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# Indices of the Esoteric: Crime, Forensic Science, and Oral Culture

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## ABSTRACT

This essay explores the relationship between geography, epistemology, and genre in Nii Ayikwei Parkes's *Tail of the Blue Bird* (2009). More specifically, I will be discussing the perspectival modulation that both the novel and its protagonist undergo as a consequence of a simple journey into the Ghanaian provinces. Kayo Odamtten, a forensic pathologist, has been sent to investigate a suspected murder in the remote village of Sonokrom. Although he relies on standard forensic procedures when he first arrives in the village, Kayo is eventually forced to utilize other perspectives, other epistemologies, in order to solve the mystery. And as we shall see, this reorientation of the story also influences the novel at the level of discourse and genre, transforming a conventional work of detective fiction into something else altogether—something far more equivocal and difficult to categorize.

[I]t is by these deviations from the plane of the ordinary that reason feels its way, if at all, in its search for the true.—Edgar Allan Poe, “The Murders in the Rue Morgue”

## I

According to Franco Moretti, geographical borders can be divided into two different categories: there are “external ones, between state and state; and internal ones, within a given state.” In the first case, he argues, the border is “the site of *adventure*: one crosses the line, and is face to face with the unknown, often the enemy; the story enters a space of danger, surprises, suspense.” In the European historical novel, this conjunction of two different spaces, this collision of opposites, typically leads to a sharp rise in narrativity—battles are fought, discoveries are made, and territories are conquered. But as Moretti observes, internal

borders “work differently” and often “focus on a theme which is far less flamboyant than adventure, but much more disturbing: *treason*.” The internal border is where the centralizing power of the state diminishes, where the gravitational pull of the capital dissipates, bringing our hero into contact with the counterforces of rebellion, nonconformity, and dissidence. “A struggle between national and local loyalties [emerges],” Moretti writes, and “treason shows the bitterness of this conflict, which keeps the hero’s soul long suspended—Waverly, wavering—between nation and region” (*Atlas* 35–37).<sup>1</sup>

In Nii Ayikwei Parkes’s *Tail of the Blue Bird* (2009), we encounter a similar kind of ambivalence. A strange pile of human remains has been found in a remote Ghanaian village; and at the behest of the Accra police, Kayo Odamtten, a forensic pathologist, is sent to investigate. Although he relies on standard forensic procedures when he first arrives in the village, thereby privileging material evidence over oral testimony, Kayo is eventually forced to utilize other perspectives, other epistemologies, in order to identify the mysterious remains. And by acknowledging the validity of these “alternative” resources, he experiences some of the ambivalence that Moretti associates with the internal border—finding himself caught between the “indifferent world of modern knowledge” and the “enchanted topography of magic story-telling” (Moretti, *Atlas* 72).<sup>2</sup> In what follows, I shall be exploring the perspectival modulation that Kayo undergoes as a consequence of his encounter with such epistemic difference. Sonokrom, the village in question, is situated 250 kilometers inland from Accra, Ghana’s sprawling capital city, and as he makes this three-hour journey, Kayo gradually moves from one epistemological sphere of influence to another. In the village, unlike the city, he is encouraged to privilege orality over materiality, the sacred over the secular, and the esoteric over the forensic. Only by doing so, it is intimated, will he be able to solve this particular case, given its location and the circumstances under which the “crime” was committed. Moreover, as we shall see, this transformation at the representational level of the narrative, where the investigation is actually conducted, also influences the novel at the level of discourse and genre, causing it to deviate, quite significantly, from its anticipated trajectory as a work of detective fiction. In his discussion of readerly narratives, Roland Barthes argues that “the readerly is controlled by [a] principle of non-contradiction,” which ensures that the discourse does everything in its power to avoid “the scandal of some illogicality, some disturbance of ‘common sense’” (*S/Z* 156). This is particularly true of the classic detective novel, where logic and common sense are regarded as supreme values. In *Tail of the Blue Bird*, however, the ineluctable fact of the novel’s setting forces the discourse to accommodate other values, other epistemologies, and other ways of solving a crime—even if this means altering (or expanding) the generic coordinates of the narrative itself.<sup>3</sup>

Needless to say, Parkes is not the first African writer to have undertaken a project of this kind. Indeed, one of the more salient features of modern African literature is its heavy reliance on the conceptual and aesthetic resources of oral culture (in all its interdiscursive and multi-generic complexity).<sup>4</sup> “Because the traditional culture has been able to maintain itself as a contemporary reality,” F. Abiola Irele writes, “and thus to offer itself as a living resource, the modern literature strives to establish and strengthen its connection with a legacy that, though associated with the past, remains available as a constant reference for the

African imagination" (29). It is this reliance on the epistemological legacies of oral culture that has led many African writers to resist the "disenchantment" we typically associate with European modernity (Weber 12–13). In a fascinating essay that reconceptualizes the history of modern African literature, Ato Quayson traces the process by which the "ethnographic sensibility" of the late 1950s and early 1960s (as typified by Chinua Achebe's *Things Fall Apart* [1958]) was eventually eclipsed by "two different and mutually reinforcing modalities"—namely, the "auto-critique of the African postcolony" and "the literature of re-enchantment." "Unlike the ethnographic impulse," Quayson argues,

which was firmly wedded to a realist mode of representation, the modality of re-enchantment separated itself from realism and instead foregrounded a series of different African ontologies as the organizing principles of the literary representations. The re-enchantment of the familiar is a fundamental acknowledgment of the volatile proximity between the real world and that of the ancestors and the spirits of the yet-unborn in a dialectical synthesis of tradition and modernity. ("Modern African Literary History" 144)

As I have suggested, Parkes's *Tail of the Blue Bird* can be situated within the same generic category, one that distances itself from the conventions of literary realism in order to bring about the "re-enchantment of the familiar." And the fact that the novel does so is a direct consequence of its geographical setting. By crossing the internal border that separates the capital city from the provinces, that is to say, the narrative inevitably exposes itself to the "organizing principles" of Ashanti oral culture—creating a "dialectical synthesis of tradition and modernity," bringing the "real world" into contact with the realm of the esoteric, and investing the visible surface of everyday life with a profound and sacred significance.

## II

Accra is a large city whose entire metropolitan area covers 173 square kilometers, so it takes Kayo and his partner, Constable Garba, some time to reach the rural hinterland. But when they finally do leave the city behind, after much driving, the geographical and cultural differences are unmistakable. "Kayo," we are told,

gazed at the vast lands to either side of the road, taking in the rich green of the vegetation. He [was] amazed to see the varied wealth of the landscape driving up from Accra to [the provincial town of] Tafo; the hills that appeared to fade into the massed trunks of giant trees, the odd baobab rising like a grey sentinel above smaller trees; and by the sides of the roads life progressing as though modern initiatives were a passing fancy. Children balanced yam, cassava and woven baskets containing tomatoes on their heads, farmers walked bare-chested and barefoot into the shade, with cutlasses swinging at their sides—and every one of them understood the language of the forest; a language Kayo didn't know. (Parkes 90–91)

Outside the city, the baobab trees have become giant gray sentinels; the forest itself has acquired a voice; and there may be a very good reason why they have done so. In *Atlas of the European Novel*, Moretti argues that stylistic choices in literature are often determined by "topographical" considerations, and this is particularly

notable during instances of border-crossing. “Although the [realist] novel usually has a very low figurality,” he writes, “near the border *figurality rises*” (43)—the discourse takes on a metaphorical intensity that subsides only once the border has been traversed. This is the case, Moretti says, because only metaphors “can simultaneously *express the unknown we must face [in crossing a border], and yet also contain it.*” They “express it, they ‘say’ it, via the strangeness of their predication,” yet since they use a familiar field of reference, “they also give form to the unknown: they contain it, and keep it somehow under control” (47). But there are other transformations occurring here too. As Kayo crosses the border separating the capital city from the provinces, *orality* also rises, and this exposure to the “language of the forest” will have wide-ranging consequences for the narrative as a whole.

In an African context, as Ato Quayson indicates, the term “orality” is employed “to denote a set of conceptual skills which bear the same status as literacy in constituting a sense of cultural identity” (“Magical Realism” 159). Or to put it simply, as Quayson does, orality in Africa is “not just a mode of speech different from writing, but undergirds an entire way of life” (159)—a way of life that *Tail of the Blue Bird* associates with a specific place (rather than a particular historical period). Oral culture and literary culture are often situated on a diachronic trajectory, with the former constituting an archaic “tradition” and the latter being seen as synonymous with modernity. However, Parkes’s novel chooses to locate these two categories on a *spatial* plane rather than a temporal one—so that each category is afforded a certain preeminence within its respective geographical sphere.<sup>5</sup> When Kayo and his partner arrive in the village of Sonokrom, then, they don’t leave the “literary” behind in Accra; but they do enter a space where the relative salience of the “oral” and the “literary” has shifted, and as a result, the epistemic protocols governing this particular space have also changed.<sup>6</sup> If our primary detective figure is going to solve the mystery, he will need to see things from a different perspective, employing “conceptual skills” derived from Ashanti oral culture rather than relying on his knowledge of forensic science. But this circumstantial imperative, encoded within the topography of the village itself, is something he doesn’t immediately recognize.

Before leaving Accra, Kayo had been instructed to compile a “full *CSI*-style report” (Parkes 55) of his investigation, and given his background, it would seem that he is ideally qualified to do so. It has always been difficult, we learn, for Kayo to explain “why he [is] so attached to the idea of working as a forensics officer in Ghana; how so many deaths attributed to witchcraft and bad luck [make] his skin crawl with impatience”; and why he feels such a strong urge to “go in with his silver forensics case and present scientific answers, *real answers*” (32). Since returning from London, where he completed a degree in forensic science at Imperial College, Kayo has been unable to find a job in his chosen field. So when he and Garba are finally brought to the hut where the remains were discovered, he is only too happy to put his studies into practice, subjecting the place to several hours of close forensic scrutiny. According to the report he later writes,

*[Various objects] were found on the external periphery of the scene, and [these] were photographed, tagged in numerical order, and bagged for reference. The interior [of the hut] was a circular space with clay walls and floor. . . . The contents of the room were: a pot of palm wine, three pieces of folded cloth, some decaying food, a table, an enamel*

*plate and two cooking pots. All the items were processed . . . for fingerprints and the room was subjected to a 450 nanometre blue merge scan. The scan revealed apparent medium to high velocity-type spatter and drops of suspected urine. The velocity range suggested auto-emission or pouring. The flesh remains . . . were located on a straw mat in the middle of the room. Close examination revealed the presence of housefly maggots in the remains, which were of indeterminate shape and foul-smelling. Fluid and tissue samples were taken from the flesh mass, and examples of the maggots were also taken. All flesh and liquid samples were frozen in liquid nitrogen and taken to Accra . . . for [DNA] testing. The flesh remains were subsequently burned in the interest of public health, given their advanced state of putrefaction. Processing of the scene of crime was completed at 5:36 p.m. (160)*

In this passage, with its minute attention to physical detail, Kayo demonstrates the same kind of “empirical vigilance” that Michel Foucault associates with the “clinical gaze” and the rise of medical rationality in the late eighteenth century (xiii). By compiling this inventory of mundane objects (a pot of palm wine, three pieces of folded cloth, some decaying food, etc.), and by subjecting each item to such careful scrutiny, he hopes to discover the true “story” of the presumptive crime. If he is scrupulously attentive to the *surface* of things, Kayo believes, if he plunges into the “marvelous density of perception” (Foucault xiii), with all the forensic technology at his disposal, then this story will eventually be revealed. In other words, from Kayo’s perspective, there is no underlying meaning to be found here; nothing resides beneath the surface or beyond the gaze. If these items are subjected to even closer scrutiny—using a 450 nanometer blue merge scan, for instance—they simply reveal more surfaces, smaller surfaces, surfaces within surfaces: “*medium to high velocity-type spatter and drops of suspected urine.*” To cite Foucault once again, this projection of evidential meaning onto the “plane of absolute visibility” gives Kayo’s investigation an “opaque base” that is ultimately impenetrable—but that’s just fine, as there’s nothing “under there” anyway. For our hero, in short, “[t]hat which is not on the scale of the [forensic] gaze falls outside the domain of possible knowledge” (Foucault 166). And this correspondence between the figure of the doctor and that of the detective, between medical rationality and modern forensic procedures, is no coincidence.<sup>7</sup>

In the middle years of the nineteenth century, as Victorian society became increasingly secularized, religious scripture lost much of its credibility as a source of historical knowledge. Instead, there was a growing tendency to rely on evidence derived from scientific disciplines such as evolutionary biology, archaeology, and paleontology. “At some point during this transition from sacred to secular explanations of the past,” Charles J. Rzepka writes,

the increasing tempo of the West’s reiterated crises of historical explanation began to change people’s understanding of the relative priority and weight to be given to material evidence, to what we might call the physical “clues” of history, as opposed to the “testimony,” the oral or written accounts of past events, including God’s, cited to explain those “clues.” (35)

By the 1840s, this “crucial shift in evidentiary priority was all but complete.” The “unimpeachable authority” of sacred testimony was rapidly giving way to “the new authority of material ‘clues’ interpreted in the light of conflicting

'testimonies'"—testimonies that were seen to be "entirely human in origin" (35). A similar (and arguably related) paradigm shift was also occurring in the judicial system at roughly the same time. In *Detective Fiction and the Rise of Forensic Science*, Ronald R. Thomas argues that trial procedures on both sides of the Atlantic underwent a fundamental transformation during the nineteenth century. "Circumstantial evidence," he notes, "gained more and more authority, while direct testimony lost much of its probative force"; and as a consequence, "the application of rational principles of evidence to verbal testimony increasingly required substantiation by material and circumstantial evidence" (34). In the cultural sphere, these scientific and legal developments were reflected in the emerging genre of detective fiction, which employed a similar methodology and was equally averse to the unsubstantiated.<sup>8</sup> Or to put it another way, citing Thomas, the literary figure of the nineteenth century that "most elaborately stage[d] this transformation of 'testimony' into 'things' to produce 'real evidence' [was] not the lawyer [or the doctor], but the detective" (35).

Given all of the above, then, it is not particularly surprising that Kayo should focus his attention on the material evidence to be found at the crime scene. But nothing he discovers there brings him any closer to solving the mystery of the unidentified remains. Nor does he manage to locate the owner of the hut, a cocoa farmer by the name of Kofi Atta, who has been missing for several weeks. "What he had so far," Kayo realizes, "was nothing. All he could say for certain was what didn't happen; with these baked mud floors he couldn't even pick up footprints accurately. Indeed, even if they had found an entire body which could be identified, no criminal case could be made with the information he had" (Parkes 115). As his frustration grows, Kayo begins to suspect that the villagers may know more about the case than they have admitted—and so, one night in the village bar, he interrogates a local hunter called Opanyin Poku. At first, the old hunter is evasive; but eventually he offers to tell Kayo a story about *another* cocoa farmer ("like Kofi Atta"), who lives in a nearby village ("like this [one] but with more trees" [97–98]) and goes by the unlikely name of Kwaku Ananse.<sup>9</sup> This is a pivotal moment in Parkes's novel. Opanyin Poku has assumed narratorial duties before—in a brief prologue and on pages 65–71 (of my edition). However, this is the first time that his story has been told at the intradiegetic level of the narrative, and it is the first time that Kayo has performed the supporting role of an intradiegetic addressee. "Sebi," the hunter announces, "in the tradition of our elders, maybe I will put myself in the story, but it is not me, you hear?"<sup>10</sup> The other men at the table nod their heads, and after a brief pause, Opanyin Poku begins to tell his tale. "It was the year after Nkrumah became our land's elder," he says. "I mean, sebi, the Englishman was still here, but Nkrumah was *prime minister*; he went around visiting villages, greeting the people. Yes, he visited this village (Oduro will bear witness) and many other villages near here . . ." (98).

At this moment, and in the pages that follow, Kayo undergoes a perspectival modulation of some significance (one that will eventually alter the generic trajectory of the novel itself). Since the nineteenth century, as we saw earlier, criminal investigation and judicial practice have tended to privilege material evidence over oral testimony. But on this particular evening, in the village bar, Kayo has chosen to do the opposite. Having reached the limit of what forensic science can achieve in this case, he has decided to explore other possibilities,

other perspectives. And given the circumstances, this shift from the material to the oral is not simply a procedural issue, a matter of methodology, but also carries a deeper cultural significance. (Remember where we are, where the story is being told, and remember what the term “orality” signifies in this particular location.) By attributing evidential value to the hunter’s narrative, by drawing on the conceptual resources of oral culture, Kayo has made it possible for the supernatural to infiltrate—and ultimately transform—the secular landscape of the novel in which he figures.

This process is a gradual one, however, and for quite some time, we are offered only vague intimations of the esoteric. When Kayo and Garba burn the remains in the forest, for instance, a “thick white smoke” fills the entire clearing, “infusing the air with the smell of nutmeg, honey and thyme.” There is also a sound of flapping wings, which surprises Kayo as “he had spotted no birds in the nests [among] the bamboo trees” (74). Later, when he and Garba return to the scene of the crime, they discover “a single blue feather lying in the centre of the floor, where the remains had been [found]” (75). And that evening, as they are drinking in the bar, Kayo hears the sound of a “distant xylophone”—“melodious, riding the wind like a charm, splitting the night into slats” (80). As it turns out, none of these “clues” carry value in themselves, but they do reveal the existence of another ontological sphere, beyond the “plane of absolute visibility” (Foucault 166), where the solution to the mystery may be located. When he is discussing the case with Inspector P. J. Donkor, the police officer who had requested the “CSI-style report” (Parkes 55), Kayo realizes that he “[can’t] tell the inspector about the sweet smell of the flesh they burned,” or about the blue feather or the sound of the distant xylophone. “He [was] caught in a void between instinct and knowledge and, for once in his professional life, he didn’t have the answers” (86). Yet these fleeting glimpses of the supernatural do eventually lead Kayo to a higher plane of evidential meaning; and on this occasion, in a reversal of standard judicial procedure, it is Opanyin’s “oral testimony” that is used to corroborate the “material evidence” (however strange it may be).

In an essay titled “Introduction to the Structural Analysis of Narratives,” Roland Barthes makes an important distinction between two different “units” of narrative meaning: *functions* and *indices*. The first of these he describes as “distributional” in that they follow the logic of causality and operate on the chronological plane of the narrative, influencing, in one way or another, its diachronic unfolding. The purchase of a revolver, for instance, has “for [a] correlate the moment when it will be used (and if not used, the notation is reversed into a sign of indecision, etc.)” (264). Narrative indices, on the other hand, which Barthes describes as “integrational,” refer not to a “consequential act” but to a narrative unit whose broader significance can only be understood at another level of (implied) meaning—indicating “the character of a narrative agent,” for example, or “a feeling,” or “an atmosphere” (267). In order to understand, Barthes writes,

what an indicial notation “is for,” one must move to a higher level . . . for only there is the indice clarified. . . . The ratification of indices is “higher up,” sometimes even remaining virtual, outside any explicit syntagm. . . . That of functions, by contrast, is always “further on,” is a syntagmatic ratification. *Functions* and *indices* thus overlay another classic distinction: functions involve metonymic



relata, indices metaphoric relata; the former correspond to a functionality of doing, the latter to a functionality of being. (264–65)

One of the examples that Barthes offers, to clarify this distinction, is taken from Edgar Allan Poe's "The Purloined Letter" (1844). In this story, as you may know, the detective C. Auguste Dupin is called on to find a compromising letter that has been stolen from "a certain royal personage" (Poe 342), presumably the queen. When the apartment belonging to the thief is searched by the police, however, the letter is nowhere to be found—until Dupin realizes that, in order "to conceal the letter, the [guilty party has] resorted to the . . . sagacious expedient of not attempting to conceal it at all" (Poe 341). According to Barthes, Poe's story serves as an apologue for the way in which every narrative carries multiple layers of meaning, located not only on the horizontal (or syntagmatic) axis, but also on the vertical (or paradigmatic) one.<sup>11</sup> In "The Purloined Letter," he writes,

Poe gives an acute analysis of the failure of the chief commissioner of the Paris police, powerless to find the letter. His investigations, says Poe, were perfect "within the sphere of his specialty"; he searched everywhere, saturated entirely the level of the "police search," but in order to find the letter, protected by its conspicuousness, it was necessary to shift to another level, to substitute the concealer's principle of relevance for that of the policeman. Similarly, the "search" carried out over a horizontal set of narrative relations may well be as thorough as possible but must still, to be effective, also operate "vertically": meaning is not "at the end" of the narrative, it runs across it; just as conspicuous as the purloined letter, meaning eludes all unilateral investigation. (259)

We see the same thing in *Tail of the Blue Bird*, where Kayo does everything he can—"within the sphere of his specialty"—to solve the crime. He saturates the level of forensic analysis, using blue merge goggles and microscopes and 3D digital imaging to do so; yet he is unable to find anything of real significance. Once he has exhausted the syntagmatic plane of enquiry, the plane of the visible, he begins to consider other possibilities. But the "clues" that gradually accumulate, as the novel progresses, don't seem to make much sense; these disparate particles of evidential meaning simply refuse to cohere. How is one to decipher the "sound of flapping wings," for instance, or the "smell of nutmeg, honey and thyme" (Parkes 74)? Only after listening to Opanyin's story in the village bar does Kayo realize that the value of such clues may be indicial rather than functional, paradigmatic rather than syntagmatic. In other words, these strange episodes may serve as *indices of the esoteric*, whose true significance can only be understood at another, "higher" level of meaning/being—somewhere far beyond the range of the forensic gaze. And if Kayo is to solve the mystery, this is precisely where he will need to go.

### III

Earlier, I suggested that the transition from literary to "oral" discourse on page 98, when Opanyin Poku begins to tell his intradiegetic story, represents a crucial turning point in the narrative. From this moment on, *Tail of the Blue Bird* will be increasingly dominated by oral testimony (rather than material evidence), the conceptual resources of Ashanti oral culture (rather than forensic science), and the

forces of the supernatural (rather than secular rationality). But as I have indicated, this reorientation of the story also influences the novel at the level of discourse and genre, transforming a conventional work of detective fiction into something else altogether—something far more equivocal and difficult to categorize. At the discursive level, the differences are fairly obvious. Halfway down page 98, there is a sudden transition from mimetic representation to diegetic “storytelling.” In the former case, we are privy to a carefully delineated visual scene (“The flame in the centre of the hut, behind Kayo and Garba, was reflected in the hunter’s eyes,” etc.), while in the latter, we are simply listening to an oral narrative (“The story I am telling you is the story of the cocoa farmer . . .” [Parkes 99]). The essential difference between these two representational modes is one of plausibility or verisimilitude. With mimetic discourse, the mode most closely affiliated with literary realism, we are encouraged to believe what we are “seeing,” while diegetic discourse, having been liberated from the tyranny of the scene, is far more receptive to invisible or “superempirical” forces. In *The Curtain*, a collection of essays tracing the historical development of the European novel, Milan Kundera associates the diegetic with eighteenth-century literature and the mimetic with the rise of realism in the early nineteenth century; and he uses the examples of Henry Fielding and Balzac to distinguish between these two different types of discourse. “When they were reading Fielding,” Kundera argues,

his readers became *auditors* fascinated by a brilliant man who held them breathless with what he was telling. Balzac, some eighty years later, turned his readers into *spectators* watching a screen . . . on which his novelist’s magic made them see scenes they could not tear their eyes away from. Fielding was not inventing impossible or unbelievable stories; yet the plausibility of what he was recounting was the least of his concerns; he wanted to dazzle his audience not by the illusion of reality but by the enchantment of his storymaking, of his unexpected observations, of the surprising situations he created. But later, when the novel’s magic came to lie in the visual and auditory evocation of scenes, *plausibility became the supreme rule*, the condition *sine qua non* for the reader to believe in what he was seeing. (13)

In *Tail of the Blue Bird*, then, when Opanyin Poku begins to tell his story, we are not only undergoing a transition from literary to “oral” culture, from the mimetic to the diegetic, but we are also witnessing a reconfiguration of aesthetic values. From page 98 onward, the novel will no longer be governed by the “*supreme rule*” of plausibility, reinforced through the diligent production of visual scenes. Instead, it will explore a more “enchanted” topography, one that draws its primary inspiration from Ashanti oral culture. As Quayson writes, “To understand African magical realism . . . is perforce to engage with a full range of oral discourses: how they imbue, reshape, and ignite a sense of enchantment in a world that appears to be singularly disenchanting” (“Magical Realism” 175).<sup>12</sup>

The story that Kayo hears over two consecutive nights in the village bar can be summarized as follows. In a nearby village there once lived a cocoa farmer by the name of Kwaku Ananse, whose wife had died in childbirth, leaving him to raise their daughter, Mensisi, alone. Over time, Ananse grew very close to the child. “Indeed, some of the women in the village said it was unnatural for a man to take such interest in his daughter; they said it was like a love affair” (Parkes

103). In any case, it's certainly true that Kwaku Ananse was a domineering and overprotective father. One day, Mensisi went missing for several hours, and when she was finally found, Ananse "grabbed [the girl] and started beating her" in front of the entire village. The beating was so severe that his mother-in-law, Yaa Somu, tried to intervene, but Ananse "knocked her to the floor" (107). Picking herself up, Yaa Somu uttered the following curse:

If you beat her like that again, I will kill you, and if I'm not here, the moment she conceives, that will be the beginning of your punishment. I curse you in the name of all my ancestors. You are not a man. It is not a man who raises his hand against a woman who has sixty years. I curse you. (108)

Sadly, Yaa Somu died a short time later, and the beatings continued as before. When she eventually came of age, Mensisi married and moved to the city of Kumasi with her husband. But every time she conceived, as a consequence of the curse, Kwaku Ananse fell ill; and every time his daughter returned to the village, for whatever reason, the cycle of abuse resumed, causing her to suffer multiple miscarriages over the years. One day, a strange boy emerged from the forest and made his way to Kwaku Ananse's hut. According to Oduro, the local "medicine man" (69), this was a sign that the curse had entered its final phase. The three boys that Mensisi had miscarried would return to the village, one after the other, "in the order that they were meant to be born" (148). They would serve as helpers to their mother, and it was foretold that they would die exactly a year after she died. But Mensisi also had a daughter, a girl who had survived, and she would be Kwaku Ananse's "real punishment" (170). For "as soon as the child reached the age of her mother's first conception," Kwaku Ananse would begin to grow younger, "los[ing] one year a day, and [on] the final day he would lose that which he hurt others with—his hardness, his bones" (170). All that would be left was a pile of human tissue, a small quivering thing, roughly the same size as a newborn child and the color of a "skinned adanko [or hare]" (8).

As mentioned above, this is a story with far-reaching consequences. Not only does it represent a shift from literary to "oral" discourse, along with everything that signifies, but it also forces the novel itself to deviate from its anticipated generic trajectory. In the classic work of detective fiction, we are usually offered a range of possible solutions to a mystery. On the one hand, as Tzvetan Todorov writes, "there are several easy solutions, initially tempting but turning out, one after another, to be false," while on the other hand, "there is an entirely improbable solution disclosed only at the end and turning out to be the only right one." If the latter solution is "so inaccessible as to 'defy reason,'" however, we may be forced to "accept the existence of the supernatural rather than . . . rest with the absence of any explanation at all" (*Fantastic* 49). In Poe's "The Murders in the Rue Morgue" (1841), for instance, as the material evidence accumulates, all the obvious (and plausible) solutions are progressively eliminated, until we are left to consider the possibility that Madame and Mademoiselle L'Espanaye may have been killed by some "praeternatural" entity (257). "I wish to impress upon your understanding," Dupin says, "the *very extraordinary*—the almost praeternatural character of [the] agility which could have accomplished [such a crime]" (260). But in the end, of course, the culprit turns out to be a "large, tawny *Ourang-Outang of the Bornese*

*species*" (265); and with this revelation, the natural order of things is restored. As Todorov observes, the classic murder mystery "approaches the fantastic, but it is also the *contrary of the fantastic*: in fantastic texts, we tend to prefer the supernatural explanation; the detective story, once it is over, leaves no doubt as to the absence of supernatural events" (*Fantastic* 49–50; emphasis added).<sup>13</sup> In other words, to use Barthes's terminology, as long as the central hermeneutic sequence in a work of detective fiction remains unresolved, there is always the possibility of a supernatural solution to the mystery.<sup>14</sup> Yet when this hermeneutic sequence does finally achieve closure, the "specter" of the supernatural is emphatically banished from the narrative. Such a conclusion, Barthes argues, "implies a return to order, for . . . disorder is supplementary, it is what is forever added on without solving anything, without finishing anything; order is complementary, it completes, fills up, saturates, and dismisses everything that risks adding on: truth is what completes, what closes" (*S/Z* 76).

In *Tail of the Blue Bird*, however, the solution that we are offered is neither "rational" nor definitive. It defies these generic imperatives by locating the solution in the realm of the supernatural; and in doing so, it refuses to provide the kind of closure, the full and final predication of meaning, that we ordinarily associate with detective fiction. Whereas the solution in Poe's story "completes, fills up, [and] saturates" the discourse, so that no other explanation seems possible, the solution in *Tail of the Blue Bird* inevitably leaves things hanging. Rather than reestablishing the natural order of things, it creates further ontological instability; and rather than bringing the novel's central hermeneutic sequence to a close, it generates more uncertainties, more mysteries. Did Kofi Atta really die in this way? Did the miscarried boys really return to the village? Was the story even about Kofi Atta in the first place? Was it so or was it not so? These are all questions that Opanyin Poku refuses to answer. When pressed by Kayo, he simply replies, "I am not the one to tell you what is true. I am [only] telling you a story. On this earth, we have to choose the story we tell, because it affects us—it affects how we live" (Parkes 151). Like the Marquise de Rochefide in Balzac's "Sarrasine" (1830), then, Opanyin remains pensive, unforthcoming.<sup>15</sup> He refuses to divulge everything he knows, preferring to take refuge in an oblique (possibly displaced) story about another cocoa farmer in another village—a village "like this [one] but with more trees" (98). And like the Marquise, he could also be seen as emblematic of the narrative itself, which, even as it concludes, seems to be holding some "ultimate meaning" in reserve, "one it does not express but whose place it keeps free and signifying" (Barthes, *S/Z* 216). Frustrated by this lack of candor, Kayo finally demands to know the truth, one way or the other. But Opanyin Poku merely smiles and, resting his hand on Kayo's, asks for patience. "It is not the right time" (152), he says—thereby ensuring that, on this particular occasion, what concludes will neither complete nor close.

#### IV

Realism is primarily concerned with the material world, with *things*, and as a consequence, it tends to privilege the visual. As Peter Brooks argues, sight is believed to be "the most objective and impartial of our senses." Thus, "any honest accounting for the real . . . needs to call upon visual inspection and inventory. It needs to give a sense of the thereness of the physical world, as in a still-life painting"

(*Realist Vision* 16). In *Tail of the Blue Bird*, Kayo's microscopic analysis of the crime scene, using his 3D imaging and his blue merge technology, represents the point at which the aesthetic principles of literary realism and the investigative procedures of forensic science converge in a single act of sustained scrutiny. But when this visual analysis of the material world fails to yield anything of real significance, our hero is obliged to look elsewhere for textual (and evidential) meaning. He begins to explore other ontological spheres, spheres that lie beyond the plane of the visible, and, in the process, causes the novel itself to deviate from its generic trajectory. If this is a work of realism, then it is a realism that has developed the preternatural ability to "[see] around the corner of its own declared aesthetics" (Brooks, *Realist Vision* 16). It still focuses on the material world, on "things" such as blue feathers and distant xylophones; but as we have noted, these objects serve as indices of the esoteric—directing our attention beyond the opaque parameters of the forensic gaze. In *The Melodramatic Imagination*, Brooks identifies a similar tendency in the work of Balzac, whose "realist" discourse also manages to transcend the world of appearances. "If we consider the prevalence of hidden relationships and masked personages and occult powers in Balzac," he writes,

we find that they derive from a sense that the novelist's true subject is hidden and masked. The site of his drama, the ontology of his true subject, is not easily established: the narrative must push toward it, the pressure of the prose must uncover it. We might say that the center of interest and the scene of the underlying drama reside within what we could call the "moral occult," the domain of operative spiritual values which is both indicated within and masked by the surface of reality. (5)

The example that Brooks provides is taken from the first chapter of Balzac's 1831 novel *The Wild Ass's Skin*. In this opening scene, as he enters a gambling house to play roulette, Raphael de Valentin is obliged to surrender his hat—a fairly routine occurrence that immediately acquires deeper layers of (conjectural) meaning. Is this a "parable from the Gospel or a providential warning?" the narrator wonders. Is it "a way of concluding an infernal pact with you by exacting a sort of pledge?" Might it not "be devised to force you to show due respect to those who are to win your money?" Does it allow the police to learn your name, "if you have written it on the [hat's] lining?" Or is it a way of "tak[ing] the measure of your skull" in order to compile "illuminating statistics on the cranial capacity of gamblers" (Balzac 21)? Here, as elsewhere in the novel, Balzac is subjecting an ordinary transaction to such intense hermeneutical pressure that it eventually divulges a more profound spiritual and moral significance—one that is usually concealed beneath the surface of everyday life. In Balzac, that is to say, "[t]hings cease to be merely themselves, gestures cease to be merely tokens of social intercourse whose meaning is assigned by a social code; they become the vehicles of metaphors whose tenor suggests another kind of reality" (Brooks, *Melodramatic Imagination* 9).<sup>16</sup>

From an African perspective, this conjunction of the secular and the sacred, the material and the spiritual, could be described as "animistic"—demonstrating, as it does, a belief that the phenomenal world (even the world of gambling houses and roulette) is animated by an underlying spiritual force. As we have seen, a similar animistic impulse can be identified in *Tail of the Blue Bird*, where ordinary

objects are “endowed with a spiritual life both simultaneous and coterminous with their natural properties” (Garuba, “Explorations” 267).<sup>17</sup> This observation brings us back to our earlier discussion of space and the influence that geography can have on literary narratives. If you remember, Franco Moretti believes that “each space determines, or at least encourages, its own kind of story” (Atlas 70). And this “place-bound” quality (Moretti uses the German term *ortgebunden*) is also a defining characteristic of animism, which attributes spiritual qualities to specific topographical features—a particular mountain range, say, or a row of tattered palm trees, or even a single stone retrieved from a riverbed.<sup>18</sup> So when Kayo and Garba leave the main highway and enter the village, on the very first day of their investigation, they are entering another epistemological sphere or “territory,” where the conceptual resources associated with an animistic oral culture predominate. As I have argued, this rise in orality also influences the novel at the level of discourse and genre, making it far more receptive to “oral testimony” and the forces of the esoteric. But above all, perhaps, this influence can be felt in the novel’s resistance to closure, its refusal to provide stable or definitive meaning. As long as the supernatural is regarded as a possible solution to the mystery, in other words, as long as an explanation of this kind remains viable, *Tail of the Blue Bird* will continue to replicate the semiotic and ontological instability of “traditional” oral discourse.<sup>19</sup>

In the novel’s final pages, we are offered two different solutions to the mystery—one grounded in scientific rationality, the other relying on an “indigenous resource-base” (Quayson, *Strategic Transformations* 65). The first of these two solutions is described in the CSI-style report that Kayo dutifully delivers to his employers. The report tells a complicated story involving “a group of five men from Côte d’Ivoire [who] had come looking for Mr Kofi Barima Atta some weeks prior to the discovery of the remains, and had exhibited threatening behaviour” (Parkes 162). Apparently, the cocoa farmer had physically assaulted one of their female relatives, and the men were seeking vengeance. Although he went into hiding for several days, Kofi Atta was eventually located and murdered by the Ivoirians, who left their victim’s lung behind, in a pool of his urine, as a grim memento. “This hypothesis,” Kayo concludes, “is consistent with the laboratory findings and the splatter pattern of the urine” (162). It is pretty clear that these events did not actually transpire; but the report does gesture toward the type of novel that *Tail of the Blue Bird* might have been if not for its setting—if not for the fact that it was obliged to occupy these precise geographical coordinates. The second solution, the supernatural one, is obviously more plausible, but plausible in a rather implausible way, and the narrative itself refuses to verify Opanyin Poku’s tale. So where does that leave us as readers? Like Kayo, we are obliged to choose our own solution to the mystery, the one we find least implausible. (“I am not the one to tell you what is true,” our intradiegetic narrator says. “I am [only] telling you a story” [151].) However, like Kayo, we are ultimately encouraged to accept the hunter’s supernatural explanation, even if it cannot be verified by empirical evidence. And as a consequence, like Kayo too, we must learn to see the world from a different perspective, one that moves beyond (or rises above) the visible surface of everyday reality.

At the beginning of this essay, I argued that we tend to see things differently depending on where we are. In a capital city, the values associated with literacy

and scientific rationality are typically privileged, while in the provinces we are more likely to encounter their opposites (as the gravitational pull of the urban center diminishes). Yet it is also vital to acknowledge the considerable degree of interpenetration and exchange that takes place *between* these different spheres. In our global age, it is no longer possible to divide space into dichotomous, self-contained territories. There will always be a “to and fro” that complicates any attempt to establish such hermetic enclaves.<sup>20</sup> In *Tail of the Blue Bird*, it is Kayo and Garba’s journey into the hinterland that reveals the existence of these different geocultural spheres; yet, in making this journey, they also create a “corridor” between the two spaces. Or to put it another way, by leaving Accra, they simultaneously delineate *and* rupture the boundary separating the capital from the provinces, establishing a clear binary structure within the novel only to complicate it with the very same denotative gesture. And of course this is precisely what the novel itself does too. By bringing Kayo and his partner to this remote village, it isn’t simply directing our attention to another “way of life” or inviting us to contemplate the various differences between the periphery and the center. In fact, as Moretti writes of the modern European novel, *Tail of the Blue Bird* has a far more ambitious objective: “to be [a] bridge between the old and the new, forging a symbolic compromise *between the indifferent world of modern knowledge, and the enchanted topography of magic story-telling.*” As with all compromises, “the success of the attempt is inseparable from a certain ambiguity”; but this ambiguity is not without literary value, as it allows a “new kind of story” to emerge, a story of “the world in between.” The resulting narrative is “not quite neutral (no story ever is), but [it is] more complicated, more indeterminate” (Moretti, *Atlas* 72–73). And I would like to conclude with an example of the kind of “symbolic compromise” that Parkes’s novel establishes—thus synthesizing the “*indifferent world of modern knowledge*” and the “*enchanted topography of magic story-telling.*”

It is the eve of Kayo’s departure from the village, and he and Opanyin Poku are reflecting on the narrative we have just read. They are sitting side by side on a palm tree that had been felled by lightning several years before. Opanyin Poku has resumed his narratorial duties, and he is discussing the curse that eventually killed this “other” cocoa farmer by the name of Kwaku Ananse. Some of the details of the story had been prophesied by the local “medicine man,” while others were left to the contingencies of fate. But “we have to accept that the ancestors had a plan,” Opanyin says. And what really matters is “that when Kwaku Ananse was burned (you were there), it smelled exactly like the medicine man said it would—sweet, like justice” (Parkes 170). It is only fitting that this should be the novel’s last sentence, for this is the point at which the various “spheres” that we have been discussing finally converge. At the narratological level, we are privy to an episode of discursive rupture, or metalepsis, whereby a character from the intradiegetic story (Kwaku Ananse) comes to occupy the same narrative plane as our diegetic protagonist (“you were there,” the hunter says to Kayo). Moreover, it is important to remember that Kwaku Ananse is a mythological figure who plays a central role in Ashanti oral culture, and so this episode of metalepsis also serves to combine two different discourse-types (i.e., the oral and the literary), two different epistemologies (the sacred and the secular), and two different ontological spheres (the supernatural and the real). The novel’s final sentence creates another kind of slippage as well, provoking a lateral shift from the syntagmatic level of



the narrative to the paradigmatic. Barthes, you may recall, uses the term “indice” to describe a narrative unit whose true significance can only be understood at another, “higher” level of meaning. If we are to recognize “what an indicial notation ‘is for,’” he argues, we must move to a “higher [paradigmatic] level . . . for only there is the indice clarified” (“Introduction” 264). In this particular case, that means moving from the literal to the figurative, from the vehicle of the metaphor (the “sweet” odour of the smoke) to its tenor (justice). Only by doing so are we able to identify, and fully understand, the additional layer of moral significance that this ritual generates. But there is another, even higher level of indicial meaning to be found here too; and as the novel concludes, we are reminded one last time of its existence. I am referring, of course, to the level of the esoteric, and the notion that the material world, even when it takes the form of a crime scene, may be animated by something else—something that lies beyond the plane of the visible, beyond the limits of scientific knowledge, and beyond the representational capacities of language itself.

## NOTES

1. As you may have surmised, Moretti is referring here to Walter Scott’s *Waverly* (1814), a novel that offered “nineteenth-century Europe a *veritable phenomenology of the [internal] border*” (*Atlas* 35).

2. Before proceeding any further, I would like to explain in greater detail the critical methodology I will be employing in this essay. In particular, I think it is important to justify my use of non-African theoretical sources and generic categories (such as realism or the fantastic) in order to analyze a work of African literature. My reason for doing so is really quite simple. Although *Tail of the Blue Bird* demonstrates the strong influence of Ashanti oral culture, it also situates itself very clearly within the tradition of the European novel. As F. Abiola Irele notes, African literature is a “comprehensive field that embraces several conventions of imaginative expression and brings into view different traditions of literary valuation”; and “while the postulate of a universal, undifferentiated experience of literature does not appear to be tenable, it is nonetheless useful, if only from a theoretical and methodological perspective, to examine the lines of convergence that relate various literary traditions to one another despite the differences of language, conventions, and historical development” (xvii). In my view, then, it is precisely the syncretic nature of a novel such as *Tail of the Blue Bird* that encourages us to approach it from various different perspectives—employing an equally syncretic combination of critical and theoretical sources. If theory is “an instance of bricolage,” as Olakunle George writes, “our best course is to draw on as many theories as the novels we [study] accommodate, anticipate, or dialogize” (“African Novels” 33). And that is exactly what I have sought to do in the following pages. Rather than confining myself to a single critical perspective, I have allowed *Tail of the Blue Bird* to delineate the parameters of its own analysis, parameters that turned out to be as capacious and inclusive as the novel itself. For more on the “global” nature of contemporary African literature and culture, see Mbembe 9; Garuba, “Critical Reception” 254–60; and Quayson, “Modern African Literary History” 145–49.

3. With reference to Balzac, in particular, Peter Brooks writes that nineteenth-century literary realism is “nothing if not urban: it is most characteristically about the city in some important way.” And it is the “movement from country to city that might be said to trigger the realist impulse: the impulse, and the need, to describe, to account for, to perform a kind of immediate phenomenology of one’s new surroundings” (*Realist Vision* 131). Although the realist novel typically demonstrates such strong centripetal



tendencies, I would like to suggest that Parkes's narrative traces a reverse trajectory, traveling from the city to the provinces, and, in so doing, undergoes a corresponding generic transformation.

4. For examples of writers whose work can be situated at the "oral-literate interface" (George, "Oral-Literate" 15), see D. O. Fagunwa, Amos Tutuola, Ayi Kwei Armah, Kojo Laing, Ngūgi wa Thiong'o, and Ben Okri, among many others.

5. The oral/literary ratio within these spheres will obviously vary from place to place; and there will also be a considerable degree of "leakage" between the categories themselves. This is the kind of mobility that Karin Barber has described as "entextualization," which "may involve detaching stretches of discourse in order to freeze them: but . . . often involves setting stretches of entextualized discourse in motion, actively redeploying and 'quoting' them in such a way as to highlight the fluidity of performance" (23). As Quayson argues, however, entextualization is "not limited exclusively to the relay between orality and writing, but . . . takes place regularly across various citational networks that may have an oral standpoint but may also readily have been transposed from a written source that has itself been dissolved into the resources of orality before being restored back to the ambiguous place of writing" ("Modern African Literary History" 141).

6. In this regard, *Tail of the Blue Bird* could be situated within the tradition of the provincial novel, a subgenre that was particularly popular in England during the latter half of the nineteenth century. "The characteristics of [a provincial] setting," Ian Duncan writes, "are that it is *distinctive*, differentiated from the metropolis or from other regions within the nation, and that it is at the same time *familiar*, a more or less spacious version of what Raymond Williams . . . has called the 'knowable community.'" In such narratives, Duncan notes, the province "will always be set, tacitly or not, against the larger horizon of the nation, to which it occupies a critical relation" (321–22).

7. "For someone who feels ill," Moretti argues in *Signs Taken for Wonders*, "the doctor's diagnosis will always be spectacular, especially if reassuring. [Sherlock] Holmes is just that: the great *doctor* of the late Victorians, who convinces them that society is still a great *organism*: a unitary and knowable body" (145).

8. Edgar Allan Poe's "The Murders in the Rue Morgue," which is generally acknowledged to be the first modern detective story, was published in 1841 (and followed shortly thereafter by "The Mystery of Marie Rogêt" [1842] and "The Purloined Letter" [1844]).

9. This name is obviously intended to evoke the *anansesem*, or "spider stories," which occupy a central place in Ashanti oral culture. Kwaku Ananse, the protagonist of these stories, is a trickster figure, a shape-shifting spider who is able to move freely between different ontological spheres.

10. One may be reminded here of the formulaic phrase "It was so, and it was not so," which many traditional Arabic storytellers use to introduce their narratives.

11. It was Ferdinand de Saussure, of course, who first argued that linguistic terms interact with one another on two different planes, the syntagmatic and the paradigmatic. In the former case, we have a linear and irreversible "chain" of language, in which each "term acquires its value only because it stands in opposition to everything that precedes or follows it," while in the latter case, these terms acquire an "associative" value, following a lateral trajectory rather than a sequential one: "For instance, the French word *enseignement* ['teaching'] will unconsciously call to mind a host of other words (*enseigner* 'teach,' *renseigner* 'acquaint,' etc.; or *armement* 'armament,' *changement* 'amendment,' etc.; or *éducation* 'education,' *apprentissage* 'apprenticeship,' etc.," (Saussure 123).

12. For more on the complicated, "prismatic" relationship between African literature and oral discourse, see Quayson, *Strategic Transformations* 16.

13. In S. S. Van Dine's "Twenty Rules for Writing Detective Stories," first published in *The American Magazine* in 1928, rule number 8 specifies that "[t]he problem of the crime must be solved by strictly naturalistic means," while rule number 14 states that "[t]he method of murder, and the means of detecting it, must be rational and scientific" (190–91). These two rules were later condensed into a single imperative by Todorov: "Everything must be explained rationally; the fantastic is not admitted" ("Typology" 49).

14. According to Barthes, every literary narrative is structured around a series of textual enigmas, and it is the narrative's hermeneutic code that is ultimately responsible for their formulation and resolution. Under the category of the hermeneutic, he includes "the various (formal) terms by which an enigma can be distinguished, suggested, formulated, held in suspense, and finally disclosed" (*S/Z* 19).

15. In the final sentence of Balzac's story, we are told, quite simply, that "the Marquise remained pensive" (qtd. in Barthes *S/Z* 254).

16. Similarly, in "The Purloined Letter," Dupin declares that the "material world . . . abounds with very strict analogies to the immaterial" (340).

17. In a 2003 essay on the subject, Harry Garuba employs the term "animist realism" to describe "the representational and linguistic practices underwritten by an animist conception of the world" ("Explorations" 274). "The animist urge to reification may have been religious in origin," he argues, "but the social and cultural meanings that become attached to the objects often break off from the purely religious and acquire an existence of their own as part of the general process of signification in society. . . . The 'locking' of spirit within matter or the merger of the material and the metaphorical, which animist logic entails, then appears to be reproduced in the cultural practices of the society" (267).

18. "Perhaps the single most important characteristic of animist thought," Garuba writes, "is its almost total refusal to countenance unlocalized, unembodied, unphysicalized gods and spirits" ("Explorations" 267).

19. "By its very nature," according to Irele, "orality implies . . . a built-in principle of instability. But what may seem, from the point of view of literate culture, a disabling inconvenience has been transformed into a virtue in African orality, for although the textual elements cannot be disregarded in the forms of our imaginative expression, they are more often experienced as the outline of a verbal structure and as reference points for the development of ideas and images, as suggestive signposts in the narrative or prosodic movement of a discourse that is still in the future" (34).

20. Quayson makes a similar point with reference to Ben Okri's early short stories. "In several of [these] stories," he writes, "there is a dual movement between the city and the forest or village, and the trajectory of the characters' movement traces an increasing entry into the world of the esoteric whose strongest expression seems to lie outside the city. This trajectory is not to suggest a simple dichotomy between city and forest and real and esoteric, a dichotomy which was dominant in [Amos] Tutuola's mode of storytelling. Instead, there is always the sense that the reality of the city itself is interwoven with esoteric significance" ("Magical Realism" 172). For more on this subject, with specific reference to literary representations of Accra, see Quayson, *Oxford Street* 213–38.

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