiv). One might

counter that intensive self-critique and the resultant self-doubt would immobilize the

impulse to help others. What I take from these texts, however, is a mobilizing crisis of

faith, a crisis which is the necessary foundation for humanitarianism's radical rethinking.

Barnett explains that even though "[f]aith is required to imagine an always elusive

humanity, to persevere despite the onslaught of disappointment and the cascade of

evidence of humanity's failings, . . . frequently it is a *crisis* of faith that has bent the path

toward realizing progress in humanitarianism and humanitarianism as progress" (239). It

is only from that place of crisis, that humanitarian discourse will be able to fundamentally

transform its narratives, its expectations, its methods of looking—and not looking—at

Africa.

A productive crisis of faith for humanitarian thought will necessarily unseat the

hero who has so long stood at its helm. Like the critical mission novels written in the

wake of decolonization, the humanitarian narrative must be "interrupted" by African

voices. Writers of African literature have long known "the danger of the single story"

(Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie's phrase), a singularity exemplified by the unity of the

Mission narrative, even when told in different forms. Despite their attention to African

input, these Western critical mission novels are still stories told by Westerners primarily

if not entirely about Westerners. Writing about the early days of establishing an African

tradition of written anglophone fiction in the mid-twentieth century, Achebe notes that

"there weren't any models. Those [Western novels] that were set in Africa were not

particularly inspiring. If they were not saying something that was antagonistic toward us,

they weren't concerned about us" (*Education* 54).[30] He took this issue up as his "mission

in life. My kind of storytelling has to add its voice to this universal storytelling before we

can say, 'Now we've heard it all' " (*Education* 55). The task for the critical mission novel

by the Western writer lies primarily on the side cultivating a critical self-consciousness of

various Western missions and dissolving the easy security of good intentions. It will be

necessary to turn to African critical mission writing in order to find a fuller perspective. I

turn now to those stories.

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[30] As is well known, Achebe has taken particular issue with Conrad, pointing out that the only time an
African opens his mouth in *Heart of Darkness* it is to speak of cannibalism. African writers have also taken
issue with Conrad's nihilism, particularly as it relates to African agency. Ngũgĩ puts it this way: "Conrad
always made me uneasy with his inability to see any possibility of redemption arising from the energy of
the oppressed" (*Moving* 6).

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"A Real Heaven on Their Own Earth":
Promises and Practices of Emancipation in African Mission Writing

She turned to Isaiah, chapter 61, and began, " 'The Spirit of the Lord is upon me,' " and waited for
Manute [to translate].Coming from him, Isaiah sounded more like the word of God, even in
Dinka; his deep and solemn voice could make a recipe like the word of God. " 'He sent me to bind
up the broken-hearted' "—pause—" 'to proclaim liberty to the captives' "—pause—" 'and the
opening of the prison to them that are bound.' " She was determined to coax a response
out of her listeners and repeated that last ringing verse.
– Philip Caputo, *Acts of Faith*

She talked of a new earth, another world, that knew no classes and clans, that leveled the poor
and the wealthy, once they accepted the eternal law of God. Not churches; not learning; not positions;
not good works: just acceptance, in faith, and behold: a new earth and a new heaven….
– Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o, *Petals of Blood*

There is a saying about missionaries which goes something like this: "When the white man came to Africa, he had the Bible and the black man had the land. The white man said, 'let us close our eyes to pray.' And when they opened their eyes, the white man had the land, and the black man was left with the Bible."[1] I want to think through the implications of this anecdote, because it models a set of arguments about missions which have become commonplace. First, it points to the link between cultural and political empire—the idea that colonizing culture through Christianization was part of a larger scheme to conquer African lands. The Bible was, in other words, a pawn of deceptive politics—a tool and a mask for domination. Also implicit here is the Marxist critique of religion as the opium of the masses. According to this line of argument, missions offered Africa a kind of anesthetic, implying that the Christianization of Africa involved not only the colonization of culture but of vision and consciousness—and thus an even more

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[1] This joke has often been attributed to Desmond Tutu and, before him, to Jomo Kenyatta, but it operates as a widely known and repeated adage.

thorough enslavement—negating the victim's capacity to even see the scene of his dispossession. The Bible, then, was a tool of blinding, dulling the critical senses and distracting African people from the real problem—political disempowerment and material dispossession—by producing an otherworldliness which would wait upon the next world to the neglect of the present one. This suggests that missions have not only facilitated the seizure of African lands, but have gone so far as to block the impulse to fight that injustice and the problems of the present more generally.

These claims have entered a kind of shorthand for talking about missions, rooted in African nationalism and echoed in postcolonial theory, tightly linking the cross and the flag, the Christian and the colonialist. Missions did indeed precede empire, opening up new paths to European travel and commerce, and with the consolidation of the empire they operated on a radically uneven terrain of power. This inequity also played out in the unidirectional politics of conversion, and missions did irreversible damage to African cultures and communities. Thus, in the period leading up to decolonization, the affinity between missions and empire seemed to be a settled matter: "Christian mission and European colonialism in Africa seemed so closely and obviously connected that their relationship did not seem to pose particularly interesting problems" (Peel 2).[2] The rise of postcolonial studies in the 80s renewed interest in colonial power, reinvigorating this sensibility and solidifying the view that "[c]onversion is control at its most complete, and it is this which makes mission colonialist to the core" (Peel 6). The missionary has thus come to register, by V.Y. Mudimbe's account, as "the best symbol of the colonial

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[2] *The Role of the Missionaries in Conquest* (1953) by Nosipho Majeke (a pseudonym for Dora Taylor, a white South African member of the Unity Movement) is a classic example of this perception. Peel notes that more complex treatments of missions by J.F. Ade Ajayi and E.A. Ayandele did exist but as the exception to the rule.

enterprise" (47), making the colonial Christian church, in Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o's words, "the greatest opponent of the African struggle for freedom" ("Church" 33). As such, the critique of Christian missions in Africa has been part of that freedom struggle, a component of the project which Ngũgĩ famously calls decolonizing the mind.

This marks a popular turn away from the religious Mission narrative, which told the opposite story. It spoke of Africa's emancipation through Christianization, offering "a new earth and a new heaven" (Ngũgĩ, *Petals* 298); if freedom didn't come within this world, it was at least promised in the next. Missions, according to this line of thought, were God's gift to Africa; within the counter-narrative, they have, for good reason, become the West's imperialist curse. As Edward Said has explained, "stories are at the heart of what explorers and novelists say about strange regions of the world; they also become the method colonized people use to assert their own identity and the existence of their own history" (*Culture* xii). Counter-narratives generated through nationalist resistance and metropolitan self-criticism brought about an extensive reframing of the terms through which missions had been popularly defined.[3] The connection between African conversion and Western control is not limited to the high theorizing of postcolonial academics; it has also become familiar within mainstream media through the discourse of cultural relativism.[4] This argument—initially a much needed counter-discourse—has become a dominant discourse itself, at least within academic and mainstream liberal discussions. The assessment of missions has thus calcified into two

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[3] In chapter 1, I claimed that a version of this argument was anticipated by Joseph Conrad in *Heart of Darkness* and rearticulated in various ways in the outgrowth of the Western critical mission novel. Although the investments of these writers certainly cannot be equated with those of African nationalists writing in the period of decolonization, they contribute to an overlapping project from different perspectives.

[4] This argument is also echoed in public debates over foreign aid as the benign mask of a malignant empire, although this version of the critique does not have the same level of popular agreement. In the following chapter, I will clarify the continuity between religious and humanitarian missions and critiques of them.

prevailing narrative forms—on the one hand a story of liberating salvation and on the other a story of imperial domination. The critical claims associated with the latter view are not untrue and have provided a much needed corrective to the former, but it seems worth asking, to adapt a question Bruce Robbins has raised in a different context, what do these now seemingly self-evident statements stop us from thinking?[5] A closer look at African responses to missions suggests that there is indeed much left to be thought.

The counter-narrative becomes particularly problematic in terms of African agency which gets elided within claims of Western hegemony, or total domination. Philip Zachernuk has criticized the tendency to frame African encounters with Western culture in terms of a binary choice: conserve or convert. Within this either-or framework, conversion becomes a form of surrender to the supposed injunction of the mission: "ABANDON AFRICA, ALL YE WHO ENTER HERE" (qtd. in Zachernuk 7). This has troubling implications regarding those who did not resist and reject missions, implying that they were duped, complicit in the domination and degradation of Africa. One way of restoring African agency to the story of mission-based domination would be to argue for practices of what Homi Bhabha has called sly civility. This is a way of reading resistance into what, at first glance, looks like complicity. Bhabha draws the term from a missionary sermon which defines sly civility as a practice through which colonized people demurely evade the missionary message (141). It draws attention to the role of performance within colonial engagements as a strategy for deflecting influence and avoiding complicity.[6] Mudimbe has argued that " 'African conversion,' rather than being a positive outcome of a dialogue—unthinkable per se—came to be the sole position the African could take in

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[5] See *Feeling Global,* 19.
[6] James Scott's *Domination and the Arts of Resistance* elaborates this kind of subversive dynamic at length.

order to survive as a human being" (48). It thus follows that Africans would act agreeable, or civil, in order to survive, pushing subversion into covert, or sly, forms. Jean and John Comaroff have advanced this claim within a broader argument about the "colonization of consciousness." They explain that the "long conversation" between British missionaries and the Tswana of South Africa occurred on two levels; most evident was the "overt content," which was "dominated by the substantive message of the mission," but under it flowed a quieter current which attempted to put off missionary authority in a struggle for local control (I: 199).

This line of argument has gone a great distance in complicating notions of colonial hegemony and false consciousness, showing Africans to be more than passive victims in face of mission intervention. But as it tackles a particular problem, it exposes another. The deflective practice of sly civility is a kind of protection against influence, but it doesn't help us deal with instances in which the appearance of mission enthusiasm reflected genuine feeling. What then do we make of Africans who sought out mission influence? By uncovering practices of resistant conservation within what appears to be straightforward conversion, the sly civility argument doesn't break the dualism Zachernuk points out, since resistance still requires the conservative move to avoid influence. In this chapter, I want to open up a different angle on the issue. Rather than looking at practices of deflection, I will explore points of genuine attraction to and engagement with missions. Literary critics have begun to complicate perceptions of nineteenth and early twentieth century mission writers such as Tiyo Soga, Sol Plaatje, and Samuel Ajayi Crowther, unearthing secular projects and emergent nationalism within religious discourse and clarifying that their Christian enthusiasm does not justify the

notion that they "merely accepted the metaphorics of the civilising mission" (Attwell, "Reprisals" 268).[7] I want to extend that work, again from a different angle. Rather than considering figures like these who appear complicit with missions and their "civilizing" message, I will examine figures of *overt* resistance in order to think about how they drew missions into complicity with their own anticolonial projects, albeit in partial ways. I aim to clarify why nationalist thinkers who often distanced themselves from their Christian upbringing were also intensely and sincerely attracted to certain elements of missions, revealing the ways in which the acceptance of mission influence—rather than avoidance—could also be critical without being sly. In contrast to critical distance, this is a model of critical proximity, which uncovers the real yet ambiguous value of missions within struggles for African freedom.

A shift in focus from colonialism to anticolonialism shows that the story does indeed have many more layers than the missionary-imperialist thesis allows. As David Attwell has explained, the argument that "the cross was indistinguishable from the flag" has revealed itself to be "too blunt an instrument: it obscured just how consequential missionary institutions and discourse have been in the history of African nationalism itself" (*Rewriting* 32). If mission stations of the colonial era were meant to turn out "good Africans"—"black Englishmen" who would assist in the turnover of land and authority— they ultimately turned out a great number of very "bad" ones for whom the Bible, believed or not, was an insufficient consolation prize. Africa's major anticolonial (and anti-apartheid) activists and political leaders in the initial years of independence in the sixties and seventies (and in the case of South Africa all the way into the nineties) were products of mission education, including Jomo Kenyatta, Kwame Nkrumah, Agostinho

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[7] See Attwell, De Kock, and George.

Neto, Léopold Senghor, and Nelson Mandela among numerous others. This is one of the

great ironies of missions in Africa—that these often colonially enabled institutions turned

out Africa's most vocal, persistent, and militant anticolonialists. E. A. Ayandele and J. F.

Ade Ajayi have thus described missions as an "incubator for African nationalism"

("Church History" 98). This doesn't mean that the Mission narrative was right all along

and that the emancipation story wins out. Rather, it begins to open up a third narrative

which weaves the story of colonial domination into a consideration of Africans' own

narratives of emancipation, tied to complex engagements with missions. My interest,

then, is not in mission intent but in African response. The reality too is that missionaries

were enormously diverse in terms of theology, relations to the imperial state, modes of

interaction with African people, and so forth. The only consistent thing we can say about

missions' relation to empire is that it was inconsistent, sometimes propping up its power,

sometimes undercutting it. The missionary-imperialist thesis fails to capture what is, in

reality, a remarkably mixed legacy with which colonized subjects knowingly engaged.

In this chapter, I argue that while missions were surely implicated in colonialism,

and part of the burden of anticolonial writing has been the critique of them, missions have

also been central to Africans' own narratives of improvement ranging from the reformist

to the radical, particularly when the horizon of improvement was independence.

Somewhat akin to Marxism in this sense, Christianity was a discourse from without

which fueled emancipatory narratives generated within Africa, linking up with

preexisting desires for freedom. The point is not to displace the narrative of missions as a

force of colonial domination—and certainly not to embrace a missionary rhetoric of

emancipating Africans—but to consider how Africans' own narratives of emancipation

were often built upon cautious encounters with missions. Missions have been part of a dual narrative process, foundational to stories which Westerners have told about Africa and which Africans have told about themselves and their continent. We know that missions have bolstered colonial narratives, but their entanglement with anticolonial narratives has yet to receive such full articulation. Since narrative is so central to the questions raised here, African literature (both fictional and autobiographical) offers an especially rich field of response. An exploration of literary treatments of missions, written by authors who came of age in the years of the independence struggle, brings into focus a subtle weaving of narratives which share some of missions' grand goals— emancipation and improvement—but with different definitions, different means, and different ends. Though inevitably imperfect, this suggests that a positive form of international assistance is not impossible and prefigures a mode of critically engaged response to contemporary humanitarianism.

Both Chinua Achebe and Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o have come out with autobiographical works in recent years which, in their emphasis on missions specifically, ask us to reopen the subject, thinking through their nuanced place within empire and anticolonial writing. While these authors are some of mission' most exacting critics, they suggest that the mission presence was multifaceted, a site of contestation not only between Africans and foreign missionaries, but among Africans themselves who viewed missions with a mix of hope and disappointment, disgust and desire. In other words, the choice before them, as Zachernuk has suggested, was far more complicated than simply conserve or convert. Achebe's *The Education of a British-Protected Child*, a book-length compilation of autobiographical essays was published in 2009, soon followed by Ngũgĩ's

Dreams in a Time of War: A Childhood Memoir in 2010. Achebe and Ngũgĩ have been Africa's most known, prolific, and long-lasting writers of the anglophone tradition; these publications come approximately half a century after each first published. Achebe and Ngũgĩ started writing for publication in the late 50s and early 60s respectively, in the midst of the decolonization era,[8] each with keen attention to missions. Couching my examination in the background of those early novels, I will focus on the two contemporary texts for the way that they combine literary and biographical history, showing the entanglement of missions in the personal lives and public works of anglophone African writers.

For Achebe and Ngũgĩ, missions cannot be summed up in a phrase or in a unified narrative of destruction—although that is part of the story. The question, their writings suggest, is not whether missions were good or bad for Africa, but how have they been imperialist *and* anti-imperialist, coercive *and* liberating, racist *and* antiracist, radically violent *and*, at times, radically humane? And ultimately how have African people worked to privilege the latter? In returning, all these years later, to the sites of their mission upbringing, how do Achebe and Ngũgĩ re-inflect the hardened field of debate? And what is at stake in making this return in the contemporary moment? This can help us answer a question of particular salience today: if humanitarian missions continue to be implicated in contemporary forms of imperialism, how can they be turned toward more genuinely emancipatory ends? The African literature of missions has been thinking through these issues for decades, and it thus provides resources for the debate over historical missions and for the imagination of humanitarian missions today.

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[8] Nigeria gained independence in 1960, Kenya in 1963.

Anti-Mission Orthodoxy and Historical Debates

African novelists have long articulated a set of complicating claims that a handful of

scholars have been fighting to gain traction for. The centrality of missions within African

literature about colonialism lies in contrast to their peripheral place within scholarly

writing. Andrew Porter, in *Religion versus Empire?* (2004), which explores the question

posed in his title, marks Brian Stanley's 1990 publication of *The Bible and The Flag* as a

turning point in the historiography of global missions, a foundational attempt to move

beyond the shorthand and work through the ambiguities of mission history. Stanley

framed the problem in terms of the dominance of the critical discourse: "the belief that

'the Bible and the flag' went hand in hand in the history of western imperial expansion is

fast becoming established as one of the unquestioned orthodoxies of general historical

knowledge" (qtd. in Porter 6). Lamin Sanneh had made a very similar claim a year earlier

in *Translating the Message*, noting that "no serious scholar" up to that point had

contested the idea that missions colluded with colonialism to "destroy indigenous

cultures" (4). [9] Still, Porter tells us, writing over a decade later, the amount of space

given to missions within studies of British imperialism is minimal, and he seeks to

augment it by continuing to press the question of the taken for granted relationship

between missions and empire. In 2003, Stanley would reiterate the point, calling for

increased attention to the relationship between decolonization and the growing

concentration of Christianity in the global South, which "has scarcely begun to attract the

attention of scholars" (1). Again and again, contributors within this emergent sub-field

lament tenacious oversimplifications by both apologists and critics.

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[9] See also the introductions by Etherington to *Missions and Empire* (2005) and Robert to *Converting Colonialism* (2008). Nearly two decades after Stanley and Sanneh made the argument, Etherington and Robert suggest that the problem of anti-mission orthodoxy persists, continuing to obscure the history.

Whereas this trend in scholarship seems to have gathered steam in the 90s,

African historians of religion have been complicating views of African Christianity and

mission history for decades, illuminating the agency of African converts as well as the

problematic implications in strong models of cultural imperialism. As early as 1966, E.

A. Ayandele, writing about the history of missions in Nigeria, was arguing that "[t]he

greatest weakness of the cultural nationalists was that they emphasized only the negative

results of missionary enterprise on Nigerian society" (*Missionary Impact* 284). In 1978,

Ogbu Kalu insisted that "[t]he history of christianity is not just the history of what

missionaries did. The responses of Igbo people are a crucial part of the story. In the

pattern of these responses lies the explanation for the rapid spread of missions" (315).

This pushes back against accounts of emancipatory missionaries on the one hand and

dictatorial missionaries on the other. When centered on Africa, Kalu suggests, the

narrative takes a very different form. Sanneh, who has written prolifically on the subject

throughout the 80s, 90s, and 2000s, suggests that "over-emphasis on the 'colonialism

paradigm' in mission history effectively silences indigenous agents and ignores how they

'translated' the gospel into their own social and spiritual realities for the fulfillment of

their own goals" (qtd. in Robert 3-4). These repeated calls over the course of half a

century to move away from the missionary-imperialist thesis toward a more nuanced

view of missions and their role in African history is suggestive of the hardy persistence of

that narrative.

Within literary and postcolonial scholarship the most known and referenced

account of missions has been Jean and John Comaroff's *Of Revelation and Revolution.*

The first volume, published in 1991, put forth a powerful anthropological argument about

the colonization of Tswana consciousness by Nonconformist missionaries, shifting away from claims about direct political involvement toward the more subtle politics of culture, suggesting that the "tacit question" which has defined the field—"Whose side were the Christians really on?" (I: 7)—isn't the right one. Missionaries "were often catalysts in the European domination of southern Africa," they explain, but "in ways they rarely would have chosen" (I: 306). They argue that while missionaries had an equivocal relation to colonial governments, their cultural project enacted a "revolution in habits" which converted Tswana life worlds (a far more extensive transformation than religious conversion alone), inserting them into the colonial culture and economy. The second volume, published in 1997, turns its focus toward modernity and the process of African incorporation into its colonial form. In each text, the Comaroffs insist on a dialectical model of mission history, "a history of reciprocal determinations" in which "the colonial evangelists were constantly diverted from their religious, cultural, political, and social objectives by African interventions of one kind or another; that European ways and means were repeatedly appropriated, refashioned, and put to their own ends by Southern Tswana" (II: 37). As I mentioned previously, they call this dialectical relationship a "long conversation" in which the "overt content" of missionary discourse was underwritten by the quieter current of African contestation.

Despite the sophistication of the Comaroffs' work, some have argued that it doesn't go far enough in complicating the relation between missions and empire due to the predominance of their claims about the colonization of consciousness and culture. These scholars have suggested that the cultural imperialism thesis continues to gloss over the complexity of the situation with a conquest narrative. Norman Etherington, a

prominent voice in the debate over mission history, writes that "[w]hile the Comaroffs cannot be accused of resuscitating missionary heroes, they have breathed new life into the almost lifeless corpse of the missionary-as-imperialist" (4).[10] Much of the reaction has to do with the problem of African agency; if missions are said to colonize consciousness, does that mean that African converts are dupes of the colonial system? How then do we account for the connections between nationalist movements and missions? If missions colonized consciousness and culture, what do we make of the indigenization of Christianity and the role of local converts in evangelism? Although *Of Revelation and Revolution* resists "any easy-to-hand binary model of 'the' missionaries against 'the' Africans" (De Kock 14), critics suggest it doesn't adequately grapple with the African side of the story, particularly in regards to African believers. Through complicating the relationship between missions and Western hegemony and turning to the agency of local converts, a number of writers have opened up new terrain on missions.

Dana Robert suggests that the missionary-imperialist orthodoxy is being forced to shift by the reality of the contemporary world: by the 1990s, Christianity had become a primarily nonwestern religion. Continuing to view Christianity as the "monolithic imposition of European domination" would problematically "attribute 'false consciousness' to the majority of Christians in the twenty-first century" (Robert 2). Gauri Viswanathan too has sought to extract conversion from the language of complicity and colonized consciousness, arguing that in many cases, conversion in colonial contexts was not a "knee-jerk reaction to failed political solutions, as mass conversions tend to be read" but a "form of political and cultural criticism" (213). Brian Stanley suggests that

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[10] For a related view, see Ryan Dunch, "Beyond Cultural Imperialism: Cultural Theory, Christian Missions, and Global Modernity."

the relationship between decolonization and the growth of Christianity in the global

South and East demands that we consider the relationship between missions and the end

of empire rather than merely its perpetuation. "Christian mission," he argues,

"contributed substantially to the emergence of nationalism through the introduction of

Western education, social reforms, and political ideas" (7).

Although some critics have begun to make inroads,[11] a discussion of the

relationship between missions and the anticolonial imagination has been largely absent

from literary study. In 2000, a conference entitled "Missions, Nationalism, and the End

of Empire" was held by the Currents in World Christianity Project.[12] This

interdisciplinary conference included representatives of history, sociology, anthropology,

missiology, and theology. This configuration of disciplines is suggestive of the limited

role literary scholarship has played in thinking about missions, empire, and world

Christianity. African literature must be brought to bear on this debate as it speaks directly

and insightfully to the ways in which missions have resonated with both colonialist

imposition and anticolonial resistance. Novelists, including Ngũgĩ and Achebe, have

offered precisely the ambiguous, unsettled accounts that revisionary historians have been

calling for, accounts that defy orthodoxies of both varieties.

Christian Missions, African Novelists, Ambiguous Allies

The critique of missions has been foundational to the anglophone literature of

decolonization. Achebe has defined his task as a writer as a process of undoing the very

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[11] These include David Attwell, Leon de Kock, Isabel Hofmeyr, and Olakunle George.

[12] Out of this conference grew Stanley's edited collection under the same title, *Missions, Nationalism, and the End of Empire* (2003), which includes essays by Porter and Kalu. On the conference, see pp. 3-4 of Stanley's introduction.

concepts I have associated with the Mission narrative: "I would be quite satisfied if my novels (especially the ones I set in the past) did nothing more than teach my readers that their past—with all its imperfections—was not one long night of savagery from which the first Europeans acting on God's behalf delivered them" ("Novelist" 105). While this is a response to colonialism and its civilizing mission more generally, it also speaks specifically to the religious institutions through which Europeans enacted God's supposed plans for Africa. The energy of African fiction writing has been generated partly by the impulse to surpass the narrative of Africa's salvation as delivered by western heroes. Achebe and Ngũgĩ (as well as Tsitsi Dangarembga whose work I will address in detail in chapter 4) write novels of non-deliverance in which missions and the Mission narrative fail to produce glory and wreak havoc instead. They tell stories of things falling apart in the wake of mission intervention, of previously stable societies, families, and individuals fragmenting. In Achebe's fiction that is set in the early days of British invasion, missionaries are the catalysts of catastrophe. In *Things Fall Apart*, they forge the first paths into the African countryside, ushering in a new and destructive era of colonial domination. In *Arrow of God,* missionaries encourage converts to defile the most sacred Igbo cultural symbols, and they take advantage of internal rifts and the desperation of a delayed harvest in order to win more converts. In Ngũgĩ's *The River Between,* missionaries stir up conflict that bitterly divides the people into cultural war. His second novel, *Weep Not Child,* is structured around a reversal of the trope of missionary-sourced enlightenment: Part I, titled "The Waning Light" is followed by the dénouement, "Darkness Falls." Dangarembga's *Nervous Conditions* describes missionary goodwill as a form of benevolent tyranny and narrates the psychological process of alienation through

the mission station. The list goes on. Since mission presses were typically the first sources of publication for African writers, literature of the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries has been associated with mission sympathy, but with the era of decolonization it took an unambiguously critical stance.

While African writers became some of missions' most exacting and articulate critics, their descriptions are shot through with contradictions and complications. Consider the casts of characters in *Things Fall Apart* or *The River Between.* In each novel we see more than one missionary type as well as a vast range of African responses. In *Things Fall Apart,* among the six missionaries, who first arrive, only one is white, and of the two white missionaries who appear through the course of the novel, one is characterized by accommodation to local practice, the other by an over-zealous rejection of any compromise. Among locals, some are drawn to the mission for reasons we could frame in terms of human rights—think of the mothers of twins for whom Christianity provides an alternative to disposing of their newborns or of Nwoye who is deeply distressed by the killing of Ikemefuna and finds comfort in the church with its alternative law. The *efulefu,* in particular, considered "worthless, empty men" (*Things* 143), are compelled by the missionaries' claim that all are "brother[s] because they [are] all sons of God" (*Things* 145).[13] For characters such as these, missions hold the promise of justice and equality not previously though possible. In Ngũgĩ's *The River Between,* characters attempt to forge different paths between the hardening sides of converts and traditionalists and draw on Christianity and mission institutions in practices of self-fashioning. It is about attempts to maneuver between orthodoxies and blend identities in

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[13] Christianity's universal conception of humanity is a point of consistent attraction, but it also produces a whole set of problems which I will explore in the following chapter.

new ways. And it is the river between the polarizing hills that is the site of movement, of imagination, of possibility, although the novel allows no sense of easy hybridity. The African critical mission novel works to dismantle the grand Mission narrative of the West, while also exploring how mission stations of the colonial era have been a pivotal figure in Africa's own narratives of development and how African colonial subjects have grappled with that tension. Missions are deeply problematic within these novels but also deeply compelling. In this body of fiction, major questions get worked out in relation to missions—questions of how to survive in a rapidly and violently changing world; how to address the problems of poverty, dispossession, and development; how viable it would be to accept foreign assistance and on what terms. Missions, from the perspective of this literature, are not the straw man of easy critique but a vexed and nuanced site of contestation, dilemma and ambivalence.

It is a tension very much alive within the personal histories of these writers, and for that reason I will turn to their own autobiographical meditations. It is often noted, though seldom analyzed, that the African novelists of the generation of decolonization (often described, though not with complete accuracy, as the first generation) were products of mission education. Achebe, the son of an early convert and evangelist, was raised in the church and educated in its schools. For primary school, he attended St. Philip's C.M.S. (Christian Mission Society) Central School. For secondary education, although he went to the Government College, Umuahia, rather than a church-run school, this colonial state institution had an English cleric as its founding principle. Ngũgĩ did not come from a Christian family himself, but converts had a large presence in his upbringing too. His mother sent him to the local mission early on, embracing the opportunity for

education which it would provide, regardless of religious content. He started at the missionary school, Kamandũra, and transferred in grade three to Manguo as part of the independent school movement. While this was a break away movement from the missionary-run school system, it maintained religious affiliation, proclaiming a Christianity "shorn of its Western propensities" (Ngũgĩ, *Dreams* 113). The Alliance High School, Ngũgĩ's final destination in his childhood memoir was established by the Alliance of Protestant Missions. The coming-of-age stories of these writers and numerous others are saturated with missionary affiliation and influence. Education was a powerful force, and anglophone African literature would not be what it is today without the missions; Simon Gikandi explains that, "more than religious belief, it was the mission schools that were to prove indispensable in the emergence of an African literary tradition. For many Africans, the main attraction of these schools was their ability to confer the gift of literacy often seen as the key to a modern life and identity" (*Encyclopedia* 172). The skills on which the very identities of these writers *as writers* are based associate them implicitly with missions.

While missions did enable African writing, this has been an uneasy relationship. Alison Searle has pointed to the ambivalence of that relationship within *Things Fall Apart* and *Nervous Conditions*: "The narratives [Achebe and Dangarembga] tell are born out of an education and language offered by missions, which threatens a consuming alienation at the very moment of empowerment" (60). The African discourse around missions is constantly negotiating that doubleness, the costs and benefits of mission school. Nelson Mandela, for example, balances skepticism with an appreciation for the services missions provided and turns the discussion toward their utility for Africa.

Colonial era missions, according to this line of thought, were not ideal but were useful in an environment where options for Africans were tightly constricted:

> These schools have often been criticized for being colonialist in their attitudes and practices. Yet, even with such attitudes, I believe their benefits outweighed their disadvantages. The missionaries built and ran schools when the government was unwilling or unable to do so. The learning environment of the missionary schools, while often morally rigid, was far more open than the racist principles underlying the government schools. Fort Hare [a missionary college] was both home and incubator of some of the greatest African scholars the continent has ever known. (Mandela 38)

The most critical reading of these schools would say that they are merely institutions of social control—a way of colonizing minds in order to keep bodies fully in check. Missionary intent aside, something quite different than social control was often accomplished. Surely they didn't educate Mandela into complicity with white rule. In this assessment, Mandela doesn't replace the radical critique but supplements it with the additional dimensions of the story, and the evidence of independent African thought emerging from mission education is incontestable. The structure of response he poses is defined not by an "either-or" but a "both-and," simultaneously rejecting and embracing various aspects of missions.

Mandela draws attention to the fact that Africans under colonization and apartheid were working in an environment without ideal options. For Africans writing in a period when the most pressing problem is white rule, missions are evaluated for their tenuous balance of costs and benefits in relation to it. Missions did provide considerable resources *against* colonialism which are erased by arguments that collapse the two. For these writers, missions are situated instead as an ambiguous ally. In *The Education of a British-Protected Child,* Achebe is constantly qualifying his position in relation to missions, negotiating between their potential advantages and dangers. He describes his inheritance

as a dialectical one which leads to the simultaneous embrace and rejection of missions and their Christian message. He writes, "I am a prime beneficiary of the education which the missionaries had made a major component of their enterprise. My father had a lot of praise for the missionaries and their message, and so have I. But I have also learned a little more skepticism about them than my father had any need for" (*Education* 37). Achebe positions himself simultaneously in two camps as a skeptic and beneficiary. These are not the mutually exclusive positions they are often made out to be. In *Dreams in a Time of War*, Ngũgĩ makes a remarkably similar statement: "From Lord Reverend Kahahu [a local convert and mission figure] I myself learned to revere modernity; from Baba Mũkũrũ, the values of tradition; and from my father, a healthy skepticism of both" (86). It is a stance which I would suggest characterizes African literature more broadly which is marked by traces of the mission, viewing that inheritance as both advantageous and lamentable.

Achebe advocates this mode of thinking which stakes itself in the middle ground. It is a value he draws from Igbo thought but seeks to apply more generally: "Why do the Igbo call the middle ground lucky? What does this place hold that makes it so desirable? Or, rather, what misfortune does it fence out? The answer is, I think Fanaticism. The One Way, One Truth, One Life menace" (*Education* 5). This "One Way" language comes out of Christian doctrine, but it pushes back against both the most triumphant and most critical accounts of missions. Achebe arrives at this perspective through his own dual inheritance: "Those two—my father and his uncle—formulated the dialectic which I inherited. Udoh stood fast in what he knew, but he left room also for his nephew to seek other answers. The answer my father found in the Christian faith solved many problems,

but by no means all" (*Education* 37). If answers to some problems have been found, then missions are partially enabling though incomplete, not so far gone as to require full dismissal. And for Achebe, tradition surely doesn't provide all the answers to the problems of an invading modernity either. In his novels, purists don't survive. Ezeulu of *Arrow of God* and Okonkwo of *Things Fall Apart* lack the flexibility of his uncle Udoh; they refuse compromise and end up mad or dead. It is, in the extensiveness of the new dispensation, an untenable, even un-survivable position. The mission station provides a source for new narratives of survival:

> In the new world that was emerging, of money and taxes, mining and military conscription, the syringe and the bicycle, the book and the blackboard, the white shirt and the wellington boot, this was *the way to go on.* The bravery games in the cattle villages and the lessons learned around the village fires had little to say about this world. Old solutions no longer seemed to be working; old systems no longer guaranted [sic] a man status and respect; old beliefs ceased to be convincing. In growing numbers Africans turned to the missions. (Pettifer and Bradley 98-99, my emphasis)

The question becomes, how to make good on this irreversible situation, how to move beyond the survival of colonialism toward its subversion? Africans found, in missions, resources for thinking out those problems.

What then, for the anticolonial project, is at stake in the middle ground? As Achebe asks, what possibility does this place hold and what misfortune does it fence out? What might it offer that has been inaccessible in the polarized debate over missions, and what resources does that grounding provide for dealing with the closely related debates over humanitarianism and its universal values today? There is a risk in fundamentalisms of both varieties—the hardening of each discourse can become paralyzing, and thus there exists significant potential for movement within tempered modes of thought. This both-and position which holds together both sides of that inherited dialectic and carves new

positions in-between, this middle ground place, should not be romanticized. It is not an ideal but a negotiation of the non-ideal real. In the face of overwhelming and unavoidable colonial power, it is the place of survival. It is not understood to be the best of things, but the best option in a world of very limited options—the semi-choice when an ideal choice is simply unavailable. Achebe and Ngũgĩ (among others) shift the question from the terrain of ethical ideals (praising missionaries as saviors or condemning them as imperialists) to that of political options in a real, non-ideal environment. They engage multiple discourses of improvement in order to find the most tenable path. Missions become a source for making the best out of a terrible situation, an expression of what the Comaroffs have called the "will to make livable lives" (II: 217). These authors offer a model of political engagement as "urgent collective action in an imperfect world (with allies and under circumstances that one might not have chosen for oneself), rather than as a radical refusal of all imperfection and, with it, of all action" (Robbins, *Feeling* 4). Bruce Robbins has argued that the "moral messiness of politics" demands getting messy, lest one "condemn oneself to an indefinite wait—and, in effect, to withdraw from the project of political change" (*Feeling* 4, 75). That is what the African literature of missions has been thinking about all along.

People of the Book

If these writers and their families were so willing to engage with missions, then what was it that made them positively enabling? What did politically conscious African subjects seize on and why? Much of the revisionary historical analysis, which argues that there were resources within Christian missions that genuinely benefitted African people,

focuses on education and literacy as the centerpiece of missionary work and the key

aspect of African attraction to missions. This perception is confirmed in much literary

and autobiographical writing from the continent.[14] In the African context at least, it is

impossible to understand the impact of missions without grappling with education as the

two were so closely intertwined with missionaries serving as the primary providers of

formal education in the colonial era. In the pages that follow, using Achebe and Ngũgĩ as

guides, I will explore the implications of mission education, particularly in regards to the

critique I outlined in the opening according to which missions worked toward the

blinding and de-politicization of African colonial subjects.

There is a close relationship between Christian missions and the flowering of

African literature. Although scholarship on the subject is limited, missions are woven into

the very fabric of secular African writing. Missionaries had their hand in all aspects of the

writing process. They developed orthographies for unwritten African languages, spread

literacy through their schools, and, through mission presses, were in many places the first

to publish African writers and for many years Africans' only outlet for publication at

all.[15] While they learned local languages and translated the Bible to make it locally

accessible, missionaries were also the primary source of English. Alison Searle argues

that their trace is always "embedded in the textual nature of . . . African literature written

in English" as a language acquired through mission education (60). African anglophone

writing is, in and of itself, a manifestation of mission history.

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[14] On language learning and translation, see Paul Laudau's essay, "Language," in Etherington's edited collection, and Sanneh's *Translating the Message* as well as "'They stooped to conquer': Vernacular Translation and the Socio-Cultural Factor." On education and literacy Sanneh's 6th chapter in *West African Christianity,* de Kock's *Civilizing Barbarians,* Porter's *Religion versus Empire?,* Hofmeyer's "Reading Debating/Debating Reading," and Peterson's *Monarchs, Missionaries, and African Intellectuals.*

[15] Missionary orthographies in Roman script were preceded in parts of Africa by ancient scripts—Egyptian hieroglyphics and Ge'ez—and later by the use of Arabic script for Hausa, Wolof, Somali, and centuries-old Swahili writing traditions. See Gérard.

Lamin Sanneh's work on missions and African vernaculars suggests that this trace of the mission lies in indigenous language writing as well. Although English was associated with missions and conversion, it was not a requirement of participation in the church; biblical literacy did not require knowledge of a colonial language. The sacred, Sanneh points out, could be accessed in African tongues. He describes a bi-directional linguistic encounter in which missionaries validated the indigenous by learning African vernaculars and translating sacred texts into them while also giving African students access to the global medium of English.[16] One of the implications for literature is that missions' language activities were enabling to writers of both Achebe's and Ngũgĩ's varieties through equipping mission students for writing in *both* colonial and indigenous languages. Thus Ngũgĩ's decision to write first in Gikuyu is not a way of breaking with his mission heritage but of putting it to use for the conservation of the local language.[17] In their most recent writings, Ngũgĩ and Achebe have provided evidence that supports Sanneh's claims. Recalling his arguments with Ngũgĩ over the proper language of African literature, Achebe comments that Ngũgĩ is "too good a partisan," regarding his own claims about the imperial imposition of European languages in Africa, to confront the "inconvenient" history of "imperialist agents (in the shape of Scottish missionaries)

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[16] Of course the primary text for translation was the Bible, but second to that was *The Pilgrims Progress* which was widely translated and became a major presence in the Christian textual tradition within Africa. See the work of Isabel Hofmeyr who looks at the influence of translations of *The Pilgrim's Progress* in African languages and literary contexts, exploring how Bunyan's portrayal of literacy and documents gets taken up in African writing.

[17] Other indigenous language novelists in this position include Thomas Mofolo (Sesotho), Henry Masila Ndawo and A.C. Jordan (Xhosa), John Langalibalele Dube, R.R.R. Dhlomo, and C.L.S. Nyembezi (Zulu), Daniel Olorunfemi Fagunwa and Adekanni Oyeldele (Yoruba), Pita Nwana (Igbo), and Stephen A. Mpashi (Bemba). See Gérard, *African Language Literatures.* A full account of the mission influence on African writing would have to consider the African language traditions which often preceded fiction in European languages. Many of the African language texts of the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries grappled with the relationship between local cultures and Christianity.

desiring to teach Kikuyu children in their mother tongue, while the patriotic Kikuyu are revolting and breaking away because they prefer English!" (*Education* 104). Nuancing those previous claims, Ngũgĩ recounts precisely this situation in *Dreams in a Time of War*. In the memoir, English is portrayed as one of the main motivations for breaking off from missionaries who were not teaching *enough* English. The independent school "was seen as having a more challenging curriculum, demanding rapid acquisition of English as we entered modern times" (*Dreams* 114). Later, he describes the years of Emergency in the 1950s in which Gikuyu became the subject of derision and thus the context and demand for its use changed (177). The relationship between missionary teachings, Western control, and African demands thus defies the logic of the imperial imposition argument that Ngũgĩ himself has advanced. That is not to say it overthrows the argument, but it certainly does qualify it.

In reflecting on his own biography as well as that of Ngũgĩ, Simon Gikandi explains that missions and literacy were so closely linked that Gikuyu Christians in Kenya were called *Athomi*—literates of "people of the book."[18] There has been a very close tie, this implies, between African identifications with books and with *the* Book. In Noni Jabavu's *The Ochre People*, for one example of a common trope, converts are described in contrast to the non-converted traditionalists as "school people." Often this went even more directly to "book people." Angolan convert and pastor, Jesse Chipenda, recalls his father's response to how he had changed after visiting his mother's village and learning to read: "He believes in Jesus, and he has a book" (qtd. in Henderson 2). In other words, books and belief went hand in hand, even in language itself; in Umbundu, Chipenda's mother tongue, the verbs "to believe" (*oku tava*) and "to read" (*ok tanga*) are

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[18] See the preface and first chapter of *Maps of English* and *Ngugi wa Thiong'o* (21-25).

closely associated. The founding figures of anglophone African literature as it is canonized today were logically book people and school people, their histories entangled with the mixed inheritance of literacy, Christianity, and the English language.[19] Olakunle George has argued that, although the identity they "insist upon is emphatically no longer a Christian one," contemporary writers occupy a position closely resembling that of nineteenth-century African missionaries, partly exterior to the people they represent ("Native" 18).[20] By entering the literate order, novelists were indeed converts of a sort. Literacy was also viewed as a form of conversion since one did not acquire literacy alone; it came with a whole set of associations: "To become readers, the colonized were required not only to acquire literacy but also to adopt Western values, vocations, modes of dress, and a 'European demeanor' " (Gikandi, *Maps* 34). Therefore, "one was not merely a Christian because one believed in a certain doctrine; rather, conversion was apparent in one's ability to live a modern life, a life manifested in a new monetary economy, mode of dress, set of cultural values, and even architecture" (Gikandi, *Ngugi* 39). The accoutrements of mission education were in some ways desirable and in others quite worrisome. Novels of mission education such as *The River Between, Things Fall Apart,* and *Nervous Conditions* are mindful of the alienation and distance that it would build between the student's own culture and history.[21]

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[19] I should note that in focusing on literary figures I am dealing with a subset of the colonized African population, a group of people who were at least curious about and compelled by elements of what missions had to offer. Their level of engagement cannot be generalized and should not be extended to any kind of universal statement about missions and African people.

[20] George advances this argument in "The 'Native' Missionary," the African Novel, and In-Between," and draws related comparisons between Samuel Crowther and Wole Soyinka in "The National and the Transnational."

[21] Gikandi describes the desire for education and the fear that it "marked an irreversible move away from the existing foundation of identity and community" as major themes of Ngũgĩ's works throughout his career (*Ngugi* 40).

At the same time, as Andrew Porter has argued, Africans perceived the schools to hold emancipatory potential of a form not necessarily anticipated by missionaries themselves:

> missionary work and education, despite their manifest limits, often had a vital liberating impact and was [sic] welcomed for that reason. There is no doubt that the spread of literacy and knowledge of other languages both widened horizons at many different social levels and greatly enhanced the ability of ordinary people to question or subvert traditional attitudes as well as imperial and colonial assumptions. (317)

A pedagogy of conversion, even as it seeks to implant a new orthodoxy by replacing an old one, renders belief and tradition questionable, thus destabilizing, to a degree, the new orthodoxy itself. Porter points to a dual destabilization of local tradition and colonial imposition. Of course these competing traditions—both rendered questionable to a degree—meet on a very uneven terrain of power. Thus the relationship between loyalty to the local and the acceptance of foreign learning is never quite settled for the African writer. In his essay "Biggles, Mau Mau, and I," Ngũgĩ grapples with that contradiction of attending a "colonial school in a colonial world" which aimed "to produce leaders who of course, had the necessary character and knowledge to faithfully but intelligently serve King and Empire" while receiving continuous encouragement to "cling to education" from his brother who was away in the forest fighting against that very King and Empire (*Moving* 137, 139). The title alludes to an uncomfortable triangle between the author, the figure of colonialist literature, Biggles, loyal "first and foremost to the flag" (137), and the Mau Mau freedom fighters, most intimately his own brother who opposed everything Biggles stood for—except, somehow, education. How "Biggles and I" fit together represents an anxiety over the influence of the mission school: would reading Biggles

equate to betraying the relationship between "Mau Mau and I"? Could all three ever really reside together as closely as they do in the title?

Education theorist and activist Paulo Friere argues that there is "no such thing as a *neutral* educational process" (*Pedagogy* 15). Biggles, as Ngũgĩ knows, is anything but a neutral character. Rather, he is part of an educational system backed by imperial interests. Freire goes on:

> Education either functions as an instrument which is used to facilitate the integration of the younger generation into the logic of the present system and bring about conformity to it, *or* it becomes "the practice of freedom," the means by which men and women deal critically and creatively with reality and discover how to participate in the transformation of the world. (*Pedagogy* 15)

Clearly, Biggles belongs in the former category. But Freire later qualifies this either-or statement to suggest that it is possible for a critical capacity to emerge even in students under the former regime (*Pedagogy* 61). That slipperiness is a function of literacy itself. Literacy is particularly vulnerable to practices of freedom, since the capacity to "deal critically and creatively with reality" by interpreting for oneself is enabled by the capacity to read for oneself.[22]

A large part of the anticolonial potential in mission education was found in literacy. Much progressive thought has viewed literacy as a vital element in the process of liberation as Friere's work demonstrates. The Portuguese colonialists in particular saw African literacy as a liability; in Angola, for example, "local Portuguese officials were highly suspicious of missionaries' efforts to learn the local language and to provide literacy skills (both reading *and* writing) to the students in mission schools" (S. Robbins and Pullen xviii). The idea of literacy as a threat to imperial power crops up in writing

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[22] A key component of Freire's education plan in Brazil included a National Literacy Program. See *Education for Critical Consciousness.*

from across the continent under various white regimes.[23] In Jabavu's *The Ochre People,* a

young anti-apartheid activist seeks "to *convert* [people] to religion if possible even

though he wasn't a minister, but mainly to the idea of educating their children" (75). His

interest is in educating them out of the apartheid order, not into it. This re-inflects the

idea of conversion, leading it to apply a conversion *out* of the oppressive order that is the

reality of the day. This is related to what Dana Robert describes as a practice of

"converting colonialism." She explains that those who converted to Christianity used the

new faith to help navigate the strictures of colonial rule and to create alternative

structures of governance. Along with missionaries, these Christians sought to "convert

colonialism" by co-opting aspects of it that seemed compatible with their goals while

changing prejudicial elements to accommodate biblical values (Robert 5). Achebe too

has made the connection between mission school and the rise of political consciousness,

in spite of the specific content of the curriculum. In the title essay of *The Education of a

British-Protected Child,* he recalls the school library which housed adventure stories for

boys: "Even stories like John Buchan's, in which heroic white men battled and worsted

repulsive natives, did not trouble us unduly at first. But it all added up to a wonderful

preparation for the day we would be old enough to read between the lines and ask

questions. . . ." (*Education* 21). With the ellipsis, he gestures toward the success of that

preparation. Achebe has indeed read between the lines and asked questions very

unsettling of the colonialist texts he read as a boy.[24]

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[23] My focus is on anglophone literature by writers from British colonies, but as the work of Sarah Robbins and Ann Ellis Pullen suggests, these are relevant issues within the colonial context more broadly and would merit consideration in a comparative framework.

[24] Of course literacy gave access to other kinds of texts as well. I will come to the issue of the Bible which, despite all its imperialist adaptations, is full of anticolonial inspiration, an effect that was not lost on some missionaries.

Education in the Alien Palace: On Reading and Rebellion

I turn now to a question I raised early on: if missions have been central to both colonialist and anticolonialist consciousness building, as these writers suggest, then how did Africans manage to privilege the latter? Since literacy was naturally the point of most powerful, and even enchanting, attraction among many of those who became writers, I want to direct that question specifically toward literacy to explore how these writers have theorized and demonstrated the components of its emancipatory potential. I will enter this myriad of responses by way of an illustration.

In his essay, "The Education of a British-Protected Child," as Achebe introduces the concept of the middle ground, he alludes to the story of Moses. The reference is brief but significant for the way it positions the writer, offering a window on Achebe's theorization of the problems and potentialities of mission education. He compares himself to Moses as a way of contemplating how a concept from Igbo tradition, the luck of the middle ground, managed to penetrate the powerhouse of colonial culture:

> my traditional Igbo culture, which at the hour of her defeat had ostensibly abandoned me in a basket of reeds in the waters of the Nile, but somehow kept anxious watch from concealment, ultimately insinuating herself into the service of Pharaoh's daughter to nurse me in the alien palace . . . taught me a children's rhyme which celebrates the middle ground as most fortunate. (*Education* 5)

The first point is simply that this is a writer as well-versed in the art of biblical allusion as in Igbo proverbs. It is a moment which performs the duality of his formation, yet there is also much more going on here related to the specificity of that reference. I want to read his self-comparison to Moses as emblematic of the anticolonial writer more broadly and as a cue for how to think about culture and empire—for how to think, in other words,

about what it means to be educated in "the alien palace." I will first tease out some implications of the allusion within the context of Achebe's usage. Then, I will follow the implications of this reading to frame out a broader analysis of African literacy, literature, and mission education.

Achebe's allusion to Moses raises the question of formation under a foreign power. Baby Moses, set afloat in a world where being an Israelite is enough to get him killed under Pharaoh's paranoid, oppressive regime, ends up in the house of Pharaoh himself. There, he is raised by the Pharaoh's daughter and will be mistaken by his own people for an Egyptian.[25] In spite of this context, Achebe describes the values of Moses's own trampled culture finding their way to him in the undercover form of his own biological mother. Yet there is much more to the story which Achebe does not recount here but which is built into the significance of the figure of Moses, thickening the reference. What, ultimately, does his upbringing produce with Hebrew influence situated in the house of the oppressor? With the parallels between the enslaved Israelites and colonized Africans, the story speaks very directly to the experience of African writers educated in colonially connected mission schools. Many arguments suggest that it was about the production of "good Africans," servants of the colonial order who betray their own culture and history.[26] Contrary to that line of thinking, the Moses story suggests a possible alternative. Moses emerged to become *the* defender of the Israelites, delivering them out of slavery under the Egyptians. The subversive leader is not an Egyptian himself but is formed in the house of Egypt, adept in the use of the master's tools. That

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[25] Olakunle George's comparison of the African novelist to the "native" missionary is again relevant. See "The 'Native' Missionary."

[26] For an example of this argument within an analysis of Ngũgĩ's work, see Mugambi, *Critiques of Christianity in African Literature*

education does not guarantee loyalty but in fact comes to serve the work of rebellion in this narrative. As it applies to Achebe and writers in his position, anticolonial discourse and narrative has indeed emerged from the collusion of biblical traditions and indigenous ones.

In the Exodus story, it is the one positioned within the house of Egypt who overthrows it, and African fiction has often depicted mission education in this way. Education in the alien palace is of strategic value. In *Arrow of God,* the priest Ezeulu, even with his intense commitment to tradition, sends his son to the mission school "to be my eyes there" (189) and to "learn the ways of [white] people" (13). "A man must dance the dance prevalent in his time," he tells his son (189). The education in the ways of the white man is seen as a "way to go on" (Pettifer and Bradley 98), a security so as not to be caught off guard by rapidly changing times. In *Dreams in a Time of War,* Ngũgĩ's father's land, purchased "in goats under the traditional system of oral agreement in the presence of a witness" (18) is later re-sold, this time "recorded under the colonial legal system, with witnesses and signed written documents. Orality and tradition lose out to literacy and modernity. A title deed no matter how it was gotten trumped oral deeds" (19). The man who buys the land, the Reverend Kahahu, a figure closely associated with the church and the mission school, is also Gikuyu, also subject to dispossession under colonialism. The power and privilege he has lies in his association with missions and the capacity he gains to participate in the now dominant literate order. Gain literacy or get "trumped." There is an element of covert resistance in Kahahu's refusal to be dispossessed by the colonial order—this figure who appears to be most in line with colonial values is the one best equipped to compete with colonists—yet for Ngũgĩ it is

radically insufficient; the problem is that "making himself at home" in this colonial modernity means putting others out of theirs.[27] While he may get himself out of colonial dispossession, he is indeed complicit in the dispossession of others. But this is not the only model of engagement which Ngũgĩ offers.

Often participation in the literate order is seen not only as a mode of surviving colonial imposition but of resisting it through a kind of infiltration or poaching. Like Moses, the liberator comes from the inside. In *The River Between*, Chege, a well-respected elder sends his son to the mission to "learn all the wisdom and all the secrets of the white man. But do not follow his vices," he warns; "Be true to your people and the ancient rites" (20). Chege's hope is to empower his son so that he will fulfill the Gikuyu prophesy and save his people from British domination. In this view, the mission is essentially a leak. It is a place through which people reckon with and rise against white rule by learning to take up the weapons of modernity; one goes to the mission (ambiguously situated *within* colonialism) to gain a foothold *against* colonialism. Take, for example, these lyrics which the children in Ngũgĩ's community sing in his memoir:

> If these were the times of our ancestors Ndemi and Mathathi
> My father, I would ask you for the feast due to initiates,
> Then I would ask you to arm me with a spear and shield,
> But today, Father, I ask you for education only. (*Dreams* 123)

In order to cope with the new colonial world, education stands in place of the spears and shields which have floundered against modern guns, and the mission is the place to get that education. Full conservation, it seems, would be an ineffective resistance. The implication is that the mission is essentially arming the people, regardless of missionary

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[27] I borrow the notion of "making oneself at home in modernity" from Marshall Berman who defines modernism as a range of "attempt[s] by modern men and women to become subjects as well as objects of modernization, to get a grip on the modern world and make themselves at home in it" (*All that is Solid Melts into Air* 5).

intentions, and the effects are not confined to the spiritual or cultural realms. Scenes

which seem to register aspirations to European likeness, often signal social and political

aspirations instead. For example, Isabel Hofmeyr points to an incongruous "proclivity for

quoting Shakespeare" among the leadership of the African National Congress, arguing

that "Shakespeare, in short, became a way of talking about politics" ("Reading" 259).

Missions were used strategically, but they were also genuinely attractive in many

ways that went deeper than strategic utility. Not all missionaries would have opposed

liberationist thinking, and in fact the Bible provided inspiration and divine sanction for

rebellion. Access to that inspiration was dependent on literacy which, in theory, opens up

an unlimited world of ideas. The reality, however, is determined by material constraints

and very limited access to textual resources. The most widely accessible book in Africa

was and is the Bible. Achebe's use of the Moses reference is itself a mark of literacy and

the freedom of interpretation. The Exodus story has been one of the most powerful for the

vision of emancipation it provides. Ngũgĩ's work too abounds with references to Moses

and the Israelites. In *Weep Not Child* when the young protagonist begins hearing

whispers of Kenyan liberation and asks "Who is Jomo?" he is told only that he is called

"the Black Moses" (43). The language of the narrative takes on the language of the

Exodus: "Everyone knew that Jomo would win. God would not let His people alone. The

children of Israel must win" (72). This is not the way the story of Moses is being taught

at Njoroge's school. Rather it is a demonstration of literacy as a practice of freedom

through interpretation, the text taken into the hands of its readers. Mission education thus

becomes a common trope within anticolonial narratives of emancipation as a force of

communal and not merely individual uplift. Njoroge's mother tells him: "Your learning is

for all of us. Father says the same thing. He is anxious that you go on, so you might bring light to our home. Education is the light of Kenya. That's what Jomo says" (*Weep Not* 38). Njoroge overestimates the power of education to overcome the constrictions of colonial life—he envisions himself as "a possible saviour of the whole of God's country" (82)—and this narrative ultimately disappoints, thus chastening this adapted Mission narrative of education as surefire liberation. The emancipatory potential is more subtle and more tenuous.

Kenyatta himself, the Black Moses of *Weep Not Child*, was interested in the ways Kenyans took ownership of Biblical interpretation, becoming authorities of the text, capable of contesting missionary readings on Biblical grounds. In *Facing Mount Kenya*, he describes the conflicts that arose when missionaries condemned and attempted to outlaw local beliefs and practices without understanding the values and social functions which made them important. Of particular issue was the missionary insistence on monogamy:

> Faced with this acute problem, the African, whose social organisation was based on polygamy, which harmonized his communal activities in tribal affairs, set about to look for evidence in the Bible. In the holy book the African failed to find evidence to convince him about the sacredness of monogamy. On the contrary, he found that many of the respected characters in the Book of God, *Ibuku ria Ngai* (as the Bible is translated in Gikuyu), are those who have practiced polygamy. On this evidence the African asked for further enlightenment from his missionary teacher, but the missionary ignored all these queries, with the assumption that the African was only suited to receive what was chosen for his simple mind, and not ask questions. (Kenyatta 261)[28]

Solicited or not, literacy, as Achebe has also suggested, led to questions. Recalling the anecdote I opened with, when the white man showed up with the Bible, this passage

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[28] The issue of polygamy regularly provoked such questioning as African believers attempted to separate the Bible out from the culture built up around Western Christianity. See Ajayi and Ayandele, "Writing African Church History," 93-94 and Ayandele, *The Missionary Impact on Modern Nigeria,* 335-37.

suggests, the black man didn't close his eyes. Rather he learned to read it and used it to get his land back, privileging interpretation over mere adaptation. The Bible, the very centerpiece of missionary intentions, was also separable from them.

The scene of learning to read thus becomes a powerful moment of emancipatory vision, not unlike the trope of literacy in the African American literary tradition. In *Dreams in a Time of War,* Ngũgĩ's description of the "magic of learning to read" (70) echoes what Henry Louis Gates calls trope of the talking book in American slave narratives.[29] Ngũgĩ writes, "And then one day I come across a copy of the Old Testament, it may have belonged to Kabae, and the moment I find that I am able to read it becomes my book of magic with the capacity to tell me stories even when I'm alone, night or day. I don't have to wait for the sessions at Wangarĩ's in order to hear a story" (65). It is an enchanted experience, opening up a new world and freeing him from dependence on other tellers. Significantly, the newness of the reading experience is not characterized by total difference from the oral culture he knew—Wangarĩ's storytelling—but by an extension of that culture, an opportunity to have more of it. He falls in love with text on the basis of comparison rather than distinction: "Written words can *also* sing" (65, my emphasis). The young Ngũgĩ is attracted to the modernity of the written word for the way it resonates with the oral tradition. The Old Testament story he finds most compelling reveals the same pattern:

> Most vivid in a positive way is the story of David. There is David playing the harp to a King Saul of contradictory moods. Their alternations of love and hate are almost hard to bear. Years later I would completely identify with the lines of the spiritual: *Little David play on your harp*. But David the harpist, the poet, the singer is also a warrior who can handle slingshots against Goliath. He, the victor over giants, is like trickster Hare, in the stories told at Wangarĩ's, who could always outsmart stronger brutes. (66)

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[29] See Gates, *The Signifying Monkey,* chapter 4.

Like Ngũgĩ, David was a kind of rebel artist. The story's attraction is partly in its familiarity, in the way it recalls and reinforces a story he has heard before in the house of his father's eldest wife. It is not a new story of freedom, but *another* story of freedom, echoing and further legitimating the impulses expressed through trickster Hare. This does not pose an either-or choice, conserve or convert. In this instance, conservation and conversion are not entirely at odds. Ngũgĩ's embrace of the biblical David does not divorce him from the indigenous culture or betray its oral literary tradition; rather, it fortifies preexisting narratives about the desire to be free. The anticolonial resonance of the unlikely little David with his sling, defeating the massive, sword-wielding Goliath is evident. Literacy unlocks the revolutionary potential buried in the missionary's book.

Ngũgĩ uses the words of a hymn—written by an Englishman but associated closely with black American spirituals—to articulate the significance of acquiring literacy: "The school has opened my eyes. When later in church I hear the words *I was blind and now I see,* from the hymn 'Amazing Grace,' I remember Kamandũrũ School, and the day I learned to read" (*Dreams* 67). Elsewhere, Ngũgĩ recounts the story of missionaries arriving, and closing the eyes of the people to pray. But it should be held alongside this story of his own mission education—the school that "opened [his] eyes." Both stories make up the larger picture. But there is more to deal with here; in the quotation above, I have left out a significant but troubling line which sets it up: "The ability to escape into a world of magic is worth my having gone to school" (67). The language of magic suggests, contrary to the lines of the hymn, that Ngũgĩ's eyes are closed to reality. Doesn't escape through stories draw him away to the passive, otherworldly realm of sleep? This moment has to be read in the larger context of a

memoir whose title directs us to think about the closed-eye state of dreams. One of the

epigraphs with which Ngũgĩ opens the text brings books and dreams together in a way

that helps us read that problematic line. Quoting Guyanese poet Martin Carter, he writes:

> I have learnt
> from books dear friend
> of men dreaming and living
> and hungering in a room without a light
> who could not die since death was far too poor
> who did not sleep to dream, but dreamed to change the world.

Ngũgĩ frames the text by establishing a connection between dreams and the real world.

He also quotes Victor Hugo: "There is nothing like a dream to create the future." He

gives dreams a material and political valence which is at work in the magic of learning to

read. The memoir plays with the tension between sight and blindness, open and closed

eyes in association with the mission through numerous scenes—readings of the Old

Testament, a call for closed eyes in prayer (in which Ngũgĩ and his brother get in trouble

for keeping them open), and a surgery on Ngũgĩ's failing eyes with help from Reverend

Kahahu. It doesn't resolve that tension, but this bildungsroman does seem to land on the

idea that mission education, even with all its problematic elements, did engender dreams

worth having. Literacy in particular comes with an endowment of authority and vision,

contradictory to the deprivations of colonial seizure, which are the context for the

narrative.

Returning to the work of Lamin Sanneh can help develop the implications of

mission literacy for the authorization of African readers and cultures. Sanneh reminds us

that literacy was not only about foreign language learning; translation of sacred texts into

African languages was a cornerstone of missionary work. The work of translation which

emphasized local legitimacy put missions at odds with colonial rule with its "current of

foreign legitimacy (with the corollary of local inadequacy)" ("Stooped"). Taking on the

language of the colonized had far reaching implications. Sanneh argues that

> Societies that have been less broken up by technological change have a more
> integrated, holistic view of life, and language as complete cultural experience fits
> naturally into this worldview. Missionary adoption of the vernacular, therefore,
> was tantamount to adopting indigenous cultural criteria for the message, a piece
> of radical indigenization far greater than the standard portrayal of mission as
> Western cultural imperialism. (*Translating* 3)

This makes for an interesting reversal of Fanon's famous claim about colonial dominance

through language: "To speak a language is to take on a world, a culture" (*Black Skin* 38).

Sanneh suggests that missionaries, in taking on the language of the colonized, took on

their world and culture in ways that did a disservice to colonial authority. While some

missionaries encouraged the formation of political associations, their vernacular work

alone "helped nurse the sentiments for the national cause, which mother tongues

crystallized and incited" (*Translating* 125). In other words, the authorization of

indigenous languages corresponded to the authorization of their speakers, and value for

the indigenous was crucial to theorizing African nationalism.

In addition to narratives of divinely sanctioned rebellion, biblical concepts were

readily available to confirm the value of African peoples. Particularly powerful was the

idea of a universal humanity, in spite of the very problematic history of its deployment.

This foundational concept for the missionary enterprise was hypocritically practiced with

some humans higher on the ladder than others.[30] Regardless of Christian practice, the

Bible offered compelling means of conceptualizing humanity in ways subversive to the

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[30] See Catherine Hall, *Civilizing Subjects,* for an exploration of what she calls "fault-lines in the family of man."

colonial order of things, ways that made "bad Africans" rather than "model kafirs."[31] In

his autobiography, *Let My People* Go (1962), Albert Luthuli, a mission-educated South

African and the first president of the African National Congress, responds to the claim

that "natives who travel get spoilt": "perhaps the desire in any African for normal human

relations—not group relations—is itself proof that he is 'spoilt.' If that is so, I can only

reply that I was not spoilt abroad. I was spoilt by being made in the image of God" (85).

This universal and sanctified notion of the human—made in this image of God—creates a

rebellious sense of inclusion which radically defies apartheids' categorical grouping of

human beings.

That is not to say that Africans needed the Bible in order to consider themselves

human, but that its universal vision was useful for reconfiguring group belonging and

making political claims on that basis. Missions also physically brought together

collectivities which made visible that human universalism and had real potential for

nationalist organizing. Mandela recalls that it was at the mission school that he began to

shift from an ethnic identity to a continental one through interaction with students of

other languages and backgrounds: "I began to sense my identity," he explains, "as an

African, not just a Thembu or even a Xhosa" (33). In the words of Catherine Hall, "[n]ew

thinking was framed by new forms of organisation" (105). Njoroge's experience at the

Siriana Mission School in *Weep Not Child* is similar:

> Here again, he met boys from many tribes. Again if these had met him and
> had tried to practise dangerous witchcraft on him, he would have
> understood. But instead he met boys who were like him in every way. He
> made friends and worked with Nandi, Luo, Wakamba, and Giriama. They
> were boys who had hopes and fears, loves and hatreds. If he quarreled

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[31] On the "rise of the 'model kafir'" narrative and its subversion in 19th century South African literary
production, see De Kock.

> with any or if he hated any, he did so as he would have done with any
> other boy from his village. (108)

The strength of the anticolonial project was fed by these new forms of organization,

which were enabled not by physical assembly alone, but through the cultivation of

broader forms of Pan-African association through written literature. As Ajayi and

Ayandele explain, literary education also had a hand in "the development of uniform

aspirations, values, outlooks and desires across ethnic frontiers—a factor of great

significance in the emergence of a nation" (99). The anticolonial (as well as the anti-

apartheid) project required strength in numbers and thus missions became "complicit" in

political organizing. Luthuli's "spoiling" by Christian theology is suggestive of the link

between religious ideas and worldly freedoms for which Africans would engage in

collective struggle.

In a study of nineteenth century Jamaica, Catherine Hall shows that slave holders

and colonial settlers actually feared missionary work for that very link: "the heart of the

complaint against the missions" was over "the slippage that occurred between temporal

and spiritual freedom. If religious freedom were granted, what certainty was there that the

claims of the enslaved would stop there?" (102). This was the case among colonized

people as well. Granting Africans the "privilege" of human status was seen as a

dangerously slippery slope between ideas and material realities:

> Missionaries believed in the unity of humankind and wanted to emancipate the
> local populations, beliefs not necessarily shared by administrators and settlers
> who placed power and profits above Christianity. In many places, the settler
> communities stiffly resisted missionary work, fearing that if the indigenous
> peoples became Christian, then they would demand to be treated as equals.
> (Barnett 67)

Some missionaries pushed these questions themselves, although more often the "equality of Africans was a matter of principle and potential, not a suggestion of immediate egalitarianism" (Gustav Sjablom, qtd in Barnett 69). Ideas of individual salvation and choice foundational to evangelical Christianity were perceived to be dangerous for dominated peoples who were not supposed to have individual choice at all. One kind of freedom could open up the desire for another. Furthermore, the discourse of universal humanity which included Africans (albeit at a lower level of humanity) contradicted the Manichean colonial discourse. Even as they

> appealed for obedience to the authorities, the missionaries insisted on the right to individual salvation, and thus opened up the question of freedom of thought. The Rev. Thomas Cooper enunciated the problem this way: if the enslaved learned Christianity, 'they would find out that they were Men, and as such would ask the Question, why are they to be treated as mere Animals—Goods and Chattles?'" (105).

In other words, Christianity would "spoil" them. Fears of mission influence were justified. Hall argues that "Christianity played a vital part in articulating new claims for freedom" (105). It provided a shared language of struggle around which people of separate traditions could rally.

Ngũgĩ's work suggests that the Mau Mau movement made precisely the link that colonizers and slaveholders feared between spiritual and political freedom. While "the colonial state encouraged that brand of christianity that abstracted heaven from earthly struggles" (*Writers* 20), they reinterpreted it. Notice Ngũgĩ's de-capitalization of "christianity," contributing to the sense that he isn't referring to the imported religion as a unified thing in itself, but as multiple, interpretable, colonially conscripted though not inherently colonial. Anticolonial fighters put that flexibility to use:

> So Mau Mau took the same Christian songs and even the Bible, and *interpreted them for themselves,* giving these values and meaning in harmony with the aspirations of their struggles. Officially approved Christians sang of a host of angels in heaven. They sang of a spiritual journey in a spiritual, intangible universe where a metaphysical, disembodied evil and good were locked in perpetual spiritual warfare for the domination of the human soul. They called on the youth to arm themselves spiritually and take up spiritual arms against an invisible satan. Led by Jesus, they would be victorious.
>
> The Mau Mau took up similar hymns but now turned them into songs of actual political engagement in an actual political universe. They called for *visible material freedom.* The battle was no longer for some invisible new heaven but for *a real heaven on their own earth.* (*Writers* 20-21, my emphasis)

Here we see the slippage between freedoms of spiritual and material varieties in practice. Christianity provided a wealth of ideas that often had very literal consequences for the strength of the colonial order, but those ideas were not predetermined by the Western disseminators of Christianity. The significance of literacy in the capacity for critical interpretation and the authorization of indigenous people and cultures described by Sanneh become important corollaries for the usability of religious resources. These writers push us to rethink the history of concepts of like progress and universal humanity which we know to be very problematic, particularly for the ways they have excluded African and other colonial subjects, but perhaps we must ask if there is, to quote Ngũgĩ, "redemptive possibility in the action of the oppressed" upon colonial implicated ideas such as these (*Moving* 6). In chapter 3, I will explore in detail how African writers have worked to sophisticate the concept of universal humanism. For now, suffice it to say that missions provided both practical and ethical resources which fueled the anticolonial imagination and produced new practices of freedom.

Christianity, Freedom Struggles, and the Postcolonial Problem-Space

In the postcolonial era, the struggle for African freedoms has taken new forms. As David

Scott has argued, the postcolonial problem-space calls not only for new answers but for

new questions—new approaches tailored to the problems of the present. Increasingly

complex approaches to Christian missions, I argue, are a part of that critical demand.

Achille Mbembe suggests that this turn is indeed taking place: "to a certain extent, we

have moved beyond a time, not so long ago, when generations after generations of leftist

revolutionaries were happy to denounce religion as a *façon de parler*—a force of

alienation which threatened human freedom" (qtd. in Spivak interview, "Religion" 150).

Ngũgĩ's work reflects the possibility within that shift as he has moved to articulate

Christianity with projects of human freedom. He suggests that Christian ethics can indeed

play a role in narratives of Africa's radical transformation, and not for Christians alone.

In a speech called "Church, Culture, Politics," which he presented in 1970 to the

Presbyterian Church of East Africa in Nairobi, he opens with the confession that he is

"not a man of the church . . . not even a Christian" (31). He then goes on to declare the

Christian church to be colonialism's "religious ally" (31) and "the greatest opponent of

the African struggle for freedom" (33). Missionaries, he argues, "set in motion a process

of social change, involving rapid disintegration of the tribal set-up and the frame-work of

social norms and values by which people had formerly ordered their lives and their

relationship to others" (31). This is very much in keeping with the anti-mission orthodoxy

I outlined above, and yet citing this aspect of the argument alone paints an incomplete

picture. It seems, initially, an attack from an outsider. Yet in presenting the critique of the

church *to* the church he implies that it is a conversation worth having. This represents an

attempt to build an alliance with the church over and against its imperialist history.

Alongside the critique of Christianity's ties to imperialism, Ngũgĩ points to resources

within Christianity which suggest that the Marxist materialism he so deeply values is an

alternative point of resonance and perhaps its better suited ally. Christianity, he suggests,

must be understood as contradictory, an historical ally of colonial imposition and

anticolonial rebellion:

> Christ himself had always championed the cause of the Jewish masses against
> both the Pharisees (equivalent to our privileged bourgeoisie) and the Roman
> colonialists: he was in any case crucified on the orders of the Roman conquerors.
> One could say that if Christ had lived in Kenya in 1952, or in South Africa or
> Rhodesia today, he would have been crucified as a Mau Mau terrorist, or a
> Communist. (34)

In this description, Ngũgĩ produces a model of something William Connolly has called a

"complex assemblage" of religious and left-wing materialist thought, a way out of the

idealist stand-off which blocks movement forward.[32] Because Christianity is not tied to

imperial power by necessity, other alliances become possible, but it is first necessary to

see that flexibility. Ngũgĩ pushes us to think through the possibilities of moving beyond

the pieties of debate, to ask how ideas can collide and coexist and be put to work in the

world.

But when he delivers this speech, it isn't 1952 anymore, and thus the link between

Christ and the Mau Mau is not immediately applicable. The colonial era has passed, and

Ngũgĩ speaks in 1970 to Kenyans facing the continued inequities and insufficiencies of

postcolonial life. While he never strays from his critique of its imperialist history, he

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[32] See *Capitalism and Christianity, American Style*. For another way of envisioning and articulating such an assemblage, see McClure, "Do They Believe in Magic? Politics and Postmodern Literature."

implies that the critique should not lead to a separation from the church. Rather, its lessons should be taken up in order to make the church relevant to the problems of postcolonial Africa: "I am stressing these things of our colonial religious inheritance," he writes, "because if the church is to mean anything then it must be a meaningful champion of the needs of all the workers and peasants of this country. It must adapt itself in form and in content to provide a true spiritual anchor in the continuing struggle of the masses in today's Africa" (34). He calls the church to a theology of liberation which, in the words of Gustavo Gutiérrez, "is open—in the protest against trampled human dignity, in the struggle against the plunder of the vast majority of humankind, in liberating love, and in the building of a new, just, and comradely society—to the gift of the Kingdom of God" (12). As I began to suggest earlier, Ngũgĩ is not working in a world of ideals, and is thus thinking about the need to make things better, the need to continue envisioning, narrating, and creating real, tangible improvement, resisting that trampling of human dignity and plunder of humankind. His primary concern is the "struggle of the masses in today's Africa," and if the church can help, all the better.

This brings us to the question of why Ngũgĩ and Achebe have returned to the issue of missions in the present moment. While they have always pointed to the complexity of missions, these recent recollections are more affirmative of, and even affectionate toward, their Christian inheritance than they have ever been. In closing, then, I want to suggest that this shift may have to do with the new locus of Christianity and the constituencies of African politics. With the enormous growth of Christianity in Africa after decolonization—led not by foreign missionaries but homegrown evangelists—it has essentially displaced Europe as *the* Christian continent. The time is thus ripe to recall

what the church in Africa has been and reimagine what it could be, a chance to harness

the emancipatory potential in the creed held by so many African people today. The

church has become a space for the expression of African agency and leadership,

particularly among the poor.[33] For Ngũgĩ in particular, who continues to advocate a

revolutionary politics of the masses, the church holds unique potential in that that it

assembles, organizes, and mobilizes masses of people, including the poor, excluded, and

dispossessed. Achebe also built connections to the global church, which he describes in

his final publication, *There Was a Country*. During the years of civil war in Nigeria, he

traveled as a humanitarian advocate for Biafra to speak before the World Council of

Churches, "one of the most magnanimous supporters and suppliers of humanitarian relief

for the suffering and dying of Biafra" (*Country* 166). Within the same book Achebe

expresses deep ambivalence about Christianity and its evangelical expressions, as he does

in his fictional writing, but he recognizes that, in their humanitarian investments, they

also share a common cause, and he views this as an alliance worth cultivating.

Furthermore, it allows him to enter their conversation about Africa and influence their

narratives of African improvement. The problem space of the postcolonial present calls

for new African articulations of Christian ethics and material need, new imaginings of "a

real heaven on their own earth." Ngũgĩ and Achebe each model a way of critiquing and

rethinking Christianity, along with its notions of progress, humanity, and emancipation,

not to leave it dismantled but to reassemble it toward the needs of the African present as

defined by African people, using the admittedly imperfect tools—and allies—available.

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[33] See Maxwell's essay in Etherington's edited collection, *Missions and Empire.*

- 3 -

The Fiction of the International Community: Postcolonial Humanism and the Ethics of Humanitarian Engagement

Feeling ourselves responsible to the civilized way of thinking we look
beyond people and states to humanity as a whole.
– Albert Schweitzer

All human beings are born free and equal in dignity and rights. They are endowed with reason
and conscience and should act towards one another in a spirit of brotherhood.
– Universal Declaration of Human Rights, Article One

Missions, both sacred and secular, generally operate at the edges of society among the marginalized, the excluded, and the disempowered. Thus mission novels, critical and otherwise, are generally set on the periphery of human inclusion and physical survival. In Graham Greene's *A Burnt-Out Case,* a passenger seeking to escape his life in Europe boards a boat heading into the Congo to disembark only at the point where "[t]he boat goes no further" (16). There, at the remotest spot he can reach, he finds a leper colony, staffed by a group of European priests and an atheist doctor working among the quarantined, both the sick and the "burnt-out cases" who are healed but not integrated back into society. In John Le Carre's *The Constant Gardener,* the humanitarian heroine takes on a pharmaceutical company that is testing new drugs on Kenyan slum dwellers to deadly effect, proclaiming the value of lives the industry sees as disposable. Bessie Head's *A Question of Power* addresses humanitarian work from the perspective of a woman who occupies multiple margins: she is born to a black father and white mother under apartheid, designating her as "Coloured" (neither black nor white), and becomes a refugee in Botswana where she is hospitalized for a nervous breakdown. The injunction of humanitarian movements is to bring into the circle of humanity those who occupy its

fringe by alleviating inhumane suffering and restoring basic needs and rights. The Mission narrative (in both its religious and secular humanitarian versions) posits a universal community which crosses the boundaries of race, ethnicity, nation, gender, illness, class, and so forth. For many of the writers I have addressed, that idea is powerfully compelling, yet at the same time it generates new risks, and practice often fails to live up to promise. The concept of universal humanity thus forms a vein of tension which runs throughout the critical mission tradition.

Chinua Achebe's "Africa is People," the final essay in *The Education of a British-Protected Child,* illustrates this tension. In this piece as in many others, Achebe emphasizes the humanity of African people and the necessity of understanding Africa in human terms. This time, however, he is not responding to colonialism itself but to the neocolonial imagination of global development as a participant in an international conference focused on poverty. This is a scene of the International Community[1] at work, revealing its unsettling ironies: it is located in a European metropolis; it is composed of "Europeans, Americans, Canadians, Australians,"—"the masters of our world"— accompanied by one Kenyan banker and one seemingly out-of-place Nigerian writer (155). It is centered in the West and aimed outward, all too reminiscent of the structure of colonialism. Achebe's depiction is indeed suggestive of the ways in which the International Community is itself a fiction, a euphemism for Western control and African dependence rather than an honest description of mutual contribution and obligation.[2]

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[1] In this chapter, I will capitalize *the* International Community in order to distinguish it from the more general concept of international community, an ideal it names but does not reflect. On the doctrine and deployment of the International Community and the response of the left, Feher, *Powerless by Design.*
[2] For more detailed examples of this argument see Mamdani's introduction to *Saviors and Survivors*, and Rieff's introduction to *A Bed for the Night.*

Achebe emphasizes the gap between this particular community and the international "targets" of its development efforts. These "experts" speak on Africa's behalf from a great distance, and the spatial gap is reflected in an interpersonal one. Achebe's point isn't that identification across that gap is impossible but that their mode of identification with Africa is deeply problematic. Even from within "the very heart of the enemy's citadel," he offers his critique in hopes of harnessing what might be "the very best intentions" toward better outcomes (158, 157). Community might indeed be the right goal, but surely it is not the right description of the gathering at hand. Their discussion betrays a sense of real distance from the African subjects of their programs and plans. In evaluating structural adjustment, for example—the "magic bullet of the 1980s," expected to "yank the sufferer out of the swamp of improvidence back onto the high and firm road of free-market economy"—they repeatedly suggest that the answer is simple: keep waiting (155,156). Achebe draws attention to the distinction between the kinds of stories they tell about African people and those they would muster in regards to their own families. He goes on to offer stories of Nigerian experiences with structural adjustment, which challenge the vague, numerical abstraction that human beings take on within the language of the International Community: "We are talking about someone whose income, which is already miserable enough, is now cut down to one-third of what it was two years ago. And this flesh-and-blood man has a wife and children. You say he should simply go home and tell them to be patient. Now let me ask you this question. Would you recommend a similar remedy to your own people and your own government?" (157). This reveals the need for a deeper, more sincere form of identification with the people humanitarian development aims to assist. To insist that

Africa is people is an attempt to close the gap between these Western experts and their

supposed beneficiaries—to make the fiction of international community a reality.

To advocate Western identification with Africa is not without irony, since

universalist identification has been part of the problem. Achebe's advice speaks to the

existing divide, suggesting that these leaders must do something to narrow it before they

will be able to generate an ethical narrative of African improvement: "I have news for

you. Africa is not fiction. Africa is people, real people. Have you thought of that? You

are brilliant people, world experts. You may even have the very best intentions. But have

you thought, *really* thought, of Africa as people?" (157).[3] What he is recommending here

is a kind of humanism—a philosophy centered on the primacy of the human being—yet

certainly the discourse of humanity is not unfamiliar to discussions of poverty and

development in Africa. Indeed, international plans for Africa's improvement are today

carried out in the name of humanity more than any other principle. One could argue that

the solution lies not in more humanism but in less, and I will think through that tension in

the pages that follow. Achebe is addressing what I see as the paradox of humanitarian

ethics. One of the foundational problems of humanitarian discourse is its universalism—

the fact that it addresses itself to everyone, to humanity in general—but that has also been

very compelling when so many have been excluded from the inheritance of

decolonization. Humanism is thus at the heart of Achebe's critique *and* his

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[3] I must reinforce a point I made in the introduction which is of particular relevance to this chapter regarding the double meaning of "fiction" which Achebe uses and which I mean to deploy in my title, "The Fiction of the International Community." On the one hand, fiction can refer to something divorced from reality. When Achebe insists that "Africa is not fiction," that is what he means. But fiction also refers to the imaginative representation of reality which seeks to speak meaningfully to that reality; Achebe has described this as "The Truth of Fiction" in an essay of that title. Thus his notion of the conference as a fiction workshop isn't about moving from the patently false to the patently true. It is more subtle. Representation will always be a fiction of sorts, but the metaphor of the fiction workshop suggests that it is worth developing better fictions of Africa which take it seriously as a reality and attempt to meaningfully address it in a real way.

recommendation. Universal humanism makes it possible for this group to advocate for African people—it is the assumption without which this meeting would not occur—but it also obscures their vision of the specificity of those people; it enables the group to care and, at the same time, renders that care problematic. The language of "people" as opposed to "humanity" attempts to restore some of the specificity and familiarity that gets lost in the number-crunching discourse of the International Community; it attempts to build an ethical mode of identification by combining universality with particularity, so often seen as bitter rivals.

Theories of universal human inclusion have long plagued Africa specifically. To define a concept, like humanity, is always to lay down boundaries; defining what it is depends in part on distinguishing what it is not. Each description of humanism has been "derived from a prior determination of what it means to be human—that is, what the *essence* of 'the human being' is. It is clearly the definition of this essence that draws the line between the human and the inhuman" (Puledda 98). Africans have often fallen outside of that essence by Western definition, and even when they have tenuously fit, it has often been at a lower rung on the civilizational ladder, with the burden on the Westerner to bring the African up to a fuller level of humanity. Yet, in spite of all this, the notion of universal humanity, so central to both religious and humanitarian missions, has been a point of genuine attraction among many African thinkers. The question of human definition is not a point of anxiety for these writers; they are not questioning the fact of their humanity but trying to make the inclusive category live up to its name. The fact that white humanists have excluded Africans from full belonging discounts those proponents of humanity but not the concept of humanity itself. Kwasi Wiredu's argument

about cultural universals is apt: "More often than not, the alleged universals have been home-grown particulars. Not unnaturally, the practice has earned universals a bad name. But, rightly perceived, the culprits are the hasty purveyors of universals, not the idea of universals itself" (2). This issue began to surface in the preceding chapter in the texts of Achebe and Ngũgĩ, Mandela and Luthuli, and in this chapter I will flesh it out through readings of Zakes Mda and Bessie Head.

Within critical mission writing, universal humanity has functioned as a valuable and often radical concept, a language of rebellion, in spite of its colonial career. Whereas some would argue that the language of universal humanity is the method of a new empire, these writers suggest that it is also a language of opposition to neocolonial power and inequity. I am interested in filling in the latter side of this conversation. Part of the problem of the postcolony that writers have continually attacked is its non-inclusivity— the fact that the transformations of decolonization did not meaningfully address everyone. Samuel Moyn has argued that the rise of universal human rights discourse since the 70s grows out of that crisis of the state, out of the failure to guarantee rights on the basis of the nation. This could also be said of humanitarianism and third sector solutions more broadly; international humanitarianism responds to a crisis of national inclusion and goes over the sovereignty of the state in order to address the needs of, at least in theory, everyone. Critical mission novelists have taken up this dimension of mission discourse to decenter and decolonize it, making use of its necessary but insufficient universalism as a concept that is "both corrupted *and* indispensable" (Rose 401).

In this chapter, I turn to Bessie Head and Zakes Mda as key examples; they grapple with the idea of universality within the context of humanitarian action in ways

that are not naïve or sentimental but intensely engaged with the problematic history of its

deployment. I will ask how these writers have negotiated the idea of universal humanity

with its implications for international relations, and I will argue that for humanitarianism,

universal humanism is both its repressive risk and its radical possibility. I will begin by

examining a debate within Zakes Mda's *The Heart of Redness* (2000) to illustrate the

relationship between universal humanism and third sector development strategies. After

filling out the implications of that debate within anticolonial and postcolonial theory, I

will then turn to two novels by Bessie Head—*When Rain Clouds Gather* (1968) and *A

Question of Power* (1974)—which, despite their early dates, speak powerfully to the

humanitarianism of the contemporary moment and its dramatic discontents.[4] Head's

focus on the relationships between international agents of development and the poor in

Botswana (who are both recipients of and participants in development projects) allows us

to explore the connection between a reimagined humanism and the possibility of a

revised humanitarian practice. Her work offers a model of how "Africa is people" can be

mobilized into a new narrative of African improvement, clarifying how the critical

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[4] Although Mda is writing about the aftermath of apartheid and Bessie Head, as a refugee writer, is addressing apartheid at a remove, both writers also situate their texts within broader discussions of colonialism and decolonization despite South Africa's unique historical trajectory. In her essay on "Postcolonial Discourse and the New South Africa, Rosemary Jolly explains that although South Africa won independence from Britain in 1961, apartheid meant the "suspension of a postcolonial era for the majority of South Africans" (22). For the majority of the population, postcoloniality did not arrive until 1994. Also relevant is Carusi's "Post, Post, Post. Or, Where is South African Literature in All This?" In *Citizen and Subject*, Mahmood Mamdani argues that apartheid was not exceptional within Africa but a form indirect rule which fits into the same genealogy as the other colonies. As a suspended form of decolonization, the post-apartheid does parallel the postcolonial in many ways and literature has captured that. Mda actually writes apartheid out of *The Heart of Redness,* moving between nineteenth-century British invasion and the post-apartheid era with apartheid itself existing as a temporal gap in the narrative. Bessie Head is thinking within a pan-African framework, considering (and critiquing) various projects of black nationalism within the continent and beyond. While these writers could certainly be situated within more specific discussions of the South African timeline, I will place their texts within an anticolonial and postcolonial framework which their work seems to welcome.

mission novel can provide imaginative resources for humanitarianism and how humanitarian debates can generate new insights about the work of literature.

Through examining the intersections of these novels and theoretical debates about humanism, I aim to sketch a model of decentered humanism which I see emerging from these texts, providing a corrective to colonial and neocolonial humanisms and an ethical framework for reimagining humanitarian relations. Humanitarian assistance never can and never will be a solution to the inequity of the world or to the problem of Africa's position within that uneven field of power, but, to borrow the words of Alex de Waal, "[a]id exists and will not disappear" ("Democratizing" 638). Thus for these critical mission writers, humanitarianism—with its complex mix of imperialist and egalitarian tendencies—is an ambiguous but necessary ally in a non-ideal world.[5] They unveil the fiction of the International Community while also offering their own fictions of international community—creative narratives through which writers attempt to imagine what genuine international community would look like and require.

The Problem of Everyone

The Heart of Redness is set in two periods and shuttles back and forth between the historical and the contemporary, drawing links between past and present. The historical portion deals with the cattle killing of the mid-nineteenth century when a young prophet, Nonqawuse, advised the Xhosa people to kill their cattle and destroy their crops in order stave off British invasion.[6] The second intertwined plotline, on which I will focus, is set

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[5] For more on Achebe's approach to humanitarianism, see *There Was a Country: A Personal History of Biafra* in which he appeals directly to humanitarian ethics and action.

[6] In *Bulletproof,* Jennifer Wenzel offers an extensive exploration of the cattle killing and the ways it has been taken up within contemporary writing. This includes a chapter on *The Heart of Redness,* its complex

after the fall of apartheid. Camagu, a middle-aged South African, returns to his newly

democratic country to vote after nearly thirty years of exile in the United States. He has

spent his time abroad earning a PhD in communication and economic development,

gaining experience as an "international expert" with UNESCO and other global

organizations. He thus re-enters South Africa as a figure of the International Community

and decides, upon his return, to stay and "contribute to the development of his country"

(29). He begins by looking for jobs with government agencies but is repeatedly told that

he is overqualified—"[t]oo much knowledge is a dangerous thing" (29). The "big men of

the government" recommend he "try the private sector" instead (30). There too he is

rejected, discovering that "the corporate world didn't want qualified blacks" (30). After

failing to find work in both the governmental and private sectors, he moves into the third

sector—the non-governmental, non-profit sector. He does not join a major international

NGO (non-governmental organization) for which his qualifications would make him a

good fit. Rather, after pursuing a woman to the rural seaside village of Qolorha, the home

of the infamous prophetess, Nonqawuse, he settles, becomes engaged in debates about

development, and starts a cooperative with local women, volunteering as a kind of

development consultant. I argue that the novel, through the cosmopolitan figure of

Camagu and the debates in which he engages, is testing various approaches to

development and honing in on the problems and possibilities of identification across

differences of power and privilege.[7]

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temporality and what Wenzel calls its ethics of retrospection. Mda's use of history has also been a point of
some contention. Andrew Offenburger accuses Mda of borrowing too extensively from his historical source
to the point of plagiarism. See also Mda, "A Response to 'Duplicity and Plagiarism in Zakes Mda's The
Heart of Redness' by Andrew Offenburger." For a theorization of temporalities within the novel, see Parry,
"The Presence of the Past in Peripheral Modernities."
[7] For a different approach to the problem of development in *The Heart of Redness,* see Jay.

Camagu enters a tense, long-standing debate about bringing development to Qolorha, which escalates as various outsiders come in with plans and promises. The debate has become frozen in the polarization of modernity and tradition, a fault-line suggestive of the Eurocentric trajectory of the discourse of universal development. Those in favor of development proclaim: "We want to get rid of this bush which is a sign of our uncivilized state. We want developers to come and build the gambling city that will bring money to this community. That will bring modernity to our lives, and will rid us of our redness" (92). Redness refers to the traditional use of red ochre to decorate the body and to dye clothing, and it stands in for Xhosa cultural heritage more broadly. For those who favor modernity, it is a subject of shame—a practice from which to be converted. To be for progress, in this formulation, is to be against tradition of all kinds; to advocate development is to reject local heritage and welcome in the rush of globalization (particularly Westernization) without thinking about the mix of potential consequences, without questioning how its universal pretentions will affect this particular place.

But, Mda leads us to ask, does it have to be that way? Must one really be uncritically for progress or unwaveringly against it, or might it be better to think not simply in terms of the embrace or rejection but the redefinition of progress? Does the universal necessarily drive out local particularity (or "redness), or might they reside together? Academic debates also tend to take on this dynamic, but as Josefina Saldaña-Portillo suggests, "if one continues to recognize a need for revolutionary change in the aftermath of what fifty years of 'development' have wrought . . . then one accepts that some model of progress pertains" (6). She argues that "the problem lies not with the idea of progress per se but with the *mode* of progressive movement" (6). In *The Heart of*

Redness, Mda is grappling with that balance. Camagu enters as a mediating figure—both

modern and traditional, a secular intellectual and a believer in the supernatural—and a

test case for exploring how to advocate development in a critically minded, genuinely

democratic way.[8] Rather than thinking in terms of the embrace or rejection of progress,

Camagu seeks the redefinition of universal development, directing it toward the specific

needs of those with whom he works. Camagu, with his U.S. doctorate and his

cosmopolitan sensibility, is taken to be a figure of modernity (and thus anti-

traditionalism) by the people of Qolorha, but he surprises them with his respect for their

customs, not a detached, ethnographic kind of respect but an engaged, participatory

form.[9] Camagu becomes an advocate of development for Qolorha but in a highly critical

mode which constantly throws into question its methods and its potential consequences.

He seeks a model of development which brings material benefits to Qolorha without

facing the loss of natural resources, cultural resources, or independence. Through

Camagu, the novel imagines a model of third sector development—based on universal

standards of living—which does not imply destruction of the local.[10] To explore the

implications, I want to turn to one specific avenue of the development debate.

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[8] Simon Gikandi's formulation of the dual desire around universal modernity is elegantly clarifying: "I should also like to have good roads and railways….But I will remain the Makombe my fathers have always been" ("Culture of Colononialism" 57). This statement nicely captures Camagu's mode of being as well.
[9] For example, when he returns to his hotel room to find a snake coiled on his bed, he stops the staff from killing it. "This is not just any snake," he tells them. 'This is Majola….This snake is my totem"—a sign that he has been chosen (98). As the assemblage of gardeners and handyman who have gathered walk away, "they talk of Camagu in great awe. They did not expect a man with such great education, a man who has lived in the lands of the white people for thirty years, to have such respect for the customs of his people. He is indeed a man worthy of their respect" (98-99). For a reading of Camagu as an "interstitial" intellectual, see Titlestad and Kissack.
[10] The arguments of chapter 2 about African responses to Christian missions are largely applicable here as well. As religious missions contained both colonial and anticolonial possibilities, so too does humanitarianism contain both neocolonial and anti-neocolonial possibilities. The paradox of emancipation and domination is again at work, and Mda is negotiating the attractions and the dangers.

The scene on which I will focus unfolds the multilayered notion of speaking for everyone and its role in humanitarian discourse. Mda depicts a tense discussion regarding a water pump that has fallen into disrepair and disuse—perhaps the quintessential image of failed benevolence. The donor of this particular water pump is a trader named John Dalton, a white liberal "of English stock" so steeped in local culture that he is said to have "an umXhosa heart" (8).[11] He and Camagu debate the value and method of his project. Dalton is irate at Camagu's unwillingness to invest his own efforts in the water project, particularly due to their shared commitment to a blend of development and conservation of local lands. Dalton is a partial outsider, distinguished not by foreignness but by privilege, both racial and economic. He comes from an advantaged place-in-the-world even though he comes from the same place as the other villagers. Mda is testing out models of development through outside assistance by setting Camagu, the migrant expert, alongside Dalton, the local philanthropist, as an alternative figure of development. Camagu is an outsider of a different kind, grouped racially with local people but of a different clan. Of far more significance than clan, he is a foreign-educated "international expert" who has spent the majority of his years abroad. An exile, as opposed to a complete foreigner, he has links and loyalties to the specificity of South Africa but within the framework of a Western education and experience. As they argue over the best approach to development, Dalton condemns him as an impostor: "You come all the way from America with theories and formulas, and you want to apply them in my village"

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[11] Dalton's genealogy is suggestive of the continuity between Christian missions and humanitarian programs. His grandfather, Mda writes, "was a trader of a different kind. As a missionary he was a merchant of salvation" (8). Going further back clarifies that his "own family history was as blood-soaked as any" (9); his great-great-grandfather, a soldier, features in the cattle killing plot line. He too, also named John Dalton, was an agent of conversion, working on behalf of the "Great White Chief" whose "magnanimous wish was to convert the amaXhosa from their barbarous ways" through the injunction "spread British civilisation" (123). The shared name creates disorienting moments of slippage between the past and present and their respective projects of improvement.

(180). This is a familiar argument against international assistance in favor of localism, but Camagu's distance, for Mda, does not ruin the prospects of an ethical model of development and localism is an inadequate answer.[12] In other words, this is not merely a problem of foreignness; it is possible, the novel suggests, for one from the outside to be more sensitive to the dangers of universalism and the specificity of the local than the one who has lived there all along. Ethical engagement is dependent not on where these men come from but on the way each sets up and narrates his relation to the community—how each bridges the gap of difference. Different modes of identification produce very different models of development.[13]

Despite his long-term access to the local, Dalton identifies and operates on the basis of universality, which emerges as he becomes defensive of his work. Camagu critiques the foundation of the water project, explaining that it "is failing because it was imposed on the people. No one bothered to find out their needs" (179). His argument seems to fit with critiques of humanitarian development as the new imperialism, yet it is actually more subtle. The language of imposition suggests that the supposed gift of supposed improvement is burdensome to its recipients rather than emancipatory or even mildly helpful. Dalton finds this critique ridiculous, but rather than going to specific knowledge about the community and its needs in response—the supposed justification for his authority—he turns to sweeping universals, related to this community only in so far as

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[12] Michael Ondaatje's novel, *Anil's Ghost,* about the humanitarian crisis of civil war in Sri Lanka, offers a different take on the problem of the exilic "international expert" returned to a home that is no longer familiar. This would be a rich point of connection for extending this project beyond Africa.

[13] For related arguments about the scales (local to global) of assistance which have influenced my own analysis, see Olaniyan's "The Paddle that Speaks English: Africa, NGOs, and the Archaeology of an Unease" and Robbins' *Feeling Global.* From their analyses of separate contexts and materials, both authors suggest that the distance of the agents and recipients of assistance is not as specifically damning as it may seem, since it is a problem that affects assistance at large, since it always operating across different levels of power, even at the local scale.

they are related to everyone. No one bothered to find out their needs? "That is nonsense,"
he says. "Everyone needs clean water" (179). That is the line I want to underline here.
Everyone needs clean water. The statement is not untrue, but it obscures (and produces) a
number of problems—ideological, ethical, and practical—which the conversation with
Camagu draws out. Need poses as the obvious universal. Need, it seems, testifies to the
biological sameness of human beings; in order to survive, everyone does need clean
water, food, and shelter. This is related to the claim often made for humanitarianism—
that it operates in the field of ethics, not of politics,[14] but as this novel demonstrates, it is
always negotiating politics, operating on a charged field of power relations. The critical
mission novel refutes this division, politicizing that which is supposedly beyond politics
and throwing into question the seemingly natural notion of everyone's needs.[15]

Through the universal discourse of "everyone," Dalton becomes a figure of
colonial humanism which freely imposes on others on the basis of that universalism. This
discourse obscures relations of power and difference while also reinforcing the existing
inequity. It produces the dangerous mode of confidence I have associated with the grand
Mission narrative: "Conviction," to again reference Caputo's line, "will blind you if it is
not shaded by doubt" (*Acts* 663). Camagu, however, continues to cast doubt on this
gesture and its arrogance: "That is the main problem with you, John. You know that you

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[14] Michael Barnett has been among the critics arguing for a more nuanced explication of the terms of
humanitarian engagement: "In addition to suffering from historical amnesia, the accepted narrative protects
the virtue of humanitarianism, but at the expense of a fuller, and decidedly more complicated, picture of its
lived ethics. Stories about humanitarianism tend to be organized around binaries, most prominently ethics
versus politics. Humanitarianism presents itself as living in a world of ethics, constantly battling the forces
of evil and indifference" (*Empire of Humanity* 6).
[15] This move is indeed characteristic of the critical mission novel generally. Examples include *Heart of
Darkness, The Poisonwood Bible,* and *Acts of Faith* which reveal the third sector to be compromised by its
entanglement with the interests of Western states. Achebe and Ngũgĩ show the negotiation of both colonial
and anticolonial politics through the channel of the mission school. And in chapter 4, I will argue that Tsitsi
Dangarembga's *Nervous Conditions* and Nuruddin Farah's *Gifts* situate the suffering body of humanitarian
imagery within a network of socio-political relations that that imagery tends to obscure.

are 'right' and you want to impose these 'correct' ideas on the populace from above"

(Mda 179). In undermining "our infinite wisdom" to know what everyone needs, he

points to the specific source of those proclamations about everyone's needs; they come

from a narrow place. The task of speaking for everyone falls upon the privileged few. To

speak of everyone obscures those levels from which speaking occurs with the developer

above and the populace below. By speaking the language of the everyone, Dalton doesn't

have to consult the people who will be receiving his benevolence; in effect, addressing

the everyone cuts those particular someones out of the circuit. Thus the ideological

problem—about how humanity is theorized—produces both ethical and practical

consequences. The method of assistance based not on the specific "they" or "we" but the

universal "everyone" simply doesn't work. The end result: the pump falls into disrepair

and ultimately it doesn't get water to anyone.

I am interested in this particular moment for the way it models a key operation of

the Mission narrative. I want to think further about the theory of global interconnection

that informs this kind of approach and the alternative Camagu will offer. Within the

Mission narrative we find the humanist core which characterizes so many global projects

of improvement. Critiques of Christian missions, development, modernization, and

humanitarianism all very frequently come down to the problem of how universalism

configures humanity, thinks across difference, and what it means for how we act upon

one another. Within this brief exchange, Mda dramatizes the relationship between

humanitarianism's theoretical, discursive core—the way it thinks and speaks about its

task—and its incapacity to carry out its proclaimed goals. Humanism could be described

as the paradox of humanitarianism—it is at once its motivation, its very reason for

existence, but also its greatest liability, the force behind many of its failures. Humanitarianism's identity depends on humanism with its universal concept of humanity and its faith in the human progress. These related concepts are also the primary drivers of the religious Mission narrative as a narrative which promises *everyone's* salvation. What then is the proper response? If we can't in fact know the needs of others, and if intervention is imposition, shouldn't we just leave others alone? If universalism is a tool of power, and development is a euphemism for Westernization, shouldn't they be rejected?

Then again, the rejection of projects which address humanity at large holds its own set of dangers. The novel is attentive to post-apartheid exclusion (also applicable more broadly to the postcolonial)—the fact that the new nation does not meaningfully address everyone. Camagu joins a cohort of "disaffected exiles and sundry learned rejects of this new society" (26). Of course it is not only the educated who feel this sense of exclusion: " 'Everything now . . . the fruits of liberation . . . are enjoyed only by those from exile or from Robben Island,' [Camagu] overhears a man from the group of dagga smokers complain. 'Yet we were the ones who bore the brunt of the bullets. We threw stones and danced the freedom dance' " (32). If the potential violence of humanitarianism lies in the problem of the everyone, the exclusions of the post-apartheid, postcolonial nation give a different valence to that same problem. Some kind of universalism is needed for this complaint of exclusion to become a meaningful claim to inclusion.

Mda thus presents the problem of the everyone with two sides, exploring the danger of addressing everyone and danger of *not* doing so. If we dismiss the notion that everyone needs clean water—or that everyone has the right to clean water—as an

imperialist universalism, an unacceptable imposition, then the alternatively unacceptable inequity of resource distribution and access to services can be rationalized in the name of liberal relativism. Some critics have claimed that postcolonialism's affinity for deconstructing master narratives of progress and universal modernity amounts to an acceptance of the status quo, since social transformation requires a belief in progress and equity depends on universals. Aijaz Ahmad makes this argument in his evaluation of "recent developments in 'theory,'" namely the interrelated set of "post-" theories (poststructuralism, postmodernism, postcolonialism) which tend to reject the concepts of progress, development, and universal humanity as imperialist impositions. Ahmad argues that to dismiss "[a]ny attempt to *know* the world as a whole . . . let alone the desire to change it . . . as a contemptible attempt to construct 'grand narratives' and 'totalizing (totalitarian?) knowledges'" (69) amounts to "the *death* of politics as such" (65). Furthermore, he claims that "it takes a very modern, very affluent, very uprooted kind of intellectual" be so flippant about modernity and progress: "Those who live with the consequences of that 'long past', good and bad, and in places where a majority of the population has been denied access to such benefits of 'modernity' as hospitals or better health insurance or even basic literacy," or in this case, clean water, "can hardly afford the terms of such thought" (68-69). In other words, to dismiss the claim that "everyone needs clean water" amounts to brushing off the urgent material needs of far too much of the world; it seems a bit too convenient for those who have inherited the benefits of modernity without having to face its consequences. This too is a problem of identification. Claims for universality and claims against it fail to identify effectively

with the poor, the marginalized, and the dispossessed. Universalism trends toward domination, anti-universalism toward relativist neglect.

This is a sticking point in debates about development when critiques imply a total dismantling of its project. Camagu, an exilic, postmodern intellectual, engages anti-development arguments, but he is not the detached intellectual Ahmad describes. Rather he uses those arguments in calling for a critically minded model of development and in doing so models what I have described as the work of the critical mission novel. He too is an advocate of progress and material modernization (terms bound up with universalism). Indeed, he "assures [Dalton] that he is not belittling his efforts to develop his village. He is merely being critical of the method" (180). His critique of the water project does not mean pitching the whole enterprise, but rethinking its method of identification though extended engagement with the local "beneficiaries" of Dalton's humanitarian efforts.

As is the case for Dalton, inequalities structure the relationship between Camagu and the rural villagers. Nonetheless, he serves as a model for thinking across such boundaries without obliterating or ignoring them—a model of identification that is inclusive of humanity in general without obscuring difference. His strategy is dependent upon asking questions and engaging the community in a dialogue about what they need: "Perhaps the first step would have been to discuss the matter with the villagers, to find out what their priorities are. They should be part of the whole process. They should be active participants in the conception of the project, in raising funds for it, in constructing it. Then it becomes their project. Then they will look after it" (179). Universalism becomes a cover for power, a way of doing things for people without consulting them. Dalton's identification with the everyone forces others to assimilate to his plans.

Identification in Camagu's model still implies assimilation but in the opposite direction. Identifying with the local poor is not is not about making them more like himself but about bringing his aims into line with their stated needs; he enters not as a knowing conqueror but as a learning immigrant. *The Heart of Redness* suggests that this is the kind of posture we must take toward development, understanding that humanitarian assistance involves ethically risky maneuvers across differentials of power and privilege and moving ahead with that in view, acknowledging how little we know of others. The novel explores how to move forward on a balanced path, one that is not immobilized by the critiques but strengthened. I see Camagu as a postcolonial humanist, though one might quickly interject that this is a contradiction in terms. The remainder of the chapter will attempt to show why it is not. By raising the question of the implications and consequences of speaking and acting in terms of everyone, this scene dovetails with debates about humanism that have been unfolding since the time of the Second World War. I turn now to these debates in order to articulate the significance and the stakes of a postcolonial humanist position.

Universal Humanism and the Problem of Difference

The concept of humanism, in its broad sense and usage, refers to "positions which emphasize the intrinsic value of humanity" (Baldwin 672). Accordingly, it combines a sense of human unity—typically described as a shared essence—with a faith in human agency and even perfectibility. While it has always been a "conflictual concept," to borrow Robert's Young's phrase, these elements have remained relatively consistent even when they have taken different forms. Humanism's origins in the Renaissance grow

out of a transition from a God-centric worldview to a human-centric one. According to

the medieval conception of history which preceded it, humans' existence and destiny

were fully determined by God. Moving away from this theological, deterministic lens,

Renaissance humanism came to "situate the essence of human being on the plane of

freedom" (Puledda 19). In other words, man is viewed as the agent of his own life, even

of history itself.[16] This sense of agency has been linked to rationality, that uniquely

human quality which supposedly separates people from animals and enables them to

become the determinant of history. Implicit all along has been a narrative of

improvement, linked specifically to the notion of rescue, onto which human rights and

humanitarianism have mapped their own narratives. Renaissance humanism took up the

"ideal of *humanitas,* the Latin translation of the Greek word *paideia*, 'education.' In a

confluence rich in meanings, *humanitas* came to indicate the formation and development,

through education, of those qualities that make an individual a truly *human* being, that

rescue 'humanity' from its natural condition and differentiate it from the barbarian"

(Puledda 9).[17] Within the context of the mission narrative, this language is indeed

familiar.

Humanitarianism, as "humanism's more practical-minded offspring" (Robbins,

"Race" 558), takes up this language of human development with its problematic divisions

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[16] Kate Soper's definition clarifies the relationship between human unity, agency, and history, a current which runs throughout the history of humanist thought. Humanism, she explains, "appeals (positively) to the notion of a core humanity or common essential features in terms of which human beings can be defined and understood, thus (negatively) to concepts ('alienation', 'inauthenticity', 'reification', etc.) designating and intended to explain, the perversion of 'loss' of this common being. Humanism takes history to be a product of human thought and action, and thus claims that the categories of 'consciousness', 'agency', 'choice', 'responsibility', 'moral value', etc. are indispensable to its understanding" (11-12). She goes on to call for a different approach to human agency, arguing that the humanist idea that "men make history" can also be viewed merely in terms of the "the aggregate of human acts" rather than necessarily meaning that "everything which is 'historical' is intentionally brought about by human agents in an attempt to control collective existence" (20).

[17] On the bildungsroman narrative of human rights incorporation, see Joseph Slaughter, *Human Rights Inc.*

between the rescuers and the rescued, the "truly human" and the "barbarian." The

humanitarian imperative is founded on a universal concept of the human according to

which human beings are all similar in certain ways, possessing the same needs and rights,

and it has been motivated by that humanist impulse to bring suffering people into a fuller

humanity.[18] Its task is essentially to rescue humanity in an inhumane world, and to do so

it calls for a problematic mode of identification with the suffering subject:

> The one 'to whom humanitarian action is addressed,' as Rony Brauman
> [former president of Médicins Sans Frontières] puts it, 'is not defined by his skills
> or potential, but above all, by his deficiencies and disempowerment,' and this
> deficient being is a by-product, in Brauman's account, of the processes of
> identification humanitarianism solicits….
> The humanitarian precept that beneath, behind, or before allegiances,
> nationality, ethnicity, or race, lies the human thus proves to be deeply
> problematic. (Festa 13)

That humanitarian process of identification is haunted by its directionality. It is an

arrogant mode of identification, a weak mode which simultaneously says "they are like

us" and "they are not enough like us." It pulls the world toward its own Western center

without thinking very specifically about those human beings as figures with universal

dimension but also particular lives, contexts, and histories. This is the process of

identification that produces Dalton's altruism of imposition. This argument also implies

that to confront the division between the agents and supposed beneficiaries of

humanitarian practice requires a transformation at the ideological level and not merely

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[18] See Festa, Hunt, and Laqueur for a range of perspectives on the eighteenth-century emergence of that narrative, aimed at cultivating sympathy for the suffering body. Festa is by far the most skeptical of the capacity of what she calls "sentimental humanitarianism" to produce a meaningfully inclusive concept of humanity. She speaks to the mode of appealing to humanitarian agents through a problematic conceptualization of humanitarianism's "targets." Her argument is also relevant to the contemporary moment: "It is by no means clear," she argues, "that modern discourses of humanitarianism and human rights escape form the dilemmas posed by sentimental humanity"; "sentimental humanitarianism cannot operate from the 'conviction that all people have equal dignity by virtue of their membership in humanity,' because the sentimental doesn't have a stable or logical definition of 'humanity' to work with" (7, 5).

the practical one. On the other hand, that stripped down definition of the human is not without purpose. Supplementing it results in kicking people out of the ring: "As soon as one enlarges the definition of the human, real human beings begin to be excluded: the Tom O'Bedlams of our time, the mad kings, the insane, the retarded, the deaf and dumb, the crippled and deranged" (Ignatieff, *Strangers* 43). And, of course, the African.

The exclusionary tendency of humanism has long been a particular problem in regards to Africa. The belief in human progress—that man will continually better himself and the world around him, and more importantly for our purposes, that he can do it on behalf of others—justified imperialism as the uplift of mankind. Although humanitarianism speaks a language of care, the argument that humanism—its ideological underpinning—is a form of imperial violence has been unfolding for several decades. The concept of humanism has indeed had a long colonialist career and thus African writers do not take up the idea lightly. In both anticolonial and postcolonial theory, humanism has come to stand in for some of the most egregious offences against humanity. Recall Fanon's resonant statement in *The Wretched of the Earth*—"Leave this Europe where they are never done talking of Man, yet murder men everywhere they find them" (311)—or Cesaire's in *Discourse on Colonialism*: "that is the greatest thing I hold against pseudo-humanism: that for too long it has diminished the rights of man, that its concept of those rights has been—and still is—narrow and fragmentary, incomplete and biased and, all things considered, sordidly racist" (37). He concludes that "[a]t the end of formal humanism and philosophic renunciation, there is Hitler" (37).[19] The love of

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[19] Wole Soyinka explains that "the Atlantic slave trade remains an inescapable critique of European humanism," one which came long before the Holocaust. He argues that the insistence on the Holocaust as *the* moment of that critique—and Césaire is not making that claim—is "proof that the European mind has yet to come into full cognition of the African world as an equal sector of universal humanity" (38). Like

"Man" is utterly disconnected from the treatment of "men." Fanon and Cesaire thus laid

the groundwork for a growing critique which would reveal the counterintuitive

consequences of a seemingly benign discourse of human universality.

According to the anticolonialists, the problem stems from the fact that

humanism—or more accurately Western humanism—has represented hypocrisy on a

grand scale. Its claims to universality are in fact a mask for a violent kind of

particularism.[20] As Achille Mbembe explains, that expansive discourse of humanity in

fact demarcated a tightly constricted circle. The universal man was defined by his

capacity to reason, but Africans were

> supposed not to contain any sort of consciousness and to have none of the
> characteristics of reason or beauty. . . . Because of this radical difference, it was
> deemed legitimate to exclude them, both de facto and de jure, from the sphere of
> full and complete human citizenship: they had nothing to contribute to the work
> of the universal. (Mbembe, "Self-Writing" 245)

In other words, the allegedly "universal" was in fact defined by the West and centered on

the West. According to this model, the "not-yet-sufficiently human" could become

human only through the erasure of difference and the cultivation of European civilization.

Universalist claims about the all-inclusive circle of mankind were thus a tool for racist

delimitation, and theories of human perfectibility implied an inevitable trajectory toward

Europe. The human is thus a "highly politicized category" (Young 121).

Nevertheless, the anticolonialist critique of European humanism was not

ultimately anti-humanist. Fanon and Césaire called for new, genuinely inclusive forms of

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Achebe, Soyinka, writing in 1999, suggests that the idea of African humanity may sound obvious, but it
remains remarkably problematic.

[20] That is not to say that European philosophical traditions, including that of humanism, were entirely
defunct. These thinkers are more precise and more subtle in their response. Césaire, although he has been
painted as an advocate of a pre-European past, insists that this is not his claim; rather, "it was our
misfortune to encounter that particular Europe" (45).

humanism. Césaire argues that "at the very time when it most often mouths the word, the West has never been further from being able to live a true humanism—a humanism made to the measure of the world" (73). Fanon associates the break from colonialism with the emergence of a new kind of humanity: "After the conflict there is not only the disappearance of colonialism but also the disappearance of the colonized man. This new humanity cannot do otherwise than define a new humanism both for itself and for others" (*Wretched* 246).[21] He describes the reparative redistribution of wealth as the task of "reintroducing mankind into the world" (*Wretched* 106). Decolonization bears hopes of a new era of humanity, although Fanon also anticipates its collapse. In *Black Skin, White Masks* too, a text all about the malignant division of humanity by race, Fanon ends on the note of humanism: "man is a yes….Yes to life. Yes to love. Yes to generosity….No to the butchery of what is most human in man: freedom" (222). He advocates a kind of international community—an inclusive vision in response to colonialism's violently antihuman practices: "Why not the quite simple attempt to touch the other, to feel the other, to explain the other to myself? Was my freedom not given to me then in order to build the world of the *You*?" (*Black Skin* 229). In other words, Fanon and Césaire view the Western rhetoric of humanity as a false universalism—a mere "pseudo-humanism" (Césaire 37)—and they thus call for a new humanism that is truly universal.

Postcolonial critics, in contrast, tend to claim that the problem isn't false universalism but the very notion of universalism itself. This largely comes through a new approach to the problem of difference, influenced by poststructuralist thought.[22]

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[21] On the revolutionary discourse of the New Man and its coincidence with Western development discourse in the Latin American context, see Saldaña-Portillo.

[22] Simon Gikandi explores the relationship between anticolonialism, postcolonialism, and poststructuralism in detail in "Poststructuralism and Postcolonial Discourse," arguing that this distinction constitutes a

According to this line of argument, humanism served not merely as a cover for colonial violence, but as the root of violence itself. Thus, we have entered a period described as the post-human, an age that has lost faith in Man. That loss of faith also has to do with the history that unfolded in the wake of decolonization: that "new Man" never arose and the postcolonial populace has been plagued by ongoing divisions of class, gender, party affiliation, and ethnicity that were not neatly encompassed by the new nation. The central problem of humanism, as far as postcolonial studies is concerned, is about the relationship it establishes between universalism and difference: "To speak of 'man' and the 'human' is to run the risk of reducing contingent differences to a system of universal essences" (Clifford 144); it is this flattening of difference that produces the impulse to dominate and convert—in all its various forms—those who are different. Universal humanism, in some sense, demands colonialism; therefore, postcolonial theory has shown that colonialism was a sign not of humanism's collapse but of its climax. As Leon de Kock explains, "the Renaissance-humanist movement assumed a coherent and unified subject in its own image, and projected the idea of such a subject as a norm on to the Others of the New World" (9). Take Christian universalism, for example; because it views all human beings as essentially the same in their fallen state and their shared need for divine redemption, it sets out to make everyone a Christian. In resistance to this defeat of pluralism, postcolonial studies, drawing on structuralism and poststructuralism, has valorized difference (often described as alterity) over universality and sameness, and has linked "the production of the humanist subject [to] the general process of colonialism by

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fundamental break in which postcolonial discourse aligns itself with poststructuralism over and against anticolonial thought. He argues against Robert Young's claim that despite the anticolonial attachment to new forms of humanism, it was their politicization of the category of the universal human that the project of dismantling the very category of Man, known as anti-humanism, developed.

which Europe consolidated itself politically as sovereign subject of the world" (Young

124-25).[23] The discourse of universal essence works to shroud that uneven political field.

Critics have thus exposed the violence in universalism's assumption of a

fundamental sameness and in its injunction to produce sameness. Roland Barthes, for

example, critiques *The Family of Man* photography exhibition, a collection of images of

birth, death, work and play, as an exercise in building the "myth of the human

'community' " (Barthes 100).[24] "Any classic humanism," he explains, "postulates that in

scratching the history of men a little, the relativity of their institutions or the superficial

diversity of their skins . . . one very quickly reaches the solid rock of a universal human

nature" (101). By resorting to the natural it covers over the socio-historical:

> What does the 'essence' of this process [of the human life cycle] matter to us
> compared to its modes which, as for them are perfectly historical? Whether or not
> the child is born with ease or difficulty, whether or not his birth causes suffering
> to his mother, whether or not he is threatened by a high mortality rate, whether or
> not such and such a type of future is open to him: this is what your Exhibitions
> should be telling people. (102)

That is, indeed, what postcolonialism has been telling people; it has been sharply attuned

to historical difference—to the ways in which history has positioned people within a

radically uneven world. To say that we are all the same is to accept the status quo—"to

give to the immobility of the world the alibi of a 'wisdom' and a 'lyricism' " (Barthes

102). In other words, it suppresses the reality of injustice.

But this brings us to another paradox. Barthes argues against universalism for the

same reasons Ahmad argues for it. Proclaiming the universality of mankind obscures

unjust differences, and yet at the same time, some notion of universality must pertain in

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[23] Major theorists of this tradition of dethroning humanism's sovereign subject include Heidegger,
Althusser, Foucault, and Derrida. See Baldwin and Puledda who chart the history of the humanism debate.
[24] These photographs are collected in book form; see Edward Steichen's *The Family of Man,* in print since
1955.

order to have standards for justice at all. Ernesto Laclau zeroes in on this challenge by asking what happens to

> unsatisfied demands concerning access to education, to employment, to consumption goods and so on?....these demands cannot be made in terms of difference, but of some universal principles that the ethnic minority shares with the rest of the community: the right of *everybody* to have access to good schools, or live a decent live, or participate in the public space of citizenship, and so on. (Laclau 100-101, my emphasis)

Again there is that problem of everybody; anti-universalism has real consequences for justice. To speak of and on behalf of everyone obscures the unevenness of the world, and yet at the same time to amend that unevenness, standards for everyone are required. As Laclau puts it, "rejecting universalism *in toto* as the particular content of the ethnia of the West—can only lead to a political blind alley" (qtd in Robbins, "Race" 562). Barthes recognizes this and will, within the same brief essay that dismantles universal humanism, call for a "progressive humanism" which makes a reverse move, "scour[ing] nature, its 'laws' and its 'limits' in order to discover history there, and at last to establish Nature itself as historical" (101). Tensions in the critique of universal humanism thus arise over the relationship between theory and practice. Theoretical rigor does not always correspond to the messy demands of politics in the real world; justice requires universals, flawed as they may be.

Postcolonialism often comes under attack for political inefficacy, and Bruce Robbins has argued that its anti-humanism may be its greatest liability. In "Race, Gender, Class, Postcolonialism: Toward a New Humanistic Paradigm?" he focuses on the relationship between postcolonialism's political interests and its anti-humanist emphasis on difference. Drawing on the assessment of historian Russell Jacoby, Robbins explains that "[w]hat has kept the field [of postcolonial studies] from linking up with potential

allies and thus doing something to realize its political aspirations . . . is its programmatic antihumanism" (556). The argument that human rights discourse is an imperialist imposition "is not calculated either to assist Third World activists in their present struggles or to drum up support among nonacademic Westerners. In short, if it wants to be treated as a serious political voice, postcolonial studies needs a new humanist paradigm" (557). If we want to move from "interpreting the world toward changing it" (Robbins, *Feeling* 5), a move away from epistemological purism is in order: "all universalisms are dirty," Robbins writes, and "it is only dirty universalisms that will help us against the powers and agents of still dirtier ones" (*Feeling* 75). Theory is able to favor an ideological purity that real world politics cannot afford; politically efficacious theory has to negotiate that tension. This, I want to argue, is the place from which Mda and Head are thinking, negotiating "dirty universalisms" to confront a world in which ideal, clean solutions are the stuff of fantasy. Humanitarianism offers one such dirty universalism— not a solution but a potentially ally, imperfect but available.

Still I want to clarify that postcolonial theory, to my mind, has not been as programmatically anti-humanist as it may seem and as Jacoby suggests. The humanist paradigm is already latent within postcolonial thought, a field that is constantly self-critical, constituted less by stable positions than by the constant flux of internal debate. As Robbins acknowledges, "humanism has never been foreign to the field" ("Race" 565). That undercurrent of tension is definitive of postcolonialism itself with its roots and loyalties in both anticolonial political theory and poststructuralism. Robbins is not alone in his return to humanism; he picks up on a rumbling within the field. Although postcolonialism's consensus position, we might say, is antihumanist, a number of major

contributors to the field including Appiah, Spivak, Lazarus, and Hardt and Negri have

called for new, more rigorous forms of humanism.[25] Indeed, the gesture often has to do

with the gap between theory and political praxis. Spivak might be considered its most

surprising advocate:

> It has appeared to some of my readers recently that I seem to be moving towards
> some notion of universal humanity, and this has surprised them—I am expected to
> emphasize difference. . . . Contrary to the received assumption, it seems to me
> that the non-foundationalist thinkers are suggesting that you cannot have any kind
> of emancipatory project *without* some notion of the ways in which human beings
> are similar. (qtd. in Robbins, "Race" 566).

By this definition, universalism may be sullied, but to do without it would be to neglect

emancipatory politics. Part of the tension here—the surprise in Spivak's readers—seems

to derive from postcolonialism's split genealogy, inheriting the investments of

poststructuralism and anticolonialism which have a vexed relation to one another, in part

sympathetic and in part antagonistic.[26] I view this not as a point of dissolution or even

contradiction but of productive tension. My aim is not to determine the correct side in the

humanist/anti-humanist debate but to explore how postcolonial critiques of humanism

can be mobilized in order to revise and build upon the language of anticolonial

humanism. Neil Lazarus suggests that the demand of "anti-imperialist intellectualism

today" is in fact "to construct a standpoint . . . from which it is possible to assume the

burden of speaking for all humanity":

> Where postmodern and postcolonial theory have tended to react to the perceived
> indefensibility of bourgeois humanism and of colonial nationalism by abandoning
> the very idea of totality, a *genuinely* postcolonial strategy might be to move
> explicitly, as Fanon already did in concluding *The Wretched of the Earth*, to
> proclaim a 'new' humanism, predicated upon a formal repudiation of the

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[25] See Appiah, 155; Hardt and Negri, 91-2; Sole 186; and Loomba, *et al*, introduction to *Postcolonial Studies and Beyond.*

[26] That genealogy is the subject of some debate. Again, refer to Gikandi's argument in "Poststructuralism and Postcolonial Discourse" and Robert Young's in *White Mythologies.*

> degraded European form, and borne embryonically in the national liberation movement. . . . From *this* proleptically 'postcolonial' standpoint, it is vital to retain the categories of 'nation' and 'universality.' (Lazarus 143)

This suggests that a "genuinely postcolonial position" is genuinely humanist. This may sound heretical, but it is the impure politics which the critical mission novel suggests is the only politics available and which this project seeks to affirm.

Theoretical calls for a revisionary return to humanism tend to describe it as something new and yet to be defined, but I want to argue that a critically minded, postcolonially informed, peripherally situated humanism is not all that nebulous. African novelists have long been at work reinventing the humanism of both colonialists and anticolonialists, and we can thus turn to this body of texts to develop a notion of what an alternative humanist paradigm would look like and what it might generate.[27] This opens new windows on the humanist debate within postcolonial studies. Olakunle George has argued that "the epistemological lesson of African letters . . . is that positive agency—in the domain of language or that of concrete politics—can emanate out of an act that is otherwise conceptually limited" (*Relocating* x). Certainly we could say that humanism and its humanitarian expressions are conceptually limited, but that is not to say unusable in a world where dirty universalisms are all we have. Building from George's claim, I want to suggest that the positive agency emanating out of highly sophisticated literary notions of humanism can provide resources for relocating humanitarian practice. In other words, African theorizations of the human and the humane might serve as a corrective to the conceptual limitations of humanitarian thought. The novel in particular can

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[27] Appiah has argued that postcolonial African fiction's delegitimation of both the Western empire and the nationalist project is "grounded in an appeal to an ethical universal," contrasting it to postmodernism's mode of delegitimation (152).

reinvigorate humanitarianism's anemic narratological imagination through envisioning new modes of identification with humanity at large.

"On Mankind in General": Rethinking Community, Internationally

In search of a better future for African people, Bessie Head turns away from nationalism and its leaders and toward transnational connection.[28] With a keen sensitivity to the problematic deployments of so-called universal humanism in Africa, she nonetheless insists on the necessity of thinking beyond various particularisms to address "mankind in general" (*Question* 134). Her anti-neocolonial novels echo some of the humanism of anticolonialists before her but rework it to address the critiques that postcolonial and poststructural theory would raise. Essentially, she decenters humanism in order to redeem it. She shows that humanism, to borrow Kwame Anthony Appiah's phrase, "can be provisional, historically contingent, antiessentialist (in other words, postmodern), and still be demanding" (155), and she suggests that, as such, humanism has the potential to build a genuine community internationally.

A Question of Power is situated in the space of postcolonial disillusionment within a new order that has failed to account for everyone. In light of insufficient provision by government and private sector commerce, the impoverished rural village in which Head sets her novel becomes a testing ground for third sector activity: "Motabeng village was full of IVS [International Volunteer Service] and Peace Corps, as they formed almost the entire staff of the Motabeng Secondary School" (24). Their presence enables Head to stage a critique of humanitarian practice alongside a re-envisioning of its possibilities. Through the semi-autobiographical story of Elizabeth, a South African who

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[28] On Head's transnationalism within Southern Africa, see Nixon, "Border Country."

seeks refuge in Botswana with her young son, the novel interrogates the ethical

dimensions of humanitarian work and their implications for human relationships on the

very uneven terrain of power in the postcolonial world. Head's evaluation of

humanitarian action depends on the kinds of the human relations it establishes; an ethical

humanitarianism is only possible on the basis of a rigorously ethical humanism, and that

is not the humanism most easily and immediately available to foreign humanitarians.

Actually existing humanitarianism, she suggests, has some serious soul searching to do.

In both *A Question of Power* and her first novel, *When Rain Clouds Gather,* Head

offers a provocation and a challenge to the fiction of the actually existing international

community. *When Rain Clouds Gather* is a realist narrative and thus looks very different

than *A Question of Power,* in which the text seems to go mad with its protagonist, but the

plot is closely related. It too follows a refugee from South Africa to a rural village in

Botswana and examines the interactions of locals, Africans from elsewhere, and Western

volunteers. The novel opens with a young political activist, Makhaya, fleeing South

Africa after being accused of sabotage by the apartheid government. He arrives in

Golema Mmidi, a village of refugees "who had fled there to escape the tragedies of life"

(21). There he meets Dinorego, a thoughtful old man with whom he develops a close

bond, as well as Gilbert Balfour, an Englishman, who is in the village to assist in

agricultural development and food production techniques aimed at raising the standard of

living. Gilbert wants to incorporate women into his agricultural projects, but needs help

doing it, so he gives the job to Makhaya. Their work together generates "the progress of

mankind" (168), but drought brings setbacks, hunger, and tragedy. In her representations

of these transnational communities, Head uses a set of key terms that resonate with those

of humanitarians— "mankind in general," "humanness," and "worlds of compassion"—
in order to demystify the problematic deployment of such terms and refill them with new,
critical content, recovering their utility in service of new egalitarian horizons.

Even with all that humanist vocabulary, these novels are centrally concerned with
the violent tendencies of universalism as it operates on terrains of difference. In *A
Question of Power* in particular, Head problematizes the so called International
Community, interrogating its universalism and revealing the unevenness of power that it
tends to cover up. She dramatizes the workings of international development and
"progress," with its insensitivity to differences of social position, culture, history, and
values. A series of negative mission figures reveals Head's skepticism about international
altruism, beginning with the principal of the mission school Elizabeth attends as a child:
"She was the last, possibly, of the kind who had heard 'the call' from Jesus and come out
to save the heathen. Their calls seemed to make them very bitter at the end of it, and their
professed love for Jesus never awakened love and compassion in their hearts" (*Question*
16). It is this "incredibly cruel woman" who delivers the news of Elizabeth's mother
which, it could be argued, precipitates her own experience of madness.[29] "You must be
very careful," the missionary tells her, "Your mother was insane. If you're not careful
you'll get insane just like your mother. Your mother was a white woman. They had to
lock her up, as she was having a child by the stable boy, who was a native" (16).
Professed care is a far cry from actual love, and for Head it is indeed love that is the
measure of ethics. This practice of human universalism exacerbates fractures within
humanity rather than fostering any kind of global unity.

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[29] Jacqueline Rose links questions of universality and difference to an analysis of madness in the text. See "On the 'Universality' of Madness."

This missionary mentality finds its echo in the humanitarian volunteers who populate the village of Motabeng. There is, for example, the English manager of a farming development project, who "was so intensely reserved and aloof that no conversation ever went beyond his work and his crops" (70). He too, as a Quaker, seems to have a Christian universalist motivation for his work that doesn't produce any sensitivity to the people around him. Detachment from local life characterizes his behavior across the board: "He said he didn't like the lager beer Eugene brewed because there were an awful lot of drunkards in Botswana and he was encouraging it. He didn't like any music but the great choral music of the cathedral churches of England he had on tape" (70). His attitude ranges from disinterest to disdain. With Elizabeth, "he was in the habit of replying to her every query with rude and sarcastic remarks. His attitude clearly said: 'Yes, insect, and what do you want now? Can't you see that I'm a very busy man?'" (71). Eurocentric superiority pervades his communication, all within this supposedly egalitarian project, ironizing the promises of humanism.

The humanitarian presence in the village is, in large part, a colonial resettlement. Funded by their own government, a group of Danish farm instructors and their families set up the kind of fortress that would come to characterize humanitarianism as the new empire. The Danish "built large, modern houses for the people they sent over and took care of every detail of their lives, down to the last ounce of petrol" (71). They drive around in Land Rovers and spend their evenings "denigrating their pupils. Apparently they had a high standard of culture and civilization in Denmark" (71). In spite of—and because of—their impulse to universalize improvement, they set themselves apart.[30] They

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[30] This is a common theme within both literary and non-fictional critiques. Michael Maren, in *The Road to Hell*, which combines memoir with political critique, describes it thus: "When colonials came ashore, they

are as committed to defining their distinction from the "natives" in space, in style, and in language as were their colonial predecessors. Humanitarianism in this expression does indeed appear to be the benign mask of a new empire.

This brand of self-importance takes its shrillest form in Camilla, a Danish landscape designer turned agricultural volunteer. Shortly after Elizabeth joins the vegetable gardening project associated with the Motabeng Secondary School, she goes to the Danish gardens to learn their new methods. Her teacher is a local trainee named Small-Boy. As he continues to work at turning the soil, Small-Boy proudly instructs Elizabeth who jots down notes. The process of one trainee instructing a newer one is working, even though the English project manager came up with this system in order to extract himself from it. But the lesson is soon interrupted as Camilla bursts through the gate, seeking to catch the workers off-guard, idling about as "natives" are wont to do: "If someone doesn't come down here during practical work time," she announces— "someone" being a white person—"these trainees will just sit under the trees and play dice" (74). Before even observing what is happening, she launches into a harsh series of corrections: "Small-Boy! Didn't I tell you not to leave the manure on top of the bed? You must turn it at once!" (75). She has failed to notice that he is engaged in precisely that process and has just explained it to Elizabeth: "I am careful to push the digging fork deep into the soil to the hilt, then turn. This way I ensure that enough soil mingles with fertilizer and manure, and they get down as deep as possible" (74). She speeds through the garden, stopping for only "an instant" for any worker and then only to shout,

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didn't say, 'We're here to steal your land and take your resources and employ your people to clean our toilets and guard our big houses.' They said, 'We're here to help you.' And then they went and took their land and resources and hired their people to clean their toilets. And now here come the aid workers, who move into the big colonial houses and ride in high cars above the squalor, all the while insisting they're come to help" (11).

performing her supposed superiority with frantic insistence. Although she is, technically, in Motabeng to help others, she centers the world on herself: "All life had to stop and turn towards her" (75). She brings the training process to an immediate halt, grabbing Elizabeth's notebook and writing in her own incoherent, incomprehensible notes. With her authoritarian approach to teaching, she overwrites learning into oblivion. In effect, she negates real improvement with her pretentions to expertise.

Through the figure of Camilla, Head points to the unintended consequences of aid. The idea of aid is ironized in this scene in which the offer of help actually makes things much worse: "All of a sudden," after Camilla's jarring entrance, "the vegetable garden was the most miserable place on earth. The students had simply become humiliated little boys shoved around by a hysterical white woman who never saw black people as people but as objects of permanent idiocy" (76). The people we encounter in the garden are not voiceless or powerless, but Camilla's intervention makes them so. The heart of the problem lies in her own blindness; she has never really thought of Africa as people. This is part of what draws her to the humanitarian endeavor—"[a]fter all, she was here to help the natives" (77). Her brand of universal humanism espouses that she, being more human than "the natives" has the right and responsibility to fix them, even if she has little faith in their capacity to change. It is a problem of universalism on the one hand—the idea that the whole world can use her brand of help—and particularism on the other—the idea that black people are a category distinct from her own humanity. She demonstrates something Gayatri Spivak has called "ignorant goodwill" (*Critique* 416)—an impulse that characterizes much (perhaps most) humanitarian work.

We might ask, in light of Camilla's damaging behavior, if an ethical form of

transnational assistance is even possible; can goodwill expressed across differences of

race, culture, status, and history ever be anything but ignorant? Can an outsider ever

really presume to know the needs of the local, let alone offer meaningful help? Camilla

taps into a problematic limitation of humanitarian interaction more broadly, something

that affects even Head's most sympathetic characters. In *When Rain Clouds Gather,* the

English agricultural expert, Gilbert, comes to Botswana with "plans to uplift the poor"

(23). At the other end of the spectrum from Camilla, he seeks council from a poor old

man named Dinorego and marries his daughter; he is known for the extent of his

integration with local people. For Dinorego, this rare style of being is quite profound:

> I take Gilbert as my own son, which fact surprises me, since he is a white man
> and we Batswanas do not know any white people, though some have lived here
> for many years. Many things caused me to have a change of mind. He can eat goat
> meat and sour-milk porridge, which I have not known a white man to eat before.
> Also, whenever there is trouble he comes to me and says, "Dinorego, should I
> stay here?" which fills my heart with fire since I am just an old man with no
> power. (*Rain Clouds* 27)

Gilbert defies the standards of arrogance and detachment which characterize the majority

of whites in Head's Africa, breaking the boundaries of racist and ethnocentric

confinement. Yet, emerging from a very different position in life than the hungry cattle

herders of Golema Mmidi, his universalism also creates blind spots. He is able to see the

drought and the dwindling herds as something of a "miracle"; he even hopes for it as a

reduced cattle population is necessary for high-grade beef production (179). His aims are

genuinely for the interests of the local poor, and yet he fails to see the human problems of

the present. For Gilbert, Africa truly is people and yet, in his own moment of "impatience

for progress" (*Question* 72), he loses sight of its implications. When confronted with the

possible death of a young boy, he feels "a sharp stab of pain at the way he had light-heartedly talked of scientific beef production amidst all this tragedy. . . . His mind had jumped too far ahead into the future, but the present was painful and terrible" (182).[31] Much like the world leaders of Achebe's anecdote, his vision for progress obstructs his awareness of the reality for people on the ground, even though he's right there on the ground with them. The way in which he advocates for others indicates a gap between his vision for the future and their own experience in the tenuous present.

In each of these cases, universal humanism—in seeing humans as fundamentally in need of the same things and foreign agents thus capable of providing for those needs—produces insensitivities to difference of culture, race, economics, experience, and history. Head's work focuses largely on the complex texture of difference. *A Question of Power*'s protagonist is a figure of alterity; born in apartheid South Africa to a black father and white mother, Elizabeth does not fit in either of their racial categories or communities, and thus lives a borderline existence. In these ways, the novel is very much in keeping with the oppositional postcolonialist values and critiques which would emerge over the next two decades. Yet it is this figure of difference who clarifies that universalism, problematic as it may be, is urgently necessary.[32] Head's discourse is also dramatically at odds with anti-humanist orthodoxy in her sincere celebration of terms like "humanness," "mankind in general," and the "brotherhood of man." Rather than electing ideological

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[31] This notion of a better future—a revolution, essentially—precipitated by a crisis of the present also resonates with critiques of humanitarianism which argue that it staves off the impending crises that would lead to revolution. Head cautions against the ease of speaking of revolutionary change in that way when the speaker is not subject to the pains that that crisis will inevitably produce, even if it is in the service of a better future.

[32] Desiree Lewis has charted the ways in which literary critics have approached Head's universalism (see 9). Rose's article on "The 'Universality' of Madness" is of particular relevance here, but the discussion has yet to be situated directly in conversation with Head's interest in humanitarianism; it is my aim to explore that connection and in doing so to elucidate the stakes of Head's universalism in a new way.

purism, Head draws freely on the humanist discourse that is supposedly the domain of Westerners, suggesting that it is necessary for grappling with the radical inequities and insufficiencies of the postcolonial—more accurately, neocolonial—era. She suggests that the challenge of universalism lies in building coalitions which allow for human difference rather than ignoring or obliterating it. Elizabeth's critique of black nationalism resonates with the positions of postcolonial revaluation, but to the contrary conclusion, suggesting that universalism actually fits this agenda: " 'I've got my concentration elsewhere,' she said. 'It's on mankind in general, and black people fit in there, not as special freaks and oddities outside the scheme of things, with labels like Black Power or any other rubbish of that kind' " (133). Significantly, it is a figure of difference who annunciates this position. Difference, this suggests, is not the antithesis of universality but the condition which makes it so urgently necessary.

While Head is highly critical of international altruists, she also finds them quite captivating. Their projects of improvement can certainly be neocolonialist—reinforcing imperial relations of power and inequity—but they also contain anticolonial and anti-neocolonial possibilities. Eugene, for example, an Afrikaner refugee working to build "educational programmes for developing countries" (*Question* 56), is the founder of the Motabeng secondary school and offers "youth-development work-groups" to teach practical "skills in building, carpentry, electricity, printing, shoe-making, farming and textile work" (68). Elizabeth first gets to know him when he offers to take care of her son while she is in the hospital following a nervous breakdown. "We are both refugees," he tells her, "and we must help each other" (52). Head suggests that it is his humanity which

sets him apart and makes him such an attractive figure in contrast to other humanitarians,

even those who advance his own programs: "The Englishman," for example,

> did all the right things through an impatience for progress. He lacked the humanity of the Eugene man who had originated the projects. In his pamphlet writing, the Eugene man totally blurred the dividing line between the élite who had the means for education and the illiterate who had none. Education was for all. He always turned up with something for *everyone*. (72)

The Englishman exemplifies the deep-seated flaws of the International Community. He

indexes the rationale for arguments against development as "a top-down, ethnocentric,

and technocratic approach, which treat[s] people and cultures as abstract concepts,

statistical figures to be moved up and down the charts of 'progress' " (Escobar 44).

Against this hierarchical universalism, Eugene models the radically inclusive approach to

the everyone that Head values. He is a figure of humility, sensitive to the people who

make up the everyone, rather than targeting some vague totality in the name of progress.

By blurring the lines of status and entitlement, this universalism subverts the

neocolonial order. Figures like Eugene and Gilbert complicate arguments about the

imperialism of international care. *When Rain Clouds Gather* is set in the 1960s when

British colonialists are in the process of withdrawing, but in that moment, it is Joas

Tsepe, a politician greedily poised to take power and become a neocolonialist himself,

who articulates that argument: "I'll tell you what the Imperialists are up to now. . . . First

they sent the missionaries. Now they send volunteers like Gilbert. What is a volunteer?

Volunteer, my eye. I have top secret information about these training camps in England.

Gilbert has been sent here to pave the way for the second scramble to Africa" (72). Joas

is working to ingratiate himself to Matenge, the local sub-chief, who sees Gilbert as his

"arch enemy" (72). This is a kind of misdirection; he pins imperialism on Gilbert to

shroud his own agenda of dominance. Matenge's brother, the chief above him, has sent

Gilbert to Matenge's area in the expectation that the British upstart would be destroyed.

The paramount chief's resistance to Gilbert lies in the fact that

> Because he was a chief he lived off the slave labour of the poor. His lands were ploughed free of charge by the poor, and he was washed, bathed, and fed by the poor, in return for which he handed out old clothes and maize rations. And to a man like this Gilbert Balfour came along and spent an hour outlining plans to uplift the poor! Most alarming of all, the Englishman had behind him the backing of a number of voluntary organizations who were prepared to finance his schemes at no cost to the country. (23)

The volunteer threatens the role he has taken within the colonial system of indirect rule

and the power and wealth he stands to gain within the coming neocolonial order. It is

Gilbert's universalism that he finds most subversive, "especially his habit of referring to

the poor as though they were his blood brothers, and the chief was a shrewd enough

judge of human nature to see that the young man was in deadly earnest" (24). His plan, to

set Gilbert up for failure, falls apart, and Matenge finds himself

> faced with the progress of mankind. Commoners were up and about everywhere, busy like ants, building dams for themselves. They were also laughing and had some new language up their sleeve, like "cash-crops". This sent Matenge into a fuming rage. Barely ten years ago the commoner had always to approach a chief of sub-chief and ask him for permission to progress. (168)

Gilbert's development projects are actually decentralizing power rather than reinforcing

its imperialist core. Head depicts "progress" as an unevenly distributed privilege,

withheld from the masses, and calls for the "progress of mankind" as a radically

egalitarian alternative to the exclusive imperialist strain.

Both novels suggest that an internationalist solution is needed to an

internationalist problem. A nationalist narrative of improvement does not adequately

account for the global vectors of empire. She depicts humanity as globally interconnected

in an uneven network of theft which often goes unacknowledged:

> Only Gilbert admitted the mutual interdependence of all men. The raw materials
> of all the underdogs had gone into the making of those aeroplanes and motor cars,
> and Gilbert had been surprised to find the underdogs living in such abysmal
> conditions while his own country had prospered to an almost unbelievable state of
> wealth. (156)

Head envisions an alternative network of humanity with the aim of subverting the

existing one and thus shows the logic of international responsibility to be grounded in the

history of international violence. Head urges us to ask, how can international relations

work against inequality rather than reinforcing it? Is it possible to operate ethically across

boundaries of difference? And if so on what basis? In answer to these questions, she

offers a model of what I have called decentered humanism. This neo-anticolonial (or anti-

neocolonial) version of humanism echoes the politically minded humanism of

anticolonialist thinkers like Cesaire and Fanon, while also incorporating an attention to

difference that is associated with postcolonial theorists. In the pages that follow, I will

sketch that decentered humanism by exploring where it comes from, what it looks like,

and how it extracts itself from the errors of traditional humanism.

First, I want to return to one of Head's ethical models of transnational assistance,

Eugene, in order to clarify the geopolitical coordinates of her decentered humanism. As I

began to explain above, Elizabeth is drawn to Eugene for his genuine universalism, for

the way he "always turned up with something for *everyone*" (72). His approach to the

everyone is very different than the imposition we saw with Dalton in *Heart of Redness*

and the approach of Elizabeth's missionary teacher, bitter about the "call" to Africa.

Head dismisses the notion that universalism is somehow the practice and provenance of

the imperialist First World. In Eugene, universalism is a sign of his Africanization. Head

writes, "In this respect," in his attention to *everyone*, Eugene

> was an African, not a white man, and the subtlety of it spread to his conduct in everyday life. She had spent a day in his house. At lunchtime a group of labourers had walked into his house and sat down at table with him. They were Batswana. They had picked up their spoons, quietly bent their heads and eaten their food in a humble manner. He was so identical with them in gesture and posture that, startled, Elizabeth thought: "How is it his movements and gestures are so African? There's such a depth of knee-bending in him, it's an unconscious humility." (72)

This scene of international community is located not in the grand halls of a Western

metropolis but around a table of workers in a rural African village—a marginal place that

doesn't even appear on the world map. The humanism Head uplifts is not European

humanism. It is Afrocentric by source, and yet not necessarily or exclusively centered

upon Africa and African people. For that reason, I call it decentered humanism, rather

than merely re-centered. In *When Rain Clouds Gather,* Head depicts "an atmosphere

where the most important thing in the world was the stranger whose shadow darkened the

doorstep. People were the central part of the universe of Africa, and the world stood still

because of this" (156-57). This is the kind of ethical orientation that Eugene has picked

up, which Head describes as his "humanity." With Eugene, to bring "something for

everyone" is not a gesture of arrogance that allows him to ignore the specific people

involved. Instead, it is a gesture of humility, of non-self-importance. The direction of

adaptation is reversed. The strength of his development projects come not out of making

African people more like himself, but out of making himself, even if unconsciously, more

like them. This suggests the error of talking about humanism as a European philosophy.

Head suggests that real, genuine, "Africa is people" humanism, is an African philosophy.

Achebe makes a related gesture explaining that "[i]f the philosophical dictum of

Descartes 'I think, therefore I am' represents a European individualistic ideal, the Bantu declaration '*Umuntu ngumuntu ngabantu'* represents an African communal aspiration: 'A human is a human because of other humans'" (*Education* 166). This, he suggests, is a safer ground from which to build an international community that is truly communal.

Head too is imagining a humanism that is based not on that "individualistic ideal" but on mutual dependency. Her protagonist in *A Question of Power* is a far cry from the coherent, reasoning, centered subject associated with Western humanism. For her characters, a sense of humanness is not dependent on reason or even on a definition of human essence. If anything is fundamental, it is that humans are social creatures, and the sense of humanness derives from relations with others. A person, for Head, is indeed a person through other persons, and yet those relations are never simple. What Head calls "the brotherhood of man" is not the precondition of human existence but the challenge. This universalism which Head envisions is cultivated through the daily interactions of shared labor. It is not about doing for others, but doing *with.* The external narrative—woven through the internal narrative of Elizabeth's mental state—is about cooperative farming which is understood in both material and ethical terms. Head celebrates the "tentative efforts people of totally foreign backgrounds made to work together and understand each other's humanity; that needed analyzing—intangible, unpraised efforts to establish the brotherhood of man" (*Question* 158). It is within the process of working toward more equitable distribution—not preceding it—that a "brotherhood of man" is forged. Connection is not established through grand proclamations on humanity—think back to that Europe that is never done speaking of Man—rather it is in small-scale, unpraised, unglamorous efforts at understanding the world and transforming it that an

ethical universal comes into sight. Revising the way people belong requires also revising the way things belong to them.

This model of humanism enables Head to address the problematic—all too often unidirectional—dependencies produced by international assistance. Eugene's gardening projects reflect Head's notion that "love is two people mutually feeding each other" (*Question* 14, 197). The hospitality of the poor whom the Americans, Europeans and Afrikaners have come to help engages them in a structure of mutual care. When a young man comes from London and takes up residence in a small mud hut on a family's property, they refuse to accept payment: "They said I should help them and they would help me. I share some of my food with them, but it doesn't quite work out the right way, and I'd be happy to pay the money," he tells Elizabeth (158). The structure of giving and receiving breaks down and thus evades the unequal relation of indebtedness. Both give, both receive, both are in debt:

> When the woman [in whose home the man stays] was questioned she replied that it was a kindness to a person who was a foreigner; but the story went a little deeper than that. People believe in tenderness, especially in tender heavens of compassion. These belonged to a God in the sky who could do everything for the poor in some magical way. It was quite another thing to be loved and cared for in a realistic way by other living people who came from London. These things had to be enquired into by the poor; so they opened their doors to the volunteers who wanted to live among them, so that they could comprehend a new world that had suddenly made them precious, valued. (159)

The sense of indebtedness that might emerge from this is preemptively balanced when the poor "open their doors to the volunteers." Those volunteers who make the poor feel valued, reciprocally feel valued by the poor: "'They make you feel like a queen. Our every need is catered for and attentively watched over,'" a Peace Corps volunteer explains (72). This disallows the superiority of an ethics of sacrifice. This volunteerism

based on love as "mutual feeding" avoids the risk of turning into another structure of inequity with the poor becoming indebted to the privileged, doubly entrenching the power differential.

That structure of mutual dependency opens up new possibilities for mutual speaking and shared power. Head's novels thus press on fundamental questions and problems of both postcolonial studies and humanitarian discourse about relations between those with power and resources and those without. Each body of thought addresses the gap between them but also constantly runs the risk of reifying it. In thinking about how to transform that inequity, each risks silencing the subaltern—the marginal, the powerless, the unheard—even further. The problem is built into these very descriptions of the central and the peripheral, the powerful and powerless, the vocal and the silent. Gayatri Spivak suggests that this tension defines the nature of ethics itself. By Spivak's definition, the test case for ethics is an encounter between self and other—an attempt at communication that closes the gap between them, even though it is a gap that can never be fully closed. While there is always a gap, always something that does not get across in interactions— especially as communication occurs across differentials of power and privilege—Spivak claims that it should be our constant goal to try to close it. The pursuit of justice is thus centrally concerned with the effort to hear the other. Although ethical singularity (or the closing of that interpersonal gap) is never fully achieved—it can merely be "*approached* when responses flow from both sides" (*Critique* 384)—it is the horizon for which we must continually strive: "a fully just world is impossible, forever deferred and different from our projections, the undecidable in the face of which we must risk the decision that we can hear the other" (*Critique* 199). Rather than one person managing to speak for or

represent the other, Spivak imagines a collectivity based on *mutual* speaking, not merely listening to or speaking for ("Speak?" 295). This profound kind of engagement is necessary to the transformation of society—without it, she tells us, "nothing will stick" (*Critique* 383). By Head's representation, people of goodwill, both local and foreign, are never fully good, or fully heroic, or fully able to extract themselves from the vectors of colonial history, but her decentered humanism offers a way to think about approaching an ethical version of international community even if it is never fully within our grasp. Both novels stage conversations between privileged humanitarians and the poor and suggest that this kind of conversation—which does not foreclose difference—is necessary for cultivating the "brotherhood of man." Decentered humanism strives for mutual eating, mutual speaking, and mutual power.

Desecularizing the Human, Relocating the Divine

At stake in in this version of humanism is a notion of what humanitarian care would look if it were to be developed from the bottom, up. The Eugene we see in the novel, as a model for such bottom-up humanitarian efforts, has already taken on the humble style of being that Head endorses. Although he has developed the "depth of knee bending" associated with those he has come to assist before we encounter him, these novels also explore the process of getting there, and in doing so they posit several narratives of something akin to conversion. Whereas the Mission narrative is about bringing God into dark places, Head insists that God is already in Africa. As she writes elsewhere, "Africa was never 'the dark continent' to African people…" (qtd in *Woman* 29). In these novels, Africa becomes a source of enlightenment—the very seat of the divine.

The first subject of conversion in *A Question of Power* is its refugee protagonist,

Elizabeth, who becomes a mouthpiece for Head's humanist ethics. Her experience of

madness is philosophically generative, working through the very real tensions that

Elizabeth is grappling with in her waking life and thinking about within the context of

Africa at large. She is visited repeatedly by "the poor of Africa." In one of her

hallucinatory visions, a man approaches her accusingly:

> "You have never really made an identification with the poor and humble. This
> time you're going to learn how. They are going to teach you," and he flung his
> arm dramatically into the room. They were the poor of Africa. Each placed one
> bare foot on her bed, turned sideways so that she could see that their feet were cut
> and bleeding. They said nothing, but an old woman out of the crowd turned to
> Elizabeth and said: "Will you help us? We are a people who have suffered." She
> nodded her head in silent assent. (31).

Elizabeth here receives "the call"—not entirely unlike that received by her missionary

teacher—to assist the suffering, to play a role within a narrative of African improvement.

In this passage, the form of help is not evident, but it does imply that the prerequisite will

be "*identification* with the poor and humble." This identification is not automatic, nor is it

facilitated by Elizabeth alone. It must be learned and "they are going to teach" her. Roles

are mixed up between the giver and the receiver, the teacher and the learner, the

intelligent and the ignorant. The standard racialization of those roles—white teachers and

black beneficiaries—is also displaced. Identification in the case of a character like

Camilla is about making the impoverished subject more like the "civilized" self. In this

scene, the direction of identification is reversed, disrupting relations of authority that

characterize humanist thought and humanitarian action—both of which are

problematically centered on and determined by the wealthy West. This echoes the claims

of Achebe and Mda that I addressed in previous sections, but Head goes a step further in

her attempt to fill out the specific content of what is to be learned from that identification.

What Elizabeth uncovers is a humanitarian theology, which becomes the central

component of Head's decentered humanist philosophy.

For Head, theorizing the human and theorizing God go hand in hand. The moral

orientation of both novels is based on the lessons of "the poor of Africa" (31), which

Elizabeth learns and shares. Although the image of African suffering is intimately

familiar to the humanitarian repertoire, Head changes its position within the equation.

Here, the humanitarian subject, typically defined by deficiency, is invested with divine

wisdom. In a conversation with her American friend, Tom, a Peace Corps volunteer,

Elizabeth explains,

> There's some such thing as black people's suffering being a summary of everything the philosophers and prophets ever said. They said: "Never think along lines of I and mine. It is death." But they said it prettily, under the shade of Bodhi trees. It made no impact on mankind in general. It was for an exclusive circle of followers. Black people learnt that lesson brutally because they were the living victims of the greed inspired by I and mine and to hell with you, dog. Where do you think their souls are, then, after centuries of suffering? They're ahead of Buddha and Jesus and can dictate the terms for the future, not for any exclusive circle but for mankind in general. (134)

A Question of Power links the humanitarian discourse of long suffering to that of major

world religions. Head suggests that the best ethical possibilities for a new humanism lie

with those who are not consulted—humanitarianism's recipient populations—and places

them in the position not only of epistemic privilege but religious authority. They can see

the moral demands of the future and articulate them to the well-meaning but often

insensitive humanitarians who show up in their villages. In a field that is dominated by

international "experts,"[33] Head turns from professionalized knowledge to a kind of

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[33] On the flooding of various international "experts" into the third world, see Escobar, chapter 2.

spiritual wisdom, and in doing so suggests the power of religious modalities for thinking about greed, inequity, and interpersonal care.

Following "the call," Elizabeth passes on this wisdom. When she finishes explaining to Tom her philosophy of "mankind in general," rooted in the ongoing history of African suffering, the outcome is depicted as a scene of conversion: Tom "had a way of sailing straight up to heaven when anything touched his heart. He turned towards her a face flaming with light. He said under his breath: 'Oh, oh, oh. That's right. Yes, that's right' " (135). Tom experiences a kind of religious awakening, propelling him toward heaven, lighting up his face, reversing the direction of the standard conversion narrative. Here the foreign humanitarian is converted to a local version of universal humanism founded not on reason but on reverence. Head thus replaces the hubristic reasoning subject of humanism with a humble, caring one as the ideal. Reason (that capacity that was supposed to bring man to his pinnacle) is not what builds the brotherhood of mankind. Capitalist and colonialist violence are, in some sense, reasonable insofar as self-interest is reasonable. Greed does follow logic. What is needed for a genuine form of international community, then, is not reason but reverence, not secularism but a renewed and redirected sense of the sacred.[34]

The religious dimension lies not only in the form of conversion but in the content of the belief system which Elizabeth advocates. In *A Question of Power* Head poses the fundamental questions of religion:

What is love?

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[34] For a fuller exploration of "the impulse to reopen relations with the religious," see McClure's introduction to *Partial Faiths.* He explains that this impulse returns, "as it always has, when worldly life becomes intolerable. And it returns with a specific, historically supercharged force, as secular modernity's promises of peace, prosperity, and progress fail to materialize and as reason itself begins to undermine secular rationalism's claims to exclusive authority on matters of truth" (10).

> Who is God?
> If I cry, who will have compassion on me as my suffering is the suffering of others? (70)

The text is an exploration of the nature of God and the implications for humans and their relations to both God and to one another, and Elizabeth wrestles with these questions throughout. Whereas Head's answers do not add up to any orthodox doctrine—certainly not to the Christianity missionaries taught her—she does turn to fundamental ideas of the Bible in order to articulate her own theology. The Christian elements of this theology also mingle with Buddhist and Hindu beliefs in which Head had a long-standing interest.[35] Thus the sources for Head's religiosity are multilayered and creatively mixed. Even as she affirms biblical doctrine, Head is analyzing it within that broader framework. Although "Christianity and formal church going were never going to be an expansive way of life for me," she explains, "I value that vivid, great short story teller, Jesus Christ, and the foundation he laid for such terms as mankind, the human race and love of one's neighbour" (*Woman* 96). A critically selective version of Christian humanism thus permeates her novels as well as her essays. She proclaims a partial faith, to use John McClure's apt term. Like postsecular narratives more broadly, Heads novels "affirm the urgent need for a turn toward the religious even as they reject (in most instances) the familiar dream of a full return to an authoritative faith" (McClure, *Partial Faiths* 6). For Head, particular orientations of religious consciousness are needed including moral seriousness, a focus on universal love, and a posture of reverence.

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[35] In *Living on a Horizon: Bessie Head and the Politics of Imagining,* Desiree Lewis centralizes the issue of spirituality in Head's work which has otherwise received little critical attention. She argues that "spirituality shapes her distinctive notions of humanism and explorations of subjectivity and consciousness. Head consequently invests spirituality with a powerful critical force" (11). Head's personal exploration of Eastern thought is fleshed out in Gillian Stead Eilersen's biography of Head.

When Rain Clouds Gather, with its straightforward narrative form, does not strike the philosophical pitch of *A Question of Power*, but it too draws us into a religious consideration of human suffering. To harness reverence, it is necessary to define the god deserving of it. This brings us to a third moment of conversion which connects humanitarianism directly to questions of divinity. The scene occurs when Gilbert questions his own humanitarian impulse and universalist faith:

> What was he looking for? What was he doing? Agriculture? The need for a poor country to catch up with the Jonses in the rich countries? Should superhighways and skyscrapers replace the dusty footpaths and thorn scrub? It might be what he had in mind; at least, he said this to excuse himself for the need to live in a hurricane of activity. But the real life he had lived for three years had been dominated by the expression on Dinorego's face, and God and agriculture were all mixed up together after these three years. Yet it was a real God this who stalked his footsteps along the dusty pathways, who listened with quiet interest to the discussions on agriculture. Gilbert had no clear explanation of how he had become certain of this, but there was a feeling of great goodness in this country. (*Rain Clouds* 214)

This scene combines a faltering faith in progress—represented by those superhighways and skyscrapers—with a new faith in the god who seems to reside in those dusty footpaths and in a poor old man like Dinorego. Gilbert's Western-centric agenda gives way to a new reverence for this place; the secular gods of the West are displaced by "great goodness of this country." There is a version of transcendence in his kind of work, but it is not attached to Gilbert himself nor to the grand project of improving Africa; rather, the transcendent lies within the dusty local footpaths and the bare feet that walk them daily. In poor, rural Botswana, Gilbert—a secular humanitarian—finds God. He too is a convert.[36]

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[36] In an essay entitled "God and the Underdog," Head describes her own encounter with the British volunteer on whom Gilbert's character, at least in this scene, is based. He is "deeply moved by a vision of God through an old Batswana man" (*Woman* 45-6).

All this talk of God, it must be noted, is accompanied by frequent warnings against the very concept of God. For example, Elizabeth is "appalled" and "frightened" by the phrase, "Glory be to God on high," because it "implie[s] that there was still something up there, unseen, unknown to account for" (109), and when people act on behalf of God on high, they all too often disregard the human beings around them. Yet rather than claiming that there is no God, Elizabeth relocates the divine, bringing it from heaven down to earth: "God is people. There's nothing up there. It's all down here" (109). In some ways this sounds like secularization, but I would argue that something quite different is going on here. Secular humanism addresses the problem of God with a philosophy that says "It's all down here," but this does not, in fact, escape the dangers of "God on high." In shifting the central determinant of history from God to man, humanism gives man complete power, tempting him to transcendence. Head is just as wary of men acting as God as she is of men acting on behalf of a distant God in heaven. Men who aspire to become gods themselves have no reverence for others, and thus they generate suffering. To be transcendent in this sense is to aim for ascendency over other men, a move exemplified by both the "big man" of postcolonial authority and the humanitarian who poses as a savior.[37]

Thus, within secular humanism, the elimination of God does not eliminate the *problem* of God but merely transfers it with serious consequences for humanity. As Hardt and Negri put it, "*There is a strict continuity between the religious thought that accords a power above nature to God and the modern 'secular' thought that accords that same power above nature to Man. . . . Like God, too, this transcendent figure of Man leads*

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[37] Kurtz is prime example of that version of man's transcendence. Through this critique, Head offers another perspective on the mission "heroes" I addressed in chapter 1.

quickly to the imposition of social hierarchy and domination" (91, italics in original). To

be transcendent is to identify oneself with God and thus to dis-identify with ordinary

human beings on earth, particularly the poor and suffering. Head associates this form of

transcendence with Solomon of the Old Testament:

> Sometimes a man's God was like Solomon and he decked himself up in gold and
> he built a house that was a hundred cubits in length and fifty cubits in breadth and
> thirty cubits in height. Gold candlesticks, cherubims, and pomegranates adorned
> this house, which had forty bathrooms. And there were bowls and snuffers and
> spoons and censers and door hinges of pure gold. All that the followers of
> Solomon could do was to gape and marvel and chronicle these wonders in minute
> detail. Even Solomon's wisdom took secondary place to his material possessions
> and dazzling raiments. (*Rain Clouds* 215)

Head links Solomon to the beneficiaries of empire; of course this applies to both Africans

and Europeans but she is more focused on those African inheritors of the postcolony

whose wealth defies the limitations of human consumption, those figures who exemplify

a phenomenon Tejumola Olaniyan has described as the "postcolonial incredible"—"too

improbable, astonishing, and extraordinary to be believed" ("Living" 2). This description

of Solomon is taken from I Kings, which does indeed chronicle in minute detail the

splendor of the house—the measurements in cubits, the cherubim carvings, the seamless

overlay of gold. Much like the novel's paramount chief who "lived off the slave labour of

the poor" (23), "King Solomon conscripted forced labor out of all Israel; the levy

numbered thirty thousand men" (*New Oxford Annotated Bible*, I Kings 5:13). The golden

Chevrolet with which Head will fill out this description is not, of course, a biblical

reference but a postcolonial update.

This version of human aspiration for transcendence has often appeared in literary

representations of the postcolony, figured in both the physical expansion of postcolonial

leaders and their excessive projects of splendor akin to those of Solomon.[38] I am

reminded of a scene in Ngũgĩ's *Devil on the Cross* (1987) which might elucidate the

problem-space at hand. The scene occurs within an international gathering of modern

thieves in which each man present argues for why he is the greatest thief of all. The final

testimony comes from a wealthy Kenyan who has benefitted incredibly from "The Holy

Trinity of theft: Grabbing, Extortion, and Confiscation. If you find anything belonging to

the masses, don't leave it behind," he explains (*Devil* 177). His speech combines a lament

with a proposal. He has come up against what he sees as the problem of human

universality and he hopes to transcend it:

> Whenever I, Nditika wa Ngũũnji, contemplate my extraordinary wealth, I ask
> myself sadly several searching questions. With all my property, what do I have, as
> a human being, that a worker, or a peasant, or a poor man does not have? I have
> one mouth, just like the poor; I have one belly, just like the poor; I have one heart,
> just like the very poor; and I have one…er, you know what I mean, just one like
> the poorest of men. (179-80)

The limitation of the human body, by this description, is not what separates the rich from

the poor, but what equalizes them. Humanity might be defined by the fact that we all

need certain things—food, water, shelter—but also by the fact that we can only consume

so much. This has implications for self-conception and for collective identification. For

the modern thief of Ngũgĩ's novel, it seems a brutal irony:

> I have enough money and property to supply food for a thousand people, but I am
> satisfied with one plateful, just like other people. I have enough money to wear a
> hundred suits at one time, but I can only put on one pair of trousers, one shirt, one
> jacket, just like other people. I have enough money to buy fifty lives if lives were
> sold in the market, but I have only one heart and one life, just like other people…

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[38] Ngũgĩ's latest novel, *The Wizard of the Crow*, contains noteworthy examples. The leaders of a fictional
African nation announce a project to "raise a building to the very gates of heaven so that the Ruler could
call on God daily to say good morning or good evening or simply how was your day today, God?" (16).
They promise that benefits will "trickle down to all citizens" (17), but benefits flow only to the Ruler who
physically balloons over the course of the novel until he fills a room.

> So, seeing that I have only one mouth, one belly, one heart, one life and one cock, what's the difference between the rich and the poor? What's the point of robbing others? (180)

In hopes of putting his wealth to better use, Nditika offers a fanciful solution: "in this country we should have a factory for manufacturing human parts like mouths, bellies, hearts and so one, spare parts for the human body. . . . We could purchase immortality with our money and leave death as the prerogative of the poor" (180). He wants to solidify the distinction between rich and poor, but the universality of restricted consumption prevents that. Since his proposal is perversely utopian—and he cannot purchase substitute parts to transcend his physical limitation—his previous conclusion remains: "What's the point of robbing others?" This vision of humanity defined by limitation and deficiency is typically attached to the body stripped of its earthly trappings—the body in need, the "target" of humanitarian assistance.[39] But Ngũgĩ here clarifies that this notion of the body as limit is definitive not only of the excesses of poverty, but the excesses of wealth. This human limitation—perceived at the margins of excess—forces identification with the poor and thus a rethinking of material possession and distribution. There is, within this distorted prayer for excess, an alternative ethics of sufficiency based on the inherent limitations of the human body—not the body in need but the body that only needs so much.

Head's own theology—a philosophy of God and humanity—places supreme value on the ordinary, the simple, the merely sufficient. The ethical injunction of her work—"be the same as others in heart; just be a person" (*Question* 26)—is drawn from the identification with the poor to which Elizabeth, Tom, and Gilbert are called, an identification for which Head uses biblical precedent. She bases the ethics of sufficiency

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[39] For a reading of this problematic definition, see Festa, "Humanity without Feathers."

on Christ as a god with no shoes and no place to lay his head, not unlike the hungry

peasants of Botswana:

> Then came a God who was greater than Solomon, but he walked around with no shoes, in rough cloth, wandering up and down the dusty footpaths in the hot sun, with no bed on which to rest his head. And all that the followers of this God could do was to chronicle, in minute detail, the wonder and marvel of his wisdom.
>   There were two such destinies which faced Africa—that of the followers of Solomon and that of a man with no shoes. But the man with no shoes had been bypassed, scorned, and ridiculed while the Solomons stalked the land in their golden Chevrolets. Who would eat then if all the gold and pomegranates went into the house of Solomon? Who would bathe if all the water went into his forty bathrooms? Who would have time to plough if everyone had to join the parade to watch Solomon pass by in his Chevrolet of molten gold, his top hat and silk shirt, glittering in the African sun? For that's all that Solomon wants—a lot of gapers and marvellers. And things were mixed up because there were too many Solomons and too many men with no shoes, and no one could be certain who would win out in the end—except that the man with no shoes was often too hungry to stand in the parade these days. (215-16)

This model of asceticism responds to the excesses of neocolonial life—"too many

Solomons and too many men with no shoes." Head's representation foregrounds the

materiality of Christ's position, dramatizing the ironic notion that a messiah would come

in a form so closely resembling the humanitarian subject. That in itself is a call to respect

those who are often seen merely as targets and as numbers in the vast projects of the

International Community. This representation, focused on simplicity and asceticism,

reframes the idea of divinity and chastens the grandeur of the narrative of salvation.

Redemption lies, contrary to expectation, in the humble form of a shoeless peasant. The

lesson Head takes from the biblical description of Christ is not about his death but his

everyday life, not about salvation but sufficiency, an antidote to the transcendent man of

postcolonial power and to the man turned savior of the Mission narrative. The ethics of

sufficiency is divine in that it does not seek a position above others, as is implicit in the

ethics of salvation, but to "just be a person" who only needs—and thus only takes—so

much. In the context of the neocolonial politics of hoarding (an international, not merely African, phenomenon), there is something radical in the pursuit of just enough, something messianic in the ethics of sufficiency.

The God with no shoes is also a model for the thorough identification with the poor that Head is calling for. If God is like the poor, then one offers reverence to God through reverence for them. Again Head is following biblical precedent: as Jesus instructed his disciples, "just as you did it to one of the least of these who are members of my family, you did it to me" (Matthew 25:40). In other words, there is a close identification, even to the point of interchangeability, between God and the poor. Head's postcolonial humanism thus operates on the basis of a simultaneous deflation and exaltation of humanity. Even as they dethrone the distant God in heaven, these novels propose the de-secularization of man. Head explains elsewhere that "I have used the word God, in a practical way, in my books. I cannot find a substitute word for all that is most holy but I have tried to deflect people's attention into offering to each other what they offer to an Unseen Being in the sky. When people are holy to each other, war will end, human suffering will end" (*Woman* 99). Reverence for the otherworldly, for something above or beyond humanity, has often produced violence, but Head's earthly reverence aims to prevent it: "the basic error seemed to be a relegation of all things holy to some unseen Being in the sky. Since man was not holy to man," she writes, "he could be tortured for his complexion, he could be misused, degraded and killed" (*Question* 206). Since people are willing to commit their lives and their resources to an "unseen Being in the sky," Head seeks to turn that reverence to human beings themselves, and she articulates this theology through Elizabeth: "There is only one God and his name is Man.

And Elizabeth is his prophet" (*Question* 206). Head makes a subtle but significant distinction between man claiming to be god and her own claim that god is man.[40]

It strikes me that the idea behind these recommendations, this ethical model of being, is not naively utopian; it doesn't expect to transform the world into one big happy "family of man." Head has shown mankind to be far too complex for that and far too greedy. She isn't hoping that Joas Tsepe, for example, will be miraculously transformed, giving up the path of Solomon-like aspirations to step into the dusty tracks of the God with no shoes. Rather it is for people of good intentions who often get mixed up in the ugliness of the Mission narrative—in the way it segregates the world while also claiming its oversimplified unity, in its willingness to destroy in order to convert, in its blindness to people that accompanies its humanist rhetoric, in its unwavering confidence and triumphalist approach to progress. The claims here are smaller, but it is an ethics which might transform ignorant goodwill into critically minded goodwill. Even Camilla, it turns out, is capable of change. When she hears Elizabeth's critique of her racialism, she takes it as transformative advice. Afterward, Elizabeth "met a totally changed woman with a soft, subdued air, as near as a woman of her type could ever come to brooding reflection," comparable to Eugene (*Question* 86). She seems to be converted. Head recommends a decentered, desecularized humanism as an ethical and theological orientation for people like Camilla—of good but often ignorant will—as an alternative structure of thinking and believing to that of the Mission narrative, available for those who seek to find it.

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[40] The idea is summed up in Michael Ondaatje's *Anil's Ghost*, in an underlined passage in a book about Carl Jung, found in a hospital run by humanitarian volunteers: "*Jung was absolutely right about one thing. We are occupied by gods. The mistake is to identify with the god occupying you*" (230).

The Earthly and the Enchanted

This move to desecularization contrasts with the task of the critical mission novel as elaborated in the previous chapter. Ngũgĩ and Achebe have shown how mission students and anticolonial fighters took otherworldly claims about justice in the next world and made them secular and worldly, calling for "a real heaven on their own earth" and thus secularizing heaven by materializing it. In a related but distinct move, Head brings heaven to earth in a practice of enchantment. The texts I analyzed in the chapter 2 addressed the demand to be treated as human and not merely be called human; they attempted to bring the implications of humanity, the idea of being made in the image of God, into a worldly politics, in some sense disenchanting the notion of humanity and secularizing its implications. Head thinks about bringing heaven to earth in a different way; she desecularizes that project without dematerializing it, insisting on the necessity of the sacred for this world. As opposed to their worldly heaven, Head posits a heavenly world.

Relocating the divine responds to the inequities inscribed in the fiction of the International Community, and it might also offer a way of reframing the turn to enchantment in contemporary anglophone African fiction. The move away from social realism toward what is often described as magical realism—exemplified by Zakes Mda[41]—might be better understood as reverent realism, drawing on indigenous African views of the spirit world as well as world religions. Mda offers enchanted visions of both the urban and rural poor from tin and cardboard shacks that glow in multicolored

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[41] For an exploration of magical realism in the works of Zakes Mda, situated within a broader discussion of its application in postcolonial literature, see Barker. David Attwell analyzes Mda's work in order to understand what he sees as "the experimental turn" in contemporary South African fiction. See *Rewriting Modernity,* chapter 6.

splendor to miraculous conceptions on horseback. In *The Heart of Redness,* when

Camagu moves to Qolorha, he is driven by an enchanted mode of desire for a woman he

likens to a "mother spirit" (28), not with a divine intervention of his own but seeking a

kind of divinity in the South African countryside. Although Camagu arrives in Qolorha as

a foreigner with secular expertise, it is his reverence for local people, practices, and belief

systems that earns him their respect (98-99). His postcolonial humanism locates divinity

and spiritual wisdom in a rural village of southern Africa. Secular humanitarianism

contains many traces of the religious missions which preceded it. Head and Mda, in their

reverent forms of humanism, critique that religious residue while also replacing it with

new ways of encountering the divine. Both contribute to a project of revising the

humanist foundation which guides humanitarian action, and in changing the

philosophical base they help us think about how to transform the structure built upon it.

- 4 -

The Power of Giving:
Distribution, Domination, and the Dilemmas of Aid

> But the call he heard was one to which he could give no denial.
> For Christ and for Africa he felt that he must be willing to suffer the loss of all things.
> – John Crisholm Lambert, *The Romance of Missionary Heroism*

> What would you do if there was a child right in front of you sitting all alone, crying in pain and hunger,
> near death from sickness? And what if all you had to do was reach into your pocket and pull out 50 cents
> to save that child's life? This is that child. And this is that moment. These two quarters.
> It's never been easier to save the life of a child.
> – UNICEF fundraising commercial

If the problem of the twentieth century was the problem of the color line as Du Bois so

memorably declared at its inception, postcolonial writers and thinkers have suggested that

the poverty line would come to dominate the twenty-first.[1] Decolonization, Mahmood

Mamdani has argued, brought about deracialization without democratization (*Citizen and*

Subject). In other words, the black elite inherited formerly white positions of power

without the thorough restructuring of colonial society that had been promised. As Frantz

Fanon predicted in the era of decolonization, promises of a better life for all would give

way to a postcolony which he foresaw to be "only an empty shell, a crude and fragile

travesty of what might have been" (*Wretched* 148).[2] Ongoing inequity is exhibited in the

excessive wealth of the few and the deep poverty of the many, nations of "ten

millionaires and ten million beggars," in Mwangi wa Githinji's striking phrase.

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[1] On the explosive growth of poverty in recent years, see Davis, *Planet of Slums.* The statistics are indeed stunning.

[2] As I write, miners and truck drivers in South Africa are striking over precisely this disappointment. South Africa, that final horizon of white minority rule, has come to follow the pattern of postcolonial disillusionment in its own post-apartheid era. In October 2012, Linda Polgreen reported in *The New York Times* that "strikes are a common feature of life here. But this time seems to be different. While the unrest is specifically about pay, it has tapped a deep well of anger among the employed, who are frustrated with the African National Congress, which came to power in 1994 at the end of white rule promising a 'better life for all' " (5).

Accountable to the few and not the many under the politics of personal rule, the "state is not a tool for public development but for private 'eating' and for rewarding support networks" (Leonard and Straus 4). In the wake of decolonization, African fiction has represented the disappointment resulting from broken promises of redistribution. Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o, Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie, and Ben Okri have compared the bellies of Big Men, round from overindulgence, to those of hungry children, round from malnutrition. Awi Kwei Armah and Yvonne Vera have shown the arrival of the postcolony to be saturated with a sense of non-arrival, an ongoing waiting room for real transformation. Zakes Mda, Bessie Head, and Chris Abani have focused on the men, women, and children who have been excluded from the reshuffling of postcolonial and post-apartheid power. The changes that took place with the fall of empire were incomplete because they were not inclusive: the politics of "private 'eating' " did not meaningfully incorporate everyone, leaving many without enough to eat.

Poverty and hunger have indeed come to define the image of Africa within the international imagination, making over the dark continent as the poor continent. Images of postcolonial insufficiency are familiar to humanitarianism in particular, demarcating a shared problem-space with writers of African fiction, albeit not a shared set of answers. The purpose of the Mission narrative has evolved from saving African souls to saving African bodies. The "target" is not savagery but starvation. An "Official American" in Norman Rush's short story collection *Whites*, captures this sentiment when she describes Botswana as "a poor relation, someone nice who refuses gifts at first, someone you like" (19). It is a sentiment often applied to the continent at large, a poor relation within the global "family of man." The transnational third sector has expanded with the decline of

the postcolonial state; where governments have failed to provide for their citizens, non-

profit and non-governmental organizations from elsewhere have stepped in—a

phenomenon Alex de Waal calls the internationalization of social welfare.[3] Within this

globalized framework of responsibility, African improvement is everyone's task.

Some have seen that as a salutary development—a positive broadening of our

moral universe[4]—and it does have a certain logic to it; if nationalism is not the answer, if

state sovereignty fails to guarantee rights to citizens, then a post-national turn seems to be

in order. But as nice as the internationalization of social welfare is in theory, the question

of how to turn that sense of responsibility into an actual system of distribution has yet to

be meaningfully answered. Therefore, for many critics, this has been yet another story of

failure and disappointment, and they caution against the optimistic language of

international community and universal human rights.[5] Too often the source of optimism

"is not an improvement in people's lives but an improvement in human rights norms"

(Rieff 15), the idea rather than the manifestation of a better world. As it has played out,

the internationalization of social welfare raises more questions than it answers. If

responsibility does lie beyond the state, who should provide for whom and on what basis?

Is ensuring the basic standards of living to a population an obligation or a gesture of

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[3] On this rise of NGOs, see Dibie and Barrow. For a broader historical narrative of humanitarianism in its various forms, see Barnett.

[4] Michael Ignatieff describes the global "narrative of compassion" as a sign of moral progress, distinctive of our time: "The idea that we might have obligations to human beings beyond our borders simply because we belong to the same species is a recent invention, the result of our awakening to the shame of having done so little to help the millions of strangers who died in this century's experiments in terror and extermination" (*The Warrior's Honor* 4-5). This idea, he argues, has grown since the end of the Second World War. Although it doesn't represent a complete moral arrival, Ignatieff reads it as a substantial transformation and improvement: "Weak as the narrative of compassion and moral commitment may be, it is infinitely stronger than it was only fifty years ago. We are scarcely aware of the extent to which our moral imagination has been transformed since 1945 by the growth of a language and practice of moral universalism, expressed above all in a shared human rights culture" (5).

[5] See Shivji's *The Concept of Human Rights in Africa* for a view of the tensions around applying Western-generated human rights discourse within the African context.

benevolence? If aid responds to persistent inequities that characterize the globe, does it actually ameliorate that inequity? Humanitarian assistance isn't a clear solution but an ongoing dilemma. Wangari Maathai laments, "If postindependence aid had been provided to Africa in a manner designed to empower the economies and institutions of the continent and not to instill a long-term dependency, the future of Africa might have been very different" (76). While aid ostensibly addresses the injustice of Africa's place-in-the-world, it has been ineffective at transforming it, often reinforcing rather than amending inequity. Humanitarianism thus finds itself at an impasse.

The novels I turn to in this chapter help us to think from within the dilemmas of humanitarianism without suggesting there is any way out; rather, to understand the vexed terrain of international assistance, we have to think at, within, and around the impasse. They resist the problematic "tendency to retreat into the obvious, the tendency to be frightened by the richness of the world" as well as its messiness (Achebe, *Country* 59). I will ask how the critical mission novel has negotiated the dilemmas of aid, which, these texts reveal, were inherent to missions all along. Although the internationalization of social welfare is connected to the collapse of postcolonial hopes, the literature of missions has been working through this problem as it inundated colonial Africa as well. I will explore the role that giving—that fundamental structuring principle of work in the mission field—has played in narratives of African improvement, and how it has been problematized and rethought in literature. I will look first at Tsitsi Dangarembga's *Nervous Conditions* (1988), also briefly returning to Ngũgĩ's *Dreams in a Time of War,* to show how their responses to religious missions engaged questions of the material world and foresaw the attractions and limitations of humanitarian aid. Dangarembga

draws out the dialectic between emancipation and domination in aid relationships, meditating on the unresolvable tension between idealist desire and urgent need. Philip Caputo's *Acts of Faith* (2005) then takes us into a postcolonial era that looks disturbingly similar to the age of empire. Like Dangarembga, Caputo chastens the expectations of aid, but with a focus on the relief worker through whom he cultivates a darker, but less damaging, humanitarian sensibility. Finally, Nuruddin Farah's *Gifts* (1993) enables further interrogation of the structure of giving. Expressing a desire to hold onto notions of responsibility and assistance, Farah suggests that what we call giving is often a misnomer for more devious kinds of transactions. Alternative structures of global care might be found by changing the terms of exchange and the terminology with which it is described.

The problem of giving and receiving is one of the central concerns of the critical mission novel in both its religious and humanitarian forms, revealing continuities as they confront an ongoing, yet evolving, set of problems. This chapter brings literature and sociopolitical debates about aid into conversation in order that each might open up new ways of interpreting the other. The literary mode itself serves to enrich and nuance the tone of humanitarian discourse, which, as numerous critics point out, obscures the nearly immobilizing complexities of its practice in regards to giving and receiving, empowerment and dependency, control and self-sufficiency. Chinua Achebe says it best: "I am not a sociologist, a political scientist, a human rights lawyer, or a government official. My aim is not to provide all the answers but to raise questions, and perhaps to cause a few headaches in the process" (*Country* 228). In the pages that follow, I intend to chart those questions and the headaches that accompany them.

Thinking at the Impasse

The frank discussion of humanitarianism is a discussion of failure. Even among its

advocates, the argument isn't generally about preserving the humanitarian system as it is,

but reforming it. Of course radical arguments go further, claiming that humanitarianism

serves as a mask for the interests of the powerful to the great detriment of its supposed

beneficiaries.[6] This takes both neo-Marxist and neoliberal forms exemplified by Issa

Shivji and Noam Chomsky on the one hand and Dambisa Moyo and William Easterly on

the other. Drawing on Chomsky's theory of humanitarian imperialism, Shivji describes

"international responsibility" (which he places in scare quotes) as an expression of "big-

power chauvinism" (54). Moyo argues that "Aid has been, and continues to be, an

unmitigated political, economic, and humanitarian disaster for most parts of the

developing world" (xix).[7] They share the conclusion that aid has hurt Africa rather than

helped and should be abolished, although it emerges from very different frameworks

which correspond to different alternatives. Among Africanist scholars, the neo-Marxist

critique has held more sway.[8] We arrive at a sticking point between the radical and

reformist arguments, which hangs on the question of whether humanitarian assistance is

good or bad for Africa:

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[6] Leslie Omoruyi has shown the motivations of powerful aid giving nations to be far more difficult to track in the post-Cold War era. He argues that during the Cold War the allocation of aid was based on strategies for containing communism; afterward, however, the correspondence between national interests and aid allocation has lost that clarity of correspondence, nor has it neatly fit the liberal claims for promoting democracy and eradicating poverty. By tracking exchanges of aid between governments, it becomes evident that motivations behind aid are much more difficult to ascertain than both advocates and critics suggest.

[7] Moyo's subject is government to government aid specifically, although she also critiques forms of humanitarian assistance that are not necessarily state driven, such as sending food or mosquito nets purchased outside of Africa.

[8] Historically, one of the most powerful arguments in shaping the discourse came from Walter Rodney's classic *How Europe Underdeveloped Africa* (1972). On the history of development theory and dependency theory which emerged in response, see Leys, *The Rise and Fall of Development Theory.*

> when one reads much of the literature on the 'development' industry, one finds oneself doubly dissatisfied—with the liberals whose only concern seems to be with directing or reforming an institution whose fundamental beneficence they take as given—and with the neo-Marxists, who seem satisfied to establish that the institutions of 'development' are part of a fundamentally imperialistic relation between center and periphery and take the matter to be thus settled. (Ferguson, *Anti-Politics* 13)

From this, Ferguson makes the simple but powerful statement that "the matter is not settled" (13). The texts I will explore in this chapter further unsettle it.

Another set of critics, including Ferguson, work within that less settled mode of critique, taking the radical line of thought to a more open end, suggesting that the completeness of such claims paints a misleading picture of a practice that is infinitely more vexed. Beginning from a realist sense that "[a]id exists and will not disappear" (de Waal, "Democratizing" 638) and that thus we must evaluate it on that basis, these critics seek to understand what it does, how it works within and upon the world, and how it might carry out its equalizing aims more effectively. The literature thus responds to a proliferation of questions about the functioning and efficacy of aid. If giving responds to an imbalance of resources, to what extent can it actually correct that and to what extent does it perpetuate inequity? What form should aid take? Money? Food? Infrastructure? Education? To whom should aid be given? Should it go through government or directly to those in need? And how should it be distributed? Should NGOs accept funds from governments or does that co-opt them with state interests? How much aid actually goes to intended recipients and how much is diverted? What kind of relation does it establish between donors and beneficiaries? Should humanitarian organizations be neutral in conflicts or is it necessary to take sides, and if so when? When does giving end up hurting? How can aid be made less harmful? In sum, the question of whether aid is good

or bad for Africa forestalls a myriad of questions that humanitarian organizations—and those who interact with them—are confronting. They are constantly coming up against points of impasse, but not with the singularity to which the "good" or "bad" question lends itself; for aid, dilemma is a state of being expressed in multiple, multisided ways.

Current theorists of humanitarianism are working beyond the boiled down stand-off, trying to think through and beyond the impasse to deal pragmatically with the very messy realities of humanitarian assistance and the situations to which it responds. To think about and ask questions of humanitarianism in terms of two-sided polarities is to misconstrue a mode of existence that is constantly defined by its doubleness:

> Is the history of humanitarianism defined by the humanization of politics or by the politicization of ethics? Is humanitarianism a romantic or a tragic figure? Does humanitarianism help emancipate the world's forlorn or contain them? Have humanitarian organizations and their leaders bettered the world, however slightly, or have they been compromised and co-opted by global forces that are bigger and stronger than them? Is the awe-inspiring growth of humanitarianism evidence of a more humane, just, and cosmopolitan global society or of the timeless capacity of international politics to absorb principled movements and transform them into traitors to their cause? The answer is: yes. Humanitarianism is all these things and contains all these possibilities. (Barnett 15)

What emerges from this growing body of scholarship from academics and experienced aid workers is an insistence on understanding and evaluating humanitarianism in terms of dilemma. Like the religious missions from which it emerged, humanitarianism resides at the tension point between emancipation and domination, helping and hurting, as it operates within situations without ideal options available. This tension becomes particularly acute around narratives of improvement based on giving.

There is, by and large, a consensus that actually existing humanitarianism[9] has been a disappointment. To critically imagine an effective humanitarianism requires a confrontation of its limits; arguments about how to improve the efficacy of aid, thus generally begin from an analysis of why it has been so ineffective thus far. One of the predominant sentiments within this literature is that humanitarian discourse needs to be cut down to size. The Mission narrative makes claims that blow expectations of charitable giving way out of proportion. It celebrates giving as an adequate solution to global inequity, even a satisfactory replacement for government services and citizen entitlements. It conveys a sense that generosity is both noble and necessary, and it directly links the act of the gift—a $15 monthly donation, for example—to the achievement of real, dramatic improvement. UNICEF promises that by donating just 50 cents a day, you can save the life of a child.[10] In some cases, the narrative valorizes grand sacrifice on the part of aid workers and donors; in others it emphasizes the simplicity of giving in order to encourage the donor base.[11]

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[9] This concept draws on the terminology of "actually existing Communism," which has been used to distinguish the current reality from an ideal form. Speaking of "actually existing humanitarianism" enables defenders of humanitarianism to confront the reality of its existence in the world without rejecting the potential of the idea behind it. See de Waal's introduction to *Famine Crimes* and Rieff, 273.

[10] Meanwhile, the president and CEO of the US Fund for UNICEF earns $454,855 a year. This is the figure provided on the UNICEF website (as of 2013), refuting claims that the salary is even higher. In Philip Caputo's *Horn of Africa,* a character being recruited for a development position asks, "What does a savior get paid these days?" (67), and the question is apt. Executive-level "saviors" are paid lavishly, placing them well into the top 1% of American wage earners. For aid workers on the ground, there are huge differences in salary and benefits between expatriate (typically Western) employees and nationals. See Fassin, 515. For a comparison of the power of international and local NGOs in Africa, see Michael.

[11] Sam Childers' autobiography, *Another Man's War: The True Story of One Man's Battle to Save Children in the Sudan*, is a contemporary version of the triumphalist Mission narrative and a flagrant example of the inflated rhetoric of sacrifice. After he and his wife run out of money, "because we were sending everything we had to Africa" (68), he solidifies his heroic, martyr-like persona: "How do you look your wife in the eye—your life partner who depends on you and trusts you to support her and keep her safe—and say, 'Well, yes, by some great miracle we do have the money to pay the mortgage, but I'm going to send it to our ministry instead, which means we'll soon be out on the street'? I slammed the notice down on the table and bawled, 'They can have the house! Send the money to Africa!'" (69).

One strand of response has targeted those big claims for transformation, calling for the chastening of humanitarian promises and expectations. Giving is supposed to save people, to change the world, to usher in a new order of global care. In *A Bed for the Night: Humanitarianism in Crisis,* David Rieff worries that this is a "waste of hope" (28). He explores how the seemingly unimpeachable idea of moral obligation of the more fortunate to the less is actually more complex, going back to the entanglement of abolitionism and the reinterpretation of international law, missionary work and the colonial enterprise, drawing a parallel between "the white man's burden" and humanitarian discourse today. Rieff is particularly concerned with the way the grand promises of humanitarian intervention are becoming increasingly entangled with militarism. He reminds us that, at its core, humanitarianism is defined by very modest assurances, taking his title and epigraph from Bertolt Brecht's poem which shares that message:

> It won't change the world
> It won't improve relations among men
> It will not shorten the age of exploitation
> But a few men have a bed for the night.

He thus attempts to chip away at the triumphalist discourse which has reached its pinnacle in a time of "humanitarian war." Yet this isn't a full blown rejection of humanitarian logic. A bed for the night isn't much, but it is better than nothing. In a related vein of critique, Alex de Waal, argues that "most current humanitarian activity in Africa is useless or damaging and should be abandoned" but that it is nonetheless "too noble an enterprise" to be entirely neglected (*Famine* xvi). While de Waal is less pessimistic than Rieff and argues that with radical reform humanitarianism could achieve more, he contends that its transformation must begin from a reduced estimation of its

capacity and effects. He recommends that "[t]he first maxim must be do no harm. Aid at least can shed its illusory aspirations and provide some modest material benefits in the context of African political initiatives" ("Democratizing" 639). This suggest that a chastened aid narrative, combined with a heightened awareness to the damage goodwill can do, is a necessary step toward creating a more effective mode of international assistance.

Fiona Terry has offered a useful amendment to the "do no harm" argument that has become familiar within the discourse of critical reform. She argues that aid not only promises too much but that it inevitably does a measure of harm: "doing no harm is not possible because humanitarian action will always generate winners and losers. The best that aid organizations can do is *minimize* the negative effects of their action" (224). Terry was the head of Médecins Sans Frontières (Doctors Without Borders) at the time when it pulled out of Rwanda due to diversion of aid, so she is keenly aware of this "inherent and inescapable paradox" (223) and of the ways in which the supposedly independent "humanitarian space" is never fully detached from the politics surrounding it. With that in mind, she too argues for a chastening of our expectations of humanitarian care, calling us to set our sights on a "second-best world": "We can never construct the best world in which our compassion can immediately translate into an end to suffering, but we can try to build a second-best world based on hard-headed assessments of needs and options" (216-17). This is a very worldly humanitarianism, recognizing that it operates not above politics in some otherworldly ethical realm, but in the non-utopian space of *this* world.

Aid is plagued by the problem of power, a key factor in producing that inevitable harm. Michael Barnett cautions that "Any 'ism' that arrives with promises of progress

must be closely watched for signs of domination over those whose lives are supposed to be bettered" (13). This certainly goes for humanitarianism, which "is defined by the paradox of emancipation and domination" (Barnett 11). It acts upon the basis of inequity and reinforces inequity, particularly through the structure of giving, which produces obligations and dependency among recipients as well as "feel-good moments that immunize onlookers from real action that can have tangible effects" (Barnett 34). The terms of that encounter are problematic from the start, and that uneven terrain of power generates additional ethical quandaries:

> Humanitarians frequently act without asking the recipients what they want, a neglect that they generally justify on the grounds that time is urgent or that their needs are obvious. While humanitarians might claim that they do not violate anyone's liberty because they do not carry guns or use the force of law, they arrive in highly deprived environments with various privileges and resources that make any notion of consent inherently problematic. (Barnett 35)

That unevenness of power is not a reason not to act. This is the inevitable context of humanitarianism, but a better humanitarianism will not have entrenched inequity as its consequence. More effective practices of assistance will depend on changing that relationship. Tejumola Olaniyan puts it nicely when he says that the radically critical reading of NGOs—namely that they are "representatives of the hypocrisy of Western liberalism whose proboscis would suck you dry and then rub some Vaseline into the wound so that you can be available for more sucking"—"stays until NGOs begin to seriously address the fundamental inequity that, at the global level, structures the relations between Africa and the West" ("Postmodernity" 640). A set of arguments are

gathering around models of reform that aim, first and foremost, to address that

fundamental inequity.[12]

A more equalizing strategy for humanitarian organizations is blocked by their

non-accountability to the populations they serve. While changing that structure is crucial,

it is not necessarily within the interests of humanitarians themselves. De Waal's proposal

for a reformed model of aid takes inequity as its focus, explaining that an effective model

of humanitarian assistance "can only come about through radical efforts to change power

relations, in ways that may horrify much of the aid establishment" ("Democratizing"

639).[13] An American character in Norman Rush's *Whites* illustrates this in his

explanation of why development workers like to stay in Botswana within the unseemly

environment of "[d]rought [and] poor people":

> It's because it isn't our country and we can't help what happens. We can offer
> people advice and we get paid for it. We get good vacations, we eat off the top of
> the food chain, we get free housing. Hey!, but we're not responsible for what
> happens if Africa goes to hell, *because we've done our best.* Also, at the same
> time, we're not responsible for what happens in America, either, really—because,
> hey!, we weren't home when it happened. Say we get fifteen per cent compliance
> on birth control here, which is what we do get and which is terrific by Third
> World standards. O.K., *it's not enough*. But what can we do, we tried. We told
> them. But *we're too late.* We all know it, but somebody pays us to keep up the
> good work, so we say fine. (104)

There is a sense of inertia around changing this comfortable position. The problem is not

merely an issue of ideology; it is about the efficacy of aid. De Waal has shown that this

failure of accountability is responsible for the larger failure of humanitarianism. Aid

organizations are not obligated or accountable to the people on whose behalf they work:

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[12] For related arguments which have unfolded since the late 80s, see Hellinger, *Aid for Just Development*;
Escobar, *Encountering Development,* chapter 2; Koehn and Ojo, *Making Aid Work*; de Waal,
"Democratizing the Aid Encounter"; Michael, *Undermining Development*; and Dibie, *Non-Governmental
Organizations (NGOs) and Sustainable Development in Africa*.
[13] See also de Waal, chapter 4 in *Famine Crimes,* on soft and hard humanitarian interests.

"their presence is a privilege and not a duty" giving their supposed beneficiaries "very little leverage" (de Waal, *Famine* 82) and their projects, very little effect. Rather than being driven by local demands for structural change, they are driven by the need for donations and are thus accountable to donors whose favor they solicit. It is necessary, then, to change the relational structure of aid as well as the narrative that produces that structure and is also reproduced by it.

The problematic direction of accountability is particularly relevant for the kind of narrative and image that gets built up around Africans in need. Representation of poverty, hunger, and disease are crafted for donors, even if they are intended to raise funds for the benefit of the recipients. The African subjects of aid typically lack a voice in the humanitarian process and in its representational armature—the images of frail, desperate, hungry, silent people that we are inevitably familiar with. In these narratives, targeted at donors, the actual social relations that create and perpetuate poverty are obscured and left untouched:

> This model does not question the causes of poverty, either general or specific for the people it is meant to help. It does not pay attention to what people are doing for themselves or ask what they need. It is founded on a story that treats people as if they were just part of a natural landscape washed ashore by forces that aid agencies do not participate in or have any control over. (Mathers 23)

Teju Cole describes the narrative and the structure of assistance associated with it as the "White Savior Industrial Complex" which sees need but "no need to reason out the need for the need" (1). In other words, the framework for understanding and structurally responding to poverty is missing. Cole thus calls for thinking "constellationally," suggesting that the literary discourse is needed to override the oversimplification that characterizes the Mission narrative. In his response to the Kony 2012 campaign—an

instance of the Mission narrative gone viral—he writes that "a certain kind of language is too infrequently seen in our public discourse. I am a novelist. I traffic in subtleties, and my goal in writing a novel is to leave the reader not knowing what to think" (1). The novel, I hope to show, offers a complex model and nuanced language for thinking at the impasse.

Religious Missions and Material Conditions

Missions have long confronted the issues that secular humanitarianism does today. There are striking continuities in both form and content—and in the problematic patterns of power they generate and reinforce. As David Rieff explains, "In practical terms, all the elements of the humanitarian enterprise—tending the sick, improving sanitation and housing, and upgrading education—were fundamental to the enterprise of European missionaries in Asia, Africa, the Middle East, and Latin America" (64-5). In previous chapters, I have explored the tension writers have expressed about the tools and ideas which missions have offered for articulating African freedoms and universal forms of human inclusion. Now, I want to turn to the more pragmatic function of material provision, for it too is wrought with tension.

Within anglophone African writing, missions have been viewed as a channel for modernity but a troubled modernity of Western imperial origin. Postcolonial thinkers have shown the progress-based model of modernity to be deeply problematic as it locates Africa in the space of the backwards, the primeval, the always not-yet-modern. Yet, as James Ferguson argues, we must consider the fact that much of Africa is not only alternatively modern but unequally so—modernity's promise a higher standard of living

remains disproportionately concentrated in the global North. Ferguson claims that, in the

African context, modernity has consistently been envisioned not only on a horizontal axis

of backward and forward in time, but also (and more powerfully) on a vertical axis of

global standing: "yearnings for cultural convergence with an imagined global standard

can mark not simply mental colonization or capitulation to cultural imperialism, but an

aspiration to overcome categorical subordination" (Ferguson, *Global Shadows* 20).

Missions have tapped directly into this desire. To be modern is to possess status in the

world and the privileges that are inseparable from it like access to healthcare, sanitation,

education, nutritious food, and safe housing. Even when becoming modern means

narrowing the cultural gap between Africa and the West, it is important to recognize that

within that gesture there also lies an impulse toward closing the gap in social and material

privilege: "[t]aking a hard, and sometimes uncomfortable look at African aspirations to

'likeness' with real and imagined Western standards can help to point out serious gaps in

some of our most cherished understandings of cultural diversity and global order,

forc[ing] an unsettling shift from the question of cultural *difference* to the question of

material *inequality*" (20).Thus, participation in cultural forms of modernity disseminated

from the West—often through missions—gets interwoven with claims about material

justice and demands for a more equitable place-in-the-world, a phrase Ferguson uses to

signal location as well as social station.

I want to take up Ferguson's argument and adapt it slightly. Part of what his work

demonstrates is that multiple processes are at work within these cross-cultural

transactions, and to see only one—in this case cultural homogenization—obscures the

multifaceted nature of the interaction that is in fact taking place. In the case of religious

missions, African subjects have negotiated this relationship between a troubling cultural process and a desirable material one. At stake in the cultural critique isn't just homogenization or a loss of cultural diversity. It is also about the negotiation of power; to give up one's own culture in favor of another is to confer power on the cultural "giver." Therefore, it can be personally and politically compromising. Ferguson's argument about culture is also very useful for thinking about the kind of transaction that takes place in giving and receiving aid. It too involves a political compromise, a surrender of some agency, and yet it also offers the possibility of material improvement within an often desperate context. That is not to say that actually existing humanitarian aid solves the problem of material inequity; in the long run aid often perpetuates it. Yet while missions have reinforced inequity, they have also offered much needed material respite and opened up interrogations of the unevenness of the social world. In other words, they have pressed on the right questions—those of social and material inequity—but in radically insufficient ways. The dilemma of receiving humanitarian aid is less directly focused on cultural difference than the dilemma of religious conversion, but a concern with the loss of cultural models for provision and distribution remains strong, as does the question of what influence comes with material assistance. Derek Wright thinks of that influence in terms of the "cultural byproducts" of aid (*Novels* 133). The cultural, the political, and the material are so thoroughly intertwined that one cannot accept material assistance without a range of other effects. Critical mission novels open up the diversified perspective which Ferguson advocates, pushing us to think about the multiple, overlapping narratives which missions generate.

It is important to remember the context from which this perspective emerges. By taking African lands, generally the base of economic livelihood, and eroding indigenous social, cultural, and political structures, colonialism displaced the foundations of African societies, the resources and methods which had enabled communities to survive and thrive independently. This destructive process radically destabilized African societies, upending traditional forms of wealth and impoverishing vast populations. The novels I analyzed in chapter 2 pivot on this history of destabilization and loss. Through tracing the arc between Chinua Achebe's early novels, *Things Fall Apart* and *No Longer at Ease,* we see the traditional wealth of a family degenerate into poverty and hunger. Ngũgĩ's *Weep Not Child* and *The River Between* document the loss of lands and the aspiration for their recovery, and his memoir reveals this to be the experience of his own family as well. His father's land, and thus his wealth, is signed away under the new colonial legal system. Within the colonial and postcolonial African context, missions are approached from this place of erosion. Writers find themselves torn between their ideals and the immediate needs of the present.

Ngũgĩ's recollections of entering mission school illustrate this set of materialist concerns. While Ngũgĩ has, in Marxist fashion, criticized certain strands of Christianity for being too concerned with the next world and thus sidestepping the material realities of the present one, the mission in his writing has also been a node around which social questions have been raised and thought out. His early desire to join the mission school, described in *Dreams in a Time of War*, originates not in a moment of spiritual interest but material crisis. He attributes the root of his desire for education to his observations of the school-going neighbors, the children of Reverend Kahahu, a prominent convert in the

area. Although they are neighbors, they occupy "opposite spheres": "The Kahahu estate

of motor vehicles, churchgoing, economic power, and modernity," Ngũgĩ explains, "was

a contrast to ours, a reservation of hard work, poverty, and tradition" (*Dreams* 59). The

implications of expansiveness and ownership attached the word "estate" contrast to the

sense of containment in "reservation." There is a whole armature of cultural difference

that divides along those lines of modernity and tradition, but the dominant associations

here are with economic power and poverty, respectively. Churchgoing is associated with

a very material kind of modernity. The descriptions of the children in each family further

dramatize the entanglement of the cultural and the economic; the Kahahus may be

cultural converts but they have also become economic superiors:

> The difference between our clothes and those the Kahahu children wore was
> glaring. The girls had dresses; most of my sisters wore white cotton cloth wraps,
> sometimes dyed blue, over a skirt, the long side edges held together by safety pins
> and a belt of knitted wool. The young Kahahu boys' shirts and khaki shorts, held
> in place by suspenders, were a contrast to my single piece of rectangular cotton
> cloth, one side under my left armpit and with the two corners tied into a knot over
> the right shoulder. No shorts, no underwear. When my younger brother and I ran
> down the ridge, playing our games, the wind would transform our garments into
> wings trailing our naked bodies. I associated school with khaki wear, shorts,
> suspenders, and shoulder flaps. As my mother now dangled school in front of me,
> the uniform also came into view. (59)

Clothing signals culture *and* status. Tradition in this passage becomes tied to the

trappings of poverty—safety pins and knotted fabric in contrast to the security (and

expense) of suspenders. Ngũgĩ's father's "wealth in cows and goats" (59) no longer

purchases him security or sufficiency under the new colonial order. The single piece of

fabric cloaking the boys exposes their bodies and their social standing. The khaki and

shoulder straps that he fantasizes about make for a very colonial looking get-up, but one

which would mean changing out of rags and into an outfit that would cover the body,

keep it warm, and mark its status. That uniform may be in part an alternative to blackness or Africanness or tradition, but it is also an alternative to rags and nakedness and poverty. And that necessarily complicates the concepts of cultural imperialism, Eurocentric modernity, and any reading of African complicity with missions.

For Ngũgĩ, going to the mission is the first step toward dissolving the inequity between himself and the Kahahus. His desire for mission education to close the material gap between their wealth and his poverty in fact coincides with the Marxist view of the world he would later acquire, defining it in terms of haves and have-nots and assessing how the livelihood of the former is built upon the latter. It is a simple scene of childhood envy on the one hand, but I argue that it is also the seed of a larger, more sophisticated desire for social transformation, which ultimately aims through but beyond the mission. Yet, at the same time, Ngũgĩ cannot have the material transformation without picking up some cultural baggage along the way. Mission modernity is not a pure gift but a transaction with grave costs accompanying the benefits.

As this example shows, the critical mission novel is characterized in part by its very worldliness. These stories are about bodies worn down from thankless labor, malnutrition, nakedness, and inadequate shelter. Their writers are thinking about the most basic human needs, how those needs are met, and the implications. What does it mean to meet one's needs through the charity of others? Does it inevitably imply a surrender of agency and independence? These writers are highly critical of international altruism, but in taking up those critiques they also attempt to think beyond them toward alternative theorizations of global giving practices. They draw us into the dilemmas of aid. The tensions, which would come to define postcolonial humanitarianism, arise in that

relationship between cultural conversion and material assistance—tensions between emancipation and domination, conservation and conversion, African empowerment and disempowerment, worldly and otherworldly perspectives, grand promises and disappointing realities.

   Tsitsi Dangarembga's *Nervous Conditions* is staked upon these tensions, and reading it within the context of the humanitarian debate draws out the very contemporary concerns of this novel. It is set in colonial Rhodesia (which would become Zimbabwe), beginning in 1968 and following the coming-of-age of thirteen-year-old Tambu Siguake. An adult Tambu narrates in a voice that is disillusioned and critically retrospective. Dangarembga explores the global church as a non-governmental, non-profit source of development and in doing so anticipates the ongoing dangers and dilemmas of aid. As I suggested in chapter 1, missionaries of the colonial era were agents of the third sector— not aligned directly with enterprise or the state. In examining their supposed benevolence, this novel casts doubt on third sector solutions to meeting basic needs. When the story opens, Tambu has been growing up in poverty and longing for a way out. Up to this point, her successful uncle Babamukuru, the headmaster at a mission school, has sponsored her brother's education as a source of uplift for the family. When her brother dies, Tambu takes on the mantle of family uplift, receiving the chance to attend the mission school as her uncle's ward. She is thrilled at the opportunity, and expects to find "mental, and eventually, through it, material emancipation" (87), freedom "from the constraints of the necessary and the squalid" (93). What she finds on the mission station, instead, is a world of new constraints. As I have argued in previous chapters, one of the hallmarks of the critical mission novel is the plot reversal it enacts upon the grand

Mission narrative. It takes the narrative of salvation by the West and turns it into a narrative of destruction and disappointment. *Nervous Conditions* surely exemplifies that practice. In the words of Joseph Slaughter, Dangarembga is "rehistoricizing her personal story of development as the story of an illusion" (230).[14] In place of the total emancipation she expects, Tambu finds alienation from her family, home, and culture, indebtedness to missionary benefactors, a cap on success allowed within the colonial system, and increasing exposure to racism exemplified by the overcrowded blacks-only dorm room where she arrives at the end of the novel. The narrative of emancipation becomes a narrative of disappointment, and the sense of movement and uplift is ultimately replaced by images of confinement and limitation. It has thus been read as a story of cultural and psychological alienation.[15]

But this is a novel of conditions in both the psychological and material senses, and I am interested in how the urgency of material need constantly presses on Tambu's consciousness. I want to tease out the story of needs from the story of rights which Slaughter articulates. The human rights narrative—according to which Tambu should become an emancipated, rights-bearing subject—does indeed fail, but those larger aims are entangled with the immediacy of meeting basic needs for food, water, and clothing. I will thus read this novel within the context of humanitarianism, which is conversant with human rights discourse (and often articulates in own claims in terms of rights) but thinks

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[14] Slaughter reads *Nervous Conditions* as a "dissensual *Bildungsroman*"—a narrative of expected human rights integration (which would enable the full development of the human personality) that is ultimately characterized by hyperbole and disappointment. It displaces the teleological plot of the human rights development narrative with a "sense of no ending" (269).

[15] Dangarembga's title refers the preface of Frantz Fanon's *The Wretched of the Earth*, written by Jean Paul Sartre. The epigraph reads, "The condition of the native is a nervous condition." For several perspectives on alienation and the novel's relation to Fanon, see Sugnet, "Nervous Conditions: Danarembga's Feminist Revision of Fanon" and Willey and Treiber's *Negotiating the Postcolonial: Emerging Perspectives on Tsitsi Dangarembga,* especially the essays by Zwicker, Andrade, Willey, Geller, Wixson, and Basu.

primarily in terms of needs which can be, but are not necessarily, attached to rights. In *Nervous Conditions* the social starting point is extreme poverty, and the Tambu we meet in the beginning is the image of the humanitarian subject—the malnourished African child. Hers is a body shaped by deprivation:

> When I stepped into Babamukuru's car I was a peasant. You could see that at a glance in my tight, faded frock that immodestly defined my budding breasts, and in my broad-toed feet that had grown thick-skinned through daily contact with the ground in all weathers. You could see if from the way the keratin had reacted by thickening and, having thickened, had hardened and cracked so that the dirt ground its way in but could not be washed out. It was evident from the corrugated black callouses on my knees, the scales on my skin that were due to lack of oil, the short, dull tufts of malnourished hair. This was the person I was leaving behind. (58)

This passage reveals how the conditions of poverty become readable through the body—the thickened, cracked feet that do not know shoes, the brittle texture of skin and hair that signals a lack of protein and thus a limited diet. The journey to the mission will dramatically transform the body's signals. Tambu will transform in other ways too as she gets more closely wrapped up in colonial culture, but the novel is pushing us to think beyond the cultural terms of transaction. Those cultural terms are a consequence which Dangarembga takes very seriously, yet the primary motivation for Tambu's transformation is the intense pressure of fundamental needs, and thus we must fold together the cultural and material narratives at hand. The mission promises a solution to material deprivation, and thus Tambu determines it to be worthwhile despite the loss it will incur: "At Babamukuru's I would have the leisure, be encouraged to consider questions that had to do with survival of the spirit, the creation of consciousness, rather than mere sustenance of the body" (59). She expects to be "emancipated" from the

persistent nagging of the physical, and she describes her departure primarily in terms of

material hardship:

> This new me would not be enervated by smoky kitchens that left eyes smarting and chests permanently bronchitic. This new me would not be frustrated by wood fires that either flamed so furiously that the sadza burned, or so indifferently that it became mbodza. Nor would there be trips to the Nyamarira, Nyamarira which I loved to bathe in and watch cascade through the narrow outlet of the fall where we drew water. Leaving this Nyamarira, my flowing, tumbling, musical playground, was difficult. But I could not pretend to be sorry to be leaving the water-drums whose weight compressed your neck into your spine, were heavy on the head even after you had grown used to them and were constantly in need of refilling. (59)

These are conditions Tambu cannot simply work her way out of—she has certainly

tried—and thus she welcomes external assistance, even at the cost of the river she loves

so dearly. The river itself, even with all its joys, is associated with the hardships of life

without plumbing.

Dangarembga wrote *Nervous Conditions* in the 1980s, following a massive surge

of images for humanitarian fundraising not unlike that we see of the malnourished, water-

drum toting Tambu. The novel confronts us with the body that is the subject of

humanitarianism, and while this imagery resonates with those representations of hunger,

it also does a different kind of work. In his powerful essay, "How to Write about

Africa"—a facetious prescription—Binyavanga Wainaina draws our attention to the

problem of "The Starving African":

> Among your characters you must always include The Starving African, who wanders the refugee camp nearly naked, and waits for the benevolence of the West. Her children have flies on their eyelids and pot bellies, and her breasts are flat and empty. She must look utterly helpless. She can have no past, no history; such diversions ruin the dramatic moment. Moans are good. She must never say anything about herself in the dialogue except to speak of her (unspeakable) suffering.

This is an old standby of the humanitarian imagination. Wainaina's satire articulates with particular eloquence a common critique of the representation of Africa in Western writing in many forms—books, film, news, and, of course, humanitarian fundraising efforts. Dangarembga takes up the same subject, but she addresses *a* (nearly) starving African rather than *The* Starving African, a flat, singular figure. Her image of hunger includes the physical signs standard in representations of malnutrition but within a context that changes the stakes.[16] Tambu is not wandering aimlessly, waiting for Western benevolence. She does receive it, but within a narrative of her own striving. Before her brother dies and the mission school scholarship becomes available to her, she sets up her own business, growing and selling maize to raise funds for her education. She has a past and a history. In fact the novel is dedicated not to the singular image but to the extended documentation of her history, spoken in her own unruly voice, distinguished by critical retrospection. Dangarembga writes over the silence which is produced by the humanitarian "machinery of compassion" (Caputo, *Acts* 310), emphasizing the role of African agency and the much fuller life that often gets written out of the representation of need. This is the story of humanitarian giving told from the perspective of the recipient.

Going to the mission school does not deliver emancipation but mere sufficiency, and so its costs become very difficult to navigate, since the desire for self-determination gets tangled up in the drive for enough. Consider the contrast of the "peasant body" to the body of the mission student, a description which appears just a few pages before that of Tambu's needy body. She knows what the mission offers after seeing her brother, Nhamo, return after a period of time spent there: the

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[16] For an extended examinations of food and hunger in the novel*,* see Bhana, Creamer, and Wright. On the gendered dimensions of growing, preparing, serving, and eating food, see Wixson's essay in *Negotiating the Postcolonial.*

change in appearance was dramatic. He had added several inches to his height and many to his width, so that he was not little and scrawny any more but fit and muscular. Vitamins had nourished his skin to a shiny smoothness, several tones lighter in complexion than it used to be. His hair was no longer arranged in rows of dusty, wild cucumber tufts but was black, shiny with oil and smoothly combed. (52)

This narrative of improvement does involve looking more European, but there is more to this likeness than cultural transformation. Eating with a fork also means, for the first time, eating enough and getting the nutrients that nourish the skin and hair; Nhamo is whiter but also far healthier. And even as the mission student approaches the colonial culture, he is moving out of colonially imposed conditions of the material variety (although his improved conditions are themselves colonially enabled). Under these conditions, the deeply problematic narrative of mission uplift is hard to fully reject.

Tambu will undergo the same kind of transformation as her brother. When she arrives at Babamukuru's home, signs of "civilized" culture are also signs of a new social station. She is intimidated by the gracious dining room, for example, with its large table and abundant seating: "That table, its shape and size, had a lot of say about the amount, the calorie content, the complement of vitamins and minerals, the relative proportions of fat, carbohydrate and protein of the food that would be consumed at it. No one who ate from such a table could fail to grow fat and healthy" (69). Dangarembga, through making bodies and furniture speak so vividly to material conditions, primes us to read characters and settings for the ways in which they signal needs, their fulfillment, and social status; inequity is woven into the literary landscape. The novel fits a modernist sensibility which is deeply skeptical of modernization and its promises, and yet it is also keenly aware of the very real benefits of modernity for those who can access them and their powerful

attraction for those who cannot.[17] Thus Dangarembga cannot disregard the mission's

offerings entirely. The mission-built cage is complicated by the fact that in it Tambu is

healthy, well-fed, and well-dressed.

The modernity extended to Tambu through the mission stings because it is far

more limited than the expansive horizon it had projected. Improvement turns out to be

incremental, not emancipatory, and it is dramatically diminished when its trajectory

staggers within the confines of an oppressive system that will always delimit it. The

mission-based structure of material distribution helps to a very limited extent, staving off

the immediate effects of poverty without tackling the structure that produces it, while also

inviting other, less calculable, problems. This is manifested partly in cousin Nyasha's

own nervous condition—a life threatening eating disorder—which reverses and ironizes

Tambu's trajectory from starvation to sufficiency. The improved conditions Tambu finds

in mission schools are themselves nervous conditions in both psychological terms and

very practical ones; better living conditions are urgently necessary, but under better

circumstances they would not be so contingent, so indebting, so tenuously held. Tambu

avoids displeasing her uncle for the fear of losing the basic resources he provides,

because he, as the giver of gifts, also controls them. She is forced to negotiate how much

control is worth forfeiting. Would it be better to return to grinding poverty for the sake of

self-determination? Can she be expected to worry about alienation when she doesn't have

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[17] I am reminded of Bruce Robbins' caution about academic critique of modernity and progress: "Those who urgently need to 'change their lives' do not speak lightly of progress, even if they rightly distrust the universalized, inevitabilist gradualism that has been its frequent ideological form. While it presents itself as metropolitan self-critique, the unreflective scorn for modernity among Western intellectuals actually functions as metropolitan self-aggrandizement. Like a certain left-wing antiprofessionalism, aimed obliquely at the new place women and people of color have made for themselves in the academy, this apparent self-critique denigrates in the metropolis precisely that which is now being desired and demanded by intellectuals on the periphery. This is kicking away the ladder one has climbed oneself; it ensures that the necessarily higher ground from which the critique emanates remains in metropolitan hands and defines the metropolis's continuing superiority" (*Feeling Global* 112).

enough to eat? Should she reject a well-rounded meal for the sake of those higher-level

needs like independence and pride when the alternative she sees in her mother doesn't

accommodate those needs either?[18] These are questions without satisfactory answers. The

life of her mother—in which the "poverty of blackness" is compounded by the "weight of

womanhood" (19)—is not a romantic alternative by any means. Self-actualization is also

blocked by the constraints of material deprivation, and thus her mother is hardly a figure

of independence. This is not a scenario of real choice but a forced impasse. These issues

become a point of intense contestation within debates about human rights. Some argue

that "first generation rights"—political and civil individual rights—should be deferred in

the interest of material and economic rights (called "second generation rights"), which

are most urgent and become the necessary base for individual liberty.[19] Others argue that

the order should be the reverse. For Tambu, the fulfillment of material rights comes at the

expense of individual liberties, and it is not an easy trade-off. Neither option is without

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[18] Maslow's theorization of the hierarchy of needs clarifies their relations to one another; physiological needs including food and water must be met in order to make those higher level needs like self-esteem and self-actualization possible. This is related to the basic needs approach to development which was influential in the 80s. For an introduction to this approach, see Stewart, *Planning to Meet Basic Needs* and Streeten, *First Things First: Meeting Basic Human Needs in the Developing Countries*.

[19] Dambisa Moyo makes this kind of argument in *Dead Aid,* although she does so from a neoliberal perspective and not the socialist view from which this argument originated: "The uncomfortable truth is that far from being a prerequisite for economic growth, democracy can hamper development as democratic regimes find it difficult to push through economically beneficial legislation amid rival parties and jockeying interests. In a perfect world, what poor countries at the lowest rungs of economic development need is not a multi-party democracy, but in fact a decisive benevolent dictator to push through the reforms required to get the economy moving (unfortunately, too often countries end up with more dictator and less benevolence). The Western mindset erroneously equates a political system of multi-party democracy with high-quality institutions (for example, effective rule of law, respected property rights and an independent judiciary, etc.). But the two are not synonymous" (42). In my view, it isn't worth arguing over what would happen in a "perfect world"; isn't the "benevolent dictator a pipe dream? Alex de Waal offers an alternative argument, claiming that to change system which produces poverty, it is necessary that citizens be able to hold their governments accountable for providing the needs of their populace. That of course demands some measure of democracy. David Scott has offered related insights about the deferral of individual rights: "the error of the Marxist road is now clear: it lies not only in its epistemological naïveté—the reductionism of the base/superstructure model, and the teleology of its mode of production narrative—but more tragically in its cavalier attitude toward individual rights and the norms of democratic procedure" (*Refashioning* 149-50).

serious cost. The novel thus resides within the tension of answering needs with external, charitable, compromising sources, thus producing a sense of unease without a straightforward resolution—in essence, a nervous condition.

Although we can think of basic needs as material rights, the Mission narrative separates needs from the language of entitlement. The mission is framed not as a source of sustenance which Tambu has a right to claim, but a gift and a blessing which could be revoked at any time. While the mission does meet Tambu's basic needs for food, clothing, and shelter, it doesn't have the far-reaching ripple effect she expected. Change is specific, not structural; having her needs met today makes no guarantee for tomorrow. Furthermore, social uplift is contingent upon the favor of missionaries who select beneficiaries they view as "useful to their people" (14). When, years previously, Babamukuru was offered a scholarship to study in England, "to decline it would have been a form of suicide. The missionaries would have been annoyed by his ingratitude. He would have fallen from grace with them and they would have taken under their wings another promising young African in his place" (14). The novel is thinking about social injustice, which Tambu hopes to resolve by going to the mission, but this system operates not on the basis of justice or equity but favor. This represents one of the major arguments against humanitarian aid: it enables the privileged to sleep at night, assuaging their guilt without ever jeopardizing their position.

Empowerment, in this scenario, is on the side of the giver. A giver of gifts doesn't have to be concerned with structural transformation or even with real success, since it is not an act of obligation but of benevolence; it is the thought—not the effect—that counts. With this arrangement, Dangarembga suggests that altruists stand to gain far more than a

good night's sleep. The missionaries of *Nervous Conditions* are in Rhodesia neither to

govern nor to get rich, and yet their detachment from power and profit generates forms of

power and profit anyway:

> The Whites on the mission were a special kind of white person, special in the way that my grandmother had explained to me, for they were holy. They had come not to take but to give. They were about God's business here in darkest Africa. They had given up the comforts and security of their own homes to come and lighten our darkness. It was a big sacrifice that the missionaries made. It was a sacrifice that made us grateful to them, a sacrifice that made them superior not only to us but to those other Whites as well who were here for adventure and to help themselves to our emeralds. The missionaries' self-denial and brotherly love did not go unrewarded. We treated them like minor deities. With the self-satisfied dignity that came naturally to white people in those days, they accepted this improving disguise. (103)

What gets built up around the missionaries is a narrative—a narrative of what they could

have had and what they have chosen, a narrative about their motivations and actions

which ascribes heroism, holiness, bravery, sacrifice, and selflessness. The missionaries'

relationship to Shona locals is a function of the narrative attached to them; a narrative of

sacrifice produces a different framework than the narrative of those who came to "help

themselves to our emeralds," for example. Giving consolidates their authority even

though power is not (explicitly) the reason for their presence.

Dangarembga reveals the language of missionary sacrifice to be deviously

misdirected. It is their supposed sacrifice that earns them the status of deities, their

apparent humility that makes them holy, the supposed discomfort of African living that

earns new rewards. Sacrifice is a slippery and dangerous concept which shrouds its

advantages at the very moment it produces them. The idea of "improving disguise"

resonates with critiques of aid as the mask of imperial power; as I argued in chapter 1, the

missionary and the mercenary become increasingly hard to distinguish. We are again

seeing something akin to Kurtz's "ascendency." Sacrificial action is ineffective in changing inequality; rather, it reinforces the unequal relationships which generated its perceived necessity in the first place. On the one hand, aid in this novel is a mechanism for social control both in what it gives and in the fact that it does not give enough for structural transformation. Yet this is set in tension with the fact that material melioration, accessed through aid, makes life survivable. That incremental improvement can function to purchase loyalty to, and thus perpetuation of, an unjust system, but it does not necessarily work. Missionary favor has indeed won the loyalty of Babamukuru. This strand of the narrative is also pulled into the sequel, *The Book of Not,* in which he goes on trial, viewed by nationalists as a traitor: "He was, the charges went, not exactly a collaborator, but one whose soul hankered to be at one with the occupying Rhodesian forces" (6). But this is also a narrative of that conservative power's failure. The novel's critique is coming from Tambu herself, one of those selected and groomed to be a "good African," loyal to the benevolent whites, and yet she finds herself increasingly rebellious toward the end of the novel and throughout the sequel. *Nervous Conditions* closes by signaling the "process of expansion" which enables Tambu to become a critical narrator: "Quietly, unobtrusively and extremely fitfully, something in my mind began to assert itself, to question things and refuse to be brainwashed, bringing me to this time when I can set down this story" (204). Tambu's critique of the mission thus complicates our own.

Sign *Nervous Conditions* represents a negotiation of the aid relationship as precarious terrain and in doing so anticipates the arguments of current scholars of humanitarianism. As Michael Barnett has argued, "any act of intervention, no matter how well intended, is

also an act of control" (12), and African interactions with missions have pressed on the question of what level of control is worth accepting. *Nervous Conditions* brings into view the mission history of this dilemma, showing that the mission school was animated by this same paradox. *Nervous Conditions* holds together the critique of the mission's imperialist nature with a constrained (but not eliminated) narrative of improvement. It is a story of material security bought with cultural, spiritual, social, and psychological costs—something far less than the narrative of total emancipation Tambu initially expected. Assistance is necessary but dreadfully insufficient, and the narrative of humanitarian potential is thus chastened. The depth of Tambu's initial faith in the mission and gratitude to her benefactors is tied to the grandeur of their promises. As she tells the story of her time at the mission school retrospectively, she chips away at that narrative. It opens up the question, what if those claims had been reduced from the start? Might relations of indebtedness operate differently if less were on the line? For material assistance to escape its constraining effects, it would have to take the power dynamics of giving into critical account.

God and the Devil: Humanitarian Technologies of the Self

For Philip Caputo, an exploration of the power dynamics circulating through the machinery of international compassion leads to the chastening of the relief worker's expectations as well. The authority of benevolence that missionaries enjoyed would find its ultimate expression in the humanitarian settlements of the postcolonial era. In *Acts of Faith,* Caputo teases out the dilemmas of aid through the guidance of a local relief worker, Fitzhugh Martin. Although the narration is not limited to his perspective

exclusively, he serves as the thread that takes us from beginning to end. He initially

provides the framework for the story and its cast of characters in the opening chapter,

"Introductory Rites," in which he is interviewed by an American journalist. This section

is placed before Book One and serves as a kind of literary preface, located before the text,

but set, in plot time, after it has all unfolded. Fitzhugh is a Kenyan "of all races" (13),

giving him a unique perspective as an outsider within Kenyan society "without a tribal

allegiance or a claim to any one race" (13) and an outsider among the mostly white,

Western UN staff with whom he works. Despite their differences, he was drawn to relief

work for reasons not unlike those of his white colleagues. As a soccer player with the

Harambee Stars, he "saw something of the world, and what he saw—namely the

shocking contrast between the West and his continent—convinced him to do something

more with himself than chase a checkered ball up and down a field. He'd heard a kind of

missionary call, quit soccer, and became a United Nations relief worker, first in Somalia

and then in Sudan" (13). But, as was the case with the Western missionaries I addressed

in chapter 1, his real motivation isn't quite as valorous: "That was the story he told, but it

wasn't entirely true: a serious knee injury that required two operations was as responsible

for his leaving the sport as a Pauline epiphany" (13). Being African doesn't make him an

ideal relief worker; he isn't a hero but a regular human being pulled by conflicting desires

and motivations. He is nonetheless the voice of conscience in the novel, even if he acts in

ways that fail to live up to his morals.

His existence within the UN, "the army of international beneficence" (14), is an

uneasy one. He loves the work but hates the institutional context in which he must do it.

The UN base had

the look of a military installation, ringed by coils of barbed wire. The field managers and flight coordinators and logistics officers—to his eyes a mob of ambitious bureaucrats or risk-lovers seeking respectable adventure—drove around like conquerors in white Land Rovers sprouting tall radio antennae; they lived and worked in tidy blue and white bungalows, drank their gins and cold beers at bars that looked like beach resort tiki bars, and ate imported meats washed down with imported wines. (14)

Taking on the role of giver enables them to receive a great deal. To locals, it appears that they are in Loki primarily for the sake of their own consumption. The base seems a kind of vortex, sucking in masses of resources in questionable proportion to what it gives out. UN workers' "special" status is akin to that of the missionaries in *Nervous Conditions,* but they have taken that status to new levels, leaving behind the simple living that was common among missionaries. None of the locals in this novel view working for the UN as a sacrifice. UN workers, with their lifestyle of luxury, resemble big man politicians who parasitically live off the people as well as their Europeans predecessors, the colonial big men of Africa: "They were the new colonials," living in the same bungalows and drinking the same wine, "and Fitzhugh grew to loathe them as much as he loathed the old-time imperialists who had pillaged Africa in the name of the white man's burden and the *mission civilisatrice*" (14). From the perspectives of Fitzhugh and the hungry Turkana locals, it becomes evident that these "do-gooders" have authority among locals but very little respect. Whereas they ostensibly come to Africa to mitigate inequity and injustice, they actually perform its reinscription. The barbed wire surrounding their compound makes literal the violent division between cosmopolitan givers and African recipients.

There is, nonetheless, something attractive to Fitzhugh in the work of the UN. Even with all the nonsense he has to tolerate, Fitzhugh does choose to work with them. This critique, we must remember, is coming from one within the system. He finds their

approach to be wrongheaded, primarily for the way it positions expatriates in relation to locals, but at the heart of the idea is something deeply compelling: "Relief work—what a bland phrase, as if it were merely another form of labor. But it wasn't. It reaffirmed the human bond. It was the marshaling of resources to organize compassion into effective action, for without action, compassion degenerated into a useless pity" (271). The UN certainly marshals resources and organizes action, yet the distance it reproduces between employees and their beneficiaries blocks the real affirmation of that bond. Often the bureaucracy itself seems to get in the way of really thinking and caring about others. The example with which Book One opens, the trigger for Fitzhugh's firing, occurs when the UN food stores get overstocked. As is standard procedure when this happens, UN employees burn the excess, but ironically they carefully protect the donated food from hungry people on the journey to its destruction:

> Mindful that cremating tons of food would make for bad press, the High Commissioners had the dirty work done under the cover of darkness at a remote dump site, far out in the sere, scrub-covered plateaus beyond Loki. Truck convoys would leave the UN base before dawn with armed escorts, their loads covered by plastic tarps; for the Turkana, men as lean as the leaf-blade spears they carried, knew scarcity in the best of times and were consequently skilled and enthusiastic bandits. (16)

Aid in places of scarcity and hunger is an envied resource, and this does generate complexities for distribution, but in following distribution plans too closely, the UN withholds food—with armed force no less—from those who need it as badly as those their mandate tells them to assist. The brutal irony becomes even more painful to Fitzhugh when he visits a Sudanese province that had recently been attacked by the government army with a slash and burn method that destroys food sources and leaves citizens worse off than the rebel army, the army's supposed target. Those who had

escaped death in the attack are dying of starvation afterward. Fitzhugh is there to do a

"needs assessment" (17) but not equipped to do anything about the needs he finds. Once

Fitzhugh puts this in perspective—"*My goodness,* he thought… *a tenth of the surplus that*

had been put to the match could have saved them all" (18)—he assists Malachy, a

missionary to the Turkana, in outing the UN scandal.

At the beginning of the narrative, Fitzhugh is an altruistic idealist with a strong

sense of the right way and the wrong way to do aid. After being fired from the UN, he

hopes to find a better humanitarian framework and joins a non-governmental

organization to fly aid into Sudan. He works under the leadership of Douglas Brathwaite,

also a former UN employee, who now manages the independent airline contracted by

International People's Aid. He is initially inspired by the confident American who seems

to have a strong ethical sensibility which resonates with Fitzhugh's frustrations with the

UN. When another pilot tells Douglas that she thinks it should be left to the southern

Sudanese to "sort themselves out," his heated response seems to outline a better model of

assistance. The task of the humanitarian is not to do the sorting himself, he argues but "to

pitch in and help them do the sorting" (71). Tara comes back at him with this: "You don't

make a good carpenter by building his house for him," a suggestion that aid is ultimately

disabling. But Douglas has thought of that:

> "Right. You give him a hammer, show him how to use it. But then you don't
> stand back and feel real good about yourself and say *tsk-tsk* when he bends a nail
> or whacks his thumb. Sometimes your arm has to get sore with his. Sometimes
> your sweat has to drip on the ground with his. Sometimes you have to swing it *for*
> him, not sit in the air-conditioning like Timmerman [and the UN workers he so
> loathes] with maps and pins and fax machines." (71)

This is an ethics of solidarity, not of pity, which projects a humanitarianism that is about

much more than handouts; it is about getting alongside the recipients rather than sitting so

comfortably above them. Fitzhugh is excited by this rare gesture of equity between the helpers and the helped, and he jumps in enthusiastically: "And you don't eat Danish ham and drink French wine while the other guy gets by on his porridge and bad water. . . . And when the job's done, you leave with the shirt on your back, not a hundred thousand in back pay" (71).

Through Fitzhugh's lament against the lavishness of the UN and through the friends he chooses—international do-gooders who he believes actually do good—the novel affirms an ascetic practice of humanitarian ethics which combines simple living and solidarity with local people. There is Father Jim Rigney, for example, an American missionary who had built churches, clinics, schools, and dug wells, and had "lived ascetically, in a small mud-brick house out in the Masai-Mara" until he was murdered for political reasons, "beloved by his congregations and seen as a champion of the oppressed" (6). His house is the same kind as the houses of the Kenyans who attend his church, a stark contrast to the barbed wire fortress of UN luxury living. Malachy Delaney, an Irish missionary, has adapted so fully to the local context that "anyone who saw him, clapping his hands to tribal songs, leading chants of call and response, had to wonder who had converted whom" (16). He lives closely among the Turkana, speaking their language and taking on their practices. The religious expats in the novel are not all good—the evangelical Quinette is a figure of ignorant, self-centered American "goodwill"—but those whom the novel most values combine a leftist political sensibility, focused on social injustice, with an ascetic religious sensibility. Their asceticism is fully grounded in *this* world, modeling a kind of "unworldly engagement with the world" (McClure, *Partial Faiths* 186). The secular Fitzhugh takes their religiously based

asceticism as a model for his own life: "Relief work *was* a religion, at least to his way of

thinking. In a way it was an act of faith that infused his actions with spiritual value,"

freedom "from the inner tyrant who kept demanding, *I want, I want, I want*" (20). What

makes these religious men so compelling for Fitzhugh is not the religious specificity of

their creed or the relationship it establishes between man and God; rather it is the

relationship among men—to the self and to others—through the restraint of personal

greed.[20]

      Although he is not religious, Douglas initially seems to voice a secular version of

this sensibility, but the offering is far less sincere than Fitzhugh first believes. He hopes

to find a transformative version of assistance with Douglas, but the fine wine drinking

UN workers ultimately pale in comparison. Douglas turns out to be one of the monstrous

anti-heroes of the critical mission novel—a gun-runner, embezzler, and murderer. His

compelling ideas about aid turn up empty, and although Fitzhugh becomes complicit, he

is not dragged down. He eventually puts together the pieces of Douglas's scheme, quits,

and sets him up to be caught although he knows the justice will be incomplete. I don't

want to focus on the details of the process (which I touched on in chapter 1) but on the

place in which Fitzhugh ends up and what it means for the novel's perspective on

humanitarian assistance. By the end he is deeply disillusioned:

> When he looked back on the past three years of work and risk, he couldn't see
> what difference he had made….He was reminded of the warning on side-view
> mirrors—CAUTION: OBJECTS IN THE MIRROR ARE CLOSER THAN
> THEY APPEAR. It was just the opposite in the mirror of Sudan. Whatever one's

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[20] Caputo's work can but situated within a body of American literature which John McClure describes as postsecular fiction, a set of narratives which "affirm the urgent need for a turn toward the religious even as they reject (in most instances) the familiar dream of full return to an authoritative faith" (*Partial Faiths* 6). This description also applies quite elegantly to the work of Bessie Head, which I addressed in chapter 3, and it would be worth considering its application within the field of African fiction more broadly.

object was—to end a famine, to bring peace, to heal the sick—it was farther away than it appeared, seemingly within one's grasp but always beyond it. (648)

His expectations for aid have been undercut by its outcomes. Furthermore, to do anything good, he finds, requires compromise with evil. To bring Douglas to some justice, at least to get him to stop what he is doing, he must make a deal with a man who is "something of a devil . . . but a minor devil compared with our American friend" (657). The ethics of the greater good, by the end of the novel, becomes an ethics of the lesser evil, since to remain above it would be to do nothing, to accept the status quo (657).

The Fitzhugh we meet in the prefatory "Introductory Rites" is radically chastened from the Fitzhugh of the early part of the narrative. His idealism has dissolved into a cynical realism. By the end, that narrative allows us to understand the position he advocates in the first pages of the book: "That's how the African thinks of good and evil. It's foolish to try and separate the two. Foolish *and* dangerous. You have to give into it, the oneness, I mean, but not entirely. No! You submit without surrendering. That's the difficult trick. That's how the African survives, physically and otherwise" (6). It seems, initially, a "sweeping generalization" (6), but by the end of the novel it becomes clear that it is more thoughtful than that. It is a strategy needed by both locals and foreigners to negotiate the terrain of greed and violence in which humanitarianism finds its home. Fitzhugh clarifies with an anecdote about the well-respected missionary, Father Jim, who he considers to be a model of successful contribution up to a point:

> A political missionary as much as one who ministered to the soul. . . . An apostle of human rights who became known in Kenya for his intemperate public denunciations of official greed and nepotism and brutality. Bandits in Savile Row suits, Father Jim called cabinet members and members of parliament, fattening themselves while people in the villages he served went without clean water or electricity or proper medical care. (6)

Father Jim's discourse does not obscure the relations of power in which his parishioners are inscribed, as is frequently the problem in theories of improvement through foreign assistance. According to Fitzhugh and to the locals with whom he works, Father Jim is doing real good, and yet that is ultimately defeated by the brutality of the elites he pits himself against. As Fitzhugh explains, "He did things that needed doing and said things that needed saying, but . . . he did them in the way white guys do things over here, head-on, and he said them so loudly, so directly, even after he got a couple of death threats, even after the head of his own order sent him a letter, asking him to back off just a little" (6-7). The death threats are not empty and he is killed by a member of parliament whom he had tried to bring to justice. The good is here defeated by an insistence on the best: "He could have submitted to the evil without surrendering to it. But he didn't," Fitzhugh laments (8). To get anywhere, it is necessary to accept the second best option; the first is mere utopianism. The novel's exploration of humanitarianism is a journey into moral messiness. Even Fitzhugh's language attests to that ambiguity. When interviewed, he "doesn't answer directly" but speaks "in the metaphorical language he favors" (5), the language of the literary which, to reiterate Teju Cole's phrase, should "leave the reader not knowing what to think" (2).

The discussion of aid has to be resituated within the context of the survival mode with its different applications for relief workers and aid beneficiaries. Built into this theorization of aid is the inevitability of failure. It's about making things less bad rather than dramatically better, recognizing that a "first-best" world is inaccessible and thus striving for "second-best." This is partly about forces beyond one's own control, but for the agent of humanitarianism it is also about the forces within. This is where the kind of

soul searching that is common to religious practice comes into play, even if it is the religion of relief work, as is the case for Fitzhugh. It enables him to be aware of and to free himself from "the inner tyrant who [keeps] demanding *I want, I want, I want*" (20). Religious discourse insists on the evil within the self, and for Douglas, it is the failure of that recognition which allows him to carry out the cruelties he enacts. Fitzhugh tries to explain how the man could have fallen so far: "Greed, believing in something too deeply, but in the end . . . there is something missing in him. He lacks a moral imagination when it comes to himself. He's so certain of his inner virtue that he believes anything he does, even something this terrible, is the right thing" (651). Douglas doesn't recognize the evil within, the inseparability of God and the Devil (649). Both Fitzhugh and the religious missionaries whom the novel affirms, through ascetic modes of thinking and living, do. This is akin to the technologies of the self, which Foucault situates in centuries old practices of Christian monasticism, "a matter of dislodging the most hidden impulses from the inner recesses of the soul, thus enabling oneself to break free of them" (*Ethics* 221).[21] Applying this practice to aid workers also changes the stakes of questions the Mission narrative takes for granted: who needs to be freed and from what kind of darkness?

From this evaluation of an individual humanitarian's devastating moral failure, Caputo develops a theory applicable to humanitarian thought more broadly: "Anyone who does not acknowledge the darkness in his nature will succumb to it. He will not take precautions against its prompting, nor recognize it when it calls" (*Acts* 648). I argue that *Acts of Faith* asks us to understand humanitarianism as a noble project plagued by dilemma within which "*God and the Devil are one and the same*" (649). In *The Dark*

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[21] See "Self Writing" and "Technologies of the Self" in *Ethics*.

Sides of Virtue, David Kennedy argues that it is only in engaging its dark sides that humanitarianism can minimize its harm and maximize its benefits. *Acts of Faith* thus articulates a "posture or sensibility for humanitarian work" (Kennedy xiv) which would allow it to anticipate and deal more effectively with the moral messiness that it can never fully escape. According to this model, the radical critique which produces the impasse is not the end of humanitarianism but its necessary starting place.

The Postcolonial Language of *Gifts*

Nuruddin Farah's *Gifts* negotiates the politics of giving and receiving on personal and global levels. It too confronts the tension between the critique of aid and the urgency of material needs. Farah enters the question of foreign aid by recounting the story of Duniya, a nurse who lives a modest life in Mogadiscio, the Somali capital, with her children. We are introduced to her discomfort with receiving gifts when she accepts a ride from Bosaaso, an acquaintance with whom her relationship builds over the course of the novel. When he asks about her hesitancy to accept the gift of a ride, her response links the personal to the political, comparing individual stakes to global ones: "Because unasked-for generosity has a way of making one feel obliged, trapped in a labyrinth of dependence. You're more knowledgeable about these matters, but haven't we in the Third World lost our self-reliance and pride because of the so-called aid we unquestioningly receive from the so-called First World?" (22). This mix of scales (individual decisions made on the basis of global transactions) suggests that her environment is so saturated by the structure of First World giving and Third World receiving that it becomes metonymic for gift relationships in general. This is also evident

in the way Farah thickens his own text with other kinds of texts—news briefs following

most chapters and editorial articles embedded within—which build up the historical and

discursive context of foreign aid. Through the inserted "non-fictional" texts about famine,

starvation, and international aid in Somalia, Farah puts own his text into conversation

with an international public discourse on aid, and thus I will be thinking about how Farah

"extends the universe of reference for his novel" (Francis Ngaboh-Smart's phrase)[22] into

the discursive realm of journalists, policy analysts, and development experts, bringing

fiction into conversation with non-fictional debates about the internationalization of

social welfare and aid.

This is a field of debate in which the novel's Somali characters are very much

engaged—it is not merely the terrain of the "international experts" and world news.

These embedded texts attest to a range of positions on aid ranging from great enthusiasm

about actress Liv Ullman's "mission of mercy" as a Goodwill Ambassador for UNICEF

to presidential pandering in order to secure aid from Western nations to reports of

rejected and failed donations such as Ronald Reagan's gift of spoiled milk to Poland and

Poland's retort in the form of donated blankets for New York's homeless. Arguments

about the imperialist nature of aid's application, the production of dependency, and the

depletion of African agency and pride are delivered primarily through the editorial

publications of Taariq, Duniya's ex-husband. He argues that aid perpetuates famine and

cultivates inequity by providing just enough stability to prevent total crisis; thus

"[f]oreign food donations create a buffer zone between corrupt leaderships and the

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[22] In his exploration of multi-textuality and the notion of the gift in Farah's novel, Ngaboh-Smart points to the centrality of an external anthropological text, Marcel Mauss's *The Gift*. He argues that, through the acknowledgement of Mauss at the front of the book, Farah "extends the universe of reference for his novel" (np). Tim Woods also addresses Farah's use of *The Gift*, linking it to implications for foreign aid. Kirsten Holt Petersen situates the novel in relation to Derrida's model of the pure gift.

starving masses. Foreign food donations also sabotage the African's ability to survive

with dignity" (196). In other words, if famine were allowed to progress to its logical

conclusion, bad leaders would be overthrown; according to this argument, aid blocks

revolution which would change the circumstances of the people in a systemic way rather

than offering a temporary fix. Farah represents a diversity of intention and effect, which

Taariq also observes in his editorial:

> Every gift has a personality—that of its giver. On every sack of rice donated by a
> foreign government to a starving people in Africa, the characteristics and
> mentality of the donor, name and country, are stamped on its ribs. A quintal of
> wheat donated by a charity based in the Bible Belt of the USA tastes different
> from one grown in and donated by a member of the European Community. You
> wouldn't disagree, I hope, that one has, as its basis, the theological notion of
> charity; the other, the temporal, philosophical economic credo of creating a future
> generation of potential consumers of this specimen of high quality wheat. (197)

Whereas giving always involves power, the structure of power it sets up is not always the

same. That is not to say that good intentions suffice. Both the Bible Belt and the

European Community, in this example, are acting in the name of good intentions, but

there is more to be distinguished in the mode of intent, depending on the philosophical

framework from which the donation emerges, the roots of those intentions. The novel

also pushes us to broaden our understanding of the network of donation. Donors include

not only foreigners from various countries with diverse sensibilities—in contrast to

Europeans, the Chinese doctors at Duniya's clinic are noted for their humility, "[n]o

pomp, no garlands of see-how-great-we are" (20)—but also locals including Somalis

newly returned after years away from the continent. Duniya takes in an orphaned baby;

her daughter donates blood; Dr. Mire, with whom she works, has returned to Somalia

from the United States "to donate his services to the government and the people of their

country, accepting no payment, only an apartment, conveniently located and modestly

furnished" (17); Bosaaso is back in the country under the same arrangement, volunteering for the Ministry of Economic Planning.

Moreover, Farah makes clear that global forms of aid are entering a culture which has pre-existing local modes of distribution and care, independent giving systems as a protection in times of need. "Most Africans," Taariq explains, "are (paying?) members of extended families, these being institutions comparable to trade unions. Often, you find one individual's fortunes supporting a network of needs of this larger unit. . . . Those who have plenty, give; those who have nothing expect to be given to" (197). Although Taariq acknowledges that the expectation of receiving can go problematically far, the novel offers a functioning example of this kind of family network through the relationship between Duniya and her brother, which I will come to shortly. Or, there is the example of *Qaaraan*, a Somali tradition of "passing round the hat for collections. . . . [w]hen you are in need of dire help" (196). The system has checks and balances; to qualify for assistance one has to be considered a "respectable member of society" and one cannot apply for more in the short term" (196). By building up this rich context of African giving systems and local agency, Farah provides a corrective to the singularity and simplicity of the Mission narrative. In this story, Somalis are not helplessly awaiting Western benevolence, but actively working to take care of themselves, their families, and communities. By offering numerous versions of the story of donating and receiving, Farah wrests the position of sole donor from the ownership of the West. [23]

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[23] For another wonderful literary example of undoing the standard roles of Western giver and African receiver, see Peace Corp Writer Marla Kay Houghtelling's short story, "Ma Kamanda's Latrine" in *Living on the Edge,* edited by John Coyne. When Ma Kamanda's rural Sierra Leonean town receives a Peace Corps teacher, she has a latrine built for her and writes in the wet cement, "A GIFT TO THE U.S. GOVERNMENT FROM THE PEOPLE OF PUNUMBA," (256) a biting ironization of the power dynamics and representational optics of aid.

Taariq's article on "Giving and Receiving: The Notion of Donations" includes a description of the discursive context to which the novel responds. If, as he tells us, every gift has the personality of its giver, television representations of hunger in Africa are both reflecting and in turn recreating a problematic personality: "No doubt, television is a personality creator, and donors have their smiling pictures taken, alternating with scenes of Ethiopian skeletons. For the first time Africa has been given prime time TV coverage, but alas, Africa is speechless, and hungry" (199). Ironically, at the very moment that African people enter the realm of global concern they are silenced, flattened, juxtaposed against the full faces of donors. Conrad's African bodies come to mind, those bunches of angles languishing under the trees, "shadows of disease and starvation" (Conrad 20), almost entirely voiceless: "In Conrad's *Heart of Darkness*," Taariq recalls, "the one and only moment the African is given a line to speak, the poor fellow is made to employ an incorrect grammatical structure. That was of prime and all-time literary significance" (198). Taariq points to a disconnect between voice and body. While *Heart of Darkness* notes the physical suffering of African people, it represents the starving body in dehumanized form: "They were not enemies, they were not criminals"—that's all well and good, but it goes much further—"they were *nothing earthly* now,—nothing but black shadows of disease and starvation, lying confusedly in the greenish gloom" (Conrad 20, my emphasis). *Heart of Darkness* is about hunger too, but this scene takes the African body beyond the earthly, and thus beyond politics.

The hazard of this kind of imagery, often used in humanitarian campaigns against hunger, is that it divorces the African body from individual or collective agency and extracts it from the sociopolitical vectors of hunger which produce it:

> what may pass unnoticed in such representations is the displacement of the complex questions away from the daunting realm of political economy and its socio-cultural sign-systems, onto the gripping telepathy of the suffering body. At such moments, it is the terrible corporeality of her victimization that the camera disseminates—a corporeality so terrible that the network of relations that determines (and thereby, narrativizes) the body in pain cannot be visible, dares not be visible in the time of the viewer's empathy. (George, *Relocating* 2)

In this assessment of televised images of the humanitarian subject, Olakunle George suggests that a particular kind of global relation—international empathy—conceals the preceding global relations, which have produced that suffering body. In contrast, we saw that Dangarembga's representation of the humanitarian subject in *Nervous Conditions* highlights the social making of that body, drawing attention to the fact that human relations that produced such inequity (particularly the dispossession enacted by colonialism). It is by loudly pointing out those social relations that Father Jim of *Acts of Faith* becomes a target for murder, striking a cord that the apolitical discourse of charity would not. Farah too takes on these humanitarian images and situates them within a narrative that is constantly pointing to the social production of inequity. The novel makes visible the determinant network of relations. There is an important relationship here between giving and receiving, representation and voice. This problem relates to the language of aid. Who speaks it? Who defines its terms and designs its programs?

Duniya is determined not to be trapped in the kind of relationship those images reflect and produce. Through her character, the novel explores a strategy of response to the critiques Taariq lays out—the reinforcing of Western power, and the disempowerment of African subjects through both voiceless imagery and actual dependency. Duniya feels that the costs of aid are too high; free gifts, like the "overpriced aid package from the European Community" (20), come with long strings attached. To

maintain self-reliance and pride, she assumes the aid of others is best rejected: "If there was one thing Duniya couldn't stand, it was her children bringing home unauthorized gifts of food, or money, given to them by Uncle So-and-so or Aunt So-and-so" (26). But Farah's answer is not so simple. The novel begins with Duniya breaking her own rule, accepting that ride against what she thinks is her better judgment. Her narrative is about the process of becoming vulnerable, about opening oneself up to receive and give in a reciprocal relationship. While the novel takes very seriously the critique of aid as imperialism and dependency production, it does not swallow it whole and repeat it back to us. Rather, it problematizes the implications of both the uncritical embrace and the wholesale rejection of aid in all its forms.

Even with its critique of dependency, the novel has little faith in isolating self-reliance that depends only on one's own arms to tug on one's own metaphorical bootstraps. The glorification of self-reliance buys into another myth that also obscures the network of social relations. The argument that the poor should independently support themselves assumes that the rich already enjoy that independence, that the "haves" are self-made. The novel makes clear that this is an illusion; it assumes a kind of social and economic autonomy that does not in fact exist. If the misfortunes of some are related to the fortunes of others, as Farah implies they are, then the solution cannot be found in isolation. That kind of rugged individualism fails to account for the ways human beings are inevitably interconnected, their fortunes directly related to the misfortunes of others. The novel builds up a different language around giving and receiving by showing how people are interconnected in ways that obligate them to one another. Obligation has a very different valence than benevolence. This is elucidated by the relationship between

Duniya and the one person whose generosity she has always accepted freely, her wealthy

brother Abshir. He explains the framework which makes that possible:

> You are a woman and younger than me . . . I suppose these facts are central to our
> gift relationship, yours and mine. . . . If you were a boy, you wouldn't have been
> married off to a man as old as your grandfather in the first place, and in the
> second, you might have got a scholarship to a university of your choice, because
> you were brilliant and ambitious. An injustice had been done. It has been my
> intention to right the wrong as best I could. (242)

What he suggests is that a giving relationship can genuinely aim to transform existing

power relations rather than reinforce them if it is situated within a critique of the social

network of inequity production. Abshir recognizes that what he has gained as a man is

not unrelated to what Duniya has been denied as a woman. To return to the language of

George's critique, this interaction is making visible "the network of relations that

determines (and thereby, narrativizes) the body in pain" (*Relocating* 2). The subject of

assistance takes on a very different relation (both socially and narratologically) to the

giver. In making visible those unjust relations and in trying to "right the wrong" from

which he has benefitted, Abshir is actually the indebted one. His gifts unveil the social

injustice that produced their inequity rather than concealing it. Furthermore, within this

framework, Abshir gives without the implication that his gifts are a solution to the

problem.

Farah is constantly playing with the terms, giving new meaning to "gifts" of

various kinds. In a flashback, Bosaaso remembers an argument between his late wife,

Yussur, and a Danish aid worker, Ingrid, "about the philosophical and cultural aspects of

giving and receiving gifts" (47). The debate grows out of what Yussur saw as Ingrid's

misuse of language when she describes a used china set she has just sold to her for ten

American dollars, "equivalent in local currency to more than a senior civil servant's

salary" as "[m]ore or less a gift" (48). Yussur points to another major criticism of aid as

an essentially self-interested gesture, given in the interests not of the poor but of the

powerful:

> My husband told me only recently that the United States, the world's richest
> country, between 1953 and 1971 donated *so-called* economic assistance worth
> ninety million dollars to Somalia, one of the world's poorest. Over sixty million
> of this *so-called* aid package was meant to finance development schemes,
> including teacher-training and a water supply system for the city of Mogadiscio.
> But do you know that nearly twenty million dollars were accounted for by food
> grown in the USA by American farmers, given to us in sacks with the words
> DONATED BY THE USA TO THE REPUBLIC OF SOMALIA written on
> them? And of course from that we have to deduct the salaries of Americans
> working here and living like lords in luxury they are not used to at home. Why
> must we accept this intolerable *nonsense*? (49, my emphasis)

Yussur echoes critiques of aid that we have heard before—the benefits for "donors," the

luxurious lives of aid workers, the misrepresentation of the extent of the gift. What is

distinct, however, is the emphasis she places on the problem of language itself. Terms

like "economic assistance" and "aid package" become nonsensical when matched up with

what their work actually looks like. According to what system of meaning are goods for

which the givers profit "donated"? And what kind of relationship to the recipients does

that misleading language produce? The language of the gift is forcing the terms of gift

giving and receiving onto another kind of transaction. A system that poses as

disinterested benevolence is in fact beneficial to the United States, its farmers and aid

workers. Yussur goes on to drive home the point: "What I'm trying to say, my dear

Ingrid, is that a language is the product of a people's attitude to the world in which they

find themselves. Now can you understand why it irks me to hear you describe the china

for which we paid ten US dollars as a gift?" (49) Yussur isn't turning down the content of

the so-called gift. She wants the china set, but according to different terms of exchange;

she wants to call it what it is and take it on that basis, not on the pretense of a gift. So-called aid, this implied, if it is to function at all, must be called by its proper name and "aid" is not it.

As Ngũgĩ reminds us in *Something Torn and New,* this is the case for the global network of giving as well. The standard terms of Western donation obscure a radically divergent reality: "the continent's relationship to the world has thus far been that of donor to the West. Africa has given her human beings, her resources, and even her spiritual products through African writing in European languages. We should strive to do it the other way around" (127-28).[24] Within this historical context, it is a bitter irony to think of the West as perpetual donor to Africa. Recalibrating the terms opens up new possibilities for more equitable exchange. At the beginning of the novel, Duniya rejects assistance because of its implications as a massive, international form of transaction, but by the end she has entered into a reciprocal relationship of giving which the novel affirms. In linking the personal and the global, Farah opens the possibility that this model might also scale up, that international assistance might be reshaped in a related form. It is thus significant that Duniya moves toward accepting assistance within the context of a different language and a different set of relational dynamics defined by independence and reciprocity. The terms of exchange—and the historical network of relations in which they are inscribed—matter.

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[24] For a reading of this passage within the wider context of the book and its relation to current aid debates, see Cilas Kemedjio, "Of Aid and the African Renaissance." a contribution to the Critical Investigations into Humanitarianism in Africa blog.

Reimagining Humanitarian Horizons

What *Gifts*, *Acts of Faith,* and *Nervous Conditions* provide is a different way of talking about aid, a place from which to construct a fresh sensibility. "[L]anguage is a product of a people's attitude to the world" (Farah 49), but reciprocally attitude is also a product of language. The personality of the giver—and subsequently that of the gift—reflects the language within which it is conceived, be it the language of salvation or of something much smaller in tone and promise. As Frantz Fanon once wrote, "To speak a language is to take on a world, a culture" (*Black Skin* 38). To operate within a particular language is to operate within its ethical framework. In order to generate more effective models of assistance, we need to begin by speaking differently about it, thus taking on a new culture of transnational care.

These novels demystify and reinvent the vocabulary of benevolence, they situate humanitarian representation within a political network of social relations, and they negotiate the tension between utopian desire and real world necessity. In contrast to the celebratory discourse of international community, they help us to assess how human beings are globally interconnected in ways that bear very little resemblance to community, while also affirming that, in this irreversibly globalized world, some version of transnational care must pertain. Western engagement with Africa, they suggest, is not a matter of voluntary, altruistic commitment to the future, but the obligatory outcome of a tragic history: "Because the West has had a long but uneven engagement with the continent, it is imperative that it understand what happened to Africa. It must also play a part in the solution. A meaningful solution will require the goodwill and concerted efforts on the part of all those who share the weight of Africa's historical burden" (Achebe,

Country 2). Better narratives of African improvement will speak a language of futurity which bears responsibility to the past.

These authors model a unique form of postcolonial skepticism, which applies to the critical mission novel more broadly—an anti-utopian political sensibility that, in its most committed forms, seeks out non-ideal allies for non-ideal times. As James Ferguson puts it, "If the question 'what is to be done' has any sense, it is as a real-world tactics, not a utopian ethics" (*Anti-Politics* 280).What these novels advance is not a plan of action but an alternative mode of thinking about humanitarian actors, intentions, plans, and potentialities, a chastened mode of commitment to humanitarian involvement in African futures. These authors, writing both before and after the disappointments of decolonization, doubt that an ideal solution is going to present itself, and thus their vision of the future is informed by a sense of the tragic. In the words of T.J. Clark, "The tragic key . . . does not expect something—something transfiguring—to turn up" (72). The critical mission novel participates in this kind of anti-utopian politics, which does not surrender the revolutionary impulse but which also looks with an almost cynical realism at the possibilities of what might come, taking radical critiques of the present into full account. Humanitarianism is necessary but insufficient—a stopgap—and the hope, it seems, is to draw on it strategically in order to address an impasse. David Scott has argued that the key to resuscitating the political salience of postcolonial theory lies in the tragic understanding, his description of which nicely articulates the sensibility of the critical mission novel:

> Tragedy sets before us the image of a man or woman obliged to act in a world in which values are unstable and ambiguous. And consequently, for tragedy the relation between past, present, and future is never a Romantic one in which history rides a triumphant and seamlessly progressive rhythm, but a broken series

of paradoxes and reversals in which human action is ever open to unaccountable contingencies—and luck. (*Conscripts* 13).

Scott argues that "tragedy may help us better than Romance to cope with so unyielding a postcolonial present as our own" (169), "a time of postcolonial crisis in which old horizons have collapsed or evaporated and new ones have not yet taken shape" (168). The humanitarian Mission narrative—in telling a romantic story of rescue—is inadequate to the critical demand of the present.

While the tragic narrative does indeed resolve certain problems of the triumphant missionary romance, it runs other risks, as I argued in chapter 1, particularly within the context of narratives about Africa. Its resolutions, though painful, can be "too easy" (Achebe, *No Longer* 46). Tragedy, after all, always ends in essentially the same way, and there can be comfort in its familiarity. We hardly have a shortage of tragic tales about Africa. Thus I want to argue that the most powerful element of the critical mission sensibility is not in turning the triumphant Mission narrative into a story of tragic destruction, but in beginning to articulate nascent horizons from within the rubble of that tragic history. To generate alternative narratives of improvement for these novelists is, in some sense, to submit without surrendering, to work "with allies and under circumstances that one might not have chosen for oneself" (Robbins, *Feeling* 4). The questions of humanitarian development, when honestly confronted, necessarily draw us into a space of moral messiness and uncertainty. The fictional discourse of the critical mission novel offers a language and sensibility that are needed to truthfully represent that world of dilemma, to grapple with questions that have no definitive answers, to produce headaches without offering a remedy, to project futures that will never be triumphant but hopefully less tragic.

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