**Allegories and Counter-Allegories of the World-System in Chinua Achebe’s *Arrow of God***

Towards the end of Chinua Achebe’s novel *Arrow of God*, there is a scene of writing in which Ezeulu witnesses Clarke, the Assistant District Officer, writing at his desk. To Ezeulu, Clarke’s ability to write with his left hand is a sign of the white man’s power. As the narrator puts it, “The first thought that came to Ezeulu on seeing him was to wonder whether any black man could ever achieve the same mastery over book [*sic*]as to write it with the left hand” (Achebe 174). Writing, in other words, is figured as an almost magical practice that is part of a wider culture of capitalist modernity, which defines its power and authority in contrast to the primitivism of pre-capitalist societies. By framing Ezeulu’s encounter with this spectacle of British colonial writing through the ethnographic trope of a people without writing, Achebe also draws attention to the way in which writing is framed as a fetish in the civilising rhetoric of colonialism. If this encounter with the performance of colonial writing dramatizes the fetishism of colonial power, it also tells another story about the historical process through which rural societies are integrated into the capitalist world-system. This allegorical mode of representation defamiliarises the world of capitalist modernity that the colonial encounter inaugurates, and invites readers to imagine the existence of a world that is not subordinated to capital’s logic of accumulation and dispossession. In so doing, *Arrow of God* raises profound questions about the ways in which the symbolic codes of the novel can challenge and contest the temporality of capitalist modernity. In what ways might the novel’s staging of the violence of European writing help to enrich our understanding of *Arrow of God* as a historical novel that frames the integration of an African village into the capitalist world system from the standpoint of a pre-capitalist rural society? How might a counter-allegorical reading help to elucidate the ways in which the symbolic codes of *Arrow of God* register, but also challenge and contest the singular historical experience of accumulation by dispossession in rural societies, before and after the colonial encounter? And what wider lessons about the relationship between the history of empire and anti-imperial struggle, literary form, and the cultures of capitalist modernity can scholars and students of literature learn from a consideration of the counter-allegorical?

If, as Pheng Cheah has suggested, orature in non-European vernacular languages contains the potential to contest predominant conceptions of the world as a resource for capitalist modernity, the literary staging of orature in Chinua Achebe’s *Arrow of God* tells another story about the world which questions and interrupts the temporality of capitalist modernity. It is the worldly implications of Achebe’s act of storytelling with which this article is primarily concerned. Beginning with a critical assessment of different allegorical readings of Achebe’s novel, this essay traces the articulation of a different conception of the world in *Arrow of God*, which runs counter to such allegorical readings. Achebe’s symbolic framing of orature and proverb as a verbal art form embedded in a specific social and cultural conception of the world that is organised around the time frame of an agricultural subsistence economy interrupts the temporality of capitalist modernity, and the primitivist tropes of pre-capitalist societies on which it depends. If Achebe’s novelistic framing of orature as part of a literary system of symbolic codes gestures towards a mode of agency that counters capital’s mode of production narrative, such a mode is enabled by a way of knowing the world that disfigures the ethnographic logic of colonial allegory. This mode of understanding is further articulated in Achebe’s temporal framing of the yam as a sacred object that also parodies the ethnographic framing of the commodity fetish. What links the ostensibly disparate rituals of the proverb and the festival of the yam, I suggest, is a counter-allegorical register which interrupts the temporal order of capitalist modernity. To elucidate the broader significance of this register for research in literary studies, the article also draws comparisons with the trope of the ticker tape in Frank Norris’ novel *The Octopus* and the framing of oil fetishism in Helon Habila’s *Oil on Water*. In so doing, the article also suggests that the symbolic codes of Achebe’s novel defetishize the totalising idea of capitalist modernity as a world-system in such a way that has profound and far reaching implications for a wider understanding of the relationship between literature, empire, and the historical development of capitalism on a global scale.

**The Irony of Allegory in *Arrow of God***

Some of Achebe’s most perceptive critical readers have identified an ironic rhetorical mode in Achebe’s narration—an irony that foregrounds a crisis of authority in Igbo society. David Richards, for instance, has argued that: “It is a repeated pattern in Achebe’s work that misinterpretation symbolically crystallises the crisis of colonial intervention” (267). If misinterpretation is the allegorical vehicle through which the “crisis of colonial intervention” is made intelligible in *Arrow of God*, it is a vehicle that also troubles the tenor-vehicle relationship around which allegorical readings are constructed. In this sense, the allegorical structure of the narrative raises further questions about the possibility of a counter-allegorical reading that does not simply repeat the pattern of misinterpretation that structures the narrative, but rather allows for a different way of reading. In a related discussion of Achebe’s narrative strategies in *Arrow of God*, Simon Gikandi has suggested that Achebe’s use of free indirect discourse works to undermine Ezeulu’s quest for stable meaning in the face of a cultural and political crisis. Such an ironic rhetorical mode exemplifies the way in which Achebe’s orature offers a complex understanding of time, language and representation. By representing the destructive effects of Ezeulu’s performance of sovereignty as Chief Priest from a temporal perspective *after* the economic and political crisis that befalls Umuaro, Achebe uses the conventions of orature to raise questions about the potentiality of a postcolonial future that is not pre-scripted by the temporality of capitalist modernity.

To clarify the ways in which Achebe’s framing of Ezeulu’s orature conveys the potentiality of a postcolonial future that is immanent to but not determined by the clock time of modernity, it is worth pausing to consider the performative dimensions of orature. In an essay published in a 2007 issue of the journal *Performance Studies*, Ngugi wa Thiong’o offers a short history of the term orature and a working definition. For Ngugi, “The major generic elements of orature—riddle, proverb, story, song, poetry, drama and dance—are an imaginative attempt to explain the universe” (6). Significantly, when Ngugi proceeds to elaborate on the significance of the proverb in orature, he cites Achebe’s famous proverb about proverbs in *Things Fall Apart*: “proverbs are the palm oil with which words are eaten” (6). The crucial thing that distinguishes orature from literature for Ngugi is performance. As he puts it:

The important [thing] in orature is the interconnectedness of all [the generic] elements. Central to them, is performance. Each is a performance genre, but performance holds them together. Performance is the central feature of orature, and this differentiates the concept of orature from that of literature. Performance involves performer and audience, in orature this often being a participatory audience; and performance space, in orature this being anything from the fireside, the village square or market place, to a shrine. But whatever the combination of location, time and audience, orature realizes its fullness in performance (7).

Ngugi makes an important point when he suggests that we attend to the ways in which novels such as *Things Fall Apart* make use of proverbs in order to carefully situate the performance of orature in a specific spatio-temporal context. Yet his suggestion that there is a categorical difference between orature and literature, and that orature “realizes its fullness in performance” runs the risk of falling back on the dichotomy between orality and literacy that he wishes to question. For novels such as *Things Fall Apart* and *Arrow of God* make use of the narrative conventions of fiction in order to register the complex rhetorical function of orature in Igbo society *and*, by implication, the ways in which orature can be understood as a socially-constitutive and legally-binding system of representation that is analogous to writing. To put it another way, the performance of orature can in certain situations be understood as a form of performative speech in which the sovereign authority of the orator is enacted.

But how might this performative dimension of orature help us to grasp the potentiality of a postcolonial future in the fictional world of an imagined pre-colonial past? In an illuminating reading of *Arrow of God*, Neil ten Kortenaar traces the novel’s ambivalent representation of books, and its association of western systems of writing with magic and power. Citing the messenger who summons Ezeulu to a meeting with the colonial administration as a case in point, ten Kortenaar describes how this figure, part of a notorious new class in the service of the colonial administration, makes a big show of bringing ‘“out a very small book from his breast pocket and open[ing] it in the manner of a white man”’ (Achebe cited in ten Kortenaar “World on Paper” 468) in order to record Ezeulu’s particulars. In ten Kortenaar’s argument, this messenger resembles no one so much as the Nambikwara chief in Claude Lévi-Strauss’s “The Writing Lesson,” who pretends to literacy because he understands the power wielded by “the violence of the letter” (“World on Paper” 468). What such a reading implies but does not quite explain is how the novel’s narrative strategies question and interrupt the ethnographic framing of Igbo society as a primitive society without writing, a developed conception of time, or indeed of economic reason based on a principle of exchange. In the example of Ezeulu’s encounter with the messenger, Achebe’s narrator encourages readers to see how the act of writing is framed as a performance of power. And yet it is also suggested that this performance of power through the act of writing is somehow “inauthentic”: by making a big show of bringing out this “very small book”, Achebe’s narrator also implies that the messenger’s association of writing and power is a misinterpretation.

This is not to suggest, however, that the novel is simply implying that orature is somehow a more authentic form of African self-expression (whatever that might mean). For as Elena Coundouriotis puts it, “all cultures are inauthentic, […] there is no ‘society without writing,’ and […] all cultures have a history” (3). By presenting the history of Umuaro using the conventions of orature, Achebe not only draws attention to the ways in which this fictional Igbo society has its own complex form of narrating the past (as Coundouriotis suggests); he also foregrounds the ways in which this form of narration is socially constituting. Orature has the force of law. Achebe’s framing of Ezeulu’s proverbs as attempts to shore up his sovereignty in a fictional pre-colonial African society that was in the process of being subjected to the law of the colonial state raises profound questions about the postcolonial future of the colonial state and the colonial genealogy of the law in the postcolony. Citing Paul Kahn’s claim that “the ‘myth of the social contract’ […] projects extrajudicial violence back into the prehistory of the state,” Neil ten Kortenaar argues that, “*Arrow of God* presents just such a version of the myth of the coming of the law” (“Rule of Law” 45). The framing of oratory in *Arrow of God* can thus be seen to offer a critique of the law-making violence of a colonial state that presents itself as a rational alternative to the reciprocal violence between villages—a violence which the colonial state deems to be anarchic and a threat to the rule of colonial law.

If for Jacques Derrida in *Of Grammatology*, writing is framed as a sign of power and sovereignty, in *Arrow of God* the proverb can be regarded as a particular kind of speech act that works to enact the power and authority of the speaker. Consider, for example, the following proverb: “when two brothers fight a stranger reaps the harvest” (Achebe 132). Here, Ezeulu is not only citing a proverb to make sense of the conflict between Umuaro and Okperi, and its wider implications for understanding British colonial sovereignty in Nigeria; the performance of the proverb also serves to exemplify Ezeulu’s attempt to re-assert his authority and status as a Chief Priest. One difficulty with this reading is that it overlooks the ways in which the authority of the orator is negotiated between the speaker and the audience. As Simon Gikandi cautions: “however important the position of the speaker may be, ‘speech acts’ draw their ‘elocutionary force’ from the addressee or audience. Ezeulu’s problem, then, is that he often speaks in vain because his utterances no longer have an elocutionary force” (70). This sense of losing face in the public performance of authority is particularly apparent in the competing interpretations of history presented by Nwaka and Ezeulu. In the case of the proverb about the stranger reaping the harvest, however, there is a sense in which Ezeulu’s understanding of the ways in which the contingent and ostensibly disconnected series of events that lead to the food crisis in Umuaro at the end of the narrative also sheds light on the novel’s use of orature to gesture towards a postcolonial future beyond the colonial present of the narrative.

The proverb “when two brothers fight a stranger reaps the harvest” can also be understood as a statement that counters Nwaka’s justification for war with Okperi earlier in the novel. His speech can, in other words, be regarded as an attempt to re-assert his sovereignty as a Chief Priest. The difficulty is that when Ezeulu’s performance as an orator does not measure up, and “Nwaka totally destroyed Ezeulu’s speech” (17), Ezeulu responds to this humiliating defeat in a way that may seem to parallel the violent sovereignty of the colonial roadbuilder, Wright. As the following proleptic sentence indicates: “Umuaro challenged the deity which laid the foundations of the villages. And—what did they expect?—he thrashed them, thrashed them enough for today and for tomorrow!” (15). The violence of this foundational deity, which Ezeulu represents, pre-exists the violence that the novel associates with Lugard’s policy of indirect rule. In this way the novel complicates attempts to read the narrative as a straightforward allegory of colonialism, as suggested by the discursive act of the District Commissioner at the end of Achebe’s novel *Things Fall Apart*: an act in which the Commissioner relegates a fixed, authentic Igbo culture to a paragraph in his book, *The Pacification of the Tribes of the Lower Niger*. Instead, by focalising the political crisis in Umuaro through the consciousness of the Chief Priest, Achebe invites readers to attend to the cultural and rhetorical frame of reference through which this economic and political crisis is mediated.

**The Temporality of Capitalist Modernity in *Arrow of God***

If, as Nicholas Brown has suggested, Ezeulu’s narrative is an allegory of world history, in which an African society is subsumed into the capitalist world-system, it is also important to consider how this process of subsumption is both understood and contested in the novel. In Brown’s reading, the proverb of the two brothers fighting is an organising theme in the story: “The historical event of the stranger inheriting the estate is the content of *Arrow of God*. But in the narrative of the novel as a whole, two priests rather than two villages are the fighting brothers, and the colonial mission inherits the village” (110). Brown’s suggestion that the people have lost faith in Ulu because they feel protected against Abam raiders by the presence of Winterbottom’s colonial forces is compelling. By juxtaposing the crisis in agricultural food production at the end of Achebe’s village novel and the novel’s reference to a peasant uprising in Russia against the demand to grow cash crops, Brown offers a thought-provoking example of how a materialist approach to African literature can help to account for the process of accumulation by dispossession which underpins the global expansion of capitalism. Yet such an approach also overlooks the counter-allegorical force of Achebe’s narrative, and its potential to interrupt the temporal logic of capitalist modernity, as we will see.

The circumstances leading to the crop failure in Umuaro and the villagers turning to Goodfellow and his religion because they are hungry may broadly support the argument of world-systems theorists such as Immanuel Wallerstein that the development of capitalism happens at different times in the core and the periphery of the global economy. But the culturally specific forms of knowledge and agency that underpin Achebe’s representation of the subsumption of subsistence farming in Umuaro to the economic forces of the world market also mark the abstraction of the sacred yam as commodity. In marking this moment of abstraction, the narrative strategies of Achebe’s village novel work to defamiliarise the rhetorical force of capitalist modernity, which removes the yam from its material setting, and reduces it to a crop that can be exchanged for cash. If such a process of abstraction is the condition of possibility for the smooth functioning of commodity circulation and capital accumulation on the world market, the counter-allegorical force of Achebe’s novel stands as a powerful reminder that an economic or political crisis—either in the core or the periphery of the world economy—is a risk that is always also inherent to the process of capital accumulation. To further clarify this point, it is instructive to compare the ending of Achebe’s village novel set in 1922 with an early passage in Frank Norris’s description of a Californian ranchers’ office in his 1901 farm novel *The Octopus*:

[…] the most significant object in the office was the ticker. This was an innovation in the San Joaquin, an idea of shrewd, quick-witted young Annixter, which Harran and Magnus Derrick had been quick to adopt, and after them Broderson and Osterman, and many others of the wheat growers of the county. The offices of the ranches were thus connected by wire with San Francisco, and through that city with Minneapolis, Duluth, Chicago, New York, and at last, and most important of all, with Liverpool. Fluctuations in the price of the world's crop during and after the harvest thrilled straight to the office of Los Muertos, to that of the Quien Sabe, to Osterman's, and to Broderson's. During a flurry in the Chicago wheat pits in the August of that year, which had affected even the San Francisco market, Harran and Magnus had sat up nearly half of one night watching the strip of white tape jerking unsteadily from the reel. At such moments they no longer felt their individuality. The ranch became merely the part of an enormous whole, a unit in the vast agglomeration of wheat land the whole world round, feeling the effects of causes thousands of miles distant—a drought on the prairies of Dakota, a rain on the plains of India, a frost on the Russian steppes, a hot wind on the llanos of the Argentine. (620–1)

Here, the ticker tape machine stands as a powerful image of global connectivity and space-time compression—in which the fluctuating price of wheat during and after the harvest produces a structure of feeling that is registered in the use of the intransitive verb form “thrilled”. The implication here is that the market takes on a life of its own and the ranchers themselves feel powerless in the face of the magnitude of a vast, global economic “whole.”

If the ticker tape is understood as a particular technology of writing that abstracts the value of commodities from the specific historical circumstances of their production, it is also a technology that raises further questions about the unequal relationship between the different parts of “the vast agglomeration of wheat land the whole world round”. The insomnia of the Californian ranchers in Norris’s novel may foreground the feeling of anxiety associated with risking one’s livelihood in a global economic system that is subject to the effects of natural events and political disputes in different parts of the world, but it is important to note that they do so from the relatively empowered position of propertied white farmers in the American South west. The villagers of Umuaro may stand in an altogether different fictional world, but it is also a world that is becoming subject to the same global economic forces. The colonial dynamics of Goodfellow’s Christian mission and the emerging market in cash crops for which it lays the ground exploits and profits from the political crisis in Umuaro, even though it does not directly cause that crisis. Yet by foreshadowing this crisis in the proverb, “when two brothers fight a stranger reaps the harvest” (Achebe 132), Achebe’s narrator also mobilises the resources of pre-colonial orature within the written form of the novel to question the global forces of capitalist modernity. In Frank Norris’ representation of the world market, peripheral spaces in the colonial world are represented as a series of remote place names, which are translated into abstract figures on a ticker tape— a strategy that exemplifies the way in which capitalism annihilates space through an abstract idea of time. In Achebe’s fictional representation of the temporal order of Umuaro, readers are enjoined to consider the ways in which the narrative time of Achebe’s fictionalised village—a temporality that is bound up with the cycles of the moon and a calendar specific to that rural society—encodes a different idea of the worldly that defetishises the idea of the world as a resource for exploitation.

To further clarify the worldly significance of orature, and its capacity to interrupt the homogenising force of capitalist modernity, it is instructive to consider the temporal significance of Achebe’s proverbs in relation to wider debates about time and capitalist modernity. In an inventive re-reading of Marx’s *Capital*, the South Asian historian Dipesh Chakrabarty has suggested that Marx’s mode of production narrative elides important distinctions between different ideas of time: “the transition from ‘real’ to ‘abstract’ [labour] is […] also a question of transition/translation from many and possibly incommensurate temporalities to the homogenous time of abstract labor, the transition from nonhistory to history” (92). In Chakrabarty’s argument, the Marxist model of the commodity as abstract labour cannot account for the singular and heterogeneous histories of labour in pre-capitalist societies. As a consequence, the secular historical narrative of commodity production is haunted by these singular, heterogeneous and (in some cases) non-secular histories of rural peasant labour. Chakrabarty’s critique of capital’s universalising historical narrative has, in turn, provoked criticism from avowedly Marxist thinkers who are sceptical of Chakrabarty’s poststructuralist re-reading of Marx. Vivek Chibber, for instance, has suggested that the difficulty with Chakrabarty’s critique of history is that it overestimates the capacity of non- or pre-capitalist histories of labour to disrupt or destabilize capitalism’s universalization, and underestimates the significance of Marx’s argument that capital accumulation is itself the source of economic crisis and destabilization in the cycles of capitalist reproduction. Chibber’s critique of Chakrabarty is illuminating in certain respects, but it stops short of considering how the global expansion of capital accumulation is a profoundly uneven process. As Neil Lazarus explains in a discussion of Leon Trotsky’s theory of uneven and combined development:

[…] the imposed capitalist forces of production and class relations tended not to supplant but to be conjoined forcibly with pre-existing forces and relations. The outcome, [Trotsky] wrote, was a contradictory “amalgam of archaic with more contemporary forms” — an urban proletariat working in technologically advanced industries existing side by side with a rural population engaged in subsistence farming; industrial plants built alongside “villages of wood and straw”, and peasants “thrown into the factory cauldron snatched directly from the plow” (99).

Uneven and combined development can certainly help to account for the ways in which archaic and modern forms of production coexist in the same economic space. But it can also help to make sense of the rhetorical power of pre-capitalist oral cultures, the forms of knowledge they register, and their capacity to question and interrupt the temporality of capital accumulation, as we will see.

Such a rethinking of the temporality of precapitalist social and cultural formations might also shed light on the political and socio-economic significance of orature in *Arrow of God*. In a speech delivered by a university orator at the University of Southampton in 1974 in which Chinua Achebe is declared “eminently worthy” of an honorary doctorate, the ghost writer of this speech refers to the “stately dialogue” of Achebe’s fiction and the ways in which proverbs and counter-proverbs are mobilised to address the social and political fractures presented by the historical experience of colonial modernity. Such proverbs and counter-proverbs also point to a different mode of historical understanding in Umuarothat is symbolised by the relationship between the cycles of the moon and the temporal organisation of subsistence agriculture—which is clearly “not on the same, secular, homogenous calendar” (Chakrabarty 93). By drawing attention to the incommensurability between Ezeulu’s non-secular understanding of time and the secular time of abstract labour exemplified in Wright’s road building project, and by suggesting in the tragic ending of the novel that Ezeulu is ill-equipped to deal with the forces of world history, *Arrow of God* may imply that the subsumption of a pre-capitalist rural society within an emerging capitalist economy is total. Yet, as Brown points out, this would be to overlook the significance of Chinua Achebe’s observation that the end of a book can also signal a new beginning. For Brown, “the parallel Achebe suggests to Russian history invites us to speculate that the same force that assured colonialism’s victory will also rise against it. The hunger that drives the village from Ulu to the colonial economy will also drive mass participation in the resistance to colonialism—and to the neo-colonial economy in turn—when that economy proves unable to meet its promise” (122). The ostensibly pessimistic ending of *Arrow of God* may point towards the possibility of collective political resistance to colonialism. However, the novel’s juxtaposition of different temporal modes complicates the assumption underpinning Brown’s reading that political struggle is always defined in relation to a utopian future, which is always around the corner. By suggesting that different ideas about time are both simultaneous and non-simultaneous in the fictional space of Umuaro, *Arrow of God* implies that the temporality of Umuaro—a mode of temporal knowledge that is based on the cycles of the moon—offers a different way of knowing and inhabiting the world. Rather than a sign of primitivism, this other mode of worldly knowledge interrupts the predominant colonial order of secular clock time, which frames the world as a resource for capital accumulation.

To further elucidate the counter-allegorical significance of Achebe’s rhetoric of temporality in *Arrow of God*, it is instructive to consider how Ezeulu’s attempt to assert his priestly authority over Umuaro is also an attempt to assert sovereignty over a certain idea of time. Previous critical readings have read *Arrow* *of* *God* as a reflection on the colonial genealogy of postcolonial sovereignty. Neil ten Kortenaar, for example, has claimed that, “*Arrow of God* is an exercise in imagining the rule of law as an African development” (“World on Paper” 45). In so doing, he reads the novel as a meditation on the ways in which the legal order of colonial sovereignty predetermined the meaning of freedom after independence. As he puts it:

At decolonization, an absolute prerequisite for a new state’s external sovereignty, the recognition of its right to self-determination by other states and international bodies, was that it have in place a law and the institutions to uphold it (how well the law was upheld mattered less than that there be an entity that claimed the legitimacy afforded by the law). That means that, in Africa (as in the Americas the century before), it was always the colonial territory that demanded and received independence, never the precolonial polity or the ethnic nation, which did not have a law on the books (and often did not have books). United Nations General Assembly Resolution 1514 of 1960, which declared that all colonies are entitled to self determination, also assumed that only colonies, not subnational or non-state groups, merit self-determination (46).

What ten Kortenaar implies but does not explicitly say here is that the rule of law—understood as a technique of sovereign power—simultaneously designates a mode of colonial power over a spatially-demarcated territory, which is also a resource for the accumulation of wealth. The meaning of postcolonial sovereignty after the act of decolonisation was thus determined in part by the topography of colonial sovereignty. If the act of decolonisation can be understood as a divide and exit strategy that facilitated the transition from colonialism to neo-colonialism, it was also a mode of power that produced the nationally bounded territory that became Nigeria. Such a spatial mode of power also entailed a technique of governance over the population and natural resources that are demarcated by the boundaries of that territory. By producing hierarchies and divisions within and between the villages, communities and ethnic groups that formed the social geography of Nigeria, in other words, the British colonial administration produced a territory that was riven with political fault lines.

A consideration of the colonial genealogy and topology of the rule of law in Nigeria, and of the ways in which the law-preserving violence of the Nigerian postcolony became normalised after independence may seem to lie beyond the temporal frame of *Arrow of God*. Yet the novel’s preoccupation with the challenges of political leadership also foreshadows concerns that Achebe addressed in his later writing, as many commentators have noted. In the specific context of Igboland in the early twentieth century, British colonial power and sovereignty was delegated through the selection and appointment of Warrant Chiefs. In *Arrow of God*, the effects of Lord Lugard’s policy of indirect rule are mediated through the story of Ezeulu’s refusal to comply with District Officer Winterbottom’s demand that he assume the responsibility of Warrant Chief. It may be true, as Jago Morrison has suggested, that Achebe’s representation of Ezeulu’s incarceration by Winterbottom downplays the violence of British colonial sovereignty epitomised in Lugard’s *Collective Punishment Ordinance* of 1912—a depiction that also contributes to the overall impression of the British colonial enterprise as inconsistent and unhappy (110–11). Yet Ezeulu’s collective punishment of Umuaro also imitates this formal logic of colonial sovereignty in a way that could be seen to prefigure the legal order of postcolonial sovereignty.

By using the period of his incarceration at the hands of the British colonial administration as a pretext for delaying the public ritual of eating the sacred yams that inaugurates the harvest in Umuaro, Ezeulu tries to re-assert his authority as chief priest by collectively punishing the villagers for allowing the British to detain him for as long as they do. In so doing, he also tries to assert his sovereignty over the time of the village. By delaying the ritual of eating the sacred yams, in other words, Ezeulu also brings the time of Umuaro to a standstill. In this moment of interruption, the symbolic value of the yam in the temporal frame of Umuaro comes into view. Commenting on the multiple meanings of the yam in Chinua Achebe’s *Things Fall Apart*, Simon Gikandi has argued that “the yam controls or explicates the temporal process and mediates between nature and culture; the feast of the New Yam denotes the transition of one period to another; success and failure are measured in terms of the yam-value” (37). As a privileged trope in Achebe’s fictional world, the yam stands as a sacred object and a bearer of both economic and temporal value in a rural subsistence economy that is anterior to the logic of capitalism. In this way, the novel’s figuration of the yam also raises questions about the sacred/ secular dichotomy that underpins the linear temporality of capitalist modernity.

In certain respects, Achebe’s figurations of the yam can be seen to parallel Marx’s reflections on the commodity in *Capital Volume One*. Barbara Johnson has written of the ways in which Marx compared the process of abstraction by which the products of human labour are transformed into commodities to a religious mode of thinking that he terms fetishism. Fetishism for Marx is a word that describes the “*false* belief in animation, as if the things on store shelves had wills of their own and entered into relations with each other” (Johnson 140). Marx’s critique of the process of abstraction emphasises that the animation of commodities renders human labour and socio-economic relations invisible; and yet in order to make this point, he also resorts to the rhetorical strategy of prosopopeia to make the commodities speak. As Johnson puts it: “By animating the commodities by means of prosopopeia, Marx makes them the spokesthings for the delusions of volition he is denouncing” (140). It may be true that Marx’s critique of the rhetoric of commodity fetishism itself depends on another rhetorical move. But this does not necessarily weaken the force of Marx’s argument—as Johnson suggests it does when she casts Marx as a literal-minded materialist thinker. By supplementing the animation of the commodity with the rhetoric of prosopopeia and the supernatural image of table turning, with its specific cultural associations of Victorian séances, Marx may appeal to the ghosts of human labour embedded in the commodity. But he does so in order to defamiliarise and interrupt the abstraction of the commodity from the human labour and social relations that produced it. If one considers that the word abstraction itself derives from the Latin *abstrahere*, to draw away, detach, or cut away (*OED*), it is not hard to see how the animation of the commodity naturalises the process of detachment associated with capitalist abstraction (McNally 14). What’s more, by comparing bourgeois common sense to a form of occult thinking, Marx enjoins readers to consider how bourgeois common sense conceals the inequality of capitalist social relations by naturalising the animist trope of the commodity-fetish. As Fredric Jameson puts it, “religion knows an immediate return of the repressed at the very moment of the coming into being of […] a secular society, which imagining that it has done away with the sacred, then at once unconsciously sets itself in pursuit of the “fetishism of commodities”’ (Jameson in Sprinker 55).

Re-reading Marx’s reflections on the commodity fetish after Chinua Achebe’s figuration of the ritual yam in *Arrow of God* certainly highlights the ways in which the uneven and unequal temporality of capitalist modernity is haunted by the ghosts of the sacred. Indeed, a consideration of the ghosts of pre-capitalist social formations can work to illuminate the ways in which the core and the periphery confront each other in the uncanny space of the European colony. As we have seen, it was Leon Trotsky who first formulated the idea of combined and uneven development in the revolutionary context of early twentieth-century Russia. Modifying Marx’s stadial conception of history, which held that a bourgeois-democratic revolution was the necessary precondition for any proletarian struggle for power (Löwy 89), Trotsky argued that Russian society comprised an articulation of ‘“all stages of civilization’ from the most primitive and archaic agriculture to the most modern large-scale industry” (Löwy 52). From this uneven development of capitalism as a world system, Trotsky noted how peripheral capitalist countries such as Russia experienced “a peculiar combination of different stages in the historic process” (cited in Löwy 87). As a consequence of this unevenness, Trotsky held that the proletariat should be the hegemonic force in the coalition between the peasantry and the industrial working class. Trotsky’s theory of combined and uneven development may help to clarify the process by which pre-capitalist societies, such as that evoked in Achebe’s novel, are integrated into the capitalist world-system. Yet it is also important to consider the ways in which Achebe mobilises the symbolic codes of the novel in order to counter the framing of Igbo society and culture as a pre-capitalist society, which is eradicated at the precise moment of its integration into the capitalist world-system.

If Ezeulu is cast as a fetish priest in the colonial mindset of Winterbottom, this narrative framing also draws attention to the ways in which the temporality of capitalist modernity is predicated on the framing of pre-capitalist societies as non-secular or primitive. Yet such a temporal frame of reference also ignores the way in which the secularisation of time is a product of the Judeo-Christian tradition. Johannes Fabian has claimed that the emergence of modernity can be understood “as a succession of attempts to secularize Judeo-Christian Time by generalizing and universalizing it” (2). In the fictional world of *Arrow of God*, the distinction between sacred and secular time that also structures the distinction between pre-capitalist and capitalist modes of temporality is rendered unstable by the figure of the Christian missionary John Goodfellow. It is Goodfellow’s intervention in the socio-economic crisis at Umuaro that simultaneously facilitates the conversion of the villagers to Christianity *and* the integration of the subsistence economy of Umuaro into the world market system. In this way, the novel foregrounds the way in which Christianity provided a rhetorical structure through which to make sense of capitalist modernity, and the process by which pre-capitalist economies have been integrated into the world economic system. It may be true that the ideological agendas of Christian missionaries, imperial company directors, and colonial administrators are in certain respects quite different. Yet the means by which these agendas were achieved in the space of the European colony converged around the order of clock time. Giordano Nanni argues that the bells of colonial missionary stations helped to establish an idea of Western clock time, which in turn promoted the liberal values of the Protestant work ethic. The reforms associated with the civilising mission, Nanni argues, “were intended to transform ‘natives’ into producers and consumers of commodities—of which time was one” (18). In this respect the rhetoric of colonialism’s civilising rhetoric is bound up with the temporality of capitalist modernity. Yet in making a fetish out of clock time, the civilising rhetoric of colonialism simultaneously destabilises the primitivist stereotype of the fetish.

If the civilising mission of colonialism entails the demonization of fetishism, it also depends upon a certain conception of fetishism. A consideration of the use and abuse of fetishism in the context of colonial Africa can help to further clarify both the political-economic and cultural significance of the trope of the yam in *Arrow of God*. Peter Stallybrass has emphasised how Marx’s own conception of the commodity fetish was itself indebted to an earlier conception of the fetish among European traders in colonial West Africa. Invoking the work of the anthropologist William Pietz, Stallybrass notes how the “fetish as a concept was elaborated to demonize the supposedly arbitrary attachment of West Africans to material objects”; by contrast, “[t]he European subject was constituted in opposition to a demonized fetishism through the *disavowal* of the object” (185). Yet in this demonization and disavowal of the arbitrary attachment to the (false) value of objects as a sign of primitivism, European traders and missionaries simultaneously introduced a new form of fetishism that worshipped the market value of objects, and abstracted the commodity from the social circumstances of its production and consumption. In this respect, primitivist stereotypes of fetishism can be seen to provide epistemological support for the process of capitalist accumulation and dispossession in the colonial context. As Samo Tomšič argues, “the colonialist ideologues didn’t know that the knowledge they produced of the ‘primitive Other’ reflected their own relation to commodities, money, and capital […]” (159-60).

By framing the crisis in Umuaro in terms of a conflict between the values of Ezeulu and John Goodfellow, *Arrow of God* also invites readers to reflect on the ways in which the secular temporality of capitalist modernity was itself bound up with a Christian way of thinking about time and causality. As a Christian missionary and an entrepreneur, Goodfellow tries to persuade the starving people of Umuaro to convert to Christianity. In so doing, he also persuades the villagers to buy into a liberal capitalist myth of the autonomous subject, and to reject the sacred idea of time symbolised by Ezeulu’s religious authority and the festival of the yam. This is not to say that capitalist modernity is a fait accompli. As Brown points out, the novel’s oblique references to news of a peasant revolt in the Russian countryside gestures towards a utopian horizon for the villagers in *Arrow of God*—even if that possibility is not realised in the narrative time frame of the novel itself. The desire of the villagers to eat, argues Brown, “exists in itself, but not for itself, and therefore its only expression can be spontaneous, uncoordinated and easily perverted” (123). Yet in framing the villagers’ desire to eat in terms of a Marxist distinction between a social class with shared socio-economic experiences who are not yet conscious of themselves as a class (a class which “exists in itself”) and a revolutionary subject (or a class “for itself”), Brown elides the counter-allegorical significance of this event in the novel, and its potential to interrupt the temporal logic of capitalist modernity and commodity fetishism. Such potential is significant because it questions the process of abstraction associated with the universalization of western clock time, which not only underpins the temporal logic of capitalist modernity, but also subordinates the temporal cycles of the environment to the exigencies of capitalist production.

If the villagers’ hunger drives them to take their yams to the Christian church to seek protection from the anger of Ulu, this act also foregrounds the religious foundations of capitalist modernity and commodity fetishism. In *Things Fall Apart*, the narrator speaks of how the white man had “brought a lunatic religion, but he had also built a trading store and for the first time palm-oil and kernel became things of great price […]” (126). Re-reading these words after *Arrow of God* illuminates a double meaning that is implicit in the subordinate conjunction linking the two clauses that form this sentence. On a first reading, “but” could be taken to imply that the white man’s “lunatic religion” is a negative aspect of British colonialism, which is outweighed by the positive benefits of capitalist modernity, symbolised by the commodification of “palm-oil and kernel” as cash crops. Yet the syntactic juxtaposition of the lunatic religion and the commodification of “palm-oil and kernel” also allows for the possibility that the transformation of “palm-oil and kernel” into “things of great price” is somehow connected to the “lunatic religion”. Indeed, this connection is developed further in *Arrow of God*, when the famine-stricken villagers abandon their belief in one sacred yam for the rituals of a Christian harvest festival in which all crops are deemed of equivalent measure:

Mr Goodcountry saw in the present crisis over the New Yam the opportunity for fruitful intervention. He had planned his church’s harvest service for the second Sunday in November the proceeds from which would go into the fund for building a place of worship more worthy of God and of Umuaro. His plan was quite simple. The New Yam Feast was the attempt of the misguided heathen to show gratitude to God, the giver of all good things. This was God’s hour to save them from their error which was threatening to ruin them. They must be told that if they made their thank-offering to God they could harvest their crops without fear of Ulu.

“So we can tell our heathen brethren to bring their one yam to church instead of giving it to Ulu?” asked a new member of Goodcountry’s church committee.

“That is what I say. But not just one yam. Let them bring as many as they wish according to the benefits they received this year from Almighty God. And not only yams, any crop whatsoever or livestock or money. Anything.

(217-18)

Here, the shift from free indirect discourse to direct reported speech works to register the significance of this “fruitful intervention” both at the level of the story and the symbolic level of the narrative. At the level of the story, the villagers interpret this intervention as a pragmatic solution to the material crisis of hunger precipitated by a ruined harvest. Yet the narrative also suggests that this intervention has an ideological function, which invites the villagers to question the authority of Ulu and the value of the sacred yam. By encouraging the villagers to view all yams, crops, livestock, or money of equivalent worth, in other words, the narrative suggests that Christianity provided the ideological foundations for abstraction, capital accumulation and dispossession in colonial West Africa. In this way, the novel invites readers to question the God-like, meta-position that Goodfellow assumes over his congregation.

By writing this story about the colonial encounter in the aftermath of British colonial rule, moreover, Achebe raises profound questions about the meaning of postcolonial sovereignty after the act of national liberation. A consideration of the complex historical relay between colonialism and neo-colonialism may lie beyond the temporal frame of *Arrow of God*. Yet there are significant connections to be drawn between Achebe’s fictionalisation of the colonial encounter and the loss of collective sovereignty over land and resources, which the colonial encounter inaugurates, and the mediation of the oil encounter in contemporary West African fiction. In “Petro-Magic-Realism Revisited”, for example, Jennifer Wenzel notes how Nigeria exported its first barrel of oil from Port Harcourt at the same time as Chinua Achebe’s novel *Things Fall Apart* was first published in London (211). It may be true, as Wenzel herself acknowledges, that the timing of these two export-events in the history of postcolonial Nigeria is a simple historical coincidence. Yet this serendipitous connection also points to a productive critical assessment of Achebe’s legacy and influence. If the denigration of Ezeulu as a fetish priest lays the groundwork for a new belief system which transforms objects and people into commodities to be exchanged in the global marketplace, this story of Ulu’s integration into the world economic system also prefigures the extraction, accumulation, and commodification of fossil oil in postcolonial Nigeria—a concern that has increasingly preoccupied contemporary African writers.

**Coda**

Near the beginning of Helon Habila’s novel *Oil on Water* (2010), the first-person narrator, a young journalist from Lagos called Rufus, provides an account of a disused oil well in a deserted village in the Niger delta:

The village looked as if a deadly epidemic had swept through it. A square concrete platform dominated the village centre like some sacrificial altar. Abandoned oil-drilling paraphernalia was strewn across the platform; some appeared to be sprouting out of widening cracks in the concrete, alongside thick clumps of grass. High up in the rusty rigging wasps flew in and out of their nests. A weather-beaten signboard near the platform said: OIL WELL NO. 2. 1999. 15,000 METRES (8).

The detailed description of the social and environmental devastation wrought by the material process of oil extraction may seem to be a far cry from the life world of the village economy evoked in Achebe’s *Arrow of God*. The comparison of the oil encounter to “a deadly epidemic” emphasises the way in which the villagers experience the extraction of oil as a lethal form of violence, even if the immediate cause of that violence is hidden from view. Yet the comparison of the oil-drilling platform to a “sacrificial altar” turns the primitivist tropes of African fetishism on their head in such a way that recalls Achebe’s counter-allegorical representation of the Christian harvest festival at the end of *Arrow of God*. By representing the abandoned oil-drilling platform as a “sacrificial altar,” Habila’s journalist-narrator implies that the modern technology of oil extraction sacrifices the lives and livelihoods of the absent villagers for a God-like figure that lies beyond the immediate time frame of the narrative.

The representation of oil as a magical substance in the Nigerian public sphere has worked to efface the material properties of oil and the socio-environmental conditions of its extraction in the Niger Delta. Michael Watts describes how, at the moment of Nigeria’s independence, all manner of messianic claims were projected onto the oil reserves of the Niger Delta. What such messianic claims have tended to overlook, however, is the violent and unequal process of accumulation, dispossession, and abandonment that the oil boom in Nigeria has entailed. In response to this specific history of petro-capitalist modernity in postcolonial Nigeria, novels such as *Oil on Water* encourage readers to reflect on the complex process by which oil is commodified and abstracted from the source of its extraction. By inventing a figurative language to articulate the material conditions of oil production in the Niger Delta, Habila raises questions about the mythical framing of oil as a magical substance that promises wealth and prosperity without work or toil. This is not to suggest that Habila’s rhetoric simply demystifies the logic of commodity fetishism. Rather, through a parody of the magical rhetoric of the Nigerian petro-state, Habila defamiliarises the logic of commodity fetishism that abstracts oil from the violent and unequal process of its physical extraction.

By figuring the oil-drilling platform as a “sacrificial altar,” Habila emphasises how this technological symbol of petro-capitalist modernity masks a history of accumulation and dispossession—a history that is also founded on an economic logic of sacrificial violence. In a similar way to fetishism, the meaning of sacrifice is bound up with western anthropological accounts of sovereignty and violence in so-called primitive societies. Yet, the ethnocentric gaze of western anthropology also reveals how an economic logic of sacrifice underpins the spatial and temporal development of capitalist modernity. Against the framing of sacrificial violence as a sign of so-called primitive societies, the non-linear narrative structure of *Oil on Water* gradually reveals how the economic sovereignty of multinational oil companies is predicated on an economic logic of sacrifice, which is aided and abetted by the contemporary Nigerian petro-state.

In a later chapter, Rufus recounts a conversation with Chief Ibiram about the vicissitudes of a village community that tried to resist the lures of oil fetishism. The village economy is loosely based on what might be understood as a hunter-gatherer mode of production; the villagers, we are told, “lacked for nothing, fishing and hunting and farming and watching their children grow up” (38). By framing the social and economic organisation of this village community as a form of “paradise” (38), this extract could be taken to imply that such a material form of existence is a pastoral myth that is doomed to subsumption by the totalising logic of capitalist modernity. Indeed, Chief Ibiram’s account of how the oil company and the Government forced the villagers to sell their land seems to reinforce such a reading. Using bows, arrows, and guns the villagers attempt to ward off the oil-company boats and the attempts by geologists “to take samples of soil and water” (39). Such a “desperate measure” provides the pretext for Nigerian government forces to intervene and arrest the village Chief Malabo. The chief mysteriously dies in police custody, having apparently consented to sign away all his village lands just prior to his untimely demise; this tragic event prompts the remaining villagers to either sell their land or to leave without taking the money. In either case, the narrator suggests, the outcome is the same: “The rigs went up, and the gas flares, and the workers came and set up camp in our midst, we saw our village change right before our eyes” (40).

This story of oil extraction may seem to offer an allegory of what Hannah Arendt once called “the original sin of simply robbery, which […] made possible the ‘original accumulation of capital’” (148), and the disposability of human life that such a process entails. Yet such a reading would be to overlook the way in which the Chief’s account also interrupts Rufus’s attempt to frame the story within the temporal logic of capital’s universalising mode of production narrative. Chief Ibiram emphasises that the villagers chose to continue hunting, fishing and farming, even though they knew about “the gas flares that lit up neighbouring villages all day and all night, and the cars and TVs and video players in the front rooms of their neighbours who had allowed the flares to be set up” (38). Moreover, by invoking a different understanding of their relationship to the land as one that is based on an ethos of custodianship rather than commodification, the Chief suggests that there are alternative ways of conceptualising the worldliness of the world to that which is defined by the temporality of global capitalist modernity.

In *What is a World?* Pheng Cheah contends that: “the source of literature’s worldly force is the heterotemporality of precolonial oral traditions” (13). Rather than a sign of authentic speech uncontaminated by the universalising script of capitalist modernity and the totalising mode of production narrative it inaugurates, Cheah suggests that “precolonial oral traditions” offer different ways of imagining the temporality of the world that defamiliarise and interrupt the worlding of the world by the *telos* of capitalist modernity. Cheah’s thesis has important implications for the readings of Achebe and Habila presented in this essay. By suggesting that Ezeulu’s proverbs serve to shore up his sovereignty over the time, territory, and natural resources of Umuaro, Achebe’s narrator in *Arrow of God* certainly refuses a romantic idealisation of pre-capitalist socio-economic formations. What Achebe calls the “powers of event” in *Arrow of God* certainly refers to a wider historical process, which Achebe frames in terms of a binary opposition between “periods when we are carried away by optimism” and “periods when we suffer great hardships and we are crushed morally, mentally, and psychologically” (Lindfors, 117). If the logic of the “powers of event” in *Arrow of God* denotes the intervention of the contingent or “unforeseen” (117), this might be taken to suggest that the event that unfolds in Umuaro signals the subsumption of that village society to the values of capitalist modernity. Yet the event of subsumption that Ezeulu’s sovereign decision to delay the festival of the yam precipitates also threatens to rupture the *telos* of capitalist modernity from a position that is immanent to the unfolding of the event.

The novel’s evocation of a society organised around yam value rather than exchange value implies a different way of thinking about the world in the aftermath of colonialism and the transition to a capitalist mode of production that the colonial encounter facilitated. This gesture to an alternative world is not simply utopian in the sense of being outside the temporality of capitalist modernity. By telling a story about the way in which Christian missionaries aided and abetted the transition from a pre-capitalist to a capitalist social formation in Southeastern Nigeria, *Arrow of God* also highlights the Christian foundations of capitalist modernity and commodity fetishism. In so doing, the novel suggests that the ghosts of Christian theology have always haunted the secular time of capitalist modernity. Such a challenge to the temporality of capitalist accumulation in *Arrow of God* is not merely conceptual. For the rhetorical structure of *Arrow of God* tells another story about the ways in which histories of collective political struggle persist in spite of the uneven development of capital accumulation that marks the transition from colonial to neo-colonial formations of sovereignty. By re-reading *Arrow of God* after *Oil on Water*, we can see how the symbolic codes of Achebe’s novel prefigure Habila’s parody of oil fetishism in the context of the contemporary Nigerian petro-state. Such a materialist reading may draw attention to the uneven spatial and temporal development of capitalist accumulation and dispossession in South Eastern Nigeria in the early twentieth century and the Niger Delta in the late twentieth century. But it also entails recognising the ways in which the counter-allegorical places the reader in a profoundly different relation to the world that is immanent to yet out of joint with the temporality of capitalist modernity. It is in this sense that a consideration of the counter-allegorical in *Arrow of God* has profound and far-reaching consequences for understanding the rhetoric of narrative temporality and the politics of literary form in the broader field of contemporary postcolonial world literary studies.

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