

The Novel after the Nation

Nigeria after Biafra

At this point we leave Africa, not to mention it again. — G. W. F. HEGEL

In Africa, the native literature of the last twenty years is not a national literature but a Negro literature.

— FRANTZ FANON

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The Black Man's Burden: The Nation in Africa

Basil Davidson, the preeminent contemporary historian of Africa, has described the nation as “the black man’s burden.”¹ His discussion of the development of nations and nationalisms in Africa in the twentieth century follows what has become an entirely familiar way of characterizing recent African history: revolutionary, nationalist hopes give way to the disappointments and disillusionment of the corrupt postindependence state that Fanon simultaneously describes and prophesizes in *The Wretched of the Earth*. The succession of one corrupt regime by another has been a persistent pattern that has defined the politics of almost the entire continent and shows little sign of changing or abating. The recent hope of yet another political rebirth in Africa that followed the removal of the Mobutu regime in the Congo by the forces of Laurent Khabila have faded away entirely as the bad political business of the country continues as usual; Africa remains today in a precipitous political state, despite (or perhaps because of) the supposedly newfound confidence of foreign investors to resume the plunder of African resources following the trip to the continent by U.S. President Bill Clinton in 1998 and by U.S. Treasury Secretary Paul O’Neill and rock star Bono

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in 2002. Overall, the almost half-century of national and nationalist politics that has framed all of these developments has been an unmitigated disaster. In Davidson's words, "If the postcolonial nation-state had become a shackle on progress . . . the prime reason could appear in little doubt. The state was not liberating and protective of its citizens, no matter what its propaganda claimed: on the contrary, its gross effect was constricting and exploitative, or else had simply failed to operate in any social sense at all."²

All nations are invented through an investment in various discursive and institutional operations that together manage convincingly (more or less) to produce the geographic coincidence of state power with cultural, ethnic, linguistic, and political boundaries. As Craig Calhoun reminds us, the nation is a discursive structure as much as it is a political one: nationalism is "the production of a cultural understanding and rhetoric which leads people throughout the world to think and frame their aspirations in terms of the idea of the nation and national identity."³ The central insight into the phenomenon of the nation that is shared by all of the recent critical writing on the subject has been that all nations must be seen as essentially arbitrary configurations of culture and power, which the phenomenon of nationalism tries to obscure and make timeless and natural. While it is true that all nations across the globe are in this sense arbitrary, there is perhaps nowhere in the world where the nation has been as arbitrary a political form as in Africa. By this I mean that it is difficult to pretend that the political boundaries within present-day Africa even minimally cohere to any long-standing ethnic, linguistic, or cultural divisions, beyond the fact, that is, that all are the residue of the political and economic struggles of competing European imperial powers. For example, it seems at times that what gives coherence to a nation such as Nigeria, which has enormous ethnic and linguistic variations within its boundaries,⁴ is *only* its history as a colony of a particular imperial power, which has left it with a different European language from that of some of its West African neighbors and with borders defined and established prior to its independence in 1960 that it has insisted on clinging to through all manner of political strife. Any initiative that would try to create the imaginative or discursive structure of the nation in an effort to link together all of the peoples of Nigeria would seem to be imperiled from the very start: what the Ibo, Hausa, and Yoruba peoples share, at least with respect to the geographic borders of the country called "Nigeria," is the experience of British colonialism and, perhaps, all of the efforts devised since to hold the nation together. It is no doubt for this reason that in Nigeria as well as everywhere else in Africa, with the notable exception of the *participação popular* that arose out of the Portuguese anticolonial movements, most of the nation-

building on the continent has been “top-down” — an imperative of the rulers rather than the ruled.⁵

One outcome of this “imposed” nationalism has been the stifling of other forms of political affiliation that existed in the African precolonial past. “‘Mass participation,’” Davidson writes, “however variously mediated by this or that structure of representation and control, was at the heart of all those African societies which had proved stable and progressive before the destructive impact of the overseas slave trade and colonial dispossession had made itself felt.”⁶ In addition to struggling with the dubious legacy of African nationalism, one of the central intellectual and cultural challenges that has faced postcolonial Africa has been the need to establish categories and concepts that are expressive of African difference — categories that neither hypothesize African Otherness through a simple negation of European definitions of humanity and culture (the old criticism of nativism), nor embrace the messy modernity of the nation-form imported from Europe. It is for valorizing the former through the production of the setting of African literature as “a landscape of elephants, beggars, calabashes, serpents, pumpkins, baskets, towncriers, iron bells, slit drums, iron masks, hares, snakes, squirrels . . . a landscape portrayed with native eyes to which aeroplanes naturally appear as iron birds”⁷ that the two best-known Nigerian writers, Wole Soyinka and Chinua Achebe, have harshly criticized proponents of negritude. Both these writers are critical not only of negritude’s fascination with the African past, but also of what they see as the false internationalism of negritude’s diasporic politics. They criticize this internationalism in much the same way as Fanon, who took negritudinists to task for failing to see that “every culture is first and foremost national and that the problems that kept Richard Wright or Langston Hughes on the alert were fundamentally different from those that might confront Léopold Senghor or Jomo Kenyatta.”⁸ Through the events of Biafra and all the coups, countercoups, and endlessly proclaimed democratic transition programs, Soyinka and Achebe have remained vocal supporters of the Nigerian *nation*, believing that it is above all else the nation that provides a political form that will enable a renewed postcolonial polity to exist. For each writer, the issue of the nation figures prominently in their understanding of the necessity and the form that African writing takes; for both writers, African literature must be *nationalist* literature before it can be anything else.

In the context of the past half-century of African history, it is tempting to see the nationalism of Achebe and Soyinka as simply a problematic residue, perhaps

of their European education and their common (though not exactly similar) liberal humanist understanding of international politics.⁹ However critical they might be of negritude, the necessity of the nation cannot help but appear as exactly that which negritude sought to exorcise: the affirmation of the inevitability of Western concepts and Western modernity. This is, of course, far too simple and reductive. It is easy enough to see each writer's early attention to the discourse of nationalism (as exhibited in Achebe's early novels and in Soyinka's dramatic celebration of the birth of the new nation, *A Dance of the Forests* [1960]) as part of the wider cultural and political discourses that accompanied decolonization. This explanation is itself limited in another way, since it fails to pay adequate attention to the complicated intersection of the concept of the nation with that of the literary in Nigeria. In other words, what it fails to address is the way in which it is precisely a certain conception of the "literariness" of literary writing that makes it an object for the nation and vice versa; and it is here, rather than in the particularities of biography or the vagueness of context, that an answer must be found. Rather than repeat the analysis of the previous chapter, in this chapter I will look at a different but related dimension of the problem of literature and the nation in the postcolony. I will examine the views of Achebe and Soyinka on the nation, literature, and their interrelation, by focusing on how these change (or fail to change) as a consequence of the tragic collapse of nationalist hopes in the bloodbath of the Biafran conflict. In other words, what this chapter will address is the question of what happens to nationalist literature *after* the nation, as a way of throwing into relief the connections that Achebe and Soyinka make between the novel and the nation. The two works that I will look at especially closely are the post-Biafran novels of Soyinka and Achebe — the only novels that either of them have written since 1966: Achebe's *The Anthills of the Savannah* (1987) and Soyinka's *Season of Anomy* (1973). What is remarkable about these works and both authors' subsequent critical writing is how little their commitment to the nation has wavered over the years. One of the main reasons, it seems to me, that the outcome of the Biafran conflict does not point for either writer to the impossibility of the Nigerian nation and the need for different modes of political life, is that they read Biafra to some degree as a sign of an *aesthetic* failure: the failure of the novel to accomplish the task that only it can carry out. In their shared antipathy toward nativism and their insistence on the inevitability of modernity, the nation becomes an inviolable principle of political life. As a result, these post-Biafran novels are curious artifacts that symbolically consume themselves and willingly stage the erosion of their own political ef-

fectivity. Since Achebe and Soyinka are unwilling to give up on the idea of the nation, it seems that the novel must be sacrificed on the altar of Nigerian nation-building.

Before proceeding any further, it is necessary to review at least the bare outline of the causes of the Nigerian Civil War. The Federation of Nigeria gained independence from Britain in 1960. A federal system of highly autonomous regions divided primarily along ethnic lines (Northern Region: Hausa-Fulani; Western: Yoruba; Eastern: Ibo) was established with the aim of making the country of Nigeria a workable whole. This close association of region and political party with ethnicity (one of the problems faced by many federations around the world) generated immediate difficulties for the new country: given the structure of the federal government, each election would inevitably result in one political party — and therefore one region and ethnic group — being effectively excluded from government (forming neither the official opposition or the government itself). The inevitable ethnic tensions produced as a result were further heightened by the ethnic composition of the military: the officer corps were primarily Ibo, while the enlisted men were drawn mainly from the north.

A military coup led by Ibo officers in January 1966 constituted the last straw for the north and led to the eruption of violence against Ibo living in the north. A countercoup led by northern elements of the army led to the brief restoration of the federal system under the leadership of General Yakuba Gowon. This countercoup led to a mass exodus of Ibo from the north to the Eastern Region, and to the secession of the Eastern Region early in 1967 as the independent “Republic of Biafra.” An incursion by Biafran troops into the Western Region in an effort to capture Lagos led to all-out war on Biafra by the remaining regions of the federation; a blockade of Biafra by both land and sea contributed to the death of up to two million Biafran civilians, mainly by starvation, before the surrender of Biafra in January 1970. Only now is Nigeria beginning to emerge from this dark period that has effectively constituted the entire short history of the nation.¹⁰

In part because of his more extensive body of critical writing prior to the Nigerian crisis, and because his views on the function and purpose of writing in Africa were so influential across postcolonial space, I begin with a discussion of Achebe. Though it might seem that in this chapter I violate the rough periodizing boundaries that I established earlier, what will become clear is that these novels are in many respects belated, responding to a logic of nationalist literature that was established well before their actual publication dates.

The Ambiguity of the Political: Achebe's *Anthills of the Savannah*

It is the story that outlives the sound of war-drums and the exploits of brave fighters. It is the story, not the others, that saves our progeny from blundering like blind beggars into the spikes of the cactus fence. The story is our escort; without it, we are blind.

— CHINUA ACHEBE¹¹

In me grows a tiny feeling against dichotomies (strong-weak; big-small; happy-unhappy; ideal-not ideal). It is so only because people cannot think more than two things. More does not fit into a sparrow's brain. But the healthiest thing is simply: maneuver.

— BERTOLT BRECHT¹²

If it is not entirely correct to characterize Chinua Achebe as a writer who has had little difficulty in clearly delineating his politics—and, furthermore, the place of writing and the function of the writer within this politics—it is nonetheless certain that over a career of almost four decades his political positions have been characterized by a relative lack of ambiguity. For a writer of fiction, and of predominantly realist fiction, ambiguity of any sort would appear to be a virtue. The world, especially the world of postcolonial African societies, is extraordinarily complex (an enormous understatement, to be sure), and any fiction that would presume to capture the dizzying heterogeneity of this world, the nearly sublime movement of forces and agents with, against, and through one another must be careful to avoid the adoption of easy positions and the mobilization of simple polemics. The success of Achebe's novels is largely due to the fact that they *do* manage to present a fully formed African present in just this way, an “ambiguous” Africa composed of multiple, equivocal voices. The sole exception to this fictional richness, however, may be found in the comparatively definitive, *unambiguous* character of the political options Achebe makes available to African societies in their struggle to define themselves in the aftermath of colonialism. Yet if an ambiguity of the political has not been a characteristic of Achebe's earlier work (and here I am thinking as much of his critical writings as of his novels), *Anthills of the Savannah* is a novel that exhibits fully and forcefully the complexities of African politics and, after Biafra, of the political more generally.

It is impossible to pass over the twenty-one year silence that ends with the publication of *Anthills of the Savannah* without speculating on the problems that

Achebe may have encountered in attempting to produce a novel-length work during this period. Given the more ambitious literary form of *Antbills* as compared with his earlier work, this silence would seem at least partially to be the outcome of serious reflection on Achebe's part on the appropriate form to describe a world in which, suddenly, the greatest hopes for African independence came so quickly to an end. More significantly, however, this silence seems to have grown out of a necessary, difficult reconceptualization of the role of the African writer or intellectual in bringing about positive change in a society characterized by widespread corruption and political inertia. (For example, the two chief political candidates in the first election in Nigeria's Second Republic in 1979—Obafemi Awolowo and Nnamdi Azikiwe—had been leading candidates in the elections of the First Republic in 1960. *Plus ça change . . .*) The changes in Achebe's thought represented by *Antbills*, both in its theme and its form, show a willingness on his part to consider for the first time the difficulties of politics in Nigeria as difficulties; solutions to these difficulties will have to come later, if indeed, solutions to the troubles with Nigeria, and Africa more generally, are to be found at all. In *Antbills*, the political is shown to be as complex and heterogeneous as the rest of human experience, fraught with impossible choices, insoluble antinomies, and frustrating, intransigent paradoxes that are less conceptual—which would mean that intellectuals could somehow then think or write their way out of them—than material and historical.

This represents a fairly dramatic shift in Achebe's own view of politics. These politics are comprised of a fairly consistent set of positions, from *Things Fall Apart* (1958) to *The Trouble with Nigeria* (1983), and are of two essential modes, divided thematically and chronologically but intimately related nonetheless. The first, as reflected in the essays collected in *Morning Yet on Creation Day* (1975) and *Hopes and Impediments* (1983) and in *Things Fall Apart* and *No Longer at Ease* (1960), is to challenge colonial readings of the African novel that would, for example, find the latter's significance only in its universal character (i.e., its potential for "speaking" to Europeans and Americans as well as Africans) and to create an autonomous space for the critical assessment and artistic development of African writing independent of Western aesthetic or linguistic categories. Achebe repeatedly denounces the idea "that before I write about any problem I must first verify whether they have it too in New York and London and Paris"¹³—the *reductio ad absurdum* of the colonial critic's demand for universality in the African novel. With respect to the autonomy of the African novel, Achebe makes a simple plea: "don't fence me in."¹⁴ His well-known defense

of the use of non-African languages in African writing,¹⁵ for example, reflects Achebe's fervent desire for the African novel to become whatever it wishes to become, independent of artificial, externally imposed criteria as to what "properly" constitutes such a novel: "My answer to the question *Can an African ever learn English well enough to be able to use it effectively in creative writing?* is certainly yes. If on the other hand you ask: *Can he learn to use it like a native speaker?* I should say, I hope not. It is neither necessary nor desirable for him to do so. The price a world language must be prepared to pay is submission to many different kinds of use. The African writer should aim to use English in a way that brings out his message best without altering the language to the extent that its value as a medium of international exchange will be lost."¹⁶

If this first dimension of his politics can be described as predominantly a reaction to a *colonial* situation that aims above all else to restore to Africans a positive self-image and belief in their abilities that colonialism did so much to erode, the second aspect of Achebe's politics can be characterized as a reaction to a *postcolonial* situation. This second dimension of Achebe's politics is less concerned with the politics of writing or aesthetics more generally, which, whether from the side of the artist or the audience, formed the basis of his earlier preoccupations, than with politics per se. It represents an attempt on Achebe's part to make sense of the African political or social situation following independence and Biafra. The colonial powers have departed, and yet the whole continent seems more awry than ever, oscillating between supposedly democratic and anti-democratic military regimes, both of which are enormously inefficient and monstrously corrupt. Achebe tries to make sense of the failure of African independence, and of Nigerian independence in particular, by exploring the psychology of corruption and the conditions that lead to a situation in which power and privilege are flagrantly abused in such a way that the majority of people nevertheless refuse to rise up and challenge the abuses of their leaders (the problem of contemporary ideology in a nutshell). He is chiefly concerned with examining the way in which the people, insofar as they have values and expectations that mirror the sickened and diseased values of their rulers, are complicit in the material despair and political demagoguery characteristic of African nations. The novel that represents this attempt most fully is *A Man of the People* (1966), which exhibits a noticeable thematic shift from his first three novels. While *Things Fall Apart*, *No Longer at Ease*, and *Arrow of God* explore the relationship of an earlier generation of Africans to the colonial situation and the extent of their complicity in (neo)colonialism, *Man* represents a very direct confrontation with postcolo-

nial politics and the “corroding effect of privilege.”¹⁷ The critical work that details the failure of leadership and the indiscipline and corruption of Nigerian society is *The Trouble with Nigeria*, which in many ways represents a systematization of the problems first expressed in *A Man of the People*.¹⁸

What connects these two politics in Achebe’s work is both the ease with which he assumes that problems or potential problems in the African polity can be identified, and the corresponding ease with which solutions to these problems are proposed. At its base, Achebe’s politics is straightforward and moralistic: the enemy can be identified, the character of his activity evaluated as good or bad, revolutionary or reactionary, and the appropriate measures then taken. There is, in other words, an epistemological simplicity to his understanding of the political: politics is simply what takes place between powerful figures in specific buildings in the capital of a country. Even if Achebe appears to realize that the “political” exists as much in the habits and practices of groups and individuals as in the chambers of power, a fact suggested by his consideration of the manner in which corruption pervades the entire body of the Nigerian polity in *The Trouble with Nigeria*, his is nonetheless a politics that has what Michel Foucault described as a “juridico-discursive” understanding of power in which change occurs by cutting off the head of the king.¹⁹ This is nowhere so clear as in the opening lines of *The Trouble with Nigeria*. Achebe writes: “The trouble with Nigeria is simply and squarely a failure of leadership. There is nothing basically wrong with the Nigerian character. There is nothing wrong with the Nigerian land or climate or water or air or anything else. The Nigerian problem is the unwillingness or inability of its leaders to rise to the responsibility, to the challenge of personal example which are the hallmarks of true leadership . . . I am saying that Nigeria can change today if she discovers leaders who have the will, the ability, and the vision. Such people are rare in any time or place. But it is the duty of enlightened citizens to lead the way in their discovery and to create an atmosphere conducive to their emergence.”²⁰

For Achebe, the problems of Nigerian society (tribalism, an absence of patriotism, social injustice, indiscipline, corruption, etc.) originate at the top of the political order and work their way down. Leaders must be understood as role models for the rest of the society. If the rulers of the country are undisciplined and corrupt one can hardly expect those not in positions of power to act any better. An end to the troubles with Nigeria must then come through the election or elevation to power of more enlightened rulers than those currently in power, Platonic philosopher kings who would lend substance to positions of leadership

and defeat the cynicism of the people that Achebe describes in *A Man of the People*: “Tell them that this man had used his position to enrich himself and they would ask you—as my father did—if you thought a sensible man would spit out the juicy morsel that good fortune placed in his mouth.”²¹

If the writer of fiction is to be involved in politics—and it is clear that for Achebe she must be if she is not to be “completely irrelevant”²² given the character of contemporary African societies—it is thus clear what her role must be. In Africa, literature should be about “right and just causes”;²³ fiction is what “helps us locate again the line between the heroic and the cowardly when it seems most shadowy and elusive.”²⁴ Fiction serves, then, an almost journalistic function or at least the political function that journalism would ideally serve if allowed free expression in Nigeria. The role of the writer of fiction is to clarify the problems of African society, to make the sometimes opaque maneuverings of power and prestige a little more transparent. For Achebe, it is this characteristic more than any other that separates the African novel from its (comparatively) highly aestheticized Western equivalents. Given the pervasive problems facing African nations, Achebe suggests that the African writer “cannot expect to be excused from the task of re-education and regeneration that must be done.” This might mean that Achebe’s writing, along with that of other African writers, is often something, he admits, more like “applied art as distinct from pure,” more didactic than an example of “art for art’s sake” (a characteristic modernism that he tends to associate with first-world writing in general). This is a fact that does not seem to bother him in the least: “But who cares? Art is important, but so is education of the kind I have in mind.”²⁵ If the form of the African novel is polemical and didactic, more concerned with functionality than with the development of a pure aesthetic, it is a form that is necessary given the state of contemporary Africa. A journalistic, didactic novel is more likely to have a definitive political impact than one that aims primarily at some form of aesthetic transgression. And this perhaps explains why Achebe is able to detect even in Amos Tutuola’s *The Palm-Wine Drinkard* a preoccupation with a primarily moral set of questions.²⁶

If Achebe’s writing prior to *Anthills* can be characterized by a politics in which the intellectual or writer plays a necessarily prominent role in the political transformation of African societies—due both to her analytic function in diagnosing the character of the nation’s social sickness and in presenting it to the public, and as the cure (in the form of a new leadership) for the same sickness—*Anthills* represents a shift from this politics. “Reversal” suggests a typical intellectual

maneuver, for example, from an elite politics to a democratic one, from thoughts about the halls of the mighty to the quotidian existence lived out by the masses in the fields and streets. And while *Anthills* might appear to be characterized by just this sort of reversal, a shift in which Achebe begins to imagine the possibility or even the necessity of political agency originating from the masses rather than from a newly enlightened elite, it is less a reversal that takes place than a complete *abandonment* of a politics that operates through those dichotomies toward which Brecht expressed such suspicion. It is in this abandonment of any straightforward notion of the political, a withdrawal from an epistemologically simple politics that posited easy political answers, that an “ambiguity” of the political arises in *Anthills*. This is an abandonment that is both brave and problematic, because it opens up the possibility for politics in Africa to move beyond the stagnant, cyclical corruption characteristic of both right- and left-wing regimes; problematic, potentially dangerous, because it displaces the political so greatly from its known parameters and paradigmatic expressions that it appears at times to offer no real possibility for any movement or determinate political agency whatsoever.

Anthills of the Savannah is the story of three men who have known each other from their days together at Lord Lugard College, a school named after the British colonialist responsible for bringing Nigeria together as a unitary state in 1914, which in the novel is the institution primarily responsible for the reproduction of the indigenous elite. They have subsequently become powerful political figures in Kangan, the fictional West African country in which the novel is set. As in Lamming’s *The Emigrants* and Soyinka’s *Season of Anomy*, this shift from a specifically Nigerian (and Ibo) setting to an imagined space is significant. Sam, who went on to study at the British military college Sandhurst, has by the beginning of the novel become the country’s military dictator; Chris Oriko is the Minister of Information in the government headed by Sam; and Ikem Osodi is the editor of the *Gazette*, the most important newspaper in Bassa, Kangan’s capital. The narrative centers mainly on Chris and Ikem and their gradual fall from political grace as tensions in the government mount over the situation in Abazon, a province of Kangan affected by severe drought. Significantly, although the novel begins as a story about these three men, the other main character in the novel turns out not to be Sam, who with the exception of the first few chapters of the book lingers mostly in the background, but Beatrice, Chris’s lover and an old friend of Ikem’s. As will become clear given the importance of Beatrice to the politics of the novel, the movement of Sam to the narrative periphery of the novel

itself indicates Achebe's political shift in *Antbills*. The tale of the dictator makes way for a woman's story — a clear sign of the shift in Achebe's views from the period in which he began writing the novel (after the publication of *A Man of the People* in 1966) to its completion in 1987.

The novel rearticulates a number of the themes that arise in Achebe's *The Trouble with Nigeria*. As summarized in Ikem's one-verse hymn, *Antbills* also stresses the way in which the greatest political threat is not nakedly displayed power, but the way in which the dispositions of the powerful can infiltrate themselves into those of the powerless:

The worst threat from men of hell
May not be their actions cruel
Far worse that we learn their way
And behave more fierce than they. (AS 43)

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But while the political problem here might once again appear to be that of leadership or its lack, the solution offered to this problem in *Trouble* (i.e., the need for a new set of leaders) is rejected in *Antbills* as unlikely to furnish any real solution. As the initial chapter, which describes a meeting between Sam and his sycophantic cabinet, makes abundantly clear, even a government begun with the best intentions has the potential to devolve into a dictatorship in which, among others things, flattery comes to assume the place of real debate (AS 2) and the moral force of governing is displaced by internal struggles over power. What Kangan might in fact need to set the country aright is a leader who would be less of an "actor" than Sam, whom Ikem describes as having "no sense of moral commitment whatsoever" (AS 50).⁵ As Chris sarcastically puts it: "What this country really needs is a ruthless dictator . . . and we will all laugh in loud excess because we know — bless our hearts — that we shall never be favoured with such an undeserved blessing as a ruthless dictator" (AS 3). A disciplined leader that would be willing to stand by a set of consistently crafted and articulated policies, regardless of whether these policies originate from the right or the left, is not something that the citizens of Kangan can truly hope for, given the history of the leaders they have had to endure. In any case, simply waiting for the right leader to appear does not really constitute a politics likely to result in positive change. If in *Trouble* Achebe berates the educated elite for betraying the "high destiny" (AS 2) of Nigeria through their refusal to take on the challenge of genuine political reform, in *Antbills* it quickly becomes apparent that the problem, and therefore the solution, lies elsewhere, outside and beyond the dangerous play of the elite.

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Anthills opens up the possibility of another solution. Much of the narrative concerns the gradual education of the elite figures of the novel — Ikem, Chris, and Beatrice as well — about the importance and dignity of the ordinary citizens of Kangan. The elite are separated from the rest of the citizens of Kangan not only by status and power, but physically: all three of the central figures live inside the “safe” confines of the government living compound and so occupy the “alien climate” (AS 9) of the chambers of power. Chris and Ikem in particular manage to learn, if too late, losing their lives in the process of this education, that “this world belongs to the people of the world not to any little caucus, no matter how talented” (AS 232). Political change will have to involve the people in some other way than simply as a reflection of an elite with a different, more democratic set of dispositions. For it is only if the people are themselves involved in change that political change can be taken to be substantive and permanent, a systemic or structural change rather than a mere shift in personalities. In essence, this is the same solution proposed by Basil Davidson to the problem of the nation in Africa: a transformation from the ground up rather than from the top down.

Exactly how the “people” are to be involved in political change and what the role of the intellectual is in precipitating this change are questions explored by Achebe in an extremely complex manner. There is no easy shift from the corruption of a Europeanized African elite to the supposed (political) authenticity of the African masses. In this respect, in *Anthills* Achebe astutely preserves and builds upon the insights of *A Man of the People*. In this earlier novel, the political fall of Chief the Honourable Nanga has nothing to do with the effort of Odili and Max on behalf of the Common People’s Convention to educate the populace about the scope of Nanga’s corruption. It is not a lack of knowledge that prevents the people from casting Nanga out of office, but the existence of an all-pervasive political culture in which Nanga’s actions are simply understood to be consistent with the actions of those in power. Odili says of his father: “He took the view (without expressing it in so many words) that the mainspring of political action was personal gain.”²⁷ The people of Odili’s home village briefly consider lending him their support only when they realize that having one of their own in a position of power might result in substantial economic benefits for the village. While the people cannot thus be entrusted with the expression of their own political views, it is nevertheless clear in *Man* that it is equally dangerous to allow intellectuals to speak on their behalf. Odili’s political motives, for example, arise less from his own desire to improve his country’s situation than from his desire to exact revenge on Nanga for having personally humiliated him. A third, inter-

mediary path between these two possibilities—between becoming the “man” and allowing the “people” to speak—seems difficult to imagine. If Achebe no longer believes the intellectual to be the one who, in the words of Michel Foucault, speaks “the truth to those who had yet to see it, in the name of those who were forbidden to speak the truth,”²⁸ nor assumes that the multitude is capable of a politics of its own that would be any better than that practiced by the elite, it is unclear what form a postcolonial African politics might take.

Much of *Anthills* constitutes a direct meditation on this difficult question. This is particularly true with respect to the character of Ikem, who, as one of the chief sources of the news in Kangan, one of its most popular and influential writers, and political spokesperson for his homeland of Abazon, may be seen at times as standing in for Achebe himself.²⁹ There are three pivotal scenes in the novel involving Ikem in which he more or less directly questions his previous, Marxist revolutionary stance, and begins to articulate a set of concepts and problems that form a more adequate political theorization of the problems with democracy in Africa; Chris undergoes this same transformation from the ideologically opposite side—both, then, moving toward some political middle ground. In these scenes (AS 96–101; AS 136–42; Ikem’s speech, AS 152–61), which heavily overlap in terms of the themes and issues addressed, Ikem reconsiders the place of women in politics, the relationship of the intellectual to the masses, and considers the possibility that reform might finally be more feasible and workable than the idea of a cataclysmic class revolution, even if this means that only a very slow narrative of political progress can be imagined.

The first impression given in the novel about Ikem’s relationship to and treatment of women is highly unfavorable. The second scene in which Ikem appears (he appears earlier as an aggressive and confrontational driver on the streets of Bassa) begins with him sending home his working-class lover, Elewa, under the pretense of not wanting her to stay the night in the government compound and so appear as a “loose” woman. In reality, having already made love to her, he wishes to have the remainder of the evening to himself, during which time he might (for example) once again contemplate aesthetically his neighbor’s abuse of his wife: there is for him “an extraordinarily surrealistic quality about the whole thing that is almost satisfyingly cathartic” (AS 34). Having just seen an example of Ikem’s behavior, we aren’t surprised when Beatrice confesses to Chris that Ikem, “the great revolutionary,” “doesn’t say much to any girl. He doesn’t think they have enough brains” (AS 65).³⁰ The largest flaw in Ikem’s thinking, as Beatrice has repeatedly told him over the years, “is that he has no clear role for women in

his political thinking and he doesn't seem to be able to understand it" (AS 91). Expanding the role for women in politics and seeing their absence from the political as a critical sign of all that is wrong in Africa become important in *Anthills* for both Ikem and Achebe.

Whether it is due to his suspension as editor of the *Gazette* or to the accumulated force of Beatrice's charges, Ikem's thinking undergoes a dramatic change in the novel. After he has been relieved of his editorial duties, Ikem appears at Beatrice's house with what he describes as a "strange love-letter" (AS 97) in which he reconsiders the role of women in African politics and society. This is not, however, all that he rethinks: his political shift is larger, more general, involving a full-fledged contemplation of "the nature of oppression—how flexible it must learn to be, how many faces it must learn to wear if it is to succeed again and again" (AS 97). All the issues that Ikem rethinks throughout the novel are shown in this first scene to be interrelated in important ways. On the subject of women, Ikem relates two traditional ideas concerning women that have worked to isolate them from the political. In the Old Testament as well as in Kanganian creation stories, women are first made the subjects of men because "She caused Man to fall" (AS 97)—a crime for which "she" must pay in perpetuity. The New Testament overturns this "candid chauvinism" through the figure of Mary, as does the Kanganian idea of women as *Nneka*, "Mother is Supreme" (AS 98). Here again, however, women are displaced from practical, earthly affairs, and placed on a pedestal, made irrelevant and disconnected from the concerns of the polity. What is the new role for women that Ikem imagines will overturn these sexist roles? Ikem answers: "I don't know. I should have never presumed to know. *You* have to tell us. We never asked you before" (AS 98).

The move to give to subaltern or oppressed groups the power to determine for themselves what their roles (political and otherwise) will be in the future together with the simultaneous renunciation of this power by those who once presumed to speak "the truth to those who had yet to see it" are familiar (if mainly symbolic) political strategies. Achebe wishes to reempower the oppressed; the rest of Ikem's speech to Beatrice complicates immensely the means by which such empowerment might take place. It is not simply a matter of a chivalrous renunciation on the part of the intellectual of his power to speak for others. Nor is it simply a matter of easily determining the crimes committed from (as it were) "above" and returning to the oppressed a freedom that is simple, monologic, and negative in form. Women are, Ikem says, the largest group of oppressed people in the world. He notes, however, that there are innumerable other groups that are oppressed, a

vast heterogeneous assembly of the powerless. "There is no universal conglomerate of the oppressed" (AS 99); "the oppressed inhabit each their own peculiar hell" (AS 99). This introduces a practical, political difficulty. Political theories, as well as political movements, have relied on large-scale abstractions and totalizing generalizations in order to link the oppressed together under labels such as the "working class" or the "proletariat." If each group of the oppressed or even if each oppressed individual must be considered in his or her singularity, this requires a radical reconceptualization of the political, the invention of a political that has not yet been thought, composed of an infinitely heterogeneous notion of the modalities of both freedom and oppression.

While Achebe does not explain what this would amount to, he does make some suggestions as to what it might look like. For example, such a politics would have to be able to accept the perpetual presence of what Ikem calls the "stubborn antibody called surprise" (AS 99). It would need to have a new understanding of contradiction. Contradiction would no longer be avoided as a "deadly disease" (AS 100) but would be cultivated as "the very stuff of life" that "can spark off the fires of invention" (AS 100). This means as well that the attitude toward change that such a politics would possess would not be revolutionary, but reformist, a gradual rearrangement and shifting of society "around what it is, its core of reality; not around an intellectual abstraction" (AS 100). The result would be a politics that could make sense of the complexity of the world (and particularly its radical contingency) without resorting to ideologically charged stereotypes. As Ikem puts it near the end of his "love-letter": "Those who would see no blot of villainy in the beloved oppressed nor grant the faintest glimmer of humanity to the hated oppressor are partisans, patriots and party-liners. In the grand finale of things there will be a mansion also for them where they will be received and lodged in comfort by the single-minded demigods of their devotion. But it will not be in the complex and paradoxical cavern of Mother Idoto" (AS 100-101).

The complex and paradoxical politics that Ikem's letter to Beatrice introduces has obvious implications for his own role (and that of Achebe's as well) as a writer and intellectual. Ikem realizes that he "had always felt a yearning without very clear definition, to connect his essence with earth and earth's people" (AS 140-41). He realizes as well that this separation from the mass is not a gap that can be bridged in anything but a false way, through invocations of the "people's name" and under the rubric of "public affairs" (AS 141) when the people are in fact absent and the "public" simply acts as a convenient euphemism for the sphere of "closed transactions of soldiers-turned-politicians" (AS 141). Ikem is what he is

and can make connections outside of his social position as an intellectual only in slow, careful, halting ways: “There seems no way to become like the poor except by faking. What I know, I know for good or ill. So for good or ill I shall remain myself; but with this deliberate readiness now to help, and be helped. Like those complex, multivalent atoms in Biochemistry books I have arms that reach out in all directions — a helping hand, a hand signaling for help. With one I shall touch the earth and leave another free to wave the skies” (AS 142).

The image that is presented here is compelling: the individual as an atom with numerous valences, each of which enable it to conjoin with substances different from itself to form entirely new compounds whose properties would be radically unlike the individual elements that comprise it. But this is only a metaphor: it does not explain the process by which such a radical transformation is to be brought about. It may in fact be the case that a politics of the sort imagined by Ikem can proceed only through metaphors. The metaphors presented in this passage are powerful ones. One hand reaches out to aid others, while the other calls for help: the intellectual is no longer the singular source of aid for the oppressed, but requires help to rise out of his own oppression. This shatters the myth of self-genesis or auto-poiesis: everyone is implicated in everybody else’s existence. There is a necessity to think materially (earth), but also to combine this thought with a potential utopian overcoming of the limits of materiality (the immateriality of the skies). Nevertheless, it is clear in *Anthills* that Achebe does not wish to be left simply with a metaphoric politics of this kind. Even if the shifts in Ikem’s political outlook represent a necessary complication of the politics appropriate to the seemingly intransigent problems of postcolonial Africa, Achebe does not want to leave the political field complicated, ambiguous, indeterminate, and indeterminable. Whatever else this reformulated politics might be, it is not a vision that wishes to promote a new, theoretically justified quietism. As Ikem says, “None of this is a valid excuse for political inactivity or apathy. Indeed, to understand it is an absolute necessity for meaningful action, the knowledge of it being the only protective inoculation we can have against false hopes and virulent epidemics of gullibility” (AS 100). The question remains, however, if politics is centered neither in the people nor in the activities of the elite, what is the location of the political? Is it even correct any longer to speak of location, a place of agency, in this way?

Achebe’s answer to this question is as intriguing as it is problematic. In locating a third site for politics he follows a somewhat predictable course, though the

fact that it is predictable does not make it uninteresting nor lessen the possibility that this course might in fact represent the source of a renewed politics. A typical maneuver: if the political is no longer functioning, look to renew it in something thus far (or even perpetually) “outside” of the political. Better yet, make this “outside” the cause of the original failure, so that its reintegration creates a genuine, undeformed, “whole” politics for the first time. In *Anthills* this “outside” is found in women, as exemplified in particular by Beatrice and, to a lesser degree, Elewa.

Chapter Seven begins with a surprise: “For weeks and months after I had definitively taken on the challenge of bringing together as many broken pieces of this tragic history as I could lay my hands on I still could not find a way to begin. Anything I tried to put down sounded wrong — either too abrupt, too indelicate or too obvious—to my middle ear” (AS 82). The narrative voice belongs to Beatrice. In the passages in which Chris and Ikem appear as first-person narrators they are described as “witnesses” (AS 1, 34). This suggests at first that the story of *Anthills* belongs to them. The paragraph that opens Chapter Seven makes it clear, however, that the story of the novel — of the education and death of Chris and Ikem — is in fact Beatrice’s: Chris and Ikem’s accounts are included in this story in the form of something like additional source material, an effort to include multiple voices. With respect to Chris and Ikem, this has the effect of focusing attention on the negative connotations of “witness”: someone connected to the events that have taken place, though not in a direct way, whose view of these events must be seen as partial, subjective, and individualized. This does not mean that Beatrice’s story represents an objective view of the events that transpire in *Anthills*. Indeed, she is intimately aware of the power of stories and of the storyteller, and problematizes this power in ways that Chris and even Ikem never manage to. Beatrice is aware that for Chris and Ikem “the story of this country . . . is the story of the three of you” (AS 66). She, on the other hand, is unwilling to conflate her personal story with that of the nation’s, or even to write her story at all if it can only be written at the expense of a larger, more encompassing narrative: “I didn’t set out to write my autobiography and I don’t want to do so. Who am I that I should inflict my story on the world?” (AS 87). It is significant that *Anthills* is a woman’s story not only because this represents a first in Achebe’s oeuvre, but also because it acts as an explicit criticism of the univocality, the singularity of masculine narratives expressed in writing and in politics. The humility with which Beatrice approaches writing is for Achebe a charac-

teristic that belongs not to her alone, but to women more generally, and for Achebe the cultivation of this kind of humility is what is necessary for a renewed politics.

In case we might miss the way in which Achebe intends Beatrice to “stand in” for women more generally, he christens her with the name Nwayibuife (“A female is also something” [AS 87]). In *Antbills*, a female is not just “something” but comes to assume the most important role in renewing the political. The humility characteristic of Beatrice the writer also makes possible the reformulation of a new community on the ashes of the old at the end of the novel. Just as she is able to write the story of Kangan with the awareness that there are other stories to be written, the baptism of Elewa’s daughter, Amaechina (“*May-the-path-never-close*” [AS 222]) in the final scene of the novel exhibits an ability to rethink the tragic dichotomies dividing the Kanganian polity. Significantly, the formation of a community of “a small band of near-strangers that was to prove stronger than kindred or mere friendship” (AS 218) is made possible not only through the rejection of divisions based on kinship, ethnicity, tradition, and religion, but also through the confusion of sexual roles and identities. Elewa’s girl is christened with a boy’s name, with the hope, perhaps, that she may in the future assume a man’s (political) function as well. Amaechina is named not by her father, Ikem (as is tradition), but out of a necessity as spiritual as it is material (Ikem has been killed), by all those gathered (AS 225). This is an act that puts an end simultaneously to traditional gender roles and to the persistence of a sad irony of Kanganian naming: “call it *The-one-who-walks-into-abundance* or *The-one-who-comes-to-eat* or such like and then blithely hand it back to its mother to begin a wretched trudge through life” (AS 217). It also constitutes the institution of an “authorless” community, a community in which power is dispersed and diffuse because all share in the activity of naming, and all are both father and mother to the children of the community.

This is a surprisingly hopeful ending to an otherwise pessimistic novel, an ending that is somewhat jarring, and perhaps even somewhat inappropriate. The formation of a utopian Kanganian community at the end of the novel implies a solution to the difficult political dilemmas that Achebe explores in the rest of the novel that is too easy. Both in the conclusion of the novel and in the figure of Beatrice as the imputed writer of the story, the answer to the question “What is to be done?” is to leave the reconceptualization of the political to women. Women have thus far remained outside of the political, which seems for Achebe to mean that vis-à-vis the political they occupy a position that has not yet been claimed by

the systemic corruption endemic to the rest of (male) Kanganian society. This immediately brings to mind yet another of Beatrice's criticisms of Ikem: "Here's a man, who has written a full-length novel and a play on the Women's War of 1929 which stopped the British administration cold in its tracks, being accused of giving no clear political role to women. But the way I see it is that giving women today the same role which traditional society gave them of intervening only when everything else has failed is not enough, you know, like the women in the Sembene film who pick up the spears abandoned by their defeated menfolk. It is not enough that women should be the court of last resort because the last resort is a damn sight too far and too late!" (AS 91-92).

If it is at times difficult to see Achebe as doing something other than using women as a "court of last resort" in this way, a more balanced reading of the novel would make it apparent that the feminine in *Anthills* acts as a general figure that implicates more than simply women. There are other scenes of resistance to dominant modes of political thought in *Anthills* than those in which the character of Beatrice appears. The people, even if they can at times act like a "mass" in the most degenerate and pejorative sense of this term (as in Ikem's description of the public execution), can also manage to resist being turned into passive objects of political power. When a soldier refuses to kill a young trader in the Gelegele market because "If I kill you I kill dog" (AS 48), it is reinterpreted by the trader in a humorous way that challenges the power of the soldier: "Does he mean that after killing me he will go and kill a dog?" (AS 48). For Achebe, there remains in the people a resistance that is not simply linked up with some sense of their authenticity, a "core" that "is in perfect health" (AS 141), but with "an artless integrity, a stubborn sense of community which can enable Elewa to establish so spontaneously with the driver a teasing affectionateness beyond the powers of Ikem" (AS 142). This is a spontaneity and a stubbornness that Beatrice herself must learn. Beatrice, who treats her maid Agatha quite harshly (AS 93), realizes that if "*it is now up to you women to tell us what has to be done*" (AS 184) that Agatha is a woman who has to be listened to and respected as much as an elite woman such as herself. Just as there is "no universal conglomerate of the oppressed," there is not simply the category of "woman" alone, but particular women who are the product of particular configurations of race, class, kinship relations, and so on. It is this set of configurations, insofar as they differ from the *habitus* of elite institutions like Lord Lugard College that reproduce the ruling elite in clockwork fashion, that Achebe wishes to draw into politics in order to produce a more differentiated political culture. Women are the focus of *Anthills* with respect to

this attempt only because it is along the axis of gender perhaps even more than class that African politics has remained monological, unable to move beyond the limited set of degraded concepts that structure political life.

There is nonetheless something troubling about the “solution” the novel offers to the stagnation of post-Biafra Nigeria. It relies too heavily on a fact of Ikem’s implicit editorial policy at the *Gazette*: “Our best weapon against them [the rulers] is not to marshal facts, of which they are truly managers, but passion” (AS 38). Passion draws the small community at the end of the novel together through a refusal to stick to the “facts” that have impeded the formation of genuinely pluralistic communities in Africa. The ending of the novel may simply reflect the desired alternative to present-day African society, highlighting the divisions within the culture that need to be broken down in order for such a community to come into existence. What is troublesome, however, is the absence of a sense of how the political culture of Kangan is to be changed in such a way that the pluralistic openness of those gathered together at the end of the novel — an openness that in the novel all of them *already* possess, making the creation of the new community no great feat — is to be made a feature of the polity more generally; this is, after all, the hard question with which much of the novel is concerned. The assertion of “passion” — of something “outside” the field of politics as defined by the ruling elite — seems too easy. There *is* a potential answer to this question suggested by the novel, but it is one that is equally unsatisfactory. As Neil ten Kortenaar points out “the overt message is that Chris and Ikem must learn the importance of ordinary citizens, but the novel itself focuses more upon the manner in which they learn this lesson than upon the people they must learn about.”³⁴ In this light *Antbills* suddenly appears as a continuation of *The Trouble with Nigeria*: a critique of the elite, directed at the elite, staged through the typicality of elite figures who occupy key nodes of the political structure, which is meant to encourage them, in the manner of Chris and Ikem, to change their politics and their political outlook. This would also mean that all of the attempts to encourage the inclusion of different voices in the political in *Antbills*, insofar as they are contained by this discourse of the elite, can be taken as only partial successes confined to the political logic that already exists.

What should be emphasized, however, is that *none* of the problems or solutions in *Antbills* can be taken as prescriptive. If in “The Novelist as Teacher” the task of the writer was a pedagogic one, one of the most important features of *Antbills* is the way in which the role of the writer is reconceptualized in a manner that makes this function problematic. Indeed, the opposite view of the task of the

writer is expressed. Ideally, the writer does not express views to the masses eager to listen to his wisdom. Rather, “a novelist must listen to his characters who after all are created to wear the shoe and point the writer where it pinches” (AS 97). Ikem makes the implications of this shift more explicit in his speech to the university students: “A writer wants to ask questions. These damn fellows want him to give answers” (AS 157–58). The function of the writer or intellectual in *Anthills* becomes a more modest one, that of a Socratic gadfly: “As the saying goes, the unexamined life is not worth living . . . As a writer I aspire only to widen the scope of that self-examination” (AS 158); the political aims of the novel itself must be seen more modestly, as doing something different from fulfilling a pragmatic, educative function.

It is finally in this light that *Anthills* must be viewed. With this novel, Achebe manages to point to the extremely complicated nature of the political in Africa, creating a new conceptual framework for politics where an older model had subsisted even in his own work; simultaneously, he places his own work into the field of movements and maneuvers of this new politics. If the intellectual has become suspect in his (and here the male pronoun is not an accident) role as the (universal) voice for those unable to speak for themselves, this suspicion must of necessity extend to Achebe’s text as well. It, too, must remain as partial and incomplete as every other claim on the political. *Anthills* admirably manages to maintain such an incompleteness, not only thematically, in terms of content, but in terms of form as well. The fact that Achebe, unlike so many other postcolonial writers, has remained formally committed to a more-or-less realist style is not insignificant. Achebe does not attempt in *Anthills* to affect, by means of an analogy that has become all too common, a transgression of the political by means of an aesthetic transgression. Nor does he try to map the new systems of political relations that he introduces through a shift in form, a “mapping” which might be seen as a feature of those texts described variously as postmodern, metafictional, or magical realist. These latter formal modes, which attempt at least in part to break up or challenge narrative modes linked to totalizing systems of thought—Western metaphysics, colonialism, and the like—have at their basis a vision no less totalizing in its ambition: to *reflect* (or express) at the level of form an epistemological shift that has taken place elsewhere. As but one example: since power is now imagined as capillary and diffuse, the imperious voice of the third-person, realist narrator must also be made diffuse. This represents a curious kind of inverted realism that challenges the artificial mimetic claims of an earlier realism (i.e., its claim to accurately depict the world “as it is”) by drawing attention to the

way in which it itself mimetically “succeeds” where realism had failed. It is with reference to these hidden ambitions of postmodern fiction that Achebe’s novel, which offers up a story, an account of events *without* an accompanying formal, epistemological machinery that would highlight this fact again and again, presents a realism that is partial, contingent, and historical, especially with reference to some of the now dominant forms associated with the postcolonial novel.

But it is important to point out that the more modest role for the intellectual *and* for literature that emerges in *Anthills*—a consequence of what I have described as Achebe’s growing sense of the ambiguity of the political—has its origins in a site that the novel never sees fit to name. It is the necessity of a *national* politics, a politics for all of Kangan, that produces a sense of the limits of the intellectual and of the function of literature after Biafra. Once the political begins to fragment in the way that Ikem describes, becoming finally radically individualized, the pedagogic task of the African writer becomes much reduced. It is possible to see the new community that is formed around the birth of Amaechina as the symbolic birth of a new political formation. Yet it is clear that for Achebe this community is meant to be taken not as a sign of something that needs to be formed in place of the nation, but rather, as a sign of the renewal of the nation. The new community formed at the end is the nation represented in miniature, not a self-sufficient community in its own right, composed of all of the diverse and previously divisive elements of the federal body of the nation. Indeed, it is possible to reread all of Achebe’s moves to dissolve the power of the intellectual as an argument on behalf of the nation. In place of the singular intellectual, Achebe celebrates the authentic national “passion” of the people that manages to survive against all odds. The dominance of the political by men gives way to women, which is nothing less than a reinvigoration of one of the oldest tropes of nationhood: the national “mother” or motherland whose autobiography doesn’t have to be written precisely because it forms the basis of all autobiography.

Spreading the Word: Soyinka’s *Season of Anomy*

What sort of nation is this? We grasp only too painfully what the nation can be, what it deserves to be. If Ken Saro-Wiwa’s death-cry does prove, in the end, to have sounded the death-knell of that nation, it would be an act of divine justice richly deserved.

— WOLE SOYINKA³²

He laid aside the book he had been reading. “I like your Mao . . . a man of simple truths and a large experimental farm.”

— WOLE SOYINKA³³

The relationship of the novel to the nation after the nation that runs through *Anthills* in a subterranean manner is brought to the surface in Wole Soyinka's second novel. Of all the work that makes up Soyinka's enormous literary output, *Season of Anomy* is perhaps the one that has had the least amount of critical attention paid to it.³⁴ This is due in part to the fact that Soyinka is known more as a poet and playwright than as a novelist. Derek Wright, for example, is content to characterize Soyinka's fiction as little more than "poet's novels, given to dense metaphoric overloading and massive rhetorical redundancies," which contain "some of the most inept features of Soyinka's writing."³⁵

Even so, Soyinka's first novel, *The Interpreters* (1965),³⁶ has long occupied a fairly prominent place in African fiction alongside other novels that detail the reactions of a younger, foreign-educated intellectual class to the disorder and corruption they find in the new African nation-states upon their return, novels such as Achebe's *Man of the People* and Ayi Kwei Armah's *The Beautiful Ones Are Not Yet Born* (1966). While it is possible to glimpse already in *The Interpreters* the political conditions that would eventually result in the Biafran War, by comparison to *Season of Anomy* the novel is nevertheless surprisingly apolitical, which is perhaps one reason that it has remained a more palatable and popular work. The main characters of the novel are shown to be in open revolt against the close-minded, imitative colonial mentality that persists among the new African elite of the country even after independence. But this revolt is staged as much as a spiritual, generational revolt as a political one, an indication that this is a work that is still framed by an interest in cultural nationalism as opposed to the problems of the nation-state.³⁷ This can be seen, for example, in what has become a set-piece of postcolonial fiction: the diplomatic dinner party, which brings together academics, journalists, important foreigners, politicians, and their henchman — the whole of the postcolonial elite. The party functions as a way of playing out in a dramatically compressed setting all of the political tensions that exist among the elites of the country. In *The Interpreters*, these multiple set-pieces are staged mainly around the refusal of Mrs. Oguazor, the white British wife of Professor Oguazor, to play by the confining social rules of the new elite. She is a constant embarrassment to her husband, who fears that she threatens his academic career through her social ineptitude; she is as a result adopted into the group of friends around whom the story revolves — Sagoe, Sekoni, Lasunwon, Bande, Egbo and Kola — as a symbolic expression of their own impatience and dissatisfactions with their society and with the preoccupations of social climbers like Oguazor.

By comparison, the party scene in *Season of Anomy* is one of enormous political tension and drama, a turning point in the novel, and a scene from which it never manages to recover: in many ways, by the party scene, barely twenty pages into the novel, the novel is already over. At this party, the pleasantries lie entirely on the surface: lives are at stake; the future of both the nation and the main character, Ofeyi, will be determined by the way in which the events at the chairman's party unfold. Prior to the party, the novel offers a vision of political hope, one, it is true, that has already been thwarted, but that retains at least a potential for progressive politics. After the party, the novel descends into a Dante-esque journey through successively more gruesome levels of hell, which in overwhelming and graphic detail show the way these hopes have been decisively crushed by the assault of the military on the people it is supposed to protect. The party constitutes the moment in which the struggle that Ofeyi has waged against the vicious cartel is revealed. So in addition to representing a turning point for national hopes, it is in this scene that the viability of a certain kind of (what turns out to be a) literary politics becomes evident. This is roughly the politics that Soyinka describes in his 1965 essay, "The Writer in an African State," in which he urges African writers to wake up from their "opium dreams of metaphysical abstraction"³⁸ in order to deal with the realities of African society. Just as for Achebe, for Soyinka the writer has a pedagogic role to perform in her society: "the African writer must have the courage to determine what alone can be salvaged from the recurrent cycle of human stupidity."³⁹

Season of Anomy constitutes Soyinka's most explicit literary reaction to the failure of the Biafran revolution.⁴⁰ Written "between the lines of Paul Radin's *Primitive Religion* and [Soyinka's] *Idanre*"⁴¹ while he was imprisoned from 1967 to 1969 during the Nigerian civil war,⁴² it is a work that not only considers the possibility of the Nigerian nation in the aftermath of Biafra, but one that undertakes an inquiry into the relationship between literature and the Nigerian nation. *Season* probes the conditions that might yet create a genuine nation and the ways in which literature — or at least something symbolically akin to it — might influence or produce these conditions. It is thus a kind of literary "thought experiment" (*a roman a thèse*) that measures the distance between Utopia and the reality of a corrupt state that, while never directly named (like Achebe's Kangan, it is an invented nation), is Nigeria after Biafra.

As if establishing a philosophical proposition that the rest of the novel will test, *Season* begins by first establishing the existence of this Utopia: "A quaint anomaly, had long governed and policed itself, was so singly-knit that it obtained

a tax assessment for the whole populace and paid it before the departure of the pith-helmeted assessor, in cash, held all property in common, literally, to the last scrap of thread on the clothing of each citizen — such an anachronism gave much patronizing amusement to the cosmopolitan sentiment of a profit-hungry society. A definitive guffaw from the radical centres of debate headed by Ilosa, dismissed Aiyéro as the prime example of unscientific communalism, primitive and embarrassingly sentimental” (SA 236).

These opening sentences of *Season* are as explicit as Soyinka ever becomes on the topic of Aiyéro. For the most part, Aiyéro functions more as an abstract concept than as a living place: it is an empty container for the concept of the perfect society, rather than a society whose practices are described in near ethnographic detail (like the utopias of old). To Aiyéro comes Ofeyi, the promotions man for the Cocoa Corporation to which the country “owes its prosperity” (SA 277). Part of Ofeyi’s work is to convince farmers to expand their production of cocoa so that the military-political-industrial cartel that controls that country can reap the benefits of its export. A growing part of his job is also to create an internal market for the domestic consumption of “cocoa-wix” and “cocoa-bix,” which he describes as “cocoa-flavored sawdust” (SA 292), so that the cartel can recoup domestically even the small amounts of money it pays to farmers for the production of cocoa. Ofeyi’s position is a deeply compromised one, and so it is not surprising that his experience in Aiyéro is transformative. The “pocket Utopia” captures his imagination and he can no longer carry out his cynical work for the corporation. He is particularly intrigued by the fact that although the youth of Aiyéro are encouraged to travel and study abroad in order to experience other ways of life, “they all returned. The neon cities could not lure them away” (SA 237).

Aiyéro is an exemplary community in many ways. It is not a utopia that has managed to survive by means of its relative isolation from the world. Indeed, it is strikingly cosmopolitan and progressive in its outlook, constantly engaged in and with the outside world, but without suffering any of the usual consequences of such interaction: the gradual erosion of their own particular values and the substitution of other, foreign ways of life. How or why this is possible is something that Ahime, Aiyéro’s “leader,” claims not to know, nor is it something that Ofeyi is able to discover. If the discovery of a utopian community was not enough, it is this characteristic of Aiyéro’s people, who are able to be somehow simultaneously “local” and “global,” that makes the narrative and the political project of the novel possible. It is also what renders it somewhat suspect, especially when these features of Aiyéro are symbolically transferred to Ofeyi: before his first trip to the

community is over, Ahime suggests that Ofeyi become his successor in Aiyéro, which would allow him to sever his ties with the corporation and begin over again in a place that is relatively immune from the cynical politics that have infected the rest of the country.

Though Ofeyi declines, the transfer of the properties and attributes of Aiyéro has nevertheless taken place symbolically. By the time of his second visit to Aiyéro on behalf of the corporation, he has come up with an idea by which the utopian conditions of Aiyéro might be transferred to the nation at large:

The idea that came from his first encounter with the commune was only one of many that sought to retrieve his occupation from its shallow world of jingles and the greater debasement of exploitation by the Cartel. The pattern could be reversed, the trick of conversion applied equally to the Cartel's technical facilities not merely to effect restitution to many but to create a new generation for the future. A new plantation within the communal, labouring, sharing entity—seed through nursery to the mature plant and fructification—Ofeyi envisioned the parallel progress of the new idea, the birth of the new man from the same germ as the cocoa seed, the Aiyéro ideal disseminated with the same powerful propaganda machine of the Cartel throughout the land, taking hold of undirected youth and filling the vacuum of their transitional heritage with virile shoot. (SA 253)

Ofeyi's plan is to transform the nation into a larger version of Aiyéro through the subversive, counterhegemonic use of the very same marketing mechanisms by which the cartel has tried to extend its interests into every corner of the nation. As shown by their desire to market cocoa-wix even to the unimportant, supposedly backward community of Aiyéro, the corporation intends to saturate the whole of national space with its message to produce and consume cocoa. Just as efficiently, the assumption that Ofeyi (and Soyinka) make is that a different message can be communicated to the nation by means of the same mechanisms. This is an assumption that masks another one: that the essence of Aiyéro lies in an "idea" that can be disseminated into the body politic like a virus, rather than in the actual material practices of this communal society (which are in any case never fully described). Ofeyi's project is ambitious, and it fails almost immediately. The Aiyéro work songs that Ofeyi transforms into jingles and the advertising images he captures of collective labor in the "experimental" farm he asks the corporation to establish in Aiyéro, trigger an immediate response from the cartel: sensing a problem, the corporation forces Ofeyi to take a study leave abroad or face dire personal consequences at home for his subversive activities.

It is obvious enough here that Ofeyi's situation is that of the third-world

writer, especially the writer who would hope to be able to politically transform his or her society. What is perhaps less obvious, though even more striking, is the assumption that is made about the appropriate *scale* of the writer's project. At one point, Ahime says that "it was good to know that our ways have always been the dream of mankind all through the ages and among people so far apart" (SA 246). The conditions of life represented by Aiyéro are universally desirable. Yet the space into which the Aiyéro "idea" is to be expanded seems of necessity, or naturally, to be that of the nation. This is not merely because this is the space saturated by the marketing mechanisms of the corporation, so that when these mechanisms are turned against themselves it is necessarily in the same nation-space that Aiyéro is conceptually reproduced. There is rather something else at work here that makes it possible to move from the limits of Aiyéro to the larger space of the nation with apparently little worry that the practices that make one space possible may not be so easily reproducible in the other, or even that it is precisely the limited space of Aiyéro that produces a utopian formulation in the first place, and that this can only be lost or destroyed if an attempt is made to multiply its effects.

What is assumed throughout *Season* in the structure of Ofeyi's first and subsequent projects is that it is only at the scale of the nation that "real" politics occurs. Writing must then also situate itself as a national project of some kind if it is seen to have any political import. How this is to be done, or (given the failure of Ofeyi's initial project) whether it can be done at all, is the question that is taken up repeatedly in the remainder of the novel, even if the answer each time appears to be the same. Indeed, the failure of Ofeyi's initial project suggests that an answer has already been decided in advance: the nation is the appropriate political level to which the utopian project must finally aspire; if the nation cannot be produced in this way, then the problem must lie in the means that have been used to spread the word about the Aiyéro idea—for Ofeyi, the language of advertising, for Soyinka, the language of the novel.

Ofeyi hatches a new plan upon returning from his study leave, which seems initially to be different in form from the first: "It was this, or leave the entire initiative to other, more drastic, means. The goals were clear enough, the dream a new concept of labouring hands across artificial frontiers, the concrete, affective presence of Aiyéro throughout the land, undermining the Cartel's superstructure of robbery, indignities and murder, ending the new phase of slavery" (SA 257). Yet what seems to be a more material way of spreading the beliefs of Aiyéro throughout the land is in fact simply a different mode of transmission that circumvents the need to use the corporation's mechanisms. In the dispersal of the

people of Aiyéro across the nation, it is in fact the abstract “idea” that they embody that has been planted in the national soil. The embodiment of the idea becomes important later on in terms of the pathos and despair generated through descriptions of the cartel’s assault on the Aiyéro people, but as Maduakor points out, for a book that is putatively about the masses and their slaughter by the forces of the military, neither is ever present to any degree in the novel except as an abstract part of the plans hatched by Ofeyi and then as the dead bodies that he sees lying in the streets in the second half of the novel.⁴³ For these reasons, it quickly becomes clear that this second plan is essentially the same as the first, especially when at the party we are alerted to the fact that the cartel is again troubled by the kinds of jingles and print advertising that Ofeyi has been producing. This time around, Ofeyi’s ads are much more difficult for the cartel to make sense of, more subliminal and allegorical, and thus more successful. Even so, the cartel is quickly on to him again, only this time they have decided that their response will be more decisive. At the opening of the second section of the novel, the chairman of the Cocoa Corporation reflects on one of Ofeyi’s songs that is being played by the band at his party:

In the beginning, there was nectar and
ambrosia
A golden pod contained them . . .

But the Chairman was no longer riled. He could afford to smile his benediction of
the orchestra . . . do carry on, carry on fools. It’s not who begins it but who ends it.
And we will. We will.

Favoured of gods they made the cosmos
rosier
The gods wiped the dribble from their
beard
And snores of thunder soon were heard
For the elixir also bred divine amnesia

Ta-ra-ra-ra-. ta-. ta — ta ———. The Chairman even supplied the coda in his head. It was different at the beginning when he raged at the perfidy. Now he could even afford to be amused. He ran his hand over his chin as if to treat his fingers to the rich dribble of nectar before it vanished into mere imagination. Damned weeping jeremiads. Envy-ridden flea-bitten social dregs! As for Ofeyi — it was clear, he had learned nothing. The Corporation had wasted money on him. He had returned truly incorrigible. (SA 266)

The centerpiece of Ofeyi's new marketing scheme is the Cocoa Queen Iriyise, who appears in all of his ads and who is famed for her personal appearances in which she arises (like Aphrodite) from the half-shell of a giant cocoa bean. As a prelude to Iriyise's appearance during each of the performances, sculpted images of microbes, weeds, and viruses — all of the various threats to the cocoa plant — float, suspended from balloons, out of something Ofeyi refers to as "Pandora's Box." For the performance at the chairman's party, which is attended by other influential members of the cartel, Ofeyi has added a surprise to "Pandora's Box." After the microbes and weeds have floated away,

four familiar faces, puppet-forms, suspended also from balloons, faces whose identities none, not even of those present, dared claim to recognize — Ofeyi had counted on this — faces whose names were whispered with dread even in the hardest sanctuaries of the underworld. These, the real powers of the cartel unfurled with linked arms as the balloons flew higher and the strings were unraveled . . . Other eyes which had followed the marionettes found themselves face to face with a spectacle which began by astounding, then, as memories were awakened, ended with a cold apprehensiveness. There was no one present who did not remember the morning when the country had woken to the knowledge that their destiny had been taken in charge by the once-invisible men of the gun. (SA 280–81)

This deliberate symbolic attack on the cartel has a predictable outcome. Fleeing the agents of the cartel, Ofeyi has to go permanently into hiding to escape their long grasp. Once again, his attempt to transform the country is put to an end. But the cartel does not stop at simply removing Ofeyi from his position as their marketing manager. Long suspecting Ofeyi's larger plan, the cartel takes swift and decisive military action against the people of Aiyéró, who had been introduced into communities around the country, and in particular, against the Aiyéró-dominated Shage dam project at Cross-river. At the same moment that the agents of the cartel begin spilling blood across the nation in an unprecedented wave of violence, Ofeyi reflects that "inwardly he took pleasure from the knowledge that Aiyéró, once the comic Utopia, had become a moral thorn in the complacent skin of the national body" (SA 320). A moment later, Ahime informs him about the viciousness of the cartel's response, and Ofeyi's hopes turn to despair.

As if the images of bloodletting and the repeated discovery of all manner of grisly scenes (slaughtered women with babies still suckling at their breasts, a lake full of floating, bloated corpses, etc.) that dominate the remainder of the book are not enough of a signal of the potential limits of the kind of politics that Ofeyi had

engaged in, they are explicitly foregrounded in the frequent encounters that Ofeyi has with “the Dentist.” The Dentist is a highly skilled assassin and revolutionary who sees violence as the only way in which anything can be done to change the situation of the country. Ofeyi first meets him by “chance” in an airport lobby while on his study leave (later we learn that he has been keeping an eye on Ofeyi on behalf of Ahime). Immediately after hearing about the tragic results of his experiment with the Aiyéro people, Ofeyi recollects his first encounter with the Dentist and with his philosophy of “extraction before infection” (SA 326). The discussion of their opposing positions in their first encounter establishes the character of all of their many subsequent disagreements:

He gestured towards the arm-chair. “Whiskey? Oh, I forget. . . .”

“No, it’s all right. I am . . . no longer on duty.”

Ofeyi glanced at the suitcase. “Yes . . . to quote a title from the world of fiction — mission accompli?”

The youth smiled apologetically. “I’m afraid I’m not familiar with the world of fiction. In fact, I rather despise it.” (SA 335–36)

“Nothing can be achieved by isolated acts, we have to organize.”

It drew a mere grunt of partial agreement. “Of course. But one cannot ignore the real incorrigible enemies who are impervious to education. The kind that hunted us down as soon as they came to power, the fat bourgeoisie who immediately began to suck up to them and lick their boots in public!” (SA 338)

“And afterwards,” Ofeyi demanded. “What do you envisage?”

“Envisage?” His tone rose in protest. “Why do you want me to envisage anything? Is that my field? I thought it was yours.”

“Surely, when you — eliminate, you have in mind something to follow, something to replace what you eliminate. Otherwise your action is negative and futile.”

The Dentist sighed. “Why do you people, you intellectuals or whatever you call yourselves impose on us burdens to which we lay no claim.” (SA 345)

In the debates between Ofeyi and the Dentist, Ofeyi claims the position of the writer for his own: instead of intervening “directly” in the revolution, the writer (or the intellectual more generally) plays an important task in organizing and educating the populace, bringing about the massive shift in consciousness that forms the necessary precondition for the new nation. The Dentist is willing to concede that this is an important role. At the same time, these debates are staged in such a way that in the context of what has just happened to the people of Aiyéro, Ofeyi seems more of a hindrance than a help to the national cause. In a sense, he is

responsible for what has happened in the country, a fact with which the Dentist directly confronts him: "That is why our people die. Because you paced in silence at the incubation of a monstrosity, preoccupied with a study of the phenomenon" (SA 368). Against such accusations, Ofeyi's self-rationalizations, which do in fact capture the *anomy* that grips the nation, nevertheless seem weak indeed: "The offensive outcrop was only a willful, incidental warning. The real death that the people were called upon to die was the death from under, the long creeping paralysis of flesh and spirit that seized upon them as the poison tuber might spread through the bowels of earth. Those noisy individual deaths were merely incidents. The real extermination went on below" (SA 363).

For a novel that is about the situation of post-Biafran Nigeria, Soyinka's multiple and relentless assaults on the (figure of the) intellectual in *Season of Anomy* are an unexpected theme. In many ways, Ofeyi is criticized as much as the cartel itself; this is perhaps why the cartel, the people, and Aiyéro seem at times to function as abstractions through which Ofeyi's politics and its outcome can be explored and mapped, and thereby lauded, questioned, challenged, or criticized. There are many other elements of the novel and of the symbolism that Soyinka employs that I have not touched on here: for example, the overt symbolism of the journey through hell, suggested by the use of the Orpheus-Eurydice (Ofeyi-Iriyise) myth in structuring Ofeyi's passage through the various chambers of the Temoko prison to find Iriyise, by the explicit reference to Dante in the words that are inscribed at the entrance to the prison ("abandon hope all who enter"), by the angelic figure of Taiila, and so on. But the danger in spending too much critical energy explaining these elements is that it inevitably begins to push to one side what is in fact the fundamental conflict in *Season of Anomy*. It is not, it seems to me, a conflict between the violent methods employed by the Dentist and the more evolutionary, nonviolent solutions proposed by Ofeyi — the novelistic staging of a debate on revolutionary method. Nor is it about the internalization of this conflict in the character of Ofeyi, for whom, after all, the Dentist is in many ways nothing more than a figure that represents another way of doing things to which he finds himself also attracted (which is made clear in Ofeyi's rescue of Semi-Dozen from the mob that has surrounded his house). The conflict has to be seen as taking place on a slightly different level where one can ask what makes it possible to deploy the contents in this manner. What needs to be explained about *Season of Anomy*, a novel in which perhaps too much is made explicit, is why a novel about the implosion of the nation through a divisive civil war takes the form of an attack on the writer and on the practice of writing.

Season of Anomy repeatedly rehearses the conditions of its own impossibility:

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the impossibility of the novel after Biafra. It goes over the same terrain again and again, as if trying to make sure that there is nothing left behind that might form the basis for a new novelistic project. For it is the novel in particular (rather than literature and literary writing in general) that for both Achebe and Soyinka comes to an “end” after the nation. What imperils the novel is not some kind of aesthetic blockage, some inability of the novel to deal adequately with the terrors of the war, or a sense that another form could better represent its causes and consequences. In fact, the novel would seem to be a singularly appropriate form by which the extent of war’s impact on the nation might be captured. Even though *Season of Anomy* tends toward abstraction, its description of the death and damage left by the cartel’s attack is not something that could be easily shown in a play, as evidenced by the fablelike character of Soyinka’s other literary work on Biafra, *Madmen and Specialists*. What we have here instead is an act of displacement. Biafra signals in a very real way the failure of the nation in Nigeria, but since this cannot be admitted, it appears symptomatically in the other term of nationalist literature as the failure of a certain form of national *literary* politics.

For if something has to end as a result of Biafra, it cannot be the nation. It is the nation that seems to represent and coalesce for Achebe and Soyinka the very possibility of politics in Africa. The nation avoids both of the problems that they identify with negritude: it is neither contextless, immersed in the international space of the African diaspora, nor requires the excavation and resurrection of precolonial forms of politics. The nation is a modern form and African countries are modern entities. To get a sense of this commitment to the nation in *Season*, one need only remember that there is something for Soyinka that is distasteful about Aiyéró when taken on its own: “It is rather like those white monks who have stayed within their citadels of stone, shut off from the real world of evil, offering candle-puffs of piety on behalf of the hideous hunger of the living world and even, presumptuously, of the hunger of the dead” (SA 259). A utopic formation that exists only in a single place, a specific community, an isolated region is irrelevant to the larger world. For Aiyéró to be anything other than “a quaint anomaly,” the space it occupies must be able to be made co-extensive with the nation-space. This does not happen in *Season*, and neither did such an all-embracing (though by no means utopic) idea of the nation manage to fuse together the Nigerian federation. Regardless, the necessity of this expansion appears to be an inviolable principle for Soyinka, which leaves only two culprits to blame for the failure of the national project: the forces of the cartel/Nigerian military government, and the politics of the intellectual and of the novel.

To get a sense of Soyinka's continued commitment to the Nigerian nation, one need only turn to his most recent work. For what is perhaps the most surprising feature of *The Open Sore of a Continent*—which is his most explicit examination of the meaning and significance of the nation to date—is not the level of political corruption and moral decrepitude that he describes in the Nigerian body politic, but that he has continued to remain a committed nationalist even after everything that has happened in Nigeria. Although each attempt at democratic reform has been squashed by successive military regimes (and the status of the current democratically elected government is shaky at best), the question of what would yet make Nigeria a “nation” is the central issue that Soyinka takes up in this book. The events that prompted the writing of the book concern the removal of the interim government of Moshood Abiola by General Sani Abacha in November 1993 and the subsequent persecution and imprisonment of the Ogoni writer and political activist, Ken Saro-Wiwa, by Abacha's government. Soyinka's analysis of these events, and of the historical and social conditions in Nigeria that have perpetuated the iron-fisted rule of the military, are enormously valuable, especially with respect to subsequent events in Nigerian politics: Saro-Wiwa's execution in November 1995 in the face of enormous international opposition and the reinstatement of a date for new democratic elections in Nigeria in 1999 in the wake of Abacha's and Abiola's deaths. What frames Soyinka's discussion of these empirical events is an epistemological and ontological inquiry, the question of “When *is* a nation?”⁴⁴ This question is posed over and over again, taking a slightly different form each time (these are but some examples):

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We shall come later to what we believe the international community can do to save the nation, not so much from itself as from the internal expropriators of the national weal. We must advance to the complementary questions: Save it for what? Or, as what? As a nation? As nations? As a satellite or satellites of other nations' arrangements? (OSC 19)

What more defines a nation? Or indeed, what yardsticks? What does the claim “I belong to this nation” mean to the individual, and when did it begin to mean anything? . . . When, and this is what is demanded, when are all the conditions present that make a nation? Can they be upheld by objective tests? Or is a nation simply a condition of the collective mind? Or will? A coerced state, the objective manifestation of an individual will? A passive, unquestioned habit of cohabitation? Or a rigorous conclusion that derives from history? (OSC 19–20)

When is a nation? Could one of the conditions in resolving this sometimes emotive issue be the articulated or demonstrable decision by the polity that actually makes up the nation? (OSC 22)

The Nigerian geographical entity was indeed upheld, but was the *nation*? (OSC 28)

There is one question that is never asked: *why* the nation. As he shows in his analysis of both Nigeria and other national situations, Soyinka is well aware of the real and epistemic violence that has been carried out in the name of the nation. Even so, he continues to envision the nation as something other than and separate from those situations in which “the national ideal becomes, for instance, conflated with notions of racial purity or other forms of extreme nationalism” (OSC 116). The criterion for a genuine nationalism that he finally decides upon is one that works on behalf of “the lowest common denominator, the human unit” (OSC 117). For Soyinka, this was the promise contained in the vote on behalf of Abiola, who garnered for the first time in Nigerian history a significant majority of votes from almost every region of the country. Soyinka claims that, “Nothing can erase the basic quality of the event: this was a *national* triumph, and the championing of its integrity must remain a national undertaking” (OSC 48).

But there is an odd sleight of hand in this book. The Abiola election is taken as an answer to the (more or less) theoretical questions that he poses throughout the book. For Soyinka, by voting for Abiola the Nigerian *people* as a collectivity cast their vote for the *nation*. They were certainly voting to improve their situation after years of military rule; it is only in terms of Soyinka’s undertheorized sense of the nation as that government or state whose interests are “with” the people that it is possible to leap to the conclusion that now, finally, with the election of Abiola the Nigeria nation is born. All of the ominous examples of nationalism that he describes so well (as, for example, “mostly a gambling space for the opportunism and adventurism of power” [OSC 121]) become by contrast merely aberrant examples of some true national essence never really described. The connection between space and politics that is assumed in the construction of the entity called Nigeria is itself never interrogated (why this space? why not a smaller space or a larger one? etc.).

It is possible to treat Soyinka’s insistence on the nation in Nigeria as either wishful thinking or as a theoretical error, a failure to learn the lessons of *Season of Anomy*. One of the difficulties inherent in the form of the Nigerian nation remains the multiple ethnicities and other divisions of identity (rural-urban,

for instance) that complicate national politics. In *The Open Sore of a Continent*, Soyinka takes the vote for Abiola as a resolution of these multiple divisions, so that where there was once people with regional and ethnic loyalties, there are now only individual Nigerian *citizens*. But perhaps it is this hope that the nation names: the promise of a collectivity like Aiyéro that is an expression of a uniquely African response to modernity. Of course, this isn't all that it names. As is shown by the questions that Soyinka poses in both *The Open Sore of a Continent* and *Season of Anomy* — questions reminiscent of the ones that Fanon poses at the end of "On National Culture" — the concept of the nation is implicated in too many other discourses to be identified simply with utopian longings: the violence of identity over difference, the space of empire, the mode by which a specific collectivity is interpellated into the international system of nation-states, the determinations of modernity itself.

And once again, the nation also names the problematic of the third-world writer. In the wake of the bloody conflict over the Nigerian federation, the connection between the activity of writing literature and producing a collectivity — between literature and the nation — is taken up as an explicit question by both Achebe and Soyinka. In their post-Biafran novels, both writers explore with great insight and intensity the zone of instability within which they must of necessity work. In this conscious exploration of the problems and possibilities of literature as a means of creating a genuine collectivity, the limits and possibilities of intellectual activity are exposed in fascinating detail. The delineation of these limits is not to suggest that there is no role for the intellectual or writer. Rather, it is a way of understanding the accumulation and concentration of forces and discourses that make up this zone that permits a more thorough understanding of the problem of cultural revolution in Nigeria. Achebe's and Soyinka's continued commitment to the nation is in this respect not a mistake, the expression of a troubling belief in a political form that both know to be fraught with problems. On the contrary, it is the apparent impossibility of the nation that produces the demand for its possibility — the persistence of a belief in the possibilities of the kind of collectivity that the election of Abiola promises.