

## Speaking in Song: Power, Subversion and the Postcolonial Text

The crucial function of language as a medium of power demands that postcolonial writing define itself by seizing the language of the center and re-placing it in a discourse fully adapted to the colonized place. (Ashcroft et al., *Empire Writes Back* 39)

Because song is one of the most pervasive oral forms in Africa, it is possible that postcolonial writers' frequent recourse to this genre constitutes a mode of *re-placement*, as referred in the opening quotation. *Re-placement* is deemed to mean idiomatic relocation signifying (re)placement. This article explores the interface between song and Anglophone postcolonial written texts<sup>1</sup>. My exploration is prompted by the prevalence of song in all genres of African postcolonial texts. Even a casual glance at titles across regions and across generations of African writers will note the pervasiveness of the concept of song in the African writer's agenda. Poets, fiction writers, and playwrights have woven a web of song-conscious texts across the continent. Nigeria's literary tradition offers John Pepper Clark's *Song of a Goat* (1961), Ojaide Tanure's *The 'Endless Song* (1989), and Niyi Osundare's song-texts, including *Moonsongs* (1988), *Songs of the Marketplace* (1983), and *Songs of the Season* (1990). Zimbabwe's Sekai Nzenza-Shand offers *Songs to an African Sunset* (1997) while Ghana's Kofi Anyidoho textualizes *song in Praise Song for The Land* (2000). The famous songs of Okot p'Bitek (1966-73), Byron Kawadwa's *Oluylimba Liva Wankoko* [Song of the Cock] (1972), and Okello Oculi's *Song for the Sun in Us* (2001) are testimony to the enchanted landscape of the song tradition in Uganda. Finally, Kenya's Ngugi wa Thion'go's *Mother Sing for Me* (1982),

1 This article is extracted from a larger book-length project in which I extensively explore this topic.

Marjorie Macgoye's *MakeltSingandOtherPoems* (2000), and Micere Mugo's *My Mother's Song and Other Poems* (2001), all support the viewpoint that song is increasing in visibility in its real, conceptual, and metaphoric manifestations. Indeed, the reverberation of song in East Africa is so prevalent that critics speak of a "song school" of literature, pioneered by Okot p'Bitek's *Song of Lawino* (1966).<sup>2</sup> Nevertheless, despite this overwhelming presence of song, critical exploration of the oral tradition in literature has generally centered around other components of the oral tradition such as folktales and proverbs, at the exclusion of song. Examining song in the written literatures, particularly as re-placement strategy suggested here, constitutes one way of conceptualizing song as a serious aspect of postcolonial theory.

The idea of song as *re-placement* strategy resonates with studies such as those in Derek Wright's anthology, *Contemporary African fiction* (1997), which have explored the ideological intersections of oral and written forms even though song has not specifically been pinpointed. In the chapter, "The use of traditional oral forms in black South Africa literature (147-59), for instance, Mbulelo V. Mzamane links literary form to the Black Consciousness movement in South Africa. He concludes that "[t]he conscious and increasing adaptation of traditional oral forms in black South African literature serves the purpose of counteracting all those notions that denigrate their culture and debase them as black people" (158). Craig MacKenzie, although exclusively employing Western literary standards to assess works that employ oral forms, nevertheless affirms that "recourse to African orality in the black short story of the 1970s and 80s takes place against the background of the rise of Black Consciousness in this period and the rejection of Western literary models and influences" (58). Drawing on previous scholarship, MacKenzie examines how South African fiction authors envisioned the deployment of oral traditions

2 1. See Adrian A. Roscoe's extensive discussion of the East African song-school in *Uhuru's Fire* (32-87). Roscoe discusses the song school and states that Song of Lawino "became at once the chosen model for a whole school of writing. Okello Oculi's *Orphan* is an imitation of it, Joseph Buruga's *The Abandoned Hul* is in the same form, and Okot himself has followed Lawino with *Song of O col*, *Song of Malaya*, and *Song of Prisoner* (32). 2. Indeed, the whole text of *Decolonizing the Mind* provides the rationale for employing song and other indigenous oral forms as indispensable tools for decolonizing African Literature. Even though he focuses on writing in indigenous languages (to decolonize the mind, and the literature), vernacular works, when translated into European languages, play the same "re-placement" role as those originally written in the European languages.

within the literary canon as a "powerful tool in the establishment of an alternative, oppositional discourse" (58). Such sentiments can be identified in many creative and critical voices.

Ngugi wa Thiong'o, the most powerful voice in the debate on language, not only talks about language ideologically, he also specifically addresses song as an element of form in African theatre. Discussing his drama *Ngaahika Ndeenda*, in *Decolonizing the Mind* (1986), Thiong'o discusses his use of song in this play and highlights the importance of using song and dance not merely as decoration but as an integral part of the play's structure (45). Like Thiong'o, numerous other writers are acutely conscience of the relationship between ideology and form as they employ or discuss the potency of song.

In this article, I propose that systematic incorporation of song into a postcolonial text transforms it into a "song text," a genre that cuts across conventional Western genres of fiction, poetry and drama. I identify the defining characteristics of the song-text and argue that, when strategically employed, song becomes a potent expressive and ideological force, a distinct language or a medium that subverts and relocates (or "reidiomizes") the colonial language. Furthermore, I propose that the song texts' relocation strategy scores both "vertically and horizontally," to use Abiola Irele's terminology (Irele 61). It scores vertically, contesting the power space with the metropolis, and horizontally, signaling to the postcolonial audience that the text is a discourse among "ourselves."

Given the contentious nature of the language debate, it may be necessary to caution the reader that the core argument here is not about whether postcolonial African writers should write in the metropolitan language or not. As may be deduced from the selection of authors discussed, it is taken for granted that the song-texts under consideration are in the language of the metropolis, English in our case. Our focus is on how the authors, regardless of the reasons for their choice, handle the English language, "song-textualizing" it and setting in motion new ways of reading articulations of the postcolonial experience. Indeed one can surmise that positive "calibanization" of English advantages the authors, enabling them to use the language of the metropolis while escaping from it through the indigenous song-text medium. Would this be an ingenious means of eating one's cake and having it too?

By deploying song in their texts (despite using colonialist languages), postcolonial African writers assert continuity with their oral or performance heritage. Abiola Irele drives this point home in an incisive analysis of orality and literature in his critical work: *The African Imagination: Literature in Africa &*

*the Black Diaspora* (2001). Not only does he extol the use of oral literature, he characterizes it as a measure of excellence: "In the quest for a grounded authenticity of expression and vision, *the best among our modern African writers* (emphasis added) have had to undertake a resourcing of their material and their modes of expression in the traditional culture" (29-30). Furthermore, after surveying the use of the oral tradition across the continent, he ardently reminds his readers that "the oral tradition continues to function as a fundamental reference of African expression, [and] as the matrix of the African imagination (31).

Song constitutes a critical component of that "matrix of the African imagination" and deserves to take its rightful place beside other more frequently explored oral forms. Its central power lies in its potential to engender a distinct literary genre—"song-text"—that cuts across the conventional (i.e., colonial) genres of fiction, verse, and drama. Song-texts exhibit an intricate or systematic incorporation of song to establish meaning. In other words, "song-texts" exist not necessarily because they can be musically scored and sung, but because they share marked characteristics that traverse conventional genres. Authors creating song-texts strategically and systematically employ song in their content, structure, themes, and style, leading to an ideological/de-colonizing statement. In conventional terms, the sample texts I have selected for analysis may be described as novels, (*Upon This Mountain* by Timothy Wangusa [1995]), and *Without a Name* by Yvonne Vera (1994), a long poem (*Song of Lavino* by Okot p'Bitek [1966]), a collection of lyrics (*Praise Song for The Land* by Kofi Anyidoho [2001]), and a play (*I Will Marry When I Want* by Ngugi wa Thiong'o and Ngugi wa Mirii [1996]). Read as song-texts, however, these texts share distinctive subversive attributes that function as idiomatic relocation strategies, some of which I discuss below.

### Saturation with Song

The most obvious subversive re-placement or relocation strategy that transforms the postcolonial text into a song-text is *saturation with song*. Saturation involves the diffusion of the text with song. Alternatively, saturation may be achieved by a systematic metaphoric use of song to pilot the plot or thematic content of the text. Although the sample texts under discussion fall into recognizable conventional/colonial genres (drama, fiction, verse), they are characterized by a profuse use of song. More important, the songs are not decoratively introduced into the text. Rather, they are

consistently presented as an integral part of the texts. In the case of p'Bitek, Anyidoho, Osundare and many others, this operation is signaled beginning with the tides. But even where this is not the case, as in Ngugi and Wangusa, songs are asserted early in the texts and they tend to intensify in frequency and complexity throughout the works. Thus, in Wangusa's *Upon This Mountain*, a novel whose poetic qualities can, in large part, be attributed to the use of songs, the author intricately weaves at least twelve songs into the 116 pages of this short novel. In this *bildungsroman*, tracing Mwambu's life from toddlerhood to potential manhood, the first song (appropriately a lullaby), appears on the second page of the novel. The lullaby is a soothing antidote to the humiliation that Mwambu suffers when he is rejected by his mother, for whose breast he tries to reach, not realizing that at three years he is "a man." Thereafter, there is hardly a major incident or development that is not either introduced by or commented upon by a song.

Similarly, Ngugi's wa Thiong'o's and Ngugi wa Mini's *I Will Marry When I Want* signals the song motif in the opening scene of the play, with the drunk's song, from which the text takes its title. From then on, nearly all the clashes between the people and the colonial and neocolonial impositions are invoked in song. The play is enveloped in song, and it culminates in the sharp revolutionary choral challenge: "On whose side are you?" Thiong'o's increasing infusion of song in his later texts is of particular interest in terms of postcolonial creative reorientations. Although he mentions popular song in his early work (the "Afrosaxon" phase, as he deprecatingly calls it), he seldom incorporates songs in texts such as *Weep Not Child*, *The River Between*, or *A Grain of Wheat*. This is in contrast with the profusion of song in his later texts, starting with *I Will Marry When I Want* and culminating—so far—in *Mother Sing for Me*. With Ngugi wa Thiong'o, perhaps more conspicuously than with the other authors discussed here (given his indigenous language crusade), this shift is part of a deliberate program of highlighting the people's voice in contemporary texts. In *Decolonizing the Mind*, for instance, he extensively demonstrates how song, as the language of African literature and theatre,<sup>1</sup> becomes an integral part in the battle for literary identity.

Ngugi wa Thiong'o is, however, not a lone pioneer in this tradition, part of which is writing in African languages. Behind him looms Okot p'Bitek. P'Bitek not only modeled *Song of Lawino* on Acholi satirical song performances, which he collected and studied extensively, but also he wrote it first in Acholi (as *Per a Layino*) more than a decade before Thiong'o's *I Will Marry When I Want*. Okot p'Bitek's challenge to colonial literary expression, dating as far

back as his Acholi novel, *Lak Tar* [White Teeth] (1951), was deliberate and systematic as evident in his essays, *Africa's Cultural Revolution* (1975), to which Ngugi wrote an introduction. Okot p'Bitek writes: "African students are taught Shakespeare's sonnets and Moliere's plays... As a sixth former at Budo, near Kampala, I used to take part in the weekly seminar at the headmaster's house for the final preparation for the Cambridge School Certificate... When the year ended we made a bonfire of the now useless notebooks and English set books" (21). Whether apocryphal or not, this "burning of the English set books" is a powerful symbol of the desire and the determination to replace them with a different idiom. As a result, we see the saturation with song and understand the writers' need for writing in and with song.

Kofi Anyidoho's agenda belongs to this same tradition and shares many of the characteristics articulated and practiced by his predecessors such as p'Bitek and Ngugi wa Thiong'o. Anyidoho's song model, so pervasive in his *Praise Song for The Land*, is the Ewe dirge, which he researched and extensively analyzed. He stresses the need to go to "the ancient dirge singers" for wisdom, and indeed for form:

The eloquence of dirge singers  
is a searchlight through nightmares  
It is a walking stick in the cripple's hands  
a key to secret doors that lead  
into treasure caves of the soul of life. (53)

His *sankofa* act, the return to the ancient sages for light, culminates in a text saturated with the wisdom of ages, and encased in lyrics of exaltation, celebration, admonition, and actual dirges, many of which he sings in the audio part of the publication. Furthermore, his statement about the word in print no longer having the capacity to hold the "burden of his voice" signals an intensifying progression into saturating his work with the oral sung medium.

In *Without a Name*, Yvonne Vera, on the other hand, provides an example of saturation with song in a work emanating partly from "the horizontal perspective" referenced earlier, a work whose reliance on song for meaning might not immediately be obvious. Undoubtedly, Vera's novel demonstrates that a feminist deployment of song as re-placement strategy can expand song's subversive power to challenge and relocate the abstract image of the African woman within the well-known "Mother Africa" trope in which woman is coalesced into the raped, colonized land of postcolonial literature.

Set in the turbulence of Zimbabwe's last war of liberation, the heroine's journey from fragmentation to wholeness is ingeniously structured around the absence and presence of the power of song or music. (Song can be read as implicated in the concept of music.) The absence of song at the beginning of the novel is metaphorically woven into the rape scene that traumatizes the heroine, Mazvita, and triggers her flight from the war torn land (her village) in search of regaining wholeness and self-fulfillment in the city. This metaphoric recourse to song is best understood if placed in the general context of the African folklore tradition. Within many folktales, a bird that witnesses crime or any type of distress generally succeeds in bringing rescue by singing the predicament or conveying the distress call to potential rescuers. The victim could be any person facing impossible odds: a hunter with a broken leg stranded in the forest, a kidnapped child, or a woman in distress. In the case of Mazvita, the witness bird fails to use its power to sing a distress call. Its song is replaced by a cry that silences and prevents the victim from even uttering her own distress call. Unlike the folldoric scenario, Mazvita's rape is real. She is pulled down on to the land and raped by a freedom fighter who addresses her as "sister." Ironically, he is caught in the circle of colonial violence as he simultaneously risks his own life to free the land (for her) from the colonizing powers. The bird, contrary to expectation, and like the freedom fighter who rapes his "sister," turns foe and participates only in silencing a fellow victim. Vera successfully employs the deprivation of song's power to signal the enormity of the crime and to reidiomize language that romanticizes woman within the postcolonial struggles. As in *Upon This Mountain*, the placement of the song scenario at the beginning of the novel functions as a signal that song/music will be at the core of the narrative structure. Subsequently, Vera scatters references to song in the novel to mark fragmentation of the female soul in the city during the war. In one unique and striking reference to song she signal the intensity of Mazvita's trauma when, as a wrecked and destitute mother, she sings a lullaby to her baby—whom she has just asphyxiated. This evocation of song relocates our perception from the associations of tenderness to realities of horror and terror. Finally, towards the end of the text, Vera creates an amazingly sophisticated scenario when she stages the concluding phase of Mazvita's return to the village to secretly bury the dead child. In this case, Vera not only saturates the body of the text with song, she saturates Mazvita's actual body with song/music as the heroine encounters the redeeming and healing power of *mbira* (song culminated into music) that restores her physically, emotionally and spiritually. I shall return

to this scenario later for a more detailed look at the significance of this particular use of music.

What, then, does the saturation with song achieve in the texts? Textual saturation with song contributes to the "seizure" of the language of the colonizer and to relocating it by boldly introducing song as the idiom of the colonized. Moreover, saturation with song appears to create an enabling environment in which other language experiments can be attempted. *Upon this Mountain* offers a striking example where a masterful deployment of song can transform other aspects of a text. Wangusa's subversive idiom is not limited to translations of songs but it also infiltrates the language in the narrative, thus illustrating the use of saturation as an analytical category in these literatures. The reader feels that, although the novel is not a translation, its style is translingual, and almost at every available opportunity, the author adopts Lumasaaba-derived expressions at the expense of standard English idiom (Lumasaaba is his native language). The resulting lyricism is a strategy that harmonizes the narrative segments into the actual songs of the text to create a "songfully" coherent whole. Indeed, of the four authors under discussion, Wangusa is the most consciously experimental with language, and employs several variations on this challenge to English. An ideal example of this challenge is the elaborate montage in the sequence in chapter 4, where a bible teacher translates a Western song, Psalm I from English and gets her pupil, Mwambu, to recite it to an audience "in the language of his people" (19-21). This linguistic sleight of hand hints at the delicate complexity of *Upon This Mountain* and other song-texts. As the reader takes in the English words of Psalm I in the narrative, s/he is left in no doubt that the text is heard ("earwitnessed") in the language of Mwambu's people, as a translation from English! Even more fascinating is the reflexive commentary, so often done in this text, on the kind of communication in process:

She [the bible teacher] said she had translated them from the red man's *fofifoti* [incomprehensible language] in her simple way, and that if someone translated them back into *fofifoti* they might sound so different. (20)

Wangusa successfully reidiomizes and resituates the English language in the psalm, irreversibly transforming it into Lumasaaba as it makes the transition from the printed page to the aural Lumasaaba medium.

## Metatextuality

Another key subversive and defining characteristic of the song-text complements and reinforces saturation. It is a manifest and deliberate *metatexttality* of song. In other words, the authors not only introduce songs into their texts but also explicitly comment, within the texts, on the song's meaning and function. The use of song titles in p'Bitek and Anyidoho, for instance, is in itself an aspect of metatextuality. The titles alert the reader from the start that they are likely to be preoccupied with song.

In Anyidoho, the whole text of *Praise Song for The Land* may be read as meta-text on song. In his introduction, the author signals his need to resort to the song mode because of the limitations of the colonial printed text. Anyidoho is clear about his project as a postcolonial poet and author: "Many of us may have forgotten the old traditional talent of the poet and musician co-existing in the same artist, but we can at least make a start through collaboration between musicians and writers" (17). This explicit statement should be related to Anyidoho's recognition, quoted earlier, of the dirge-singers as the source of or key to contemporary wisdom and inspiration. The declaration in *Praise Son for The Land* affirms not only the importance of the poet-singer, but also the role of song itself—the medium of the poet-musician—as empowering language. Anyidoho even gives the rationale (albeit somewhat cryptically) for its adoption in his text: "it has become obvious to me that the word as print can no longer carry the full burden of my voice. It certainly cannot deliver my voice to all the people I call My People" (16). A little later he elaborates on this statement, in more concrete and practical terms, by quoting his much earlier intimation that: "The poetry of print is the domain of the eyewitness, the poetry of sound, the domain of the earwitness. Africa's functionally literate population is believed to be no more than 10%. It follows therefore that the dominant poetic world of Africa is the world of the earwitness" (16-17). Against this backdrop, the author's assertion in the text that he wants to sing is thoroughly convincing. The verses of the text are themselves insistently declarative of their "songness." The refrain in the tide poem, which is itself the opening piece of a section in the collection subtitled "ultimate song of Joy," is characteristic:

I want to sing a Praiselove  
For The land I must sing a  
PraiseSong For Our  
People (52-60)

Incidentally, audibility, the "world of the earwitness" mentioned by Anyidoho, is unquestionably central to the "song-text," and it may be regarded as an aspect of the iconic metatextuality. It certainly helps the text to call attention to itself as "sound." Indeed, of the four texts under discussion, three have or have had an explicitly oral dimension. Anyidoho's *Praise Song for The Land* has been published both in print and on compact disks and cassette. *I Will Many When I Want* developed as theatrical improvisation and, as a published play, it is expected to find its completion in live performance. *Song of Lawino*, in the original Acholi, was first presented at arts festivals and then broadcast over Radio Uganda, and, as p'Bitek himself recounts in an interview with Peter Darling (reproduced in *Africa's Cultural Revolution*): "When *Song of Laivino* was first produced it was an object of great debate in northern Uganda, in Gulu at least. It was debated in the pubs and in dancing places. It was written in the vernacular [*sic*] and everybody who was around who heard it, enjoyed it... So, like the songs of the countryside, the people heard it..." (44).

The auditory nature of *Upon This Mountain* may not be easy to illustrate in a discussion of this nature, but it is extensive, not only through the recurrent references to utterance and hearing, but also through the consciously structured symmetry of its narrative." Hence, in an intricate manner, the novel is signifying on itself or, in the terms of this discussion, "metatextualizing" about itself. In his unpublished paper, "The Novel as Language About Itself," Austin L. Bukenya has described this quality of the novel as its "reverberation."

Clearly, even where the reference to song may be less obvious, there are abundant metatextual reflections or representations. The dramatic monologue in *Song of Laivino* is presented as an extended satirical song in thirteen movements, a structure directly comparable to the oral texts p'Bitek collected and published in *Horn of My Love* (1974). Indeed, some of the texts in this collection were incorporated into movements of *Song of Lawino*. (For example, see the love song, "She has Taken the Road to Nimule," in the final movement.) Beyond this, references to song and its power keep appearing in the text. Lawino's main source of pride is that, in her youth, she was the leader of the chorus of girls:

I was chief of youths  
I sang sweetly  
When I was grinding millet.  
Nobody's voice was sweeter than mine!

And in the arena I sang  
the solos Loud and  
clear... (48)

Once again, song's metatextuality is sophisticatedly executed in one of the most memorable moments in *Without a Name*. Vera's use of the metatextuality of song is already implied in the above discussion of saturation showing the porous and mutually enriching nature of these analytical categories. After committing infanticide, Mazvita, is returning home by bus, secretly carrying the corpse of her dead child on her back. Her excruciating guilt and sincere repentance makes her long "to be discovered, to be punished, to be thrown out of the bus" (104). Vera creates and orchestrates a scenario in which *mbira* music materializes as a rehabilitative redemptive force through which Mazvita obtains the forgiveness that propels towards regaining wholeness:

The people in the bus continued their chatter they laughed loud ... Mazvita listened through that din of voices and received the mbira sound, guided it towards herself. She held her fingers tightly together. It fell in drops, the sound, into her cupped hands. She found the mbira. It was beneficent. The sound came to her in subduing waves, in growing pitch, in laps of clear water. Water. She felt the water slow and effortless and elegant.... The mbira vibrated through the crowd, reached her with an intact rhythm, a profound tonality, a promise, a promise graceful and simple. She had awakened ... The sound looped in waves over her head, curled downwards, sunk deep into her chest where she had been irrevocably wounded, touching her gently and faithfully, tenderly and with mercy. There was forgiveness because she had longed for it. (78-79)

The sexual overtones in the description of this encounter with *mbira* cannot be missed. To comprehend the magnitude of the power of *mbira*, one should keep in mind that even the beautiful sexual encounter previously experienced by Mazvita with Nyennyedzi (after the rape incident) was incapable of diminishing her trauma. Simultaneously physical, spiritual, and erotic, this passage powerfully hints at music as a healing force. For it is through the intimacy with music in those moments on the bus that the heroine is able to create a new sexual memory to counteract and replace memories of rape in her violated body and her traumatized psyche. This is metatextuality at its best. By extension, could song in the postcolonial text consist of the medium that will metaphorically heal Africa's violated land? Will such an interpretive approach privilege woman's material experience of rape as the starting point to metaphorizing the colonial rape of the continent?

In Ngugi wa Thion'go, the dramatic nature of *7 Will Marry When I Want* significantly reduces the need for metatextual comment. Even so, there is no shortage of reflexive comment in either the songs or in dialogue. For example, the choral refrain in the *mucung'wa* song (11-13) becomes a thematic motif recurring later in the play:

Whose homestead is this  
Where my voice is raised in song?  
In dialogue, the *mucung'wa* dance "vision," in which the above is sung, is itself prompted by exchanges about the songs and dances of times past:  
Don't you remember before the Emergency  
How I used to sing and dance the *Mucung'wa* dance? (11)

The Emergency was the set of restrictions imposed by the British colonists on Kenya between 1952 and 1962 in an attempt to contain the Mau Mau freedom struggle. Its juxtaposition here with the singing and the dancing *o^Mumng'iva* suggests the ravages of colonialism on the Gikuyu way of life. Metatextuality is also abundant in *Upon This Mountain*. Crucial moments in the action are unraveled through song, almost always with the narrator's explicit commentary about the function of the song. Thus, a candidate for circumcision approaches the climax of his ordeal not only with song but with the author's detailed depiction of what the song does: "And then the song leader ... dream floated ahead of them" (62).

In the case of the nuptial song, the narrator introduces not only the verses but also their illocutionary force: "Murumbi's womenfolk came to fetch Khalayi on the nuptial day, insolently and provocatively singing as they danced their way into the compound" (92).

Beyond the metatextual characteristic, explicit and implicit linguistic clashes are not rare, either in the remaining text of *Upon This Mountain* or in the other texts under discussion. Although it is *a fait accompli* that the colonial language, English, has been imposed on the colonized people and they realize they have to use it to negotiate their survival, English and other colonial languages remain issues of contention invoked in the song-texts. Thus, in *Upon This Mountain* the local people almost invariably refer to English as *fofifoti*, an ideophone for incomprehensible blabber. In *Song of Mivino*, p'Bitek's lament over the colonized people's "apemanship" of the colonizer, the disillusioned heroine of the tide, who "used to admire" Ocol, her husband, "speaking English," now realizes the colonizer's language is a tool of oppression and one of the "roadblocks" on the way to her identity. She complains in her song:

"He abuses me in English" (35). To the postcolonial writer, apparently doomed to use the colonizer's language as a tool of not only communicating and negotiating his/her space but also of creating and recreating significance out of his/her experience, the struggle is excruciating. The postcolonial writers' response to this challenge is ongoing. One of the strategies that they adopt is the deliberate "othering" of the English of their texts. In all the song-texts under discussion here, as in many other well-known African texts, such as Gabriel Okara's *The Voice*, although the overt text is in English, any discerning reader quickly notices that the idiom is not necessarily English. In most cases the "peculiar" turns of phrase can be traced to specific African languages, like Ewe in Anyidoho, Lumasaaba in Wangusa, Gikuyu in Ngugi, and Acholi in p'Bitek. This is both subversion of the colonial medium and assertion of African expression, the ultimate expression of the language-challenge attribute of the song-texts.

First, idiomatic "othering" seizes the language of the colonizer and dislocates/relocates or transforms it by introducing the idiom of the colonized into the texts. This is done in many different ways, including the direct quotation of songs in African languages and the deliberately "distorted" translation of the song-texts into the colonial language. Occasionally, no translations are given at all, as in the case of Anyidoho's:

*Husago Husago*  
*Misego Misego Misego*  
*Misego GonGon Misego*  
*Misego GonGonGoGon Misego* (108-13)

The absence of translation might suggest an unapologetic challenge to the [colonial] reader—the "native" does not always have to communicate with the colonizer—although it raises practical issues given the continent's multi-ethnic composition. On the other hand, one does not have to know the words to feel the song. Nor does the song have to have words to make sense in the context of African expression. Nevertheless, even where translations are given, several strategies are employed to dislodge the colonial idiom. Sometimes the song-texts are given side by side or in tandem, with the original African text coming first, followed by the colonial language translation, as in this example from *Upon This Mountain*:

*Imbalikka yamakana*  
*Kana ikhurure yaya!*  
*A—e—e E—e E—e!*  
*Simakulu wa Murumbi*  
*Kana akhufuluke,yaya*  
*A—e—e E—e E----e!*  
 Polygamy is such a terror It will  
 undo you, dear! Senior wife of  
 Murumbi How she will vex you,  
 dear! (93)

In such cases, the authors are not only striving for authenticity but also asserting the legitimacy of the indigenous text and its place within the structure. Indeed, where the translation is given in tandem, the effect is to underline the primacy of the original African language song-text over the translation. This also relates to the aspect of visual reclamation, discussed above.

Indeed, it is striking that several African postcolonial writers (including most of those discussed here), even when they publish in English, seem to work from an African language, with the English text a mere rendering (or "version") of the original. Ngugi's *I Will Marry When I Want* was originally performed and published in Gikuyu (as *Ngahika Ndeenda*). P'Bitek's *Song of ~Lawino* is the best example of a postcolonial English classic that started as a translation from the Acholi *Per pa Lawino*,

But even where the original is not given, song-text strategists try to ensure that the linguistic place of the African author and his or her audience is emphasized. The translations, as suggested earlier, are deliberately "indigenized." Readers who are unaware of this strategy are often put off by it, assuming either incompetence or obscurity on the part of the authors. Thus, Okot p'Bitek, whose *Song of Laivino* best exemplifies the strategies mentioned above, faced a great deal of resistance in his early attempts to have his text published. Indeed, it was rejected by all the established publishers Nairobi at the time, mainly on grounds of its nonstandard English language

and literary style.<sup>3</sup> It is of course absurd to assume that an author like p'Bitek, with a degree from Oxford would be incompetent with standard English.

However, Okot p'Bitek was asserting the validity of African texts, even those in the colonizer's language, by demonstrating that they did not need to establish their legitimacy by conforming to Western colonial norms. In the end, p'Bitek actually enriches the target language, English, by bending it to the demands and requirements of his indigenous source language through the song medium.

The people's songs, as a distinct language, function as the medium for yet another important characteristic of the song-text that I label *the language challenge*. The global imperial project serves to illustrate the backdrop to the linguistic response of the colonized. The marginalization of the people's language, in the process of laying claim to their land, in Article 50 of the Tianjin Treaty by which the British claim Chinese land typifies and more than justifies the language challenge by the colonized peoples.

All official communications, addressed by the Diplomat and Consular Agents of Her Majesty the Queen to the Chinese authorities, shall, henceforth, be written in English. They will for the present be accompanied by a Chinese version, but it is understood that, in the event of there being any difference of meaning between the English and Chinese texts, the English Government will hold the sense as expressed in the English text to be the correct sense. This provision is to apply to the Treaty now negotiated, the Chinese text of which has been carefully corrected by the English original (Article 50 of the Tianjin Treaty signed between China and Great Britain in 1858).

This broader contest represented in both taking the land and appropriating the language materializes again in the African context as described by Ngugi wa Thiong'o:

It was after the declaration of a state of emergency over Kenya in 1952 that all schools run by patriotic nationalists were taken over by the colonial regime and were placed under the District education Boards chaired by Englishmen.... In Kenya, English became more than a language: it became *the* language, and all the others had to bow before it in deference." (*Decolonizing* 11)

I am aware of the debates this language issue has raised, given that no one language is shared, with a few exceptions, among people of a single nation, let alone across Africa, but that debate falls outside the scope of this discussion.

Obviously, colonized space is, by definition, contested space, and one of the most conspicuous aspects of the contest is language. The colonizer imposes his/her language on the native and the native is in a constant battle to subvert and overthrow the imposition. In our case, song becomes the weapon in this context. Wangusa elaborates a striking illustration of this struggle in a passage that aptly draws the linguistic battle lines. This linguistic battle provides a plausible reason for the infusion of song in *Upon This Mountain* as a replacement strategy for the imposed colonial language. The single incident in the novel becomes a key moment for the theorizing of song here and in other texts. It makes the discussion of language an integral part of the argument for the function of song. As mentioned above, the novel revolves around Mwambu, a Ugandan boy growing up under the British "Protectorate" and struggling to find his "manhood" between ethnic expectations and colonial impositions. The extract below can be interpreted as a dramatization of Article 50, and read as part of the motivating force behind the song-text form in *Upon This Mountain*. In the extract, Mwambu has joined the colonial school, Elgosec, (the British have claimed Uganda for themselves and renamed the people's Mountain Masaaba, Mt. Elgon). They have built a secondary school that Mwambu is attending. In the language confrontation here, Mwambu is trying to negotiate a purchase with Mrs. Graves, the school canteen proprietor, who is also the wife of the colonial school teacher, who later seduces/rapes Mwambu's girlfriend.

"And what do you want to buy?" she [Mrs. Graves] asked ...

Mwambu was very sure he said he wanted, a cake, there being a whole basket of cakes on the counter.

"Sorry, I don't have any!" she announced very firmly....

"And what are these?" he asked, pointing at the cakes.

"Oh, these?" she said, superiorly craning her long neck. "But you said you wanted a *kek*. These are *keiks*. One is a *keik* not a *kek*"

Mwambu did not have the slightest idea what the august lady was going on about.

"So you want a *keik*?" she pursued mercilessly.

"Yes, mad ..., I mean, Mrs. Graves. That's what I still want."

"What you j'//want!" she fumed. "No, that's what you *now* want." (48)

This disconcerting exchange represents language, not simply as a means of communication, but as a colonizing force. In discussing the imperialism of



language in *Moving the Center* (1993), Ngugi Wa Thiong'o states that when nations interact with each other as equals, the English language is used merely as a tool of communication "to facilitate commerce, trade, tourism and other links to foreign nations" (31). He further explains that under imperialism, when nations encounter each other as oppressor and oppressed, language becomes "more than a simple means of communication" (31). In the case of Mwambu and Mrs. Graves, if language in the cited incident simply functioned as a means of communication within the purchase transaction, Mrs. Graves, who actually knew what the young boy meant by *kek*, would have completed the transaction without the agonizing exchange. In the final analysis, does Mwambu actually end up having his "keik" and eating it, too? The situation becomes more complex.

In the segment that follows this incident in the novel, Wangusa leaves no ambiguity as he links this episode to overall colonial mastery. Mwambu wins a victory of sorts by resisting the English pronunciation, but not before Mrs. Graves marks him as colonized and subjugated, with all the sexual overtones: After receiving the payment for the cake, Mrs. Graves's "naked thumb and second finger of her right hand ritually lifted the said cake and transferred it to Mwambu's vexed ownership" (49). The thumb is considered a "male finger" in Mwambu's and many other African cultures. The sexual insinuations of these final moments of the encounter recall the well-known "penetration of the African continent" and the ongoing struggle against subjugation. Mwambu, the boy/man, is feminized by the raping gesture of the female colonial power. Furthermore, the "penetration of the African continent is complete when, towards the end of the novel, when, not Mrs. Graves, but her husband, the Reverend Graves, is caught in a sexual encounter with Mwambu's girlfriend in the sacristy. Here the linguistic clash materializes in the ultimate conquering gesture, the subjugation of the female figure with its traditional symbolism of land within the mother Africa trope. But, as previously mentioned, Wangusa uses song as a means of subverting the colonial language, represented here by the imposed English pronunciation of "cake" by Mrs. Graves. Thus, Wangusa's representative song-text successfully counteracts and re-replaces colonial language. However, in the process, Wangusa insinuates and reinforces the romanticized "Mother Africa trope" through gestures, language and incidents.

How does Vera's song-text expand "re-placement" beyond the response to the colonial language? She does so through a horizontal discourse that unambiguously writes rape on to the body of a "real" woman trapped in

Zimbabwe's struggle to liberate the land. "She employs song and music not only to bring to life the consequences of rape, but also to demystify the idealization of woman and to unbind her from the land implicated in the Mother Africa trope? Tuzyline Jita Allan best articulates the context for this interpretation:

Africa's quintessential rape narrative tells the story of the economic and cultural ravishment of the continent by foreign prowlers and native sons. The feminization (and idealization) of Africa finds its finest expression in the trope of rape which carries a potent threat of displacing "real" women in rape discourse... Turning the discourse of rape from the embodied figure of Africa to the bodies of women constitutes an urgent and mammoth challenge for African women writers given their dual sense of loyalty to woman and nation. (207-25)

Vera's novel meets this challenge as she narrates her heroine's journey. The author unflinchingly describes the physical and emotional violence dealt the young woman and merges the discourse of woman, land, and rape within the real and symbolic framework of song.

Mazvita endures rape, not once but twice. Her story is punctuated by traumatizing memories of rape by a man with a gun who, as hinted earlier, says to her, "you are my sister" then rapes her. Because she had been unable to see the rapist's face, she "transferred the hate to the moment itself, to the morning, *to the land*" (emphasis added) (36). Later Vera adds, "she hated the land that pressed beneath her back as the man moved impatiently above her, into her, past her... She connected him only to the land. It was the land that had come toward her... The land had allowed the man to grow from itself into her body" (37). Vera thus creates a disjuncture between woman and the colonized land implicating it in the rape crime. Through the absence of song as rescue, Vera succeeds in rewriting the woman/land construct that haunts the conventional postcolonial text in the mother Africa trope. She creates a heroine who flees to the city, Harare, to be "protected from the hills and the land" (64). Unfortunately, the city too, turns out to be a place devoid of song, a place where the black women offer their bodies as "ransom for their land" (72).

It is instructive to realize that although Mazvita wants to go the city to forget the land, Nyenyedzi, the boyfriend she meets after fleeing the village, is afraid of the city, characterizing it as a place where "You can forget your

own mother." He emphatically declares "I cannot go to Harare. I like the land I cannot leave the land and go to a strange unwelcome place" (30).

Here the amalgamation of "mother" and "land" is obvious. It is the man, who is unaware of the merging of postcolonial war of liberation with violence against woman, who still retains the idealization of the land and its fusion with mother Africa. The author makes it clear that the boyfriend's love and idealization of the land probably stems from his ignorance of the totality of Mazvita's story, for:

She had not told him;  
How she had run through the mist with torn clothes.... how the sky behind her exploded as the village beyond the river burned, and she shouted loud because her arms reached forward, but not forward enough to rescue the people. To put out the flames ... then she fell down, looked beneath the mist at the burning hut because the mist had lifted.... (36-37)

Thus, Yvonne Vera, in *Without a Name*, provides a unique angle to the replacement/relocation concept as she engages song to re-write the Mother Africa trope thereby expanding the subversive concept of song as the language in which to cry. She relocates, not only the colonial language, but also the postcolonial rhetoric that collapses the land (as mother Africa) into an abstracted African woman. All the texts explored here epitomize the centrality of song as an indigenous form and as a language of subversion in the postcolonial struggle for literary identity. Most of all, these texts exemplify the cross-genre characteristics of "song texts" and hence inspire new ways of conceptualizing postcolonial texts.

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