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“Animist Eco-logics: The Speculative Ecosystems of Amos Tutuola”

While Amos Tutuola is arguably one of the preeminent figures in the world of African literature in the twentieth century, his reception within the continent broadly and Nigeria specifically, as well as in the channels of world literary circulation, has been varied. Initially heavily criticized within Nigeria for his first two novels, *The Palm-wine Drinkard* (1952) and *My Life in the Bush of Ghosts* (1958), both of which will feature in this chapter,¹ Tutuola was celebrated by many contemporaneous Western critics, such as Dylan Thomas, for writing “grisly and bewitching” stories.² While many of his Nigerian critics saw Tutuola’s project as corruptive of West African folkloric storytelling repertoires,³ translating children’s cautionary tales into novelistic form (and for Western consumption), it was perhaps Tutuola’s unabashed revelry in the fantastical and the speculative that most disturbed the rationalist trends dominating the cultural nationalisms of the mid-century decolonizing moment in West Africa and elsewhere. The fraught reception of Tutuola’s initial works represents a larger contestation over the cultural and ideological thresholds between colonial and postcolonial modernity, inaugurating negotiations over which political and poetical

¹ *The Palm-wine Drinkard*, (London: Faber & Faber, 2014/1952); *My Life in the Bush of Ghosts* (London: Faber & Faber, 1954).

² Dylan Thomas, “Blithe Spirits” in *The Observer*, July 6, 1952.

³ See here, Ato Quayson, *Strategic Transformations in Nigerian Writing: Orality & History in the Work of Rev. Samuel Johnson, Amos Tutuola, Wole Soyinka & Ben Okri*, (James Currey, 1997).

registers were best suited to imagine and thus write a post-colonial future. Much of the literature of the African continent and indeed the decolonizing world more generally pointed towards a mode of 'rational' literary expression in various formations of realism. But for Tutuola, I will argue, decoloniality as a cultural, aesthetic imaginary (set apart from the more chronologically defined political machinations of historical decolonization) is expressed through speculative modes of writing. Speculative imaginaries built upon and located within representational strategies for articulating the ecosystemic, ecological connections of local environments.

In the last ten to fifteen years, Tutuola has had something of a revival, one which has refigured his work as a prescient articulation of a postcolonial politics of language in his use of English. Some of these exciting returns to Tutuola have showed us how already in the early 1950's this author was setting pace for a literature that was at once "transformative" of regional storytelling practices, expansively worldly in its imaginary, experimental in its modernist aesthetics, and even speculative in prefiguring some of the more recent turns to African science fiction. This chapter will argue that in opposition to both the kind of colonial space-making we have discussed in earlier chapters, but also pushing against the post-enlightenment rationalism of postcolonial cultural nationalism, Tutuola's writing is invested in the creation of life-worlds that are decolonial 'elsewheres' (a term I will continue to use) to both the colonial and post-colonial orderings of the world. Tutuola's speculative ecosystems, as I am calling them here, help us

to understand how many African authors, as discussed in earlier chapters, were thinking with ecological understandings of place in order to imagine decolonial outsides, and hence futures of the postcolonial space.

I will argue below that what makes Tutuola such an important figure, especially for charting an expansive genealogy of both ecologically thinking, as well as speculative imaginaries in African literature has to do with his conceptualization of the environments in which he situates his stories. The bush life-worlds of Tutuola's writings are ecologies of movement; they are produced by and are produced through various kinds of movements, transmissions, and disseminations. In both *My Life* and *The Palm-wine Drinkard*, each protagonist's narrative function is linked inextricably to the plot through their incessant movement through the bush. Both of the novels are fundamentally narratives which follow the itinerant, perambulations of protagonist figures on their journeys through the life-worlds of the bush; the bush of ghosts in *My Life in the Bush of Ghosts* and the bush of the dead in *The Palm-wine Drinkard*. Of course this will remind us of the itineracies across southern Africa upon which both Mofolo's and Plaatje's novels discussed in earlier chapters were based; especially the peripatetic nature of both Mofolo's novel as well as himself as a researcher/author. For Tutuola, perhaps a quest narrative is not so original or surprising, even within the context of Nigerian and Yoruban writing and storytelling, where forest fictions and hunter tales constitute a significant part of the literary/folkloric imaginary and thus provide the narrative scaffolding for

much of the structure of the tradition out of which Tutuola writes. But placed in the context of “colonial space-making” practices, Tutuola’s protagonists chart movements across otherwise bounded and delineated colonial life-worlds; itself perhaps another literary instance of this transgressive motif which we have seen earlier in both Mofolo and Plaatje. Moreover, these figures are written into environments which are not conceived according to Western, rationalist, scientific ecological principles of operation and connection. Characters are teleported across the plane of the bush spiritual world through various kinds of creatures which are themselves enmeshments of biological, spiritual, technological and folkloric material. If colonial rationality worked to impose cartographical grids of organized space, space divested from ecosystemic connectivity, then Tutuola works to reinvest relationality back into the life-worlds of his novels. Nor are these spaces seemingly written as specifically anti-colonial or polemical to the colonial world of Nigeria in the 1950’s. The bush for Tutuola is a truly decolonial space, outside and elsewhere to the space-making practices of the colonial imaginary where relations are prescribed through, circumscribed by, and indeed inscribed upon the land itself. The bush worlds of both *My Life* and *Palm-wine* are ecosystems of flow and exchange, both biologically, but also ideologically. For Tutuola, literary world-making outside the hegemonic rationalism and realism defining the cultural nationalism of his moment means imaging ecosystems which are themselves assemblages of biological materials, mechanical technologies of various

kinds, as well as the figurations and narrative technologies of mythology/mythopoiesis.

Critical responses to Tutuola's work do tend to revolve around the landscape, those bush life-worlds which form the setting for his two most popular works, *The Palm-wine Drinkard* and *My Life in the Bush of Ghosts*. These landscapes become essential to understanding everything from the author's idiosyncratic writerly style, to where his political and creative projects sit vis-à-vis the political independence movements of his time. Whether in Laura Murphy's reading of the metaphors of the transatlantic slave trade imbued into the landscape of a text such as *My Life*, or Matthew Omelsky's highly compelling case for Tutuola's "creaturely modernism" which places the writer at the fore of a literary negotiation of African modernity in global terms, to Nedine Moonsamy's recent and provocative recasting of *My Life* as a "pioneering work of African science fiction", in each of these orientations to Tutuola the ways in which the environments of the texts are imagined by the author is key to deciphering Tutuola's literary project.⁴ While Cajetan Iheka's work in *Naturalizing Africa* is perhaps the most explicit ecocritical reading of Tutuola, this tends to focus more on readings of "multispecies presence" in the work.⁵ Iheka rightly notes that it is Tutuola's imagining of the bush life-worlds of his novels that works

⁴ See, for instance: Laura T. Murphy, *Metaphor and the Slave Trade in West African Literature*, (Athens: Ohio University Press), 2012; Matthew Omelsky, "The Creaturely Modernism of Amos Tutuola", *Cultural Critique*, 99, 2018, pp 66-96; Nedine Moonsamy, "Faster than Before: Science Fiction in Amos Tutuola's *The Palm-Wine Drinkard*" in *Literary Afrofuturism in the Twenty-First Century*, eds. Isiah Lavender III, Lisa Yaszek (The Ohio State University Press, 2020).

⁵ Cajetan N. Iheka, *Naturalizing Africa: Ecological Violence, Agency, and Postcolonial Resistance in African Literature*, (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 2020).

against “colonialist modernity”, however I want to place Tutuola in the context of longer genealogies of African writers who think with local ecologies – as well as with forms for representing them – as a kind of representational practice of decolonial resistance, or what I have been calling the ecological imaginary in African literatures.

Thinking with the previous chapters I want to position Tutuola as part of a long genealogy of writing that works with an ecological imaginary. This genealogy, as has been previously noted, is informed by Harry Garuba’s sense of animism, so that these works display a kind of ‘animist eco-logics’ that work both at the level of plot, as is seen with Thomas Mofolo’s *Chaka* and Sol Plaatje’s *Mhudi*, but as we will see in this chapter, these animist ecological worlds are also spaces in which Tutuola is able to write in both historiographical as well as speculative modes.⁶ It is the speculative mode that links Tutuola to later generations of African writers who have been more conspicuously labeled as part of an African science/speculative fictional turn. In this way, Tutuola provides something of a bridge both in the structuring of this book, but he also provides a link in the history of twentieth century African writing and the genealogy I am tracing between the anticolonial ecological imaginaries of earlier writers from the continent and more recent and explicitly environmentalist authors of the last decade or so.

⁶ Harry Garuba, “Explorations in Animist Materialism: Notes on Reading/Writing African Literature, Culture, and Society”, *Public Culture*, 15:2, 2003.

In providing this link, Tutuola bridges some of the earlier versions of anti-colonial, ecological resistance seen in the literary projects of Mofolo and Plaatje in previous chapters. But Tutuola also prefigures the entanglement between the ecological imaginaries and the speculative/science fictional modes for representing them seen in writers such as Nnedi Okorafor. In this chapter, I will focus on three key figures in Tutuola's Bush life-worlds, from both *The Palm-wine Drinkard* as well as in *My Life*. The first is the scene near the end of *My Life*, which features the much reviewed "television-handed ghostess." This figure has often served as a critical lynchpin for deciphering and decoding the novel itself as well as Tutuola's unique style of imagination and writing. This character, perhaps more than any other of Tutuola's creations is a figuration of the myriad literary generic and conceptual vectors that come together in Tutuola's fiction. The television-handed ghostess is simultaneously part of a kind of eco-poiesis, or a mythmaking/writing, which works in an additive way to the Yoruba cosmological pantheon (in a similar way to Okorafor, who will also be discussed for her ecologically informed mythopoiesis), but does so by routing a very particular (and local) instance of ecological knowledge through a denizen of this bush world who in turn clearly points towards science fictional and speculative entanglements. In this way, Tutuola creates speculative ecosystems, which are biotechnical life-worlds composed of entanglements between 'bios' and 'technos', and which are represented through the mythos of speculative modes of writing. The television handed ghostess provides a mediated message by broadcasting ecological

knowledge which in turn aides in delivering the protagonist from further capture and enslavement in the Bush of ghosts. The ghostess also works narratively as a kind of portal or mediator, as well as a form of media; literally the television is a kind of media disseminating eco-missives from the living world to beyond the pale into the bush of the dead.

Laura Murphy argues that, "By setting traditional oral narratives in an overtly historical framing narrative drawn from images of the slave trade, Tutuola historicizes and politicizes what might seem to be a series of generalized apolitical and ahistorical warnings to children."⁷ I want to push Murphy's argument further to suggest that it is the bush itself, as a figuration of historical traumas and present dangers, that allows for this transition from folkloric warning to historical and speculative parable. In other words, Tutuola writes the bush life-world through a style of animist realism which captures both the historicity of the framing narrative of slavery, while also allowing for the animist "re-enchantment" of the space as an ecological mode driving the oral narrative. Thinking with Wole Soyinka's description of African thought as a process of "philosophical accommodation", Harry Garuba writes that "an animist unconscious... operates through a process that involves...a continual re-enchantment of the world."⁸ Garuba goes on to say that "animist logic...destabilizes the hierarchy of science over magic and the secularist narrative of modernity by

⁷ Murphy, *Metaphor and the Slave Trade in West African Literature*, 56.

⁸ Garuba, "Explorations in Animist Materialism", 265.

reabsorbing historical time into the matrices of myth and magic.”⁹ This reabsorption describes Tutuola’s rendering of folkloric storytelling forms as mediums able to portray both the animist cosmologies of local space as well as their ecosystemic specificity. But importantly, Tutuola does so in a mode that is also able to capture the historicity of the place. An urgent representational politics given the cultural debates around decolonization of Tutuola’s moment. As Ato Quayson writes, in Tutuola we can see the “desire to express marginal forms of the folkloric intuition in an idiom that would bring it to the center of cultural debates.”¹⁰ The bush world that forms the ecology of Tutuola’s literary imagination functions as a space in which the author can produce not only the kind of hybrid forms that Quayson describes, but it also allows him a style that could be “attentive to a myriad of species”, as Iheka suggests.¹¹ Iheka argues further that *The Palm-wine Drinkard’s* “anticolonial resistance resides precisely in naturalizing Africa, by yoking together the human and nonhuman worlds threatened by colonialist, rational ideology.”¹² Tutuola’s investment in an animist realist mode to recapture the ecological life-worlds of Nigeria (and of Nigerian lore) at this moment of political independence, goes against the hegemonic politics and poetics of decolonization, but it is precisely in his eschewing rationalist realism that Tutuola articulates an ecological mode of decolonial writing that will link him to earlier generations of African writers, while also prefiguring later generations.

⁹ Ibid., 270.

¹⁰ Quayson, *Strategic Transformations*, 62.

¹¹ Iheka, *Naturalizing Africa*, 27.

¹² Ibid.

Bringing together these lines of Tutuolan criticism has a few implications. The first is historical, and makes the point that Tutuola's bush life-worlds are transhistorical literary spaces, holding long historical timelines that range from (at least) the nineteenth century, including histories of the transatlantic slave trade significant to West Africa, and right up to Tutuola's time in the moment of decolonization. Equally this suggests that for Tutuola, a historical reckoning of slavery was pertinent to the cultural discourses around independence specifically and for decolonization as a cultural mode more generally. Moreover, in bringing together human and nonhuman worlds - or an "aesthetics of proximity" as a mode of anticolonial cultural production, as Iheka has suggested - Tutuola actually draws on a much longer tradition in African writing, seen in the examples of Thomas Mofolo and Sol Plaatje demonstrated in earlier chapters. The point, again, is that the decolonial imperative of ecological imaginaries in African literature can sometimes be seen to be tied directly to the politics of independence, but often they have preceded formal decolonization, and, as is the case with Tutuola, they form part of a long (if often overlooked) history of African writing that has mapped the cultural dimensions of decolonization through an ecological imagining of colonized (and decolonizing) spaces.

Reading Tutuola as such offers us the possibility of seeing other modalities of what decolonial thinking and writing might look like, especially when it is routed through the animist and ecological orientations we have been

charting thus far in this book. Ato Quayson and others, such as Bernth Lindfors, have shown how much of the Nigerian critical reception of Tutuola was driven by a reaction to what was perceived as Tutuola's regressive mode of appropriation of the Yoruba imaginary. Expropriating the cautionary folktale often told to children, Tutuola invests in these folkloric diegetic life-worlds as places capable of holding transformative quest narratives, which are at once deeply historical as well as allegorical. No longer relief settings for children's tales, Tutuola's landscapes hold the possibility of routing historical critiques as well as decolonial futures through the depiction of local environments. Tutuola's novels, much to the dismay of many of his early Nigerian critics, were appreciated by adults, and moreover were being "read by Western adults who saw in his writing important messages for the adult world."¹³ The problem, as Quayson writes was that "This was obnoxious and intolerable for an African intelligentsia poised for self-rule and eager to express their capacity for rationalist engagement with the problems of the real world."¹⁴ Situating Tutuola within a world historical moment of decolonization disrupts, or at least exposes certain genealogies of decolonial thought, those linked to discourses of rationalism and the attendant modes of cultural production such as realism. But such a response to Tutuola's work by his Nigerian peers also points towards a hegemonic consolidation of decolonial thought which coheres precisely around this mid-century moment of independence, and persists right up to some of our current understanding of decolonizing and

¹³ Quayson, *Strategic*, 61.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*

postcolonial cultures. In other words, reading Tutuola suggests another genealogy of decoloniality, one that is less interested in the histrionics of the moment of political independence, and more in the reinvestments in creative modes that might map decolonial 'outsides' to the persistent colonial imaginaries of colonized spaces.

Simon Gikandi's argument for an "early postcolonial style" suggests that the problem of early reception to Tutuola is representative of the aesthetic and ideological imperatives placed on writing of the mid-century moment of decolonization. "Postcolonial writing", Gikandi tells us, develops as an aesthetic mode of resistance to the "seemingly perverted idea of the colonial space as fetishized representation."¹⁵ Furthermore, this ideological project carried with it certain formal correlates, namely that: "a literature of decolonization was pegged on the desire to rehabilitate the real as the horizon of the expectation of the colonized. Realism seemed to occupy a privileged position in the politics and poetics of cultural nationalism because it promised narratives that would produce the objective world of the colonized and represent their spaces as autonomous and self-engendered."¹⁶ These ideological imperatives however, were of course not necessarily uniform across the colonial and postcolonial continent of Africa, varying widely depending on educational and institutional influences and structures, and producing the effect that in many cases, especially in a writer such as

¹⁵ Simon Gikandi, "Realism, Romance, and the Problem of African Literary History", *Modern Language Quarterly*, 73:3, 2012.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 316-7.

Tutuola, realism (in its European formal trappings) was not the aesthetic mode through which to re-present and indeed re-enchant the colonized world. “The challenge of early African writers”, Gikandi tells us “was to produce a literature with an African referent in a language that deconstructed the mimetic contract as one of the operating signatures of colonial governmentality.”¹⁷ This challenge, which often resulted in a tremendous amount of formal experimentation and generic hybridity, where seemingly incongruous modes such as realism and romance were corralled together into what Gikandi calls an “early postcolonial style.”¹⁸ Working across established folkloric traditions, alongside science fictional and speculative aesthetic modes, all based in an animist cosmological ordering of the world that displaces ‘rationalistic’ realism, certainly marks Tutuola’s project as an instance of Gikandi’s early postcolonial style. In this sense, perhaps Tutuola’s literary project has less to do with the national (cultural) politics of decolonization and more to do with routing a global history of colonial enslavements through the local ecologies of the bush worlds he imagines to hold both longer and more globally expansive narratives, which exceed the nation as well as its (national) moment of decolonization.

Tutuola’s Television-handed Ghostess: Broadcasting Ecological

Animism

Possibly the strangest of Tutuola’s ghostly creatures of the bush world, the “Television-handed Ghostess” is certainly one of the more fascinating and

¹⁷ Ibid., 311.

¹⁸ Ibid., 324.

commented upon. Prominent critic of African literatures, Bernth Lindfors, offers something of an insular reading of the television-handed ghostess, arguing unequivocally that this figure is an innately African character drawn from “entirely within a traditional African metaphysical system”, and thus reads the ghostess as written under the sign of a kind of cultural (racial) authenticity, and Tutuola more generally as a “parochial” writer.¹⁹ Matthew Omelsky’s reading of the “creaturely modernism” of Tutuola pushes against Lindfors, stressing the globality of Tutuola’s literary imagination. Focusing on the prosthetic and the mutational in the composition of the ghostess, Omelsky argues that Tutuola’s unique style of modernism is reflective of global circulation and flows of commodities, which mark bodies as a kind of creaturely “enfleshments of capital”, to use Katherine McKittrick’s phrase. For Nedine Moonsamy, the television-handed ghostess reflects Tutuola’s speculative/science fictional modes for refiguring the tropological casts of characters that make up Nigerian lore. Bringing together animist world-making imaginaries with speculative/science fictional modes of representation, Tutuola, Moonsamy argues, is better (re)read as articulating an African science fictional aesthetic.

In this section, I look at the two very short episodic chapters related to the ghostess for how Tutuola articulates a characteristic entanglement between ‘bios’, ‘technos’, and ‘mythos’. Of course, by these I mean bios in the sense of the biological world, technos as technologies created or manufactured to

¹⁹ Bernth Lindfors, “Amos Tutuola’s Television-handed Ghostess”, *Ariel*, 2:1, 1971, 70.

'work' with or upon things, and mythos as the rendering of ontological realities through narrative or storytelling modes of representation.

Moradewun Adejunmobi tells us that, "Occasionally...the technologies themselves are speculative as in Tutuola's well-known figure of the television-handed ghostess. The decision to include any kind of technoscience in these fantasy worlds is itself noteworthy, and is a subject awaiting further study, especially in relation to the practice of the speculation and the function of magical resources in the same narratives."²⁰

I too am reading Tutuola as writing a kind of African science fiction, and I am following others who have pointed this out, Moonsamy perhaps most recently.²¹ I certainly agree with Adejunmobi's reading of Tutuola's recombinatory literary aesthetic, though I would stress that the life-worlds of Tutuola are more a combination of the (tecno-)science fictional and the animist realist, than of pure fantasy. There is a routing of the magical and technocentric through a very real and historical (historicized) landscape. Most importantly for this reading, and what I argue has been largely overlooked in earlier criticism of Tutuola generally and his television-handed ghostess specifically is an ecocritical reading of the scene. Read ecocritically, Tutuola's ghostess is both an ecosystemic conduit for the passage

²⁰ Moradewun Adejunmobi, "Introduction: African Science Fiction", *Cambridge Journal of Postcolonial Literary Inquiry*, 3:3, 2016, 267.

²¹ See Nedine Moonsamy, "Faster than Before: Science Fiction in Amos Tutuola's *The Palm-Wine Drinkard*" in *Literary Afrofuturism in the Twenty-First Century* ed. Lisa Yaszek, Athens, Ohio: The Ohio State University Press, 2020. Moonsamy makes clear some of what she sees are "salient differences between Afrofuturism and African SF," writing that "While Afrofuturist artist often use SF tropes to explore narratives of displacement and diasporic nomadism, Tutuola's text possesses a certain ease of amalgamation - and even ownership - of the otherworldly, thus reinforcing the sense that *The Palm-Wine Drinkard* is always already at home within the genre of SF" ("Faster, 217).

of ecological knowledge between the world of the living and the spiritual plane of the forest, but her presence in the larger bush of ghosts - as a form of technology which circulates ecological information through an entangled set of material forms (sorcery, televisions, etc) - allows for a reading of the bush as what I am calling a 'speculative ecosystem'.

The television-handed ghostess is also a conduit for knowledge, passed from the protagonist's mother to himself. It is a knowledge which finally sets him on his way to returning from the bush of ghosts and back to his own town on the human spiritual plane. But more specifically it is an ecological knowledge, an ability to heal this particular ghost through the conveyance of knowledge about a certain plant that would cure the sores of the ghostess. In this way, perhaps more than any other of Tutuola's pantheon of bush creatures, the television-handed ghostess represents the confluence of animist forces making up the speculative ecosystem of the bush, and in doing so marks her as Tutuola's most science fictional character. The science fictional in Tutuola's work, the mode used to think about the modernity of the folkloric tale, is linked at this moment to the ecological. It is also a (rare) moment where the protagonist displays agency, rather than being passively subject to the forces and figures of the bush world. But perhaps most importantly, it is also an instance of what Iheka calls "distributed agency", though he does not include this scene specifically in his formulation of that concept in Tutuola's work.²² But it is this particular

²² Iheka, *Naturalizing Africa*, 44.

moment, perhaps more than any other, where we see multiple actants (human and other-than-human) at work in the movement of the story, and hence in the shaping of its form. This is a particular instance of Tutuola's literary genius. In allowing for the story to be molded and moved by a whole cast of agential forces (human and other-than-human), he has not only displaced the centrality of the human subject in the construction of the narrative, but I argue that his speculative ecosystems contribute to the changed and overtly ecological form his writing takes.

I want to begin with the mother of the protagonist and her local ecological knowledge of the salving powers of a particular plant, the kind of knowledge that is usually the result of long, historical and cultural sedimentation. In this scene, however, this knowledge is instantly mediated and made simultaneous through the broadcasting technologies of the television. It seems that in this animist "re-enchantment of the world" there is both an acceleration of knowledge about the local environment, as well as a speedy dissemination of that knowledge through the bio-spiritual technologies of the television-handed ghostess.²³ Of course, these bio-spiritual technologies themselves are part of this distribution of agency, broadcasting the ecological message from the protagonist's mother to him across the spiritual plane separating the bush of ghosts from the world of the living. Add to this the chemical agencies of the plant itself, its salving properties, which work to rescue the protagonist. The healing chemical properties of the plant will

²³ Garuba, "Explorations", 265.

save the protagonist, not only from a grotesque task set by the television-handed ghostess to “be licking the sore with [his] tongue” that she might be healed, but also this rescue is from further entrapment and servitude in the bush.²⁴ As Murphy has argued, the protagonist’s life in the bush of ghosts is a traumatic re-living and re-playing of the initial moment of capture and enslavement, and functions as a narrative and psychological working through of the trauma of slavery in the West African psyche. It is quite crucial to see that at this moment, where the protagonist is able to break this repetitive cycle of trauma, that this happens through the figurations of multiple kinds of speculative bodies and technologies (as their entanglements in the body of the ghost) but also through the mediation and dissemination through these technologies of healing ecological knowledges. Further enslavement and capture are circumvented through recourse to speculative ecological technologies. Science fiction and the ecological for Tutuola as this moment are narrative portals out of the traumatic landscapes of enslaving subjugation otherwise dominating the bush setting of the novel.

Tutuola’s speculative ecosystems are likewise made up of characteristic tropes, many of which have to do with movement or conveyance, of both bodies and information. In his bush life-worlds Tutuola takes great care in imagining how things are synaptically connected across the landscapes of the bush. The television-handed ghostess, like other figures such as the

²⁴ Tutuola, *My Life*, 156; further citations in parenthesis.

under review - please do not circulate.

“Future-Sign Tree”, which will be discussed below, function in the world of the bush as portals, leading from one part of the forest to another, or in this case out of the bush of ghosts completely and back to the plane of the living. After the protagonist uses the medicinal knowledge conveyed through the television-hands of the ghostess to heal her sores she once again shows him her hand. He relates that “Then she opened her palm as usual, she told me to look at it, but to my surprise, I simply found myself under the fruit tree which is near my home town (the Future-Sign)” (160). It seems that not only does the television-handed ghostess telegraph information from the world of the living to the bush of ghosts, but she functions as a teleporter of bodies between these two existential planes as well, returning the protagonist to the world of living by simply looking into her appendages. The ghostess is truly able to broadcast in this sense, conveying signals and knowledge, but also persons through the ecological channels of the bush life-world and beyond.

It is important to look more closely at what kind of knowledge specifically is transmitted through the television hands of the ghostess. When we are first introduced to this ghostess we learn that she has actually been searching for our protagonist. After walking into his hut and commencing to sob quite loudly, she tells the protagonist that she was “born over two hundred years ago with sores on my head and all over my body” (156). She has spent her existence visiting doctors in search of a remedy for the sores only to be told by every sorcerer she visits that “there is an earthly person who had been

lost in this Bush of Ghosts” and that if he were to lick the sores with his tongue for a period of ten years she would indeed be cured and subsequently show him the way out of the Bush of Ghosts and back to his home town. Lindfors tells us that “The licking of repulsive, oozing sores is a common motif in African folk-tales” and relates the ghostess’s grotesquerie to earlier characters in D O Fagunwa’s repertoire.²⁵ After initially presenting the protagonist with this repulsive conundrum, the ghostess displays her television hands so that he might see his family and be tempted to agree to her request. When the ghostess tell him to “look at her palm and opened it nearly to touch my face, it was exactly as a television, I saw my town, mother, brother and all my playmates, then she was asking me frequently - ‘Do you agree to be licking the sore...yes or no?’” (157). But as the protagonist cannot initially decide to undertake this task, he asks to look at the television hands a second time, and proceeds to watch his mother employ medicinal salves from a local plant to heal the sores on a small child that had been brought to her for care. The protagonist tells us that his “mother knows many kinds of leaves which can heal any sore”, and so she walks to a part of the bush near her town, harvests “a kind of plant”, and boils the leaves to make a salve (159). As the protagonist watches this broadcast through the television hands, he instantly “knew the kind of leaf and also heard the direction how to use it”. He quickly exits his hut, finds that this particular plant is abundant nearby and proceeds to use it treat the sores of the television-handed ghostess “according to the direction that my

²⁵ Lindfors, “Amos Tutuola’s Television-handed Ghostess”, 73, n.1.

mother told the woman who brought the baby to her” (159). After a week’s time, the ghostess is healed of her long affliction and eventually teleports the protagonist out of the bush of ghosts and back to the very place where he entered it, under the “Future-sign Tree”.

Crucial to this episode, and indeed the entire plot arc of Tutuola’s novel, is the way in which ecological knowledge - as well as its transmission - is foregrounded as both material and narrative salve, that both heals the ghostess, but in doing so leads directly to the protagonist’s structural breaking of the repetitive story of capture, escape, and recapture in the bush of ghosts. In this episode Tutuola subtly weaves different forms of technologies through the ecologies of both the living world and the bush world. It is obvious how the televisions of the ghostess can be read as technological mediators and broadcasters of signs and signals, messages and information, across this bush ecosystem. But the ecological, chemical knowledge of the protagonist’s mother is also a form of technology in itself, a series of techniques and applications in the service of healing. Moreover, Tutuola’s own handling of tropes central to Nigerian lore, is itself a form of manipulation and curation of narrative technologies in order to imagine this speculative ecosystem where knowledge is routed through many different forms of transmission. We have already heard about the tropological significance of sores and their treatment through licking in Nigerian folklore, but in this episode Tutuola transforms the trope through a technique of local ecological knowledge. This technique itself is diffused

across the threshold of worlds through the technology of the television, and its cyborg-like appendage to the ghostess's hands.

The quest narrative as trope is also employed as a technique by Tutuola here, but in a crucially altered way. Quayson explains in detail that part of Tutuola's "transformation" of Nigerian narrative culture is that for Tutuola the hero is not inherently heroic, but rather, *produced* as hero through the story itself. Tutuola's version of "Heroism," Quayson writes, "derives from the processes of adventure and the confrontation of challenges to which the hero is exposed."²⁶ Quayson argues that after experimenting with the more traditional form of the hero figure in an earlier work, what Tutuola does with his later and more popularized novels, *The Palm-wine Drinkard* and *My Life in the Bush of Ghosts*, is to modulate the hero form, especially the tropological connections between hero and hunter laid down in Yoruba language fiction by D O Fagunwa, Tutuola's literary predecessor. Rather than creating heroes who are innately heroic, and therefore more archetypal characters, the protagonist of Tutuola's later novels display a "heroism [that] derives from the processes of adventure and the confrontation of challenges."²⁷ For the young character of *My Life*, Quayson argues, "he acquires heroic stature in a process of maturation akin to the structure of an initiation rite."²⁸ While retaining elements of the "heroic potential in the mythopoeic structure of folktales" what is important I argue is how Tutuola imbues both the quest itself, as well as the environments and landscapes

²⁶ Quayson, *Strategic Transformations*, 52.

²⁷ *Ibid.*

²⁸ *Ibid.*

through which the journey takes place, with the structural potentials to act as reliefs upon which the protagonist can *become* heroic.²⁹

The structural, ideological and literary formal transformation that Quayson rightly marks in the work of Tutuola, are authorized precisely by the author's imagination of an ecological world in which the subjectivity of characters (especially the protagonists) is derived from, indeed produced by, their engagements with particular aspects/figures within the bush ecosystem in which they journey. The Drinkard does not transform from the lazy, socially-unproductive figure of the novel's opening to the agential character who can affect prosperity for his people by its end without his negotiations and relations formed with the bush environments through which he has passed. Nor can the young protagonist of *My Life* transition from passive victim of the brutalities of all manner of creature in the Bush, to the fully formed agent of his own escape from its enslaving logics without an apprehension (in both senses) of the particular eco-logics of the Bush world. The later protagonist, especially, affects his personal transformation as well as his ontological transition, from the Bush world back to the world of the living, through a direct engagement with forms of ecological knowledge; forms that are interestingly mediated through the creaturely, animist, and mechanical technologies which also form the web of ecosystemic relations of the Bush world. I want to argue similarly that Tutuola works on and with folkloric tropes *as* technologies to be tuned and

²⁹ Ibid.

transformed, and more specifically that this cultivation itself involves the transmission of certain forms of technology. In the case of the television-handed ghostess, as well as other episodes I will look at below, the transformational technology is an ecological one. The eco-logical part of Tutuola's writerly technique seems to lie in his ability to imagine an entangled ecosystem³⁰ where biological agents are confluent with technological ones. These entanglements in Tutuola's life-worlds serve to generate not only new characters (and new *kinds* of characters: the hero as produced by story, the pantheon of unique ghostly figures), but also to generate new forms of storytelling. In Tutuola, the biological-technological confluence produces mythos. A kind of mythopoeic production of worlds, and one routed through an ecological imaginary.

It is also interesting here to look at the compositional character of the ghostess herself. Tutuola's description of her marks her as clearly both humanoid in figure, as well as biological in her corporeal makeup. Despite her incredibly short stature, the ghostess is 'shaped' mostly like a human: "she was not more than three feet high;" she has arms, a head, etc. But beyond her human-like appearance she is also certainly made of biological matter, evidenced by the sores covering her body and the "uncountable maggots" which feed off of them (155). This seems to be true of many of the

³⁰ As Katherine McKittrick argues storying is always a kind of entanglement of spaces of knowing and ways of knowing those spaces. McKittrick writes that, "black people have always used interdisciplinary methodologies to explain, explore, and story the world" (*Dear Science*, 4).

denizens of the bush of ghosts: they are both ghostly, or “creaturely,” but the television-handed ghostess is mutant, or compositional, in the sense that her body is also written under the sign of ‘technos,’ of technological material, manufactured and uncomplicatedly integrated into her otherwise organic, corporeal whole. She is *both* bios and technos, and because of her ghostly and folkloric tropological nature, she is also ‘mythos’. I want to make clear that I read the television hands as literal here. While Lindfors argues that the television is a metaphor, or “analogue”, for “divination practices in West Africa”, I argue that drawing such a strict and frankly anthropologizing boundary around cultural production denies the vectors of circulation and globalizing effect of capital and commodification.³¹ I would ask, does it really matter if Tutuola had indeed never “seen a television set in operation”³²? Certainly, many writers have never actually seen an extra-terrestrial alien either, but that does not preclude them from utilizing aliens in the speculative economies of their literary imaginaries. Moreover, it seems too neat a line to pit the technological against the spiritual or the divinatory, especially if we take Garuba’s point seriously, that “animist logic subverts this binarism and destabilizes the hierarchy of science over magic and the secularist narrative of modernity by reabsorbing historical time into the matrices of myth and magic.”³³ It is more productive therefore to read the corporeal amalgamation of the television-handed ghostess as representing a literary example of Garuba’s “animist materialism,” where

³¹ Lindfors, “Amos Tutuola’s Television-handed Ghostess,” 75.

³² *Ibid.*, 76.

³³ Garuba, “Explorations,” 270.

“‘magical elements of thought’ are not displaced but, on the contrary, continually assimilate new developments in science, technology, and the organization of the world within a basically “magical” worldview.”³⁴ The television in the hand of the ghostess is just as “African” as any other part of the bush landscape. But more importantly, the animist register through which Tutuola makes sense of phenomenological life in the bush, what Wole Soyinka calls, “philosophical accommodation” is also an ecological mode, which renders visible the ecosystemic relations connecting this bush environment. It matters less whether the TV is innate to any particular geographical or cultural coordinates, and more that Tutuola is able to render the television as a technology of the bush world, one which is also a literary technology, serving in the text as a device which mediates between life-worlds, as conduit of ecological information, even as tele-portal fissure delivering the protagonist out of the bush itself.

The Future-Sign Tree: Portals, Parabolas and the ‘Shape’ of Tutuola’s Bush of Ghosts

This idea of portals or passage ways as environmental structures characteristic of the bush world is central to Tutuola’s ecological imaginary. These portals function as another of Tutuola’s bush world technologies, giving a textual shape as well as an ideological arc to his works. The bush worlds of Tutuola’s novels are traversed through conduits figured as part of a larger animist literary ecosystem that form the settings of his novels. In

³⁴ Ibid., 267.

addition to the television-handed ghostess, another seminal example of these ecological conduit-mediators is the “Future-Sign Tree”, the specific tree which signals both the entrance into and exit out of the bush of ghost by the protagonist. The tree marks Tutuola’s bush world of *My Life* as an ecosystem which allows him to think about how signs and signals are refracted through the landscape, and opens up the text to a broad ecocritical reading about the nature of representation in Tutuola’s work. Like the television-handed ghostess, The Future-Sign Tree also functions as a conduit, as both entrance and exit from the long journey of the protagonist, and in doing so offers a kind of shape or form to the narrative itself. The arc created by this narrative portal allows for a reading of the journey as mapping a kind of parabola, a journeying out and return, to the same plane (in this case the same tree) but somewhere further along in the development of the story.

Though we never learn exactly what kind of tree this is, it is under this “kind of African fruit tree” where the young protagonist and his brother shelter themselves from the slave raid happening in their village (4). While looking for shelter under the tree, “two ripe fruits fell down” rather fortuitously, and the brother puts them into his pocket. As the two begin to realize they will surely not escape these approaching raiders, the older brother gives the young protagonist both fruits before sacrificing himself and running “as fast as he could along this road towards the enemies” (5). The protagonist puts these fruits into his pocket “and then got back to that fruit tree” and as the

guns of the raid continue, in fear, he enters “into the bush under this fruit tree” (Ibid.). At this point the narration shifts from first person narration which has been the exclusive voice in the telling of the story thus far, to the reported speech of the protagonist quoted by himself; this might be the only time where the protagonist has quotation marks around his own speech in the text. In this moment of a strange shift in narrative voice, he relates that ““This fruit tree was a ‘SIGN’ for me and it was on that day I called it - THE ‘FUTURE-SIGN’.””³⁵ (5). The tree figures as a landmark, marking the entrance of the protagonist into the bush of ghosts, but in this same moment the tree also telegraphs its potential structural role as exit from the same bush. Acting as both entrance and exit from the bush of ghosts, the Future-Sign Tree also functions as a portal, connecting the living world of the protagonist’s town with spiritual plane of the ghost world. Indeed, by the end of the story, the protagonist is teleported by the television-handed ghostess directly back to the tree of the Future-Sign. The tree functions both materially and metaphorically in two different - and opposing - ways, serving as both entrance and exit, but also symbolizing both capture and release. The Future-Sign Tree - as much as the voice used to story it - is both proleptic and past-tense, gesturing towards a possible future outcome, but also from a future place of telling. The tree encodes the bush ecosystem as a form of “Black Atlantic temporality,” which Kodwo Eshun writes is

³⁵ The doubling of the quotation marks around this section, as well as the strange placement of the first period, are both intentional as I have tried to capture the use of quotation marks and punctuation exactly as they are within Tutuola’s text.

“proleptic as much as...retrospective.”³⁶ Sign and the potentially signified are destabilized, while the temporality of signification is also compressed into this arboreal landmark. The technologies of Tutuola’s speculative ecosystems mean that not only are signs and signals refracted through the ecosystemic networks of the bush, but also that messages and meanings are telegraphed through features of the landscape, which in turn produce a certain form of unstable narrative temporality.

Tutuola’s quest narrative is routed through a landscape which must be apprehended through a kind of eco-reading of the bush itself. As Murphy writes, “The narrator of *My Life* is not the singular hero or hunter of the oral tradition; he is the child of the bildungsroman...” and, as such, the narrative “transforms a collection of Yoruba tales into a journey of psychological and moral development.”³⁷ Indeed, this is both true, but also complicated by the idea that much of the protagonist’s development has to do with an ability to decipher the “SIGNS” of his surrounding environment in the bush; something he already shows agency in even at this earlier stage recognizing the futurity of the tree and foretelling how it will shape his journey, and thus naming it the “*Future-Sign Tree*”. Beginning and ending at the same landmark suggests that the narrative of the bush world is ‘circular’ in shape, closing where it opened. But if we consider the epithet which also opens and closes the novel as another literary technology, then perhaps we see how

³⁶ Kodwo Eshun, “Further Considerations on Afrofuturism” *CR: The Centennial Review*, 3:2, 2003, 289.

³⁷ Murphy, *Metaphor*, 55.

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Tutuola expands the moral and ideological arch that the story maps across the bush landscape to look more parabolic. Both as literary form as well as one which serves a metaphor for a narrative about a quest, or journey, Tutuola's Future-sign telegraphs its structure through a parable. Moreover, in calling it the Future-Sign Tree, Tutuola telegraphs the shape the narrative will take. Though we only come to realize this retrospectively, at the end when the protagonist exits the bush via the same arboreal conduit. But I suggest that this telegraphing itself makes the tree a kind of technology in the narrative, a form of ecological communication, which carries with it certain formal consequences for how the narrative takes shape as both parable and parabolic (i.e. in both senses of genre and shape). Tutuola's speculative ecosystems carry with them literary formal and structural consequence, changing the shape and scope of the narrative in response to the ecological relations (between bios/technos, mythological and speculative modes, etc.) he attempts to convey.

Not only has the narrator changed in his perambulations down this metaphorical and literary road, as well as through the bush, but so too has the ideological landscape shifted and expanded in consequence. The novel opens with an explanation of the consequences of "hatred" which we are meant to read within the local dynamics of the protagonist's immediate intrafamily dramas. However, we come to register a shift from the local and present to a historical and global reading of the bush as a metonymic parabolic site for thinking through histories of the Atlantic world which

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continue - even into Tutuola's time - to be shaped by transatlantic slavery. By writing this story of a haunted bush lifeworld at this moment in Nigerian history where the tectonics of anticolonial resistance and cultural nationalisms were gaining traction, part of what Tutuola gestures towards here, and by the charting and traversing of his parabolic landscapes, is an argument that posits the centrality of the history of enslavement for thinking through the cultural and aesthetic implications of decolonization. The "hatred" of the epithet, at least in the early moments of the novel, refers to the intrafamilial jealousies of co-wives in a polygamous household, especially within a patriarchal political economy which privileges boy children. The other wives of the narrator's father are jealous of and plot against the narrator and his brother as the only boy children that have been borne to any of the three wives of the father. It is because of this jealousy the young narrator tells us, that "at this stage I quite understood the meaning of 'bad' because of hatred" (1). But it is also as an effect of these jealousies that the young protagonist and his brother are lost into the bush of ghosts.

By the end of the novel, when the protagonist comes back to the Future-Sign Tree, we realize that the tree functions as both a portal, but also a portent, telegraphing a narrative and ecological landmark for his eventual escape from the bush. We also see how the narrator has changed in relation to this space, not only growing up over the course of 24 years spent wandering this forest, but has gained in knowledge and agential force. Moreover, through

the inclusion of another portal of sorts, the epithet which opens and closes the novel, “This is what hatred did” we can read the narrative itself as having shifted to a broader moral and ideological plane. “This” here refers both metaphorically and materially to forms of enslavement; as we’ve come to read the novel as an allegorical mapping of the landscapes of capture, we understand that “hatred” has resulted in all kinds of spiritual alienation and physical violence on a world historical scale. Tutuola’s novel, in this way, is also a parable of sorts, employing the allegorical and the animist realism of his bush life-worlds to map a journey through an environment which is continually in flux in terms of meaning and the grounds upon which that meaning is made. The narrative is *about* travel in an explicit sense, but the Future-Sign Tree suggests that the narrative also travels, that by the end it has moved and possibly expanded from the bounded world of the young protagonist’s early family life, to the world-historical moment of slavery and the long colonial encounter, and pays particular attention to how these different scalar narrative relations can be read through the same ecological symbol in the figure of the Future-Sign Tree.

Much like earlier moments of engagement with bush ecosystems, the speculative entanglements of the White Tree cannot be wholly be read as ecological salves to the violences of the greater bush world, but rather as a space saturated with power. Nor is it always clear in Tutuola’s worlds who is exercising power. Of course, in the scene with the protagonist in *My Life* his savvy apprehension of his mother’s knowledge through the technologically

routed ecosystem of the bush is a moment of agency and character development. However, with the Drinkard and his wife in the Tree, we find an ecosystem which is a compositional assemblage of plant, human, and technology, but that is also acting on, abstracting, extracting, and capturing the power of those who enter into its world. In a curious reversal of the typical trajectories of animist ontologies we find that the human is the object acted upon, or animated as it were. The ecosystem itself is an assemblage of forces into which the human is invested. If animism is a distribution of agency, a diffusion, or “translation” of power, then these investments are acts, themselves requiring agency. Tutuola’s protagonists seem to be acted upon, living in a world of diffuse agential realism to be sure, but a world in which the act of (re-)enchantment is not always performed by the human, but rather, and usually, upon the human body. Achille Mbembe, arguing that humans were never content being just humans, describes animism as humans’ “search of a supplement to their humanhood.”³⁸ Rather than ontological, personhood “was always a matter of composition and of assemblage of a multiplicity of vital beings. To convert one specific object into something else and to capture the force inherent in every single matter and being constituted the ultimate form of power and agency.”³⁹ In Tutuola’s world of the bush, and especially in the White Tree, it seems that the human itself can be acted up, invested in and extracted from; one more object in an animist ecosystem of diffuse agencies and exercising powers. Rerouting the flow of animist energies through dynamic circuits of power between human,

³⁸ Achille Mbembe, *Necropolitics*, (Durham/London: Duke UP, 2019) 106.

³⁹ *Ibid.*

animal, plant, and spirit, Tutuola imagines the bush lifeworld to be an environment which displaces the centrality of the human subject. Humans in the bush world are figured as both actants in animist economies, but also as object acted upon.

But more importantly, Tutuola's animist imagination appears to be a way to render the ecosystemic complexity and connectivity through a speculative animist register. Tutuola's speculative ecosystems are ways to understand ecological relations with and between environments. Animism itself, as a mode, of translation or rendering meaning becomes a technique in which Tutuola imagines ecologically. In this way, Tutuola constructs a literary project which is at once askance to the realist modes of his historical moment, marked by the rationalisms of anti-colonial, cultural nationalism otherwise characteristic of much of the African literary field, while also prefiguring the speculative turn within African literature which has continued to unfold in the mainstream over the last decade or so. Tutuola finds an ecological register which at once finds resonance with an earlier generation of African writers who precede by nearly half a century. Writers such as Mofolo and Plaatje who employ an ecological understanding of space as decolonial register for storying colonial and postcolonial places. Tutuola speculative ecosystems also allows for a genealogy of science fictional and speculative writing from the continent - and specifically one concerned with environmental representations - which spans at least half of

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the twentieth century and unfolds both in relation to, but also parallel with
the formal decolonization of the mid-century.