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BOOK FORUM

The African Novel at the Vanguard

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The final chapter of Jeanne-Marie Jackson's *The African Novel of Ideas: Philosophy and Individualism in the Age of Global Writing* (2021) opens with a characterization of the novel as the genre *par excellence* of disruption, failure, and, via reference to György Lukács, the loss of totality. This is, Jackson continues, one of two stories commonly told about the novel. The other treats the novel as a liberal and bourgeois institution, where narratives of individual development serve to sustain social and, increasingly, geopolitical inequalities. Although the latter has had greater traction in African literary studies, neither story is properly satisfactory for Jackson. There follows from this an analysis of works in which "it is the idea *of* ideas that provides some relief from a grotesquely disjointed and disorienting web of global systems."[1] The qualification "some relief" is key: the exploration of philosophical questions in fiction is not for Jackson a recuperating alternative. It is one among several modalities engaged in the works she analyzes, but one that has tended to be overlooked—even dismissed—by the predominant paradigms of African literary studies as it currently stands.

Enter the novel of ideas, alternately referred to here as the philosophical novel. In Jackson's thinking, the "novel of ideas" is less a taxonomizing literary-critical designation (a set of features that a work must or must not have) than a tool for breaching a set of critical impasses. At no point does Jackson undertake a systematic excavation of the form comparable to what one finds in Sianne Ngai's recent *Theory of the Gimmick: Aesthetic Judgment and Capitalist Form* (2020), nor

[1] Jeanne-Marie Jackson, *The African Novel of Ideas: Philosophy and Individualism in the Age of Global Writing* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2021) 145–56, 180.

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would such work be germane to the goals of this book.[2] *The African Novel of Ideas* aims instead to bring a new register of conceptual heft to the study of African literature by putting it into conversation with African philosophy, returning attention to the individual as what Jackson calls the "threshold of world-expanding abstraction." This argument moves counter to what Jackson sees as the limitations imposed by a generalized, less geographically anchored, and perhaps even sclerotic (although this is not a term Jackson uses) postcolonial criticism that has absorbed the African continent into a broader category of "otherness," leaving little room for attention to local or individual specificity, or, for that matter, for the untangling of what would seem to be contradictory positions and practices (as illustrated in Jackson's brief discussion of the life of David Eyiku Awotwi in the introduction). These issues of scale are exacerbated by the more recent shift from postcolonial to global-cosmopolitan criticism—referring to the "global turns" that have reshaped conversations about world and comparative literature as well as contemporary African writing, particularly in its Afropolitan strain—which tends to further obscure regional specificity and continues to flatten the individual in order to equate her with larger social and historical trends. The book, in this sense, consolidates a complex set of arguments about the practice of literary criticism generally and African literary criticism specifically that Jackson has been developing for some time.[3]

However, what interests me for the purposes of this article is the theory of the novel that emerges from *The African Novel of Ideas* and its implications for conversations about contemporary African writing, particularly as it pertains to recent experiments in genre fiction. To paraphrase a question Jackson herself asks in the introduction, what does viewing the African novel as the vanguard, rather than as a marginal other or belated case, reveal about the novel at large? In what follows, I elucidate how Jackson conceptualizes the novel form, the reading practices she elaborates in relation to it, and how the latter might be extended to other critical projects.

Per the closing lines of that final chapter of *The African Novel of Ideas*, for Jackson it is in universalism's erstwhile or, better, putative peripheries that the protean spirit of the novel is kept alive. The term *protean* suggests a vision of the novel closer in feeling to that of a critic such as Mikhail Bakhtin than Lukács. For Jackson, too, the novel is a genre that admits and, indeed, thrives on heterogeneity; it is characterized by its plasticity and porosity to other forms of discourse; it lends itself to parody (although this is not a term Jackson herself uses) of other forms; and, as a zone of maximal contact with the continuous and inconclusive

[2] Sianne Ngai, *Theory of the Gimmick: Aesthetic Judgment and Capitalist Form* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2020), 109–14.

[3] See Jeanne-Marie Jackson's "Reading for the Region in New African Novels: Flight, Form, and the Metonymic Ideal," *Research in African Literatures* 49.1 (2018): 42–62; "Plurality in Question: Zimbabwe and the Agnostic African Novel," *NOVEL: A Forum on Fiction* 51.2 (2018), 339–61; and "Comparison Re-Justified," *Cambridge Journal of Postcolonial Literary Inquiry* 5.3 (2018): 255–61; as well as an earlier piece that contains the germ of *The African Novel of Ideas*: "The South African Novel of Ideas," *n+1*, October 5, 2015 (https://nplusonemag.com/online-only/book-review/the-south-african-novel-of-ideas).

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present, the novel is necessarily in a process of continuous becoming.[4] These features are what make the novel both exciting and challenging to work with. The novel, in this view, can accommodate multiple orders of discourse as well as, crucially, varied critical and intellectual projects. As Jackson writes of Tendai Huchu's *The Hairdresser of Harare* (2010) in the introduction, that novel's concern with gender roles, state corruption, wealth inequality, and queer self-becoming make it "a veritable goldmine for anti-neoliberal critique," but Huchu's interest in philosophy and, specifically, in thinking about thinking as such exceed the framework of anti-neoliberal critique and require a more nuanced reading of the novel's varying registers. From this opening discussion of *The Hairdresser of Harare* through the book's epilogue, while acknowledging cause for cynicism, the novel qua novel remains for Jackson a site of hope and potential.

Such a dynamic and capacious understanding of the novel form is fundamental to the arguments made in *The African Novel of Ideas.* It undergirds, for instance, the analysis in the first chapter of J. E. Casely Hayford's *Ethiopia Unbound* (1911), whose formal instability (or, more suggestively, "freneticism") Jackson argues is a condition of possibility for the lateral comparisons staged in that work. It is similarly crucial to the ways in which she reads together Stanlake Samkange's literary and philosophical writing with his politics in the second chapter. Together, the chapters in this first part of the book (titled "National Horizons") constitute an effort to rethink the terms that have predominantly structured the study of African literature in the last several decades—a project consonant with work by critics such as Stephanie Newell, Simon Gikandi, Mũkoma wa Ngũgĩ, and Ato Quayson.[5] Jackson models a reading practice that looks to the "weird" (to borrow a term she uses in describing a key moment in *The Hairdresser of Harare*) or dissonant moments in a given work not as aesthetic or formal failures but as pressure points that open up new lines of inquiry. This is especially pertinent for her entrance into ongoing debates about the study of contemporary African literature in the second part of the book, "Global Recessions."

Perhaps nowhere are questions about the relationship between the novel and the geopolitical transformations of the last three decades being as keenly felt as in African literary studies. Post-independence African literatures have, from their inception, existed in productive tension with the world literary market, alternately engaging with and resisting its demands.[6] However, in the last decade

[4] I am working here principally with vocabulary from the essay "Epic and Novel: Toward a Methodology for the Study of the Novel," but this vision of the novel cuts across much of Bakhtin's work; see Michael Holquist, ed., *The Dialogic Imagination: Four Essays* (1975), trans. Caryl Emerson and Michael Holquist (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1981).

[5] See Simon Gikandi, "Realism, Romance, and the Problem of African Literary History," *MLN: Modern Language Quarterly* 73.3 (2012): 309–28; Stephanie Newell, "African Literary Histories and History in African Literatures," in *The Oxford Handbook of Modern African History*, ed. John Parker and Richard Reid, December 2013, doi: 10.1093/oxfordhb/9780199572472.013.0025; Mũkoma wa Ngũgĩ, *The Rise of the African Novel: Politics of Language, Identity, and Ownership* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2018); Ato Quayson, "Modern African Literary History: Nation-and-Narration, Orality, and Diaspora," *Journal of the African Literature Association* 13.1 (2019): 131–52.

[6] Olabode Ibironke, "African Writers Challenge Conventions of Postcolonial Literary History," in *Rethinking African Cultural Production*, ed. Frieda Ekotto and Kenneth W. Harrow (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2015), 29–51.

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or so there has been an explosion of international critical and commercial interest in African writing; or, more precisely, in the work of a globally mobile, predominantly Anglophone subset of African writers often described as "global" or Afropolitan.[7] Although generally celebrated in mainstream venues, in more specialized contexts many of these same writers have also been criticized for pandering to stereotypes or (at the meta-critical level) for the extent to which their prominence obscures the work of (other) writers on the continent.[8] Jackson herself makes several references to the "million-dollar Afropolitanism" that dominates discussions of African literature abroad, and this is also the "age of global writing" referred to in the book's subtitle. Such debates run alongside a more general reckoning with the state of the field of African literary studies. As Tejumola Olaniyan argued—first in a presidential address to the African Literature Association in 2015 and then in the pages of this journal—the question of what constitutes African literature, long a topic of debate, has taken on a different tenor in the wake of the ravages of late and post-Cold War globalization and neoliberal structural adjustment, which have transformed the material and imaginative landscapes of both African literature and its criticism.[9]

Jackson brings to these debates the incisive observation that there is *already* a critical language for discussion of contemporary, globally oriented African writing: that of the global novel, into which discussion of the most internationally visible African writers has been absorbed. Teju Cole, whose novel *Open City* (2011) earned immediate comparisons to the work of writers such as W. G. Sebald and V. S. Naipaul, is perhaps the best, but certainly not only, example of this.[10]

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[7] Examples here include figures such as Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie, Teju Cole, Yaa Gyasi, Dinaw Mengestu, Yvonne Adhiambo Owuor, and Taiye Selasi, whose 2005 essay "Bye Bye Babar" is one point of origin for the popularization of the term *Afropolitan.* These writers have roots in and connections to African countries, even if they do not always live or work on the continent, whereas their agents and publishers are predominantly located in the global north. The description of these writers as "global," then, has a biographical component, referring to their movement in the world as well as to the circulation of their books. It also refers to content, as many of their works take the world and the movement of Africans around the world as their subject.

For more on the origins and circulation of the term *Afropolitan*, see Sarah Balakrishnan, "The Afropolitan Idea: New Perspectives on Cosmopolitanism in African Studies," *History Compass* 15.2 (2017): e12362, and "Afropolitanism and the End of Black Nationalism," in *Routledge International Handbook of Cosmopolitanism Studies*, ed. Gerard Delanty (New York: Routledge, 2018), 575–85. For an extended critical consideration of what *Afropolitan* means for the study of the African novel, see Ashleigh Harris, *Afropolitanism and the African Novel: De-Realizing Africa* (New York: Routledge, 2020).

[8] See, for instance, Akin Adesokan, "New African Writing and the Question of Audience," *Research in African Literatures* 43.3 (2012): 1–20; Sara Brouillette, "On the African Literary Hustle," *Blind Field: A Journal of Cultural Inquiry*, August 14, 2017 (https://blindfieldjournal.com/2017/08/14/on-the-african-literary-hustle/); Siyanda Mohutsiwa, "I'm Done with African Immigrant Literature," *OkayAfrica*, February 8, 2016 (https://www.okayafrica.com/im-done-with-african-immigrant-literature/); and Lily Saint, "The Danger of a Single Author," *Africa is a Country* April 14, 2017 (https://africasacountry.com/2017/04/the-danger-of-a-single-author/).

[9] Tejumola Olaniyan, "African Literature in the Post-Global Age: Provocations on Field Commonsense," *Cambridge Journal of Postcolonial Literary Inquiry* 3.3 (2016): 388; see also the responses to Olaniyan's article published in a later issue of *PLI* (4.2; 2017).

[10] See, for instance, James Woods, "The Arrival of Enigmas," *New Yorker*, February 28, 2011 (https://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2011/02/28/the-arrival-of-enigmas).

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Within the varied landscape of contemporary African writing, the "global novel" refers to works that are outward facing—what Eileen Julien once termed *extroverted*—while endeavoring to represent, and explicitly thematizing, the densely networked present.[11] Counter to this, as Jackson observes, there is also a model of writing practiced widely throughout the continent that aims to represent more local experiences for more local audiences, most often privileging the straightforward modalities of realism in support of this project. If global novels reproduce the logics of contemporary globalization, local novels seek to illuminate experiences not solely determined by or even visible to these processes. From a distance, it is tempting to see the "local" and the "global" as separate literary systems, largely defined in opposition to each other. But this would be reductive and ultimately critically unproductive.

What Jackson is after in *The African Novel of Ideas* is a way of talking about African literature that transcends these two camps. To this end, she takes up works that are, in a sense, neither and both "global" and "local." Eschewing works by either internationally recognized or lesser known, locally celebrated African writers, Jackson instead turns attention to novels that engage with the current global moment without embracing or necessarily reproducing its governing logics. Writers such as Jennifer Nansubuga Makumbi, Imraan Coovadia, and Tendai Huchu, she argues, carve out space for the individual and abstract thought amid the pressures that shape the global present. In Jackson's hands, Makumbi's *Kintu* (2014/2017), Coovadia's *Tales of the Metric System* (2014), and Tendai Huchu's *The Maestro, the Magistrate, and the Mathematician* (2014) are exemplary works not just for the critical perspective they offer on the current moment, but for their intellectual ambition and willingness to push the boundaries of the novel form.

This returns me to the protean spirit of the novel, which thrives at the limits of established convention. This is also where I see room to push the argument Jackson makes in *The African Novel of Ideas*, as I have outlined it here, and extend the lessons of this book in new directions. In order to make her argument, Jackson must first shift her discussion of the global novel from questions of circulation, content, or authorial biography to matters of form. "Globality," drawing on critics such as Rita Barnard and Caren Irr, is therefore a formal designation referring to works that emphasize far-flung connection as a crucial element of the plot or character development, using tactics such as multi-strand narration and a temporally or (and) spatially disarrayed plot structure.[12] In their respective novels, then, Makumbi, Coovadia, and Huchu weave together the formal tactics of the global novel with those of the novel of ideas. This is a wonderfully illuminating dissection, with lessons that extend beyond Jackson's

[11] Eileen Julien, "The Extroverted African Novel," in *The Novel: History, Geography, and Culture*, ed. Franco Moretti (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2006) 667–700; Eileen Julien, "The Extroverted African Novel, Revisited: African Novels at Home, in the World," *Journal of African Cultural Studies* 30.3 (2019): 371–81.

[12] Rita Barnard, "Fictions of the Global," *NOVEL: A Forum on Fiction* 42.2 (2009): 207–15; Caren Irr, *Toward the Geopolitical Novel: US Fiction in the Twentieth Century* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2013).

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immediate interest in the novel of ideas to the dynamics of genre interplay in contemporary African writing.

Genre fiction makes two significant appearances toward the end of *The African Novel of Ideas.* In the first, Jackson notes that Huchu's *The Maestro, the Magistrate, and the Mathematician* also interpolates elements of the crime thriller, via a plotline that culminates with the murder of the titular mathematician, Farai. After briefly acknowledging that in combining the modalities of genre fiction with those of more literary fare—Huchu himself has described the novel as a spy novel "cloaked" in literary fiction—*The Maestro* reflects wider trends in contemporary African writing, Jackson quickly moves on to considering the novel's philosophical dimensions.[13] The second instance comes in the epilogue, not coincidentally titled "Speculations on the Future of African Literary Studies," where Jackson notes that three of the authors discussed in the second part of the book (Huchu, Coovadia, and Masande Ntshanga) have all turned to speculative fiction in more recent years. A booming subcategory of contemporary African writing, at the close of *The African Novel of Ideas* speculative fiction marks one possible way forward for thinking about thinking, so to speak, in the African novel and the novel at large.

In these concluding gestures, then, Jackson points to a broad swathe of flourishing literary activity. As I write elsewhere, *genre fiction*—a term that encompasses everything from detective and crime fiction, to romance, to speculative fiction, science fiction, and Afrofuturism—has been at the forefront of the current amplification of African literary production across print and digital spaces.[14] It has also become a topic of increasing critical interest, as attested to by two special issues of this journal on African science fiction (2016) and African genre (2017).[15] Although Jackson herself briefly aligns genre fiction with the global placement of African literature, a statement warranted by the prominence of writers such as Nnedi Okorafor and Lauren Beukes, as well as Mũkoma wa Ngũgĩ's and Chris Abani's experiments with crime fiction, genre fiction in fact cuts across the "global" and "local" registers of contemporary African writing.[16] It is not just that both "global" and "local" writers might draw on the conventions of and indeed produce works of genre fiction, but that genres such as crime fiction lend themselves particularly well to exploring the global dimensions of local problems.[17] Genre fiction, in part *because* it is distinguished by an easily recognizable set of narrative formulae (typical plots, characters, settings, and

[13] Tsitsi Jaji and Lily Saint, "Introduction: Genre in Africa," *Cambridge Journal of Postcolonial Literary Inquiry* 4.2 (2017): 156.

[14] Magalí Armillas-Tiseyra, "Secret Histories: Detective Fiction, Hermeneutic Skepticism, and Bad Readers in the Contemporary African Novel," *ARIEL: A Review of International English Literature* (forthcoming).

[15] Moradewun Adejunmobi, guest ed., Special Issue: African Science Fiction, *Cambridge Journal of Postcolonial Literary Inquiry* 3.3 (2016); Tsitsi Jaji and Lily Saint, guest ed., Special Issue: African Genre, *Cambridge Journal of Postcolonial Literary Inquiry* 4.2 (2017).

[16] *The African Novel of Ideas*, 197fn11.

[17] See, for instance, Miriam Pahl, "Reframing the Nation-State: The Transgression and Redrawing of Borders in African Crime Fiction," *Research in African Literatures* 49.1 (2018): 84–102; as well as Andrew Pepper and David Schmid, ed., *Globalization and the State in Contemporary Crime Fiction: A World*

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even uses of perspective and narrative style), also lends itself well to the kinds of narrative experimentation, parataxis, and juxtaposition Jackson analyzes in *The African Novel of Ideas.* To be clear, I am not arguing that genre fiction is the same as what Jackson identifies as the novel of ideas. The distinctions are significant and, indeed, crucial to the larger appeal Jackson is making for understanding African literature as the space for grappling with difficult ideas, beyond the indexing of individual experience. A novel might incorporate the modalities of both genre fiction and the novel of ideas, as is the case with Huchu's *The Maestro*, but this does not make for an equivalence between the two. What I am suggesting, instead, is that, at the level of form, genre fiction can function in ways similar to what Jackson describes of the novel of ideas vis-à-vis the protocols of the global novel.

One example of the use of genre fiction to test the limits of globality would be Sylva Nze Ifedigbo's *My Mind Is No Longer Here* (2017).[18] Begun during National Novel Writing Month (NaNoWriMo; now a decidedly global event, despite its local origins in the United States) in 2013, Ifedigbo's novel was first published by the Lagos-based Parrésia Publishers (it is also available internationally as an ebook published by the London-based Bahati Books).[19] The narrative follows four characters (Donatus, Chidi, Osahon, and Haruna) seeking to leave Nigeria to pursue opportunities abroad, but whose efforts are thwarted by their involvement with Yinka, a supposed "consultant" who is an operative in a trafficking syndicate. The novel employs the multi-strand narration and spatially disarrayed structure of the global novel, but the action does not leave Nigeria. At the level of plot, the procedures of the migration narrative are interrupted by those of the crime thriller. In doing so, I would propose that Ifedigbo parodies the migration plot, a dominant narrative in "global" novels that marries transnational movement to the development of the individual while also often conveniently overlooking the challenges to such movement in a global system designed to facilitate the global flows of goods or capital and not necessarily people. In the process, *My Mind Is No Longer Here* generates several comical observations about "Abroadians" (citizens of abroad), the lives Nigerians make elsewhere, and what happens when those same Nigerians return home. Yet the novel also takes the aspirations of its characters seriously, both as evidence of the limited opportunities available and challenges they face in Nigeria and also as reflection of their engagement with the wider world. One character, for instance, is making his way through Gabriel García Márquez's *El amor en los tiempos del cólera* (*Love in the Time of Cholera*, 1985)—itself a story of departure and return—for much of the novel, at first haltingly and then with zeal. To read *My Mind Is No Longer Here* as either "global" or "local" would be to miss the point: it, too, is neither and both. The novel is in fact interested in the points of friction between these two realms, something it explores at the level of form as well as content.

of Crime (London: Palgrave, 2016) and Louise Nilsson, David Damrosch, and Theo D'haen, ed., *Crime Fiction as World Literature* (New York: Bloomsbury, 2017).

[18] Sylva Nze Ifedigbo, *My Mind Is No Longer Here* (Lagos: Parrésia Publishers, 2017).

[19] For more information, see https://nanowrimo.org/about-nano.

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It is, in other words, a novelization of the global present that does not embrace or reproduce its governing logics and instead emphasizes its gaps and fissures.

By way of bringing this reflection to a close, I will admit that my discussion of Ifedigbo's *My Mind Is No Longer Here* perhaps wanders too far from the immediate concerns of *The African Novel of Ideas.* A discussion of Coovadia's *A Spy in Time* (2018), a work of speculative fiction that followed *Tales of the Metric System* and which in many ways bridges the formal and conceptual ambitions of that earlier novel with the modalities of genre fiction, may have made a more apposite choice.[20] Focusing on a group of spies working for an organization known as the Agency, *A Spy in Time* combines the thrills of science fiction (time travel, speculative technologies, and so forth) with the intrigue of the spy plot, spanning the globe as well as historical (and post-historical) time; chapters take place in Marrakesh in 1955, Rio in 1967, Johannesburg in 2271, a post-apocalyptic underground in 2489, Jupiter in the far future, and on the day much of the world is destroyed. Coovadia not only combines the intricacies of spy craft and time travel with the formal protocols of the global novel, he also uses these as the background against which to explore questions of environmental and civilizational collapse, injustice, atonement, and free will. *A Spy in Time* is a rich text, worth an analysis that goes well beyond what I have sketched. Nevertheless, I have chosen to discuss Ifedigbo's *My Mind Is No Longer Here* in order to highlight what I see as one strand of the many strengths of Jackson's book: its insistence on reading beyond the limitations of the frameworks immediately at hand, its attention to form, and its willingness to pursue the "weird," convoluted, or incomplete as a means of inquiry. More so than moving the African novel to some vanguard of literary seriousness, in *The African Novel of Ideas* Jackson meets it there.

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[20] Imraan Coovadia, *A Spy in Time* (Cape Town: Umuzi, 2018).

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