

*Beyond Empire and Nation:
Re-narrating Identity in B. Koko Laing's
"Woman of the Aeroplanes"*

FRANCIS NGABOH-SMART

NATION, CULTURE, AND history have been central terms in the definition of an African identity for such writers as Leopold Sedar Senghor, Ayi Kwei Armah and Ngugi wa Thiong'o. Senghor, for example, posits nation and culture as preconditions for a sense of identity; he argues that the nation, although a "deliberately willed construction," creates "a harmonious whole" (68). Early African literature, like nationalist rhetoric, thus dealt with issues of subjectivity or identity, emphasizing a desire for the past or a quest for origins.¹ No doubt, most people would today argue that, in organizing its intervention around the nostalgia for the past, early African literature inscribed the issue of authenticity at the center of literary production.

However, it is important to note that the will to plot lives and to reconstruct genealogies was more than an aesthetic choice for early African writers. Rather, it was a reaction to modernism, especially its inhuman manifestation in colonialism. Europe realized its presence in Africa through a massive displacement of the African's cultural memory, leaving the latter with no alternative but to evoke or assert his or her past and subjectivity. Unfortunately, the nationalist writer could only do so by appropriating the style and ideological presuppositions of modernism: its teleological outlook, as well as its totalizing and binary discourse. Themes such as alienation, anomie, existential anguish, and a collective sense of history, which featured heavily in theoretical pronouncements of Ngugi and in the works of Armah and Senghor, indicated the African writers' implication in the modernist problematic.

Today, however, following the collapse of many independent African nations, we are witnessing the unfolding of new novelistic forms whose disruptions of historical continuity underscore an ideological re-framing of the quest for the "authenticating genealogies" favoured by some early writers. Among practitioners of the new discourse, I would include Nuruddin Farah and Syl Cheney-Coker. Although they all engage in an intense questioning of the rhetoric of cultural homogeneity prevalent in nationalist aesthetics, they use vastly different techniques. In *Maps*, for example, Farah uses an imploded, almost enveloping narrative technique. Cheney-Coker, who depends heavily on the techniques of oral narrative, engages in a magical redeployment of traditional legends in *The Last Harmattan of Alusine Dunbar*. Most of these writers maintain an intertextual relationship with precursors such as Senghor and Ngugi. But whereas Senghor or Ngugi, who adhere to modernist aesthetics, assume that culture is a decipherable signifying code that the self can and ought to appropriate, this is not true of their successors, who are predominantly postmodernist in their aesthetic practices. This is not to say, however, that the new breed of African writers have uncritically adopted the fascination of so many Western postmodernists with empty signifiers. In fact, like their nationalist predecessors, the new writers remain interested in history and identity; the difference is that they treat these themes parodically rather than nostalgically. In addition, they seem to discard the uniqueness by which precursors such as Senghor sought to define the African, replacing it with an impure or plural identity. The result is writing that, by evoking diverse cultures, scrutinizes Africa's modern heritage. The work of the Ghanaian writer, B. Kojo Laing, belongs to this emerging consciousness in African fiction.

Laing is relatively new on the African literary scene, but his oeuvre, *Major Gentl and the Achimota Wars* (1992), a collection of poems entitled *Godhorse* (1989), and *Search Sweet Country* (1986), shows both an astounding outburst of talent and an attempt to rethink African identity discourse. Of all his works, *Woman of the Aeroplanes* (1988) could be deemed the most important, in that it extends the concerns of the other two novels

while intensifying the current debate on pluralism. *Woman* is a sustained reflection on both the notions and ideals inherent in concepts such as modernism, postmodernism, and nationalism, and their impact on African or postcolonial constructions of identity. Although Laing's schizophrenic narration makes it almost impossible to interpret and thematize *Woman*, the novel seems to disavow both the totalizing claims of modernism and the idyllic constructions of African society by radical nationalism. In contrast to both, it invokes what Lemuel A. Johnson would call a "genealogy of disconnections and connections" (112), meaning that it neither obliterates nor makes sacrosanct postcolonial history and subjectivity; rather, it shows their implication in other cultures.

A shift from the binary paradigm of earlier identity discourse inscribes itself in almost all the formal features of the text. At the level of genre, for instance, *Woman* is a collage of narrative modes: romance, adventure story, and historical fiction. This implosion of genre boundaries, it seems, presupposes Laing's departure not just from the nationalist quest for form or symmetry, but also from the constraints of valorizing the immemorial world of the ancestral past that precursors such as Armah underscored. Laing, in contrast, structures his novel according to the protocols of the adventure story. Although *Woman* thus recalls Armah's *Two Thousand Seasons*, the imagery, narrative method, plot and setting of Laing's novel seem to endorse, not the "primal" African values of Armah, but rather, an interconnected or hybrid identity.

Laing's endorsement of an interconnected or hybrid identity is evident in the novel's plot and setting. The text narrates events that alternately take place in Europe and Africa or in two communities: Tukwan, Ghana and Levensvale, Scotland. In this way, *Woman* attempts to link the two communities, which have much in common: both, for example, have severed their links with the larger societies of Kumasi and Clydesdale, respectively, and both want to create a wider scope for self-realization. Tukwan seeks to undo the strong bonds of family identity; Kwame Atta, Tukwan's erratic inventor, tables a motion for "the democratisation of family genetics," which he swears would

“reduce guilt . . . and . . . increase the space of individuality available to each person” (27). Similarly, Levensvale wants to replace the “corset” — insularity — with more openness. Both settlements are eager to twin their cities, and to achieve these ends, both encourage their citizens to travel and migrate.

The twinning of the two cities thus symbolizes Laing’s ideological position on the mutual cultural impingement of identities,² “a blast of freedom from freely-mixed bodies and worlds” (66). By broadening the novel’s geographical references, by allowing the self an opportunity to experience other values, Laing reformulates the postcolonial search for original values, while questioning the asymmetrical relation of power favoured by former empires. In this way, *Woman* endorses the mixing of “bodies and worlds,” or cultural hybridity, which, according to Bhabha, “entertains difference without an assumed or imposed hierarchy” (4).

Laing’s criticism of both imperial and postcolonial societies for emphasizing polarity as a means of self-legitimization should be understood in the context of the importance that both civilizations now attach to travel. In Laing’s novel, the ninety-nine houses that constitute Tukwan are freezing the city’s expansion and creating “a dam for history” (6). Tukwan can transcend its stagnation and avoid extinction only by means of travel: “to break the barrier of ninety-nine houses was a mortal act . . . the more change it made, the more mortal it became, the lighter its being grew” (31). For Levensvale, the act of traveling perpetuates the rejection of “all the categories of life and thought” initiated by David Mackie’s ancestor when the town became “invisible to the rest of the country” (70). The journey is thus Laing’s peculiar way of articulating regard for cultural intermingling.

Laing’s valorization of cultural interconnections can be criticized as another form of universalism, namely, the desire to unify humanity without respect for specific historical or cultural conditions. Although *Woman* lends itself to such an interpretation, it is more rewarding to consider the novel from the perspective of its broader concern with ontological issues. Laing is concerned with “what kinds of worlds are there [and]

what happens when different kinds of world are placed in confrontation, or when boundaries between worlds are violated" (McHale 10). In other words, *Woman* focuses neither on a simple-minded integration of African and Western values, nor on nationalists' concern with how Africans may have lost their way. Laing uses the motif of the journey to expose the desire of both former empires and former colonies to look inward. "The future," Laing insists, "should be the humanity of travel inner, travel outer" (18).

Laing uses symbolism to show that the journey is concerned with "modes of [co]-existence." Before the journey, "the long unbroken communal cloth for the elders was cut" (18), emphasizing the novel's resistance to a collective identity. Furthermore, Laing situates his two societies in "invisible" zones. Tukwan is "of doubtful existence to the rest of the country," Ghana (6). Levensvale, too, is "outside time" and is "finding its geography to rest in" (48). Thus, although the conference before the trip occurs in real "time and place," the use of both an erratic time scheme and problematic geographies undermines conventional invocations of what Michel de Certeau calls a "proper or distinct location" in the articulation of a sense of belonging (117). In *Woman*, then, the self creates a sense of belonging by oscillating between milieus, and by somehow replacing "place" with "space" or with the "transformation caused by successive contexts" (117). Rather than have each culture circumscribe its identity by withdrawing into a place it can wholly call its own, *Woman* presents identity as the experience of disparate consciousnesses.

Laing's concern with identity as a spatial consciousness is evident in the importance he attaches to geography in *Woman*. Within the context of African literature, such an emphasis could be described as a displacement of an earlier emphasis on temporality or history by a new emphasis on spatiality: the "juxtaposition . . . of the near and far, of the side-by-side, of the dispersed" (Foucault 22). Spatiality in *Woman* — and in post-colonial literature generally — does not make the work a floating object. Rather, by positioning the two civilizations "side-by-side," Laing "delineates sites which are irreducible to

one another and absolutely not superimposable on one another" (Foucault 23). Through such conceptions of space Laing is able to contemplate the possibility of local resistance, and show respect for his and others' space. *Woman* thus shows both how interconnected our human cultures or spaces are and what may be local to each space.

Other postcolonial writers, especially Wilson Harris³ and Edouard Glissant, share Laing's concern with spatial orientation. Glissant, who is obsessed with alternative modes of recreating postcolonial identity, has described two modes of Caribbean discourse on identity: *antillanité* and *poétique de la relation*. Adlai H. Murdoch defines these two alternatives as "Caribbeanness" and "cross-cultural poetics," respectively. Murdoch argues that Glissant favors cross-cultural poetics, with its implications of *métissage* and creolization. For Glissant and the Caribbean — as for Laing and Africa — it seems that, in Murdoch's words, "overcoming the problems of the role of the collective and the inhibitions of insularity" is key to solving the region's "social and cultural malaise," in that "diversity which is integral to the Caribbean heritage will mediate the achievement and renewal" (4, 5). A defensive cultural space, for so long the hallmark of negritudists, ceases to be the focus of such writers as Laing and Glissant.

In *Woman*, the airplane, like the journey, symbolizes the need for "diversity" and "renewal." Laing's assumption that the airplane can reconstitute a world without boundary or hierarchy recalls Gillian Beer's argument that, at the beginning of the twentieth century, when it was imperative to deal "with difficult moments of historical and national change," the airplane became a crucial symbol in representing a new vision of the world, a vision in which "narrative [was] no longer held within the determining contours of a landscape" (266). In *Picasso*, Beer writes, Stein reveals both "the beauty generated by the possibilities of flight" and "the formal reordering of the earth when seen from the aeroplane, a reordering which does away with centrality and very largely borders" (265). It is at such a figurative level that the airplane functions within the overarching journey motif in *Woman*. Again, we see Laing's

conceptual break with his literary precursors: unlike Armah's *Two Thousand Seasons*, for example, *Woman* presents existence as the disavowal of geographical limits, or as a "movement between two apparently opposed systematic cultural constructions" (Greenblatt 127).

As a metaphor, flight carries political meaning for the postcolonial world, even as it emphasizes the importance of intersecting geographies. The political meaning is underscored by the fact that the Tukwans initiate the journey to Levensvale; *Woman* thus inverts the usual pattern of colonial explorations of other cultures as, for example, in Conrad's *Heart of Darkness*. But unlike the so-called colonial voyages of discovery, the journey into the bowels of Europe is free from any desire to appropriate, judge, or displace European culture. Rather, *Woman* emphasizes the connections between Tukwan and Levensvale. Characters from Tukwan find their temperamental counterparts in Levensvale: Jack MacTaggart, the old bulldozer driver in Levensvale, has a professional affinity with Kaki, the traxcavator operator in Tukwan, and Alec Bogey, the meteorological man, like Appa, one of the pilots from Tukwan, has his "A Levels." Far from endorsing the "suspension of cultural judgment," to quote Greenblatt, the journey as described by Laing serves to negate any notion of a "divinely sanctioned" place (127). Laing is not so naive as to imply, however, that the visit of the Tukwans to Levensvale can eradicate centuries of mistrust and suspicion between the West and Africa. A few episodes illustrate Laing's political resistance to some of the assumptions inherent in the intermingling of cultures. In these passages, Laing meditates on cultural boundaries, their regimes of identity, and the modes of unsettling such boundaries.

In the scene that describes the arrival of the Tukwans in Levensvale, for example, Laing makes the point that the West still sees its land as a hallowed place. The Tukwans are accosted by immigration officers who tell them, "We have drawn a line across the valleys and the burns over which no one here is to cross except with authority" (62). It is evident that the relationship between the two cultures is still haunted by an anachronistic historical logic; a defensive Europe still seeks its "authority"

in the cohesiveness and sanctity of its place. The “blatant border” (62) is, then, a conceptual frame, which often demands that the other define itself, morally and otherwise, before being admitted into the family of “civilized” Europe. This discrimination occurs despite the Tukwans’ belief that it is possible, through travel, “to extend the territory of our humanity to include even those who deny us [our humanity]” (62). Lawyer Tay ridicules this neo-colonialism of border and definition, telling the officers, “you may have to redefine the nature of some of the living beings with us here sharp; our ducks can talk, our vulture may be the repository of a certain type of sacred soul . . . we come from an ancient civilization” (61). Despite himself, Tay exposes the racism inherent in the demand for definition. Thus even while the police officers are drawing what the novel pointedly describes as their “imaginary line,” “Pokua and Nana Bontox are already over it,” showing that “traveling on the traveling earth proved the world belonged to all” (62, 60).

In other passages, Europe emerges as the presumptuous, arrogant, and obstinate partner still bent on knowing and appropriating the African. These attitudes are evident in the episodes that described cross-cultural romantic relationships. Three of the Western men — Angus Mackie, the elder Mackie, and Alec Murray — fall in love with African women visitors. Angus Mackie is a drifter, a “wandering factotum,” roaming the glens in search of “meaning.” He seems to assume that he can find the meaning he seeks in an affair with Aba Yaa. Alec Murray, meanwhile, seeks Aba Yaa’s support in his recovery from alcoholism. In both of these instances, the Levensvale men, in their behaviour toward the Tukwan women, reenact the colonial appropriation of the African continent, which was cast in a rhetoric of domination that represented Africa as a virginal enclave ready for Western penetration.

Of all the sexual advances from European males, Murray’s best articulates an outdated colonial ideology that saw the African woman as a vehicle for re-inserting the alienated European into nature. Murray, we learn, “wanted to make this woman from the far, hot lands the focus of his future recovery; to be known not as the man who bared himself to the world, but

as the wide, wide man who bore the world" (78). For Murray, then, Aba Yaa is not a human being, but the embodiment of traits he perceives to be important for his sense of self-discovery. His mentality thus recalls ways in which earlier "European men," imperial explorers, used "female figures . . . [as] fetishes at the ambiguous points of contact" or "as mediating and threshold figures by means of which [they] oriented themselves in space, as agents of power and agents of knowledge" (McClintock 24). As such, if at this point in the novel the sexual advances of Angus, Murray, and Mackie are rejected, it has nothing to do with prudery or what the text humorously calls the "anurous renunciation" (78) of the women involved, but rather with Laing's disdain for the ideology of salvation in which Europe seems to couch its proposals. Any exchange of passions at this time, the novel seems to imply, will only perpetuate the asymmetrical relationship that the text seeks to transcend. Otherwise, the novel makes the mixing of the two worlds less problematic: the Tukwans easily "grow with [their] world" (67).

So, while some Tukwans remain in Levensvale, others accompany three of the Levensvale residents — Mackie, Jock, and Donald — back to Tukwan, to demonstrate "the new toughness of the world": "They take some of ours and we take some of theirs" (99). The real significance of the visit is its elaboration of Laing's cross-cultural politics. As in the Tukwans' visit to Europe, the people from Levensvale easily adjust to life in Tukwan. Donald, for example, melds into life in his new surrounding, and Tukwan co-opts Mackie onto the council of elders that is planning strategies against the imminent invasion from Kumasi. After the visit, Mackie is not only "determined to protect the gains of Tukwan and Levensvale to the death," but he now sees himself as "a changed man" who is "ready to broaden in all sorts of ways from food to rhythm" (131). Generally, the two cultures are committed to bringing their "different worlds . . . together" so that "identities, so different [may] become one" (156, 154).

Indeed, the two settlements seem almost to welcome the invading forces from Kumasi and Clydesdale. After the invasions, Tay reports that "things are changing. It looks as if mortal time

is returning again. Mr. K. is dead and they can't reincarnate him. The drunken Murray from Levensvale is also dead. No resurrection," Tay reports (161). Although one may see these changes as part of a shift from a mentality based on "gods and the ancestors" to a more secular vision, one should not be naïve about its implications. Change is presented as a "tragedy and a triumph," and in images of pain and agony:

What was the essence of giving cruel images for the transitional phase between the immortal and the mortal? Cruel: for a whole morning, any man who wanted to shave had to move his jaws up and down against a stationary blade; and women who were bathing had to rub themselves against soap on the bath floor. And try as they could people could not use their hands to eat; they had to put their mouths to the food direct, and this was for a whole day. (165)

The images imply that change is to be seen as a drama situated within the individual soul; as Laing insists, "the best way to break the old order, was to encourage these . . . little dramas" (165). The "little dramas" include, not just the pain of transition, but also numerous pregnancies and potential marriages. At the end of the novel, Aba Yaa and Angus Mackie are finally ready to marry; Pokua, who is two months pregnant, decides to marry de Babo. The allusions to marriage and pregnancy indicate that Laing views identity as both a mortal act and an individual choice. In addition, the metaphor of pregnancy suggests that identity remains always a potentiality.

Laing's perspective on identity becomes even more comprehensible when situated within the novel's broader narrative strategies. These include, for example, radical experimentation with narrative and history, an elaborate discussion of language, and a conscious foregrounding of artifice. Armah, in *Two Thousand Seasons*, uses Africa's racial memory to invoke time, history and identity. Laing, in contrast, rethinks the artistic representation of time, history, and identity by means of narrative disruptions of historical continuity which obscure the boundaries between origin, past, present, and future.

Early in the novel, Laing refers to times as "erratic" (39). Levensvale is plagued by the "dance of time and culture" (50). For both towns, the "years never remained in their proper slots,

and you could have a duck dancing with one foot in one year, and the other foot in another year . . . good morning could come from 1960, while good evening could come from 1965" (60). Even the lives of the characters partake in the interplay among past, present, and future. Appa, for instance, finds it difficult to locate the historical trajectory of his life: "What was I before my spirit was stolen into this town?" (19). Mackie and Margaret met "thirty years ago into the future," and Mackie lives in a world of illuminated mirrors with a "lantern to brighten any year necessary" (50). These passages reject the conventional assumption that time is linear and unchangeable. Reverting once more to his favorite Platonic metaphor for essence, which he used exhaustively in *Search*, Laing states that a "belief" in "precision" or "controlled" time is for "carpenters" (44). The novel thus describes time, not as a fixed value, but as mutable and virtual, to show that a combination of "free" and "controlled" time is "ultimately . . . the imprecise yet more intelligent thrust of the inner" (44).

In this treatment of time we see Laing's methodological and ideological shift from a precursor such as Armah, whose solution to the problem of colonialism is the retrieval of the African past: "The linking of those gone, ourselves here, those coming; our continuation, our flowing not along any meretricious channel but along our living way, the way . . . that remembrance that calls . . . far toward origins" (xiii). As Neil Lazarus comments, although by *Two Thousand Seasons* Armah moved slightly from the "messianic conception of postcolonialism" of the earlier works, the novel remains utopian, "manifesting a "racial essentialism," "oriented, still, toward a revolutionary vision of social collectivity" (221-222). Laing seems to be calling into question Armah's belief that Africans may return to the source, to a moment before plurality. Whereas most of the early African novelists, in their attempts to recreate historical ambiance, regarded time as unproblematic, *Woman's* description of time as "erratic" raises such central questions as these: If narrative is primarily recapitulation, how can it make claims to a faithful reproduction of the past? Who narrates and from which epoch? In contrast to earlier African novels, *Woman* does not attempt to recover lost

origins. In contrast to the characters in Armah's novels, Laing's characters do not feel that their life has been destroyed by the intrusion of the outside world; rather, they expand their trajectory of life, adjusting to the external intervention.

The most memorable of these characters are Kwaku de Babo, Kwame Atta, and Pokua, not because they are the most psychologically realized — the novel is too anti-phenomenological for that — but because they articulate the novel's central thematic concerns. De Babo, for example, represents Laing's conception of the writing process itself, which Laing sees as inextricably intertwined with both narration and the reconstruction of history and identity. It is Laing's treatment of writing, rather than traditional novelistic devices such as structure and characterization, that provides the novel with a semblance of unity while at the same time explicating some of its ideological presuppositions. De Babo is the twin brother of Atta, the erratic inventor whose work Tukwan expects to use to break out of its primordial mold, but the twins are not on cordial terms because of their competition for Pokua's love. The interweaving of the lives of these three characters thus assumes an allegorical dimension in the novel's articulation of writing.

"Babo," we learn, "was the chief secretary to the town, and he wrote everything with his pen and his chalk — parts of the book were slate — even when there were no meetings" (2). Babo's authority as writer is, however, a popular mandate from the people of Tukwan; the town "had even given Kwaku de Babo the task of modernising all proverbs from all tribes" (27). Babo's role as writer and the novel's view of history thus converge because, like the novel's treatment of history, Babo's writing project hints at a new dialectic in the configuration of postcolonial identity. The fact that Babo receive his accreditation from the people or city of Tukwan implies a secular vision of history or identity: Laing, in contrast to the writers who endorse negritude, does not believe that writing can replicate the timeless, essential world of the gods and thereby return Africans to an authentic past. Indeed, Laing's writing recalls Soyinka's scathing description of negritude's identity discourse as the "excavations of the vanishing racial psyche" (132).

In *Woman*, living society, not pre-given values, is the source of and most important domain for self-actualization. Babo's mandate hardly includes articulating the prescriptions of the gods, whatever such prescriptions may be. Hence, when the town prays that "God would rush up even higher, with the ancestors at His heels," it is Babo who fills the space abandoned by the gods: he "wrote all the silence . . . [and] everything was true" (18). Before the journey to Levensvale, Babo assesses those who would make the trip. The assessment turns out to be not just a quantitative exercise, but the fundamental mode of recording the individuality of each traveler: "the secrets of what [he or she] was doing before being pulled into the strange time of [the] village" (19). In contrast to earlier novels that asserted the power of place and past as fundamental markers of identity, *Woman* calls upon a profane force, the writer, to mark the self. Babo, the writer, is so important that at the end of the novel, the newcomers, anxious to learn more about the Tukwan experiment, "got to hear of Babo's book and were demanding it" (183). Babo opens his book in public, leaving the reader to wonder if the novel as a whole is Babo's reconstruction of the entries in the "minutes book," a personal archive that seems to hold the voice of the gods at a distance.

But what is the nature of Babo's writing? To answer this question we must consider the role of the "stupidity machine," which is the crowning achievement of Atta's ambition to invent something noble for his society. The machine, which functions as an emblem, a scriptural and visual allegory,⁴ is commissioned when Moro, the interim head of Tukwan, finds it difficult to rule. Moro sends a telegram to Levensvale: "Please try and get that silly Kwame Atta to invent a stupidity machine for the people here: they are feeling so clever that they are questioning every decision" (92). The machine is made of worms, cane steps, a mixture of abstract and concrete ideas, and the history of Levensvale and Tukwan, among other things. The parts are encased in a basket, and Kofi Senya supplies the memory. The shape — a circle, or perhaps a square — depends on the perspective of the observer (94). At certain points, the stupidity machine assumes an uncanny resemblance to Babo's writing endeavours and even tends to eclipse writing.

Atta's invention, which partakes of both the animate and the inanimate, is technically something other than a mere machine. It seems intended by those who commissioned it to function as a referential code, in the same way that culture becomes a referential code in the writings of Ngugi. In *Woman*, however, the stupidity machine, which is depicted as a formless world of unreliable meanings, demonstrates the dynamic process by which identity is constructed. Like some kinds of writing, identity, as symbolized by the machine, becomes a sleight of hand, "a mad legerdemain" (94), to quote Laing's description of the machine's construction. The machine is a mode of bringing improbable, incompatible entities into coexistence.

The stupidity machine also symbolizes Laing's rejection of pre-configured values. Most early African writers search for a fixed tradition that will serve as a source of legitimization. Laing's notion of writing is more profane in that the pledge is no longer solely between the writing self and a legitimating culture, but also between the writing self and its ceaselessly inventive imagination. This conception of the writing process poses a difficulty for the reader struggling to piece together events whose main recorder is part of the details he presents. For Laing, however, such difficulty serves to reinforce the notion of identity he is attempting to convey: the self is part of events that are always in the process of coming into being, which makes the position of the self problematic. Babo, who is situated on the same plane as the history he narrates, can neither use the text as a site for recovering a lost self nor claim for his writing a faithful reproduction of history. It is even more to the point that Babo's voice is not identified at the beginning of the novel: he is the embodiment of writing as the erased source. Thus, even Babo's proposed marriage to Pokua, in conjunction with Pokua's pregnancy, which may symbolize self-invention, is inadequate to posit a grounding notion of identity. Just as the stupidity machine in some instances works most efficiently by postponing meaning, their marriage and the conception of their child, which will be born in the future, signifies a beginning that is a suspended truth. Laing thus uses the machine as a comment on both his mode of composition and his vision of identity.

Indeed, the active role Laing assigns to writing and his distrust of conventional history are in consonance with the novel's displacement of paternal values. This is so not because the title underscores Pokua's prominence as the "woman boss," although her stature is likely to lend credence to such a reading. Rather, the novel emphasizes the ineffectiveness or obsolescence of numerous paternal figures. Sala, for example, discards the authority of his father, Lawyer Tay; the father-son relationship between Angus and his father, Mackie, is problematic; and MacTaggart is useless as a figurehead in his home. The feckless Ntow is displaced, as a force in the novel, by his sons Atta and Babo. If we assume that the sons symbolize writing as self-creation, or invention deprived of source and origin, it becomes apparent that the novel brackets paternal influence at the level of writing just as it displaces temporal linearity as an ontological category. These displacements culminate in the symbolic assassination of the most powerful paternal figure, the former prime minister, on whose property the delegation to Tukwan crash lands.

There are several indications that Laing is using the character of the former prime minister to disavow the paternal tenets that still provide the ideological foundation for most African nations. The former prime minister's association with the atavism that propels most notions of nationhood is underscored by the fact that he calls himself the Prime Minister of the forest. As *Search* makes clear, in Laing's world, the forest is a symbol for and the repository of predetermined, authoritative values. Although the former prime minister calls himself a "dead mercenary," Laing implies that the values he represents still have the potential to cause great damage. By causing the former prime minister to transform himself into a king and announce that his ambition is to "capture hostages," Laing calls attention to the propensity of paternal dictatorships to produce "loyal subjects." Accordingly, when the king presides over a football match, he emerges as the source of all meaning:

There was a huge crowd of black and brown people, with the black-and-brown king up there manipulating the huge scoreboard. The Left Back had dribbled himself into a philosophical cleftstick; moving forward would leave his flank open to the ravages of time;

moving back would lead him towards an own-goal of patent absurdity. The king hated paradoxical situations, so he just shot the player to the great cheers of the spectators . . . who were all subjects as well as objects. When the Right Winger made a fantastic feint to the left, and sent the entire defence the wrong way, he found himself face to face with the king. When he dared to beat the king with a flick, he too was shot instantly. (111)

The game symbolically duplicates the world as a stage on which self-identity is constructed in obedience to the dictates of the Father-King: the subjects can either play the game of life according to pre-constituted laws or risk annihilation. Hence, the two players die because their independent maneuvers are deviations from the values the paternal order orchestrates. To indicate the novel's distance from such values, before the stranded delegation leaves the land of the King, the visitors try to stir up a rebellion against him. Atta shouts to the restive subjects, "kill him and start anew" (112). Years later, Angus, the last character to pass through the land of the football king, confirms his death (190). These and other seemingly fantastic episodes are at the core of the novel's break with conventional representations of history, identity, and even nationhood.

As we have seen, Laing uses writing to distance himself from the rigid notion of identity inherent in the historical fiction of such writers as Armah. Despite this emphasis on writing, however, Laing is keenly aware of the need for a politics of resistance. It is only after collaborating with the machine that Babo articulates what seems to have escaped him all along about writing: that "positive neutrality" is impossible in art (98). Furthermore, Babo seems relieved when the machine parades Nkrumah, Busia, and Danquah before him (98). In thus representing Africa's great nationalists, Laing inscribes his own writing within the anti-imperial revolt they inaugurated, although their existence in his playful medium may well be his way of tempering their exuberant nationalism with modesty. The language in which Laing's revision of the African discourse of identity occurs also seems to favor modesty or a less obsessive concern with an authentic African language, in that his linguistic operations symbolize both resistance and hybridization.

Woman, to quote a phrase from Kropp Dakubu, is "written in a language about language" (76).

In discussing the novel's language, we must resist the temptation to see Laing's verbal idiosyncrasies as just another version of magical realism. There are obviously some magical elements in the novel — the stupidity machine, the aeroplane of the lip, and the football king, for example — and indeed such elements recall Borges' belief that fiction follows a "dangerous harmony . . . of observances, echoes, and affinities" (qtd in Echevarría 119). A review of some of the presuppositions of magical realism will, however, enable us to avoid a wholesale application of the concept to Laing. Echevarría provides a history of magical realism that is pertinent to Laing's conception of identity in *Woman*. According to Echevarría, magical realism was given a phenomenological cast in the hands of Franz Roh, who sought to transcend both Impressionism and Expressionism in art: "with the arrival of Post-Expressionism, which is the period [Roh] describes as magical realist, the dialectical opposition [between subject and object] results in synthesis" (113). Echevarría claims that Roh tried "to subtract from the phenomenon he describes a transcendental and religious impulse." Concerning Latin American literature, a writing similar to African literature as a result of its colonial background, Echevarría writes:

The concept of the marvelous or of magic rests on an ontological assumption: the existence of a peculiar Latin American consciousness devoid of self-reflectiveness and inclined to faith; a consciousness that allows Latin Americans to live immersed in culture and to feel history not as a causal process that can be analyzed rationally and intellectually, but as destiny . . . fantasy ceases to be incongruous with reality in order for both of them to turn into a closed and spherical world without cracks or ironic detachment. (125-26)

My analysis thus far reveals that Laing is concerned neither with phenomenological certainty nor with culture as a "world without cracks." Nonetheless, Laing's language does partake of the fantastic, as a result of Laing's concern with what I will refer to as "the concrete." Kropp Dakubu was the first to address this aspect of Laing's work. As he explains,

the language of the poetry of B. Kojo Laing was presented as a synthesis of the techniques and traditions associated with the Concrete Poetry movement (especially as practiced in Scotland during the 1960s) . . . the same synthesis and the same concerns are further developed in the language of B. Kojo Laing's first novel, *Search Sweet Country*. (19)

Dakubu demonstrates, for example, that Laing uses consonants to devise such "concrete" names for his characters as Beni Baidoo and Kojo Pol. I regard Laing's use of the concrete to articulate the hybrid experience of the postcolonial to be his main contribution to African literature. As I will show, he makes particularly effective use of these techniques in *Woman*.

One of Laing's strategies, for example, is consciously to subject words to grotesque contortions in order to enhance their auditory impact: "rrrubish of history" and "dindiiiiindin." At times, the sentences either begin or end with the vowel "O," thereby drawing attention to the word: "The woman she try-O" (84); "O I assure you that it is English I'm speaking" (85); "O course I see what you mean country" (85). Although in certain contexts it may be possible to interpret the marked use of a vowel as an attempt to create euphony, in *Woman*, it is a means of creating directness or immediacy. Laing achieves emphasis by the repetition of words: "New, new sister" (18); "drastically dry — for Angus, you Angus" (84). In some passage the repetitions are used to achieve onomatopoeic effects: "Boom, boom, roared the engines twice" (44). Through sound, Laing's narrator conveys his admiration for Aba Yaa's ample buttocks: "Tototicular tooshies" (84). By means of repetition, proper names seem to take on a strange doubling, as if the nouns have lost their specificity. Kwame Atta's name, for example, undergoes a sustained metamorphosis, moving from Atta to A, Atta=O (20). The use of repetition culminates in what I will call the technique of "inventory," through which, it would seem, Laing seeks to reveal the secret entity of the things he names:

Me I want rice and stew, cassava, bread, abooloo, abunabu, expertly-fried forest wood maggots, pigeon-pea bean leaves, akrantie, the under-thighs of an odum squirrel, waakye and abe-wine, fufu and abenkwan gari foto with tilapia-controlled shitoh, green-green with the freshest plantain, akple, groundnut soup with brown rice,

banku and okra soup, nkontommire stew with a koobi interregnum, the red and yellow flare of agushie stew with yam so fresh that it shouldn't be born yet, yooki ke gari, smoked deer joined with takyinkyina kyinkyinga, fresh hawk in guava sauce, wood pigeon so green with maximum pepper . . . garden-egg stew with the newest sweet potato, spinach-bokoboko with okro soup . . . wild duck and kpakpo shitoh, plain soup with cocoyam fufu. (130)

This long inventory draws our attention to the complex combinations Laing often creates. In addition, the rapid succession of foodstuffs in the passage seems to replicate the mobility of the world, which is the novel's central thematic concern. In another key passage, Laing demonstrates what the novel calls the "mathematicalization" of existence by reproducing a long algebraic equation (150-51). Here, he is perhaps showing us how the concept of god, used by his precursors to create cultural ambiance, can be modified.

However we interpret such passages, it is certain that Laing differs from those concrete writers who desire merely to give the world a graphic dimension; he would not agree with the concrete theorist Max Bense that "the world is only to be justified as an aesthetic phenomenon" (73). Laing appears more interested in concrete poetry's attempt to forge a vehicle for global language, what Eugen Gomringer calls "a universal poetry: international, supranational" (18). Laing uses the techniques of concrete poetry to imagine a new relationship to space and time; his linguistic consciousness therefore has implications for his treatment of identity. Laing etches his globalization of identity in linguistic metaphors. "Life," he tells us, "is one big translation, so I don't really mind whether I speak English or Twi, any *lingua franca* can do" (147). Even the patterning, the choice of idiom, and the imagery of Laing's sentences, reflect the comingling of different languages and cultures. In many instances, a sentence in English can embed a word from Ga or Twi, so that to make sense of the sentence one needs a knowledge of both English and the African language: "Don't mind this man one tigernut, his brain is *atadwe*" (74); "I didn't literally mean hold it, you stupid Amoa that shouldn't be in this room *koraa*" (75); "You are *alagmai* crawling into your hole of lies" (20).

In other passages, the narrative effortlessly slides into pidgin:

Me I think your questions they come from the book of abe, they make proper palm-nut matter. Me I'm booklong koraa. I dream wizardryyy, paa. But I hear them say in Kumasi that the world ibi come to an end for a town called Tukwan, ship-sharp. . . . And if you want me to take some message back to everybody at Kumasi then tell me quick. I go fly soon midnight, Yes sah boss. (140)

The slippage of English into the African languages and the African languages into English, as well as the use of pidgin (which does not necessarily designate the class or educational status of the characters), perhaps serves to make language reflect the flux of place and identity, thereby underscoring Laing's belief that languages are as transformable as "the worlds behind" them (11). Above all, Laing is likely using language to question the socially and hierarchically constructed notion of language itself. For Laing, it is not that one can no longer talk of English or Twi, but that neither can now exist on its own. Or, better still, the novel seems to insist that while we can talk about cultures and the languages that articulate them, we should also emphasize their interconnections. Laing's use of language is, then, an important example of the movement from what Deleuze and Guattari call a "vernacular, maternal, or territorial language" to "a vehicular . . . worldwide language" (23). According to Deleuze and Guattari, as a language loses its "mythic" anchor or connection to a motherland, it becomes "a blur of languages" (24). In *Woman*, both the lineal organization and the collision between English and African words demonstrate how languages, like identities, make and unmake one another.

Consequently, in the discourse on postcolonial identity, as Laing now re-narrates it, standard English, which most of Laing's precursors uncritically accepted as the norm for defining the being of the colonized, can no longer function as the shaping convention of good writing without sustaining the arrogant logic of Empire. Neither can a sudden withdrawal into and use of an African language "restore the [African] to his environment" (Ngugi 290). In this regard, within African literature, Laing's writing becomes part of the emerging new discourse that explodes the validity of the norm. In such a

discourse, as Jacques Ehrmann notes in another context, we find ourselves in “a wave of proliferating signs; a sort of unassembled film which one might designate as the discourse of the world . . . that no frontier, whether temporal or spatial, historical, or cultural, could hinder” (248).

By using language as he does in *Woman*, Laing makes two interconnected points: that the mixing of languages, cultures, and beings does not result in a senseless babble; and that value, especially the value that language as a cultural tool posits, is not permanently fixed. Fractured sentences, typographical breaks, and the self-conscious use of seemingly redundant words all foreground Laing’s belief in an unbounded world and a less rigid identity. Like Atta, who comments within the novel on the novel’s use of language, Laing perhaps sees himself as “the speaker of persiflage,” and he probably shares Atta’s gleeful delight in asserting, “I stammer, I multiply the language” (59, 73).

One can plausibly argue, then, that the novel’s linguistic idiosyncrasies result, not from inability on Laing’s part, but from the contamination inherent in language which, stripped of its assurance, becomes an everlasting “stammer.” Language, for Laing, is more than a means of expression; it is the inspiration for his vision of the world as no longer definable from a single cultural perspective. The text, with its unreserved luxuriance and wild fantastic imagery, is not concerned with the grace or smoothness of the constructions, but with their “poeticity,” as Dakubu rightly observes about *Search*.

Laing’s “poeticity” must, however, be placed within the larger context of the development of African literature. Whereas Senghor strives for internal coherence, for a sense of poetic “grace” and balance which he assumed was possible only in French, Laing overloads his expressions and frolics wildly in language in order to replicate his view of the world as dynamic. Such a vision is not a turn from reality, although it certainly contradicts the nationalist’s naive belief that the world can be unproblematically reproduced. In short, Laing criticizes both empire and post-colony for their untenable propositions about identity, while showing that writing or form can still be an instrument of resistance.

NOTES

- 1 Wole Soyinka and Chinua Achebe may appear to be exceptions to this generalization. However, although Soyinka often speaks of "an active sense of identity," he paradoxically insists on a "culture whose very artifacts are evidence of a cohesive understanding of irreducible truths" (38, 39). Although Achebe's views on identity have undergone considerable modification since the publication of his first novel, his early conception of African identity was not far from racial retrieval. To help his "society" transcend the "trauma" of the colonial denigration of its cultural identity, Achebe constructs narratives designed to instigate a process of reflection: "to look back and try and find out where we went wrong, where the rain began to beat us" (43).
- 2 The notion of "cultural impingement" is similar to Senghor's belief in "cultural crossbreeding," an inclusive gesture on the part of negritude (see Reed and Wake's introduction to the anthology of Senghor's poetry and prose). However, Senghorian negritude, even at its most inclusive, is built on a dichotomy that sees Europe as a mechanical world in need of cleansing from a spiritual or humane Africa. Negritude's rhetoric on cultural contamination is thus romantic and visionary in that it is not so much concerned with the equality of cultures as with Africa's use to Europe, without any serious examination of whether or not Europe was ready to be regenerated by or to fuse with Africa. Unlike Laing, then, even Senghor's most inclusive gestures are already steeped in an ideology of hierarchy and difference.
- 3 I am grateful to one of the anonymous readers for *ARIEL*, who called my attention to the work of Wilson Harris.
- 4 This is how *The Concise Oxford Dictionary of of Literary Terms* defines emblem (Baldick 67). Panofsky gives a more detailed definition of the emblem that is pertinent to some of the points I raise about Laing's stupidity machine. Partly (1) symbol, (2) puzzle, (3) apothegm, and (4) proverb, the emblem has other crucial features: it is particular rather than universal, visual rather than verbal, erudite rather than commonplace.

WORKS CITED

- Achebe, Chinua. *Hopes and Impediments*. New York: Doubleday, 1989.
- Appiah, Kwame Anthony. *In My Father's House*. New York: Oxford UP, 1992.
- Armah, Ayi Kwei. *Two Thousand Seasons*. Nairobi: East African Publishing House, 1973.
- Baldick, Chris. *The Concise Oxford Dictionary of Literary Terms*. Oxford: Clarendon, 1990.
- Beer, Gillian. "The Island and the Aeroplane: The Case of Virginia Woolf." *Nation and Narration*. Ed. Homi Bhabha. New York: Routledge, 1990. 265-90.
- Bense, Max. "Concrete Poetry." *Concrete Poetry: A World View*. Ed. Mary Ellen Solt and Willis Barnstone. Bloomington: Indiana UP, 1968. 73-74.
- Bhabha, K. Homi. *The Location of Culture*. London: Routledge, 1994.
- Chatterjee, Partha. *Nationalist Thought and the Colonial World*. Minneapolis: U of Minnesota P, 1993.
- Cheney-Coker, Syl. *The Last Harmattan of Alusine Dunbar*. Oxford: Heinemann, 1990.
- Dakubu, M. E. Kropp. "Search Sweet Country and the Language of Authentic Being." *Research in African Literatures* 24.1 (1993): 19-35.

- De Certeau, Michel. *The Practice of Everyday Life*. Trans. Steven Rendall. Berkeley: U of California P, 1984.
- Deleuze, Gilles, and Félix Guattari. *Kafka : Toward a Minor Literature*. Trans. Dana Polan. Minneapolis: U of Minnesota P, 1986.
- Echevarría, Roberto Gonzalez. *Alejo Carpentier: The Pilgrim at Home*. Ithaca: Cornell UP, 1977.
- Ehrmann, Jacques. "The Death of Literature." *Surfiction*. Trans. James A. Arnold. Ed. Raymond Federman. Chicago: Swallow Press, 1981. 229-53.
- Foucault, Michel. "Of Other Spaces." *Diacritics* 16.1 (1986): 22-27.
- Gilman, L. Sander. "Black Bodies, White Bodies: Toward an Iconography of Female Sexuality in Late Nineteenth-Century Art, Medicine, and Literature." "Race," *Writing, and Difference*. Ed. Henry Louis Gates, Jr. Chicago: U of Chicago P, 1986. 223-61.
- Gomringer, Eugen. "Form, No. 4." *Concrete Poetry: A World View*. Ed. Mary Ellen Solt and Willis Barnstone. Bloomington: Indiana UP, 1968. 9.
- Greenblatt, Stephen. *Marvelous Possessions*. Chicago: U of Chicago P, 1988.
- Johnson, A. Lemuel. "A-beng: (Re)calling the Body In(To) Question." *Out of the Kumbia: Caribbean Women and Literature*. Ed. Carole Boyce Davies and Elaine Savory Fido. Trenton: Africa World Press, 1990. 111-42.
- Laing, B. Kojo. *Major Gentl and the Achimota Wars*. Oxford: Heinemann, 1992.
- . *Godhorse*. Oxford: Heinemann, 1989.
- . *Search Sweet Country*. Boston: Faber and Faber, 1986.
- . *Woman of the Aeroplanes*. New York: William Morrow, 1988.
- Lazarus, Neil. *Resistance in Postcolonial African Fiction*. New Haven: Yale UP, 1990.
- McClintock, Anne. *Imperial Leather*. New York: Routledge, 1995.
- McHale, Brian. *Postmodernist Fiction*. New York: Methuen, 1987.
- Murdoch, H. Adlai. "(Re)Figuring Colonialism: Narratological and Ideological Resistance." *Callaloo* 15.1 (1992): 2-11.
- Panofsky, Erwin. *Meaning in the Visual Arts*. Woodstock, New York: Overlook P, 1971.
- Partha, Chatterjee. *Nationalist Thought and the Colonial World*. Minneapolis: U of Minnesota P, 1993.
- Popkin, H. Richard, and Avrum Stroll. *Philosophy Made Simple*. New York: Doubleday, 1993.
- Senghor, S. Leopold. *Prose and Poetry*. Trans. John Reed and Clive Wake. Oxford: Oxford UP, 1965.
- Soyinka, Wole. *Myth, Literature, and the African World*. Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1976.
- Taine, Hippolyte. "History of English Literature." *Critical Theory Since Plato*. Ed. Hazard Adams. New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1992. 608-20.
- Toure, A. Sekou. *The Political Leader Considered as a Representative of Culture*. Newark: Jihad Publications, 1975.