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Locating Ben Okri's *The Age of Magic* in a Cosmopolitan Framework

Abstract:
In this paper, I explore the implications of the term "cosmopolitanism" and focus on the critical departures Kwame Anthony Appiah's idea of "rooted cosmopolitanism" makes from the humanistic hue of cosmopolitanism. Appiah avers that cosmopolitan identities (encompassing local and global and everything in between) are based on the awareness of difference, but enabled through the desire to share narratives and stories. While Ben Okri, the Nigerian-British author has been hailed as cosmopolitan ever since *The Famished Road* (1991) was published, here I analyze his lesser discussed 2014 novel, *The Age of Magic*, and locate it in a cosmopolitan framework that is closer to Appiah's own understanding of the term. The lineage of the protagonist, Lao (to Okri's other fictional works), and of Mistletoe (to the myth of Pan), serves to instantiate the political and aesthetic imports of the cosmopolitan imagination of characters (and of the authorial figure of Okri); this cosmopolitan imagination draws with equal ease on African and European myth, magic, and cultural history. The geographical location in *The Age of Magic* also serves to exemplify an additional facet of the cosmopolitan aesthetic in question.

Keywords: Cosmopolitanism, *The Age of Magic*, Ben Okri, Kwame Anthony Appiah, local, global, histories

Introduction

Early in Ben Okri's *The Age of Magic* (2014), the protagonist, Lao, is in conversation with a spirit called the "Quylph" who remarks that "to be at home everywhere" in the world is indeed a fortuitous thing (10). This sentiment, though not necessarily shared or experienced by the protagonist or the other characters in the novel, sets the tone for a cosmopolitan worldview that the aesthetics, politics, and intertextuality of the novel's world invoke. In this paper, I first discuss the concept of cosmopolitanism and then the cosmopolitanism of the fictional world (and all it entails) of *The Age of Magic*. There is also, I posit, a shift in Okri's cosmopolitan imagination, as evinced through the difference between *The Famished Road* (1991) and *The Age of Magic* (2014). This paper, however, eschews a purely comparative analysis of the two novels in favor of analyzing the latter more closely.

To return to the novel at hand: the notion the Quylph posits of the individual who is "at home" anywhere and everywhere (and therefore, perhaps, also nowhere) in the world (geographically, culturally, and aesthetically, I would argue) is, by no means, an un-fractured, Romantic, or purely spiritual relationship between individual identity and the larger world. Of the several kinds of cosmopolitan figures[1], Cyrus Patell suggests that the modern literary cosmopolitan figure (writer or character) is not someone who is necessarily comfortable everywhere; rather, it is "someone who is

[1]Marcy Brink-Danan outlines the six kinds of the cosmopolitanisms/cosmopolitan figures as defined by Ronald Stade: spatial cosmopolitans are those who effortlessly move across the globe; social cosmopolitans do not identify with a single group or community; political cosmopolitans imagines themselves as citizens of the world; a structural understanding avers that the idea of cosmopolitanism is an elitist project that only looks down on locals; moralizing cosmopolitanism emphasizes "solidarity with strangers"; and the essentialist interpretation of cosmopolitanism projects humans as transcending social systems and classifications (Brink-Danan 445).

'worldly' and therefore not fully comfortable—never fully at home—anywhere" (4). This discomfort is critical, for it makes the cosmopolitan figure highly aware not only of the constructed nature of their identity, but also of the connections upon which this identity rests, as well as the differences upon which their connections to the world are predicated. It could be argued that comfort and discomfort arise from the same sources and simultaneously: the juxtapositions of the local/national at the core of one's identity alongside one's earliest and abiding attachments, and the global that one necessarily partakes of in several contexts and which complicates the relationship to the local attachments. Such a dichotomy is also at the heart of much of postcolonial studies (Adorján 214).

The discomfort at the heart of the cosmopolitan identity also sets this kind of identity apart from older interpretations of cosmopolitanism[2]. The form of cosmopolitanism invoked here does not strive to disregard or un-see boundaries or be naively universalist in its approach; rather, it is what Kwame Anthony Appiah calls "rooted cosmopolitanism"—a view of the world that necessarily locates and recognizes one's "local and national attachments within a cosmopolitan framework" (qtd. in Patell 14), and the ensuing discomfort comes from acknowledging, and engaging with, difference or boundaries. Appiah also invokes a moral obligation to this cosmopolitanism, which is common to older interpretations of cosmopolitanism as well, except that there is high awareness of difference in rooted cosmopolitanism. The modern cosmopolitan figure, in other words, has a moral and social obligation to the "cosmos" or to others beyond their immediate community, while also seriously valuing the practices and beliefs of those that are significant to them (De Bruijn 172). Appiah states:

> Cosmopolitanism imagines a world in which people and novels and music and films and philosophies travel between places where they are understood differently, because people are different and welcome to their *difference*. Cosmopolitanism can work because there can be *common conversations* about these shared ideas and objects. But what makes the conversations possible is not always shared "culture"; not even, as the older humanists imagined, universal principles or values (though, as I say, people from far away can discover that their principles meet); nor yet shared understanding (though people with very different experiences can end up agreeing about the darnedest things). What works in encounters with other human beings across gaps of space, time, and experience is enormously various. For stories—epic poems as well as modern forms like novels and films, for example—it is the capacity to follow a narrative and conjure a world: and, it turns out, there are people everywhere more than willing to do this. This is the moral epistemology that makes cosmopolitanism possible. (258; *italics mine*)

[2]Cosmopolitanism is not a twenty-first century invention, though its implications have changed over the centuries it has been in circulation; nor has this term ever been entirely free of paradoxes. As early as fourth century BCE, Diogenes had declared himself a "citizen of the world" or *cosmos* and thus the term "cosmopolitan", as opposed to a citizen of the "polis" (Patell 4, Appiah 217). The Kantian notion of a "global civil society", in the context of human rights and law, similarly equates cosmopolitanism to a universal existence:

> First is domestic law, the sphere of posited relations of right, which Kant claims should be in accordance with a republican constitution; second is the sphere of rightful relations among nations (*Voelkerrecht*), resulting from treaty obligations among states; third is cosmopolitan right, which concerns relations among civil persons to each other as well as to organized political entities in a global civil society. (Benhabib 21)

In the modern context, Benhabib explains that the notion of cosmopolitanism in international relations, human rights, and law ranges from placing the love of mankind above love of country to "hybridity, fluidity, and recognizing the fractured and internally riven character of human selves and citizens, whose complex aspirations cannot be circumscribed by national fantasies and primordial communities" to a universalist mode of moral ethics (18).

Of the several concepts Appiah has carved into the idea of cosmopolitanism, three are deeply pertinent to understanding rooted cosmopolitanism as well as the novel in question: one, that activities like storytelling (and the recognition of narrative) bind humans across different sites or locations together and create a space for conversation, which is crucial to a cosmopolitanism worldview; two, that principles, ideas, or tastes are not bound by geographical or social limits, which therefore also problematizes the question of identity determiners; and three, that there is a morality or ethics that is at the heart of cosmopolitanism, which implies cosmopolitanism is a socio-political as well as ethical attitude.

It is also important to remember that the political, humanist, "universalist" idea of cosmopolitanism (taking off from John Stuart Mill, Immanuel Kant, and John Rawls) is different from what Appiah argues literary cosmopolitanism desires to achieve. The latter derives inspiration from diaspora literature, and postcolonial as well as postmodernist theories (Patell 8). For Appiah, "the diversity of humankind is a fact" (qtd. in Patell 8) and the cosmopolitan outlook is a "*perspective* that embraces difference and promotes the bridging of cultural gaps" (qtd. in Patell 8; *italics mine*). Taking off from Appiah, Patell avers that cultures naturally tend to reinvent themselves; the natural tendency is towards mixing, miscegenation, and revision, rather than towards pristine purity (8), and the ensuing contamination is a welcome inevitability. So, in place of homogeneity or, at the other extreme, complete (and therefore, uncomplicated) identification with all, there is, instead, the acute awareness of the act of crossing and, more precisely, of the boundaries that indubitably exist. Of course, the discourse of cosmopolitanism subsumes within it the "genuine problem of belonging in a rootless world" (Adorján 192), while also reveling in the fact of difference. The tension arises as the cosmopolitan figure "tries to negotiate his/her identity at the intersection of various worlds" (De Bruijn 172). The emphasis on "various" worlds crucially extends the metaphor from a dichotomy (local/global) to a network (several interconnected factors, nodes, and modes). The way forward, Appiah claims, is through conversation and debate, and a certain striving towards not tolerance[3] of the other but the betterment (in a moral-ethical sense) of all (246). Such conversation, carried on, for instance, through literature or storytelling (which, Appiah states is common across cultural boundaries), is meant not to belittle the Other but to develop sympathy and empathy (Vermeulen 42).

Okri's Cosmopolitan Status

The objective of creating empathy through such acts as storytelling, deconstructing the self in the network of the individual-local-national-global, and the act of transcending (temporarily) stabilized identities make Ben Okri eligible for the status of a "cosmopolitan" writer. However, what cosmopolitan means in this context may vary. For instance, Brenda Cooper, in her book *Magical Realism in West African Fiction*, suggests that African writers such as Okri are cosmopolitan because they draw upon their indigenous cultural beliefs, myths, and folklore just as easily as they invoke more globally identifiable postmodernist elements in their narratives. In other words, "cosmopolitan" writers are those whose sources and ideas rely on identity formations that draw inspiration from the deliberate act of cutting across national and regional boundaries. This cosmopolitan attitude is usually adopted by writers who are "diasporic" and "dispersed" from their homelands (29, 55). It is important to recognize that in most cases, these writers are also the privileged (in terms of access to education, to travel, and to literary language) among "Third World" intellectuals (29), and of course, one cannot ignore the complications of the term "Third World" or its implications in larger imperialistic, colonialist, and economic frameworks. Nevertheless, such "cosmopolitan" writers/intellectuals have a global attitude, and feel comfortable mixing elements

[3]It is to be noted that Appiah is strongly critical of terms like "globalization" that he finds to be historically "myopic" and far too insufficient to explain or understand the history of human interactions (216) and "multiculturalism" that acknowledges difference but staunchly refuses to make judgements on someone else's culture. For him, "cosmopolitanism" allows criticism, discourse, and a striving towards a higher form of moral truth.

from native and international contexts. This does not imply that cosmopolitan (most notably also postcolonial) writers are escaping their indigenous histories/culture or denying them, as nativists have accused them of doing. Rather, they are aware that the new forces already in place, or in the process of becoming so, do not necessarily originate from an "external" source; in fact, nothing is truly external. Everything can be internalized or drawn upon with equal ease. As Cooper puts it, "Party to inherited traditions, open to global influences and skepticism," these cosmopolitan writers (magical realists, in this particular case) "offer antinomies, embrace hybrid transformations and, at the same time, wish to participate in the project of national healing" (58). This cements their location within both the local and the global, often in highly politicized ways.

Okri's inclusion in Cooper's list is for two primary reasons: first, his diasporic upbringing and the fact that he spends equal time in his country of origin, Nigeria, and his country of residence, England. This confluence of cultural heritages has ensured his imagination weaves in elements from both locations. The second reason is the politics embedded in cosmopolitan writers' art; these writers do not necessarily regard indigenous belief and knowledge systems and folklore to be paramount and superior to those of their (erstwhile) colonial counterparts. These writers are equally at home within their homelands or the lands they choose to live in or travel to, and have equal access to a global store of narratives, histories, and cultures. However, because of this vast body of knowledge available to them, they are also aware of the pitfalls of "truths". That is, when these writers and thinkers imbibe the cosmopolitan worldview, they accept the idea of diversity and miscegenation alongside the notion of "fallibilism" or the belief "that our knowledge is imperfect, provisional, subject to revision in the face of new evidence" (Appiah qtd. in Patell 9).

Cooper used Okri's Booker Prize winning *The Famished Road* (1991) as an instance of West African cosmopolitan magical realism. Esther De Bruijn also argues that *The Famished Road*'s cosmopolitan nature arises from Okri's employment of an abiku[4] child—a trope common in Yoruba mythology—as a protagonist along with indigenous belief systems such as sorcery and animism, but also mixing these with Christian and Islamic beliefs, and planting all of these in the midst of political turmoil in Nigeria in the 1970s. However, I would argue that this kind or degree of cosmopolitanism is perhaps of an earlier stage, and the cosmopolitan aesthetics and politics that come to the fore in *The Age of Magic* are significantly different, and perhaps more in tune with Appiah's call to conversation across local and national boundaries. *The Age of Magic* manages to achieve the latter aim especially because of its geographical setting and the cultural history it is, as a result, able to easily invoke. More importantly, it is the genealogy and circumstances of the protagonist of this novel that highlights a more complex form of the politics and poetics of modern literary cosmopolitanism.

The Age of Magic

Since *The Famished Road* has been labelled a product of cosmopolitan literary imagination, it is tempting to read *The Age of Magic* in the same vein, or to compare them at many a turn, though this paper avoids such a close comparison in favor of broader similarities only for the sake of an intertextual reading: both use magical realism, both lay emphasis on history and memory, and both are cosmopolitan, though different in kind. They also have a common protagonist—a quick overview of Okri's novels helps place the protagonist of *The Age of Magic* in a fruitful intertextual context. *The Famished Road* (1991), *Songs of Enchantment* (1993), and *Infinite Riches* (1998) are part of a trilogy whose protagonist is the abiku child Azaro. A host of characters like Dad, Mum, and the photographer, Nigerian politics and violence, and a palimpsest of Yoruba, Islamic, and Christian

[4]The story unfolds through the first person narrative of an *abiku* child, Lazaro (or Azaro, as he is called). According to Yoruba mythology, *abiku* are spirits born in human form who die early and are reborn repeatedly. The *abiku* have the power to will their own death, and they choose to die early because they long to return to their weightless world of spirits, fauns, and fairies (*Famished Road* 4). Ironically, the happier they are in the spirit world, the sooner they are reborn to human parents. Thus, they are caught in an endless cycle of death and rebirth, a notion that is intrinsically tied to high infant mortality rates in the country (Hawley 30).

folklore as the living backdrop against which events take place, are the prominent and common features of these texts. In addition, the "weird delirium of history" (*The Famished Road* 195) and the intermixing of dream reality with waking reality are also common to all of them. These confused history, and crisscrossed dreaming and waking lives are carried forward in *In Arcadia* (2002), which serves as a prequel of sorts to *The Age of Magic* (2014). I would propose that Azaro of the earlier trilogy is transformed into Lao of *The Age of Magic*, and in him we find a more pronounced link between African and European histories and cultural memories, given his literary genealogy and his current embeddedness in Europe. I will return to this aspect a little later.

Characteristic of Okri's fiction, the conventional plot of *The Age of Magic* is bare; the novel's richness, rather, lies in the treatment of the moment, the incidences of "boundary skipping"[5] and the impact of time, place, history, and mythology on the characters. The novel is set in a small town of B— on the edge of Lake Lucerne (near Basel) in Switzerland. It is ostensibly one of the many stops made on a journey undertaken by a documentary film-making crew of eight members. The crew has been tasked with a quest to find Arcadia (or what they imagine it to be), and to record the journey as they go along. The pivotal point is Nicholas Poussin's famous painting with the enigmatic quote "Et in Arcadia Ego". This narrative is a continuation of the plot of *In Arcadia* wherein Lao and his team, as part of the same quest, are traversing across America. Lao is the presenter for the documentary film. The experiential and emotional encounters of the eight team members, but primarily Lao and his girlfriend, Mistletoe, with the town and its (and their own) histories, instances of magical realism, and emotional/quasi-spiritual insights form the bulk of the narrative.

As with most cosmopolitan literature, the geographical or spatial location is quite significant. In *The Age of Magic*, the Swiss town (called B—) in which the stories unfold, was, the reader is informed, once a very popular destination for the rich and famous and suffered tremendously because of this. At first glance, it appears to be of pleasantly bland simplicity and dreamlike serenity for the protagonists—quite akin to how a tourism brochure might advertise the place. It is also a town of hotels and well-appointed houses and elegant graveyards. Yet, Lao and Mistletoe expect much more from the landscape: "They had read that the mountains had given rise to legends of dragons and giants, ghosts and witches and even meerkats. Something of those legends scented the air as they wandered through the quiet streets, following their intuition" (*Age of Magic* 98-99). The tongue-in-cheek passing reference to meerkats, which are native to parts of Africa, and dragons, which are entirely fictional, in the same breath is significant: meerkats link Lao to his African roots and also poke fun at the global traveler who would reduce an entire continent to one exotic animal. The allusion to dragons alongside meerkats equates fact with fantasy, just as the desire to find meerkats in Europe equates one continent (Europe) with another (Africa).

The town of B— has had a long and vibrant history as a cultural center: the narrator claims that the place was a favorite of Goethe, Twain, Hesse, and Turner—all stalwarts of Western art and culture—as well as the more contemporary rich and famous. But, as the crew learns from Hans, the loquacious owner of the hotel where they have put up, being part of this prestigious history also led to all manner of debauchery and the ultimate ruination of the town and its people. Hans, a storyteller and historian in his own right, recalls the rich folk that participated in this history: "'They drank, they gambled away huge fortunes, they took drugs of all kinds. And there were the constant scandals. People committed suicide over failed investments, gambling debts, and women. It all became messy. The wheel of fortune turned, and everything went bad.'" He concludes that "[P]opularity, success, hysteria, killed us" (*Age of Magic* 251). After a particularly violent scandal, the rich and famous lost interest in the town and then began a phase of implosion: "[T]he town fell silent overnight. Then it died. It became a ghost town." It is only after several years that "slowly the flowers started to grow again and freshness returned to the air.'" (252). To put it differently, the town is now beginning to recover from exploitative capitalism, moral deficiency, and the weight of exoticism and high culture. It is in this phase, when the town is beginning to recover but still wishes

[5] I borrow this term from Rawdon Wilson, who pegs this as one of the crucial features of magical realism, and this term is quite as easily applicable to *The Famished Road* as it is to *The Age of Magic*.

itself erased from the annals of memory, that Lao and company arrive. The crew members' explorations of the village's landscape are crisscrossed with interruptions from other times—ghosts of people that once counted this village as their favored haunt, long ceased music festivals, a carnivalesque circus with people who have magical abilities—and also by personifications of their own fears, ambitions, and emotions that acquire a life of their own[6]. The title of the novel is significant here: was the time when the town was popular, frenzied, and coveted an age of magic? Or is it in its ruination, with its several ghosts that cross time, or lost spaces that open up to those receptive to them that the town is experiencing its age of magic? Or perhaps these are both ages of magic, but only of different imports. Indeed, Hans asserts: "Nothing here is what it seems. The town bends, changes, depending on who's looking. That's how it keeps its magic now" (253).

The motif of ghosts that rupture the patina of realism is to be pondered on: the town, once prosperous and thriving, suffered from excess and then became a ghost town (reminiscent of villages or settlements throughout history that were once on a popular circuit but then, due to economic or environmental reasons, fell by the wayside and were abandoned); literally too, it is a ghost town since Lao and Mistletoe encounter ghosts of dead people or ghostly memories of mythic pasts. The emotional landscapes of the crew members also assert themselves in the form of ghosts and spirits. In literary parlance, such "ghosts" serve as metaphors for the disruption of reality and exemplify how "reality always exceeds our capacities to describe or understand or prove" (Zamora 498). In the novel as well, they are metaphors for the liminal spaces between the tangible and mythical, the present and the past. They are signs of lost histories and memories, simultaneously existing and yet absent, and they certainly amplify the domain of "experienced reality" (500). For instance, a ghost Lao and Mistletoe meet is of a man dressed like a well-to-do banker in a car who warns them that the town is on the brink of a moral collapse (*Age of Magic* 186-88). They later see the man's tombstone marked as "Tom Woolnoth"; he had apparently died in a car accident many years ago (190). He could be interpreted as the vestige of the capitalism that ultimately ruined the town.

A significant ghost in the novel is "Malasso", an imaginary Faustian devil, who haunts the crew and who Lao believes is a "group entity"—a manifestation of the group's negative emotions coalesced into a haunting specter when they are on their quest to find paradise (Arcadia). Lao feels that it was them collectively that had "endowed him with influence, nourished his personality, enriched his agency" (*Age of Magic* 132). Malasso is an aggregate of the group's "floating dreams. Moving between two realms, he was both visible and invisible. Mirroring their blind alternation between dream and waking, thought and things, he became the master between—the master they had brought with them" (132). Further, "Unwittingly they conferred on him the power to shape their stories: he could influence whatever happened to them as they travelled through the myth-charged spaces to Arcadia" (132). Jim (the film director), however, who is most aware of the presence of Malasso, believes that the latter is not simply a group entity but "quite real" (135). Jim also obsesses about killing Malasso (139) who he believes is an impediment to the search for Arcadia (143). In other words, Malasso is both a ghost conjured up by the creative powers of the group (94) and also a metaphor for the hurdles that lie in the path of those that seek paradise. The Biblical resonance of this idea, wherein the Devil tempts a true seeker, and the Faustian air of this character add to the cultural resources that the novel's imagination rests on. Moreover, this ghost is also the master of

[6] Several hybrid spirit forms are visible to Lao in the train carriages that bring them into the town. Lao has a vision when the train is passing through a dark tunnel: ". . . he saw, in a flash, a horrible spectacle. He saw imps of regret, goblins of worry, red-eyed monsters of nasty thoughts, giants of deeds done, hybrid creatures of fear, ghommids of envy, bats of guilt, cloven-hoofed figures of lust, beings of terrible aspect . . . It seemed everyone's troubles had accompanied them and crowed the compartment" (*Age of Magic* 34). Further, "Lao was astonished to see his ghommids chatting with Jim's trolls, to see Jute's niebelungen gibbering with Riley's gnomes, Sam's harpies conversing with Mistletoe's sprite. They seemed to keep no secrets from one another. They talked and laughed about their owners as if the evils they knew about gave them much amusement" (41). Jim, Jute, and Riley are part of the crew.

the "between", residing in liminal spaces and thus expanding the ontological comprehension of the crew members.

The connection with ghosts is also crucial to the significance of the protagonist, Lao. The ghosts in the novel are made visible to the reader via the narrator, but the focalizing points are Lao and Mistletoe. That is, the ghosts are visible to them and interact with them, giving us, the readers, an unusual insight into the past of the town, a common mythic lore of Europe, and the individual emotions of the other characters. This begs the question: why are these ghosts visible to Lao? The answer, I believe, lies in drawing a connection between Azaro of *The Famished Road* and Lao. As mentioned before, Azaro is an abiku child, and abiku are contiguous with the realms of ghosts and of the living, the waking world and the dream world. The ghosts of the past are not only visible to Lao but also unsurprising to him because he is an abiku. Azaro's real name is Lazaro, and a shortened version of it as Lao is not unimaginable. Lazaro (or Lazarus), the biblical character, symbolizes birth, death, and rebirth. As is the case with Azaro, Lao's experiences too are a cumulative effect of many worlds, many births, and many deaths: he "felt both in the present and eternal. For a moment, he was his fact and his fantasy" (*Age of Magic* 111). A mythical circularity is built into these characters and is also reflected in other symbols: for instance, Lao muses that the word "Arcadia" "began and ended with the first letter of the alphabet. Beginning with a beginning and ending with a beginning too. There was also a beginning right at its centre" (18).

The lineage from Azaro to Lao is important to understand why certain narrative choices become possible; however, it is also important to focus on how Lao is different from Azaro. Lao is truly cosmopolitan in a number of ways for several reasons. We are informed that he has travelled the world with his crew (281-82), reads extensively, and draws inspiration from texts from all cultures and regions; in effect, his imagination and understanding are shaped by numerous cultures. What Vermeulen says of Teju Cole's cosmopolitan protagonist in *Open City* is directly applicable here: Lao's imagination draws upon a "high-cultural frame of reference" (Vermeulen 40). In the novel, Lao is reading Goethe's *Faust* at the time of the story, which shapes the imaginary devil in this mold rather than those of the spirits Azaro encounters in the forest and in Madame Koto's bar in *The Famished Road*. References are made to the *Bhagavad Gita*[7] (23), Plato's ideal forms (39), Novalis (200), Velazquez (282) that make up Lao's mental landscape. He is at home with Poussin and Virgil, and dances a mix of "flamenco, salsa, and African" at a pub (229). "African" as a dance category is a nuanced hint towards Lao's citizenship, discussed later in the paper. Lao is, through such a syncretic exploration, a cosmopolitan figure, certainly far more than Azaro is.

Another remarkable feature of cosmopolitanism is that an established metaphor or symbol may be turned on its head (Patell 2). Lao's access to this kind of international "high-cultural" framework points to precisely what for centuries was inaccessible to Africans in the West (i.e. many in the West believed they were undeserving of it). Besides, he is on a quest to Arcadia, a mythological (and spiritual) Eden available only to a chosen, spiritually spotless, few. Both point to a similar politics of race and the First versus the Third World. It is also interesting that the high culture of older/classical European art and literature that played out in the town was eventually overrun by high capitalism (also a product of that part of the world) and its excesses. And perhaps most significantly, it is Lao who is the true inheritor of the town's history, for the town opens up its various layers to him (and to a slightly lesser extent, to Mistletoe).

As an abiku (and thus indubitably linked to Nigeria), Lao is able to recognize other spirit children as well, such as Nothung (perhaps a play on the word 'nothing'), a young man in the town who does not know he is a spirit child but is instantly enamored of Mistletoe (*Age of Magic* 233). Lao is surprised to find him in the "west." He imagines that "[h]e saw in his eyes the mark of one not entirely of this world, one who would have to make a great effort to accommodate himself to it" (235). As a cosmopolitan figure, though, Lao has equal and informed access to local legends and pan-European history and myth. *The Age of Magic* has both, the idea of a quest and a possible Eden (i.e. a pastoral utopia) as part of its endgame. Both ideas derive from European literary and art history—

[7] "The Song of God" – part of the Hindo epic Mahabharata; it has 700 verses (e.n.)

a fact referenced in the novel as well. The desire for Edenic origins exists in epic quests and Arthurian tales, in Biblical stories, in the idea of the noble savage, and has also served as a common response to moments of civilizational crises. Okri picks on the tradition of paradise by weaving in several prominent references to the Greek idyll as it occurs in a kind of pan-European cultural history: in Virgil's *Eclogues*, Philip Sidney's *The Countess of Pembroke*, and of course, Nicholas Poussin's famed painting. Arcadia, of ancient Greek derivation, is a symbol of pastoral beauty, oneness with nature, an Edenic wilderness, and a throwback to a time before civilization and history. Yet, the protagonist of the novel also has a Blakean vision of this Eden, recognizing that the landscape has an "inner disorder". Lao interprets Virgil's and Poussin's account thus: "Some of the dwellers in Arcadia are haunted by madness and extreme passions . . . Lao often thought that maybe Virgil had intuited the power of the god Pan, or maybe that lonely shepherds in mountains are prey to obsessions" (60). Thus, not only does he have access to this heritage, he also has the space and ability to interpret and deconstruct it. The desire to find paradise, though constantly undermined by fears that it may not exist, asserts itself strongly among the characters. The crew members contrast their ideal(s) to places they actually inhabit, such as the town. The town itself believes a return to what it remembers as a previous, more paradisiacal state, is possible: after having been corrupted by capitalism and high culture, it reimagines itself in a pre-capitalist, idyllic utopian state, a reflection of the cyclic temporal schema of many an ancient myth.[8]

Yet another way in which Okri intertwines his African and European inheritances is by presenting Mistletoe and the circus folk (dancers, jugglers, acrobats) as children of Pan. These circus folk appear when Lao and Mistletoe (literally) cross a bridge over to the non-realist layer of the town's time and space and she enters "her own eternity" (*Age of Magic* 118). Pan is the Greek god of wilderness, shepherds, and rustic music (120). Though of different pedigrees, the choice to employ such characters serves a specific purpose: an abiku or the daughter of a mythological deity is the symbol of the permeability of the membrane that separates the living and the dead, the past and the present, history and myth, the tangible and the spectral. Thus, declarations like "[t]his town is merging with its dead" by Lao after he visits a graveyard (182) or "dreams infect reality with their truth" (71) or "we're in the wrong time," (189) do not sound odd. In fact, Lao and Mistletoe allow the reader to see reality with "a third eye"—one which perceives paradoxes rather than certainties ("third eye" is a term employed in a similar context by Cooper). It is of course, part of the cosmopolitan aesthetic that none of the several worlds is ever completely absent or present; rather, all are sustained contiguously and are equally valid or true. The hybrids of spirits and humans found populating the church cemetery and the music festival arena in *The Age of Magic* (as also Madame Koto's bar in *The Famished Road*) are inspired from the Yoruba belief that the orun (otherworldly, inclusive of deities, ancestors, and spirits) coexists with the aye (people, animals, and plants) (Cooper 41). This hybridism is also called "animism," and writers often "incorporate spirits, ancestors and talking animals, in stories . . . in order to express their passions, their aesthetics and their politics" (Cooper 40)—a juxtaposition also reflected upon by Dipesh Chakrabarty in *Provincializing Europe* when analyzing the confrontation between (the Western notion of) history, which he calls a "secular" activity, and subaltern realities that often incorporate spirits, supernatural elements, and

[8]Mircea Eliade, among others, outlines the cyclical time frame found in mythic rituals: archaic ontology rests on "the abolition of time through the imitation of archetypes and the repetition of paradigmatic gestures." For instance, a sacrifice not only exactly imitates and reproduces the mythical prototype, but also takes place at the "same primordial mythical moment" (35). That is, every meaningful act not only repeats the original but also coincides with it. The possibility of a return to the Ur-moment has serious implications for communal and individual memory. Eliade argues that personal memory is important only for the modern imagination wherein time moves linearly and is marked by events that take place one after another, manifested in most realist literary imagination. Mythic time, on the other hand, enables a return to the original state, and is manifested in, among other ways, the creation of archetypal figures. When Lao desires to be dissolved of his being and consumed by the universe as "holy food" (*Age of Magic* 286), he is similarly seeking to return to the primordial state.

gods into their fold. Ultimately, cosmopolitan literary imaginations examine, explore, and explode such confrontations. They also allow for dialogue across realism, reality, and magic, and beg acceptability for these various experiences.

Mythological figures are not the only ones to populate the landscape; Okri also creates a trickster figure named the Quylph (mentioned at the beginning of the paper), who is only visible in oblique sight or in peripheral vision (*Age of Magic* 269). The harder Lao tries to fix the periphery, the more the Quylph shifts further out, thereby altering the limits of the periphery itself (271). Lao defines the Quylph, a legend of the area, as a "nature spirit, a guardian of treasures" (274). This creature, unlike an abikuor Pan, has no known sources of origin—except that Lao believes he has arisen from "aleph" or the beginning of language (285), thereby also implying the power of language to create all literary imagination. In this instance, as well as in Lao's ruminations on the word "Arcadia" and the invocation of several literary texts, the role of language and stories in shaping imagination and history is constantly underscored.

The narrative also highlights the paradoxes of memory, a salient element of cultural history. Although the town community appears to be one that wants neither to be visible nor known, and wishes to be erased from memory, it paradoxically must present its histories if it wishes to resurrect itself. The townspeople want to go back to the olden times, to be erased from the maps of memory and return to a point in history before they were interrupted and corrupted by the outside world. Hans states quite categorically: "We don't even want to be on the map but we can't stop it. We want to be our own secret. We want to be invisible . . . We have retreated into myth" (253). Myth, clearly, is another kind of history. Ironically, of course, the overt desire to be forgotten is thwarted by the presence of a documentary film crew whose ostensible purpose is to record narratives and places and freeze them in a framework of "truth". In essence, one detects the same struggle of memory over history: it presents a community whose memories and being have not been layered by the sticky dust of forgetting but by other, more overpowering—but equally effacing—forces of capitalism, power, and glitzy culture that can severely homogenize spaces across the globe.

Modern technology—an enterprise primarily of the West—plays a vital role via the photographer and his camera in *The Famished Road*, and the trope of the camera continues in *The Age of Magic*. Of course, technology, the legacy of colonialism in several postcolonial nations, is also used to subvert the very power structures these innovations were supposed to set in place. With the camera in *The Age of Magic*, the aim is to document reality, and the camera is projected as being capable of capturing the essential personalities of the people who Lao interviews on the train. The camera, quite literally, creates history by presenting a framed and carefully arranged slice of reality and assigns to it a false sense of permanence; in other words, the camera "perpetuates a false reality" (*Age of Magic* 14). Furthermore, Lao finds it incapable of recording what he sees on the train: the spirits that saturate the compartments. Later in the novel, he comes to a startling realization that " . . . there is a whole world he was not seeing because he was looking; and that whole world, that vast reality, came into being when he was not looking, when he was not trying to see" (269). It is suggested that such epiphanies lead Lao to understand that there are realities rather than a reality and these are unraveled or exposed in different ways, sometimes especially if one is not deliberately seeking them. Cosmopolitanism, Robert Fine comments, breaks the limits of "essentialising particularisms" and reorients them in the context of "the inter-subjective relations in which these particulars are inserted"—a decidedly more global phenomenon (134-35). Inter-subjectivity, openness to other (or others') realities and truths, and the ability to imagine a con-fused vision are integral to the cosmopolitan figure such as Lao is.

Conclusion

The Age of Magic embodies some of the paradoxes and conflicts that are a part of cosmopolitanism and evades others. The protagonist, Lao, is an extension of Azaro (an abiku), who is traveling the world, on a Biblical quest, and draws upon a vast store of European classics that fashion his spiritual and cultural consciousness. His companion, Mistletoe, is apparently a child of Pan,

another European entity. The entire tale is punctured by ghosts, histories, and memories that acquire form in the process of telling themselves to the protagonist. The destruction caused by capitalism and the dark emotional recesses of the characters' minds become personified in the form of ghosts. The destruction caused by capitalism and exoticization in a small town in Switzerland is similar to what happens in several parts of the now postcolonial world, thus bringing the two disparate locations at par. Lao and Mistletoe are the bearers of this complicated history, by virtue of their individual identities but also their global ones.

However, the novel also evades some of the complications that are inherent in the concept of cosmopolitanism. For instance, the politics of *The Famished Road* appear to be far more stark than what the dreamier and perhaps more "spiritual" (for the want of a better word) world of T*he Age of Magic* offers. Of course, such evaluations absolutely cannot, and should not, be based on whether literary texts have to perforce be political in intent or effect. However, reading politics, race, economy, class, imperialism, and aesthetics into a literary text is the prerogative of the reader. In *The Age of Magic*, for instance, it could be argued that Okri bypasses some of the conflicts of postcolonialism by situating the entire novel in what is regularly listed as one of the most expensive metropolitan areas in the world, Basel (in Switzerland), rather than in Nigeria (where *The Famished Road* and some other of Okri's writings are set) or even England (Okri's current country of residence). In other words, the very location that enables a cosmopolitan exposition also takes away from the political sting of a postcolonial setting.

The question of race is also only obliquely hinted at in *The Age of Magic*, but is, nevertheless, very crucial to a deeper understanding of cosmopolitan politics. Lao is black, and in a town of predominantly white people, he is the quintessential outsider. A pub that Lao and Mistletoe visit on their first night in the town highlights these racial tensions: the patrons of the pub turn to stare at the two, and "Lao felt the gazes returning him to the world of *colour* . . ." (*Age of Magic* 102, *italics mine*). Lao is black and simultaneously partaking in European "high culture", which points to the comfort-discomfort juxtaposition in cosmopolitanism.

Okri also gently mocks another pervasive phenomenon of Europeans and Americans wanting to go to Africa as benefactors, thereby turning Africa into a perennial charity case in their imaginations. Bruno, the crew's bus driver, mentions his sincere urge to go to Africa to "help the poor and the sick" (*Age of Magic* 107). Not only is cosmopolitan history cognizant of how humans across the world have affected each other's cultural and economic identities, it is also important to highlight such instances that foreground the ethical-moral conflicts that arise in conversations among people from different local/national identities and also how the imagination of the "Other" is shaped and articulated (Appiah 222). Appiah also stresses that cosmopolitanism contains within it the desire to leave a place and the community attached to it (though one may not necessarily belong to that community in a conventional or literal sense) "better than you found it" (213, 241). Okri, through Lao, manages to succeed to some extent in this endeavor by unearthing (literarily, if not literally) the many hidden layers of history and stretching the canvas of realism (as regards both space and time) and real-time experience of a town that has suffered at the hands of high capitalism and high culture, both Western products. The buried histories of a place, when articulated, are the onset of change for the better. After all, it is only with such articulations and dialogues on race, culture, history, and economics that we can create sensitivity, connections, and appropriate contexts in which to present or imbibe them.

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