

# MAGIC REALISM AS POSTCOLONIAL AESTHETICS IN AFRICAN AND AFRODIASPORIC LITERATURES

Ousmane Ngom

*Université Gaston Berger*

**196** The concept of magic realism, with its irreducible opposition, arises from the axiological opposites of Western and Third World antithetical visions and perspectives, such as modernity and decadence, materiality and spirituality, or rationality and fantasy (Le Fustec 127; Mumtaz 108). In this article, I contend that, by cutting across the real and the magic, the literary strategy of magic realism is an apt tool for representing the dual natures of post-independence Africa and post-emancipation America, such as the contradictions contained in the terminology of “postcolonialism.” In the frame of this work I understand postcolonialism as a situation, a mode or theory that simultaneously negates and confirms the institution of colonialism, a continuous “imperial process from the moment of colonization to the present day” (Ashcroft 2). The term *postcolonial aesthetics* refers to the range of literary, artistic, and cultural tools that formerly colonized peoples use to voice their situations that result from the colonial experience, especially with the view of countering colonial and neocolonial enterprises. Indeed, “postcolonial thinking is basically concerned with speaking for/about the other and providing the subaltern with tools of resistance” (Nedae 40). As such, I consider magic realism and other aesthetic elements of the subaltern culture of which it is a product as tools of “resistance to the violence of official history” (Donadey 113).

Ngũgĩ wa Thiong’o’s *Matigari*, Toni Morrison’s *Beloved*, and Boubacar Boris Diop’s *Doomi Golo*, *The Hidden Notebooks* (hereafter referred to as *Doomi Golo*)<sup>1</sup> use mythical characters and circumstances to aesthetically reveal the unreal reality of postcolonialism by narrating the unnarratable. Because it encompasses multiple types of characters in the mythic figure and condenses time and space, magic realism can transversally examine, and offer a firsthand narrative about, African and Afrodiasporic societies before, during, and after colonization, thus countering the colonialist discourse that denies history and culture to the colonized. For this reason,

Homi K. Bhabha suggests that “magic realism [...] becomes the literary language of the emergent postcolonial world” (7). The mythic figures in these three novels—Matigari, Ali Kaboye, and *Beloved*—are polymorphic characters who can physically and psychologically commute easily to different times and places. They transcend the history of their respective countries with no concern for boundaries of time or space. This article examines the modalities at play in the writing of magic realism, and shows how magic realism is both an interface between history and memory for the reconstruction of the postcolonial past and an instrument for the regeneration of the African identity and culture.

## THE AMBIVALENT CHARACTERIZATION OF THE MAGIC REALIST FIGURE

The inscription of the matrix of myth in the novel reconfigures the writing of this genre since “magical realism is defined by the paradoxically equal and non-hierarchical coexistence of realism and magic” (Aldea 145). A characteristic of magic realist writing, as Aldea contends, is the levelling of the magic and realist modes so that they constitute a crossroad between the fairy tale and social realism genres. This means that neither the magical nor the realist component supersedes or outweighs the other; they are, rather, at the same diegetic level. But at the same time, she also observes, following Chanady, that it is crucial that the real and the magic be perceived as two distinct elements in the text. In fact, the unequivocal presence of the two different “codes” (Aldea 145) is what differentiates magical realism from fairy tales and fantasy. The narration upholds a dialogical discourse, in the Ricoeurian term, meaning two dissonant voices operating at the same scale, neither embedding the other. The ironic co-presence of these contradictory qualities in a novel influences the modalities of the story’s components, including narration, characterization, representation of time and space, and language. The characterization of the magic figure in a magic realist novel vacillates between the construction of the mythical hero and the representation of the realistic, ordinary character. The character thus created displays a puzzling bipolarity in that he/she can physically and psychologically move from one end to another, leaving simultaneously the impression of a divine and a commonplace creature. Therefore, two scriptural modalities dialogically contend in the construction of the mythical character who embodies an irreconcilable duality.

Matigari, Ali Kaboye, and *Beloved* epitomize the contradictions of magic realist figures, at once bestowed with supernatural qualities and entangled by realistic human flaws. In fact, these mythic figures are polymorphic characters who can appear easily in different times and places. Matigari may appear young and robust, or old and frail, depending on his emotions, while Ali and *Beloved* can metamorphose into various shapes ranging from inanimate to animate beings. They all symbolize

the founding ancestors of their different communities and are embodiments not only of wisdom and temerity, but also of naïveté and even madness.

The characterizations of Matigari, Ali Kaboye, and Beloved shift them between two opposite poles. A description of Matigari opens his eponymous novel, yet he is not named until page twenty, before which terms such as “the man” and pronouns such as “he/his/him” are used to refer to him. He is presented bearing war accoutrements and weapons, with emphasis put on his extraordinary experience in the jungle: “He held an AK47 in his right hand. His left hand was raised to shield his face while he looked across the river, as he had often done over many years, across many hills and valleys, in the four corners of the globe” (Ngūgī 3). This type of enigmatic set-up presents the reader with an expectation of prowess from the character. Yet, the climax of this presentation flattens when Matigari is stoned by children who take him for a madman.

198 Similarly, Ali Kaboye appears to the reader for the first time three-quarters of the way through *Doomi Golo*, in which he is one of the two narrators and the most striking figure. In his first appearance, Ali is announced by the public crier, who beats the royal drum to rouse the entire population of Niarela to the meeting square. What the reader first discovers about Ali are his magical attributes: “[Ali’s] voice boomed across Niarela, so forceful it made not only trees but even brick walls tremble. It seemed to be coming from everywhere at once, from the sky, from the depths of the earth and from the houses nearby” (Diop 154). But the sublime image of Ali’s entrance at the public gathering, enhanced by referring to him as “the Prince,” “the Sovereign,” and “the Commander of the Two River Banks,” is subsequently marred by Nguiran’s recollection of him as a vagrant lunatic with “his pestilential smell, his festering sores, and especially his openly exposed private parts which he was in the habit of scratching frequently and vigorously” (Diop 155). The juxtaposition of these contradictory depictions of Ali puts the reader in a situation of perplexity and expectancy as the character becomes more enigmatic.

Beloved, who “was first a spectral entity that later took on flesh” (Soon Ng 244), is a fragile force, a wrathful baby ghost who can wreak havoc on a whole house, throw objects, and scare away the dog and Sethe’s two boys, yet is temporarily defeated by Paul D., her mother’s lover. Sivaraj and Bharathi observe that “Beloved’s elusive, complex identity is central to understand[ing] the novel” (374). Although she appears in her human form, grown to the body size she would have reached had she survived, she behaves whimsically and inarticulately, both in action and language, like the toddler she was when she died. Beloved is “the figure of both grief and outrage” (Suprajitno 63). She is terrible yet tender, powerful yet fragile, possessive yet destructive. As “the reincarnation of the guilt that suffocates [Sethe]” (Nidhin and Subin 223), Beloved nurtures a love-hate feeling toward her mother. The monologue in which she states “Sethe is mine” suggests that Beloved yearns to possess her mother exclusively, irrespective of her sister, Denver, and her mother’s lover, Paul D. However, she has plans to destroy her mother to avenge her abandonment. In the

same way, she is best described by her presence-absence state. Although she is absent in the beginning of the novel, she nonetheless haunts the house and its inhabitants with her devastating ghostly presence. However, when she is invited into the house in her human form, despite her supernatural strength, she is made fragile by her haunting visions of imminent dismemberment and of her untimely return to her ghostly world. For example, Beloved is panic-stricken the first time she loses a tooth:

Beloved looked at the tooth and thought, this is it. Next would be her arm, her hand, a toe. Pieces of her would drop maybe one at a time, maybe all at once. Or on one of those mornings before Denver woke and after Sethe left she would fly apart. It is difficult keeping her head on her neck, her legs attached to her hips when she is by herself. Among the things she could not remember was when she first knew that she could wake up any day and find herself in pieces. She had two dreams: exploding and being swallowed. (Morrison 133)

Beloved's ontological distress shows her psychic disorder. In fact, as already seen in the case of Ali, all three magic realist figures display a dialectic of reason and madness. They demonstrate superior intelligence, but also madness, or at least extreme naïveté. For instance, Matigari is perceived as a wandering madman who walks around the entire country asking silly questions and making irrational claims. Consequently, he is imprisoned and interned in a psychiatric hospital for embarking on a journey he terms "the quest for truth and justice." Thus, Matigari sinks into a profound state of disillusionment because of the cruelty of the state authorities and the inertia of a long-time self-abandoned population. The lyrical complaints and helpless interjections that punctuate his speech, such as "this world is upside-down" (Ngũgĩ 97, 98, 138, 150), show the vulnerability of the man faced with the inarticulacy of modern-day Kenya. These characters can be regarded as so idealistic that they are out of touch with the reality of survival faced by their fellow citizens, which causes them much disillusionment and despair.

Coming out of the forest, Matigari is shocked to find out that independence is a fraud. He then tries to gather his entire community to seek a true liberation of Kenya, but is always diverted from his main objective, or at least is constantly bound to redefine new priorities, which propels the narrative into a turbulent adventure. Toward the end of the novel, he is compelled to remove his belt of peace and unearths his weapons when he realizes that he had prematurely buried them. In *Doomi Golo*, Ali metamorphoses several times. When the reader sees him for the first time on the occasion of his first comeback, he had already undergone a transformation that differentiates him from the wandering and filthy fool that Nguirane describes. He ultimately presents himself as the prince of the country and increasingly displays supernatural powers. Beloved was an ordinary baby, killed by her mother to save her from the awful institution of slavery. She first manifests herself spiritually to condemn her mother and community. When she is defeated by Paul D., who had moved into the house, Beloved transmutes into her physical shape to carry out her vengeance. Such characterizations place the magic realist figures in a dual position,

behaving sometimes as ordinary people but, in other situations, revealing supernatural knowledge and power beyond the understanding of their contemporaries.

These three magic realist characters, in different ways and degrees, inspire and catalyze revolutionary actions. Nevertheless, they experience severe misunderstandings before their communities can benefit from their actions. Even though most of the time she acts unconsciously, Beloved's references to the history of slavery have the effect of compelling her community to question their own choices during that time and, more particularly, in the events causing her death. Her presence alone is a live reminder to Sethe of her infanticide, and to the community of Cincinnati of their guilt of betrayal. In fact, it is out of jealousy that they did not warn Baby Suggs of the arrival of the slave hunters coming to the city to reclaim the runaway Sethe and her children. Unless they face this tragedy, or "misery," as the chapter is entitled, they will not be able to move forward.

200 Matigari calls his people for a rebellion against the neocolonial state and sensitizes them on the paralyzing nature of fear: "Great fear breeds great misery in the land. Give a little sacrifice to appease a thieving evil spirit, and this will only whet its appetite and greed for more" (Ngũgĩ 90-91). In fact, Ngũgĩ's description of Kenya reveals a country of terror, in which opposition to the regime is suppressed in blood, and honest people are arbitrarily arrested and detained without trial. The most telling examples of the government's will to silence the people by any means are the assassination of the charismatic trade-union leader Ngarũro wa Kĩrĩro and the killing and wounding of several demonstrators among the protesting workers and students. Moreover, an order is issued to shoot on sight anyone displaying approval of Matigari.

Similarly, Ali Kaboye engages what he calls an everlasting and merciless fight against the hypocrisy of Niarela's inhabitants, whom he sees as morally corrupt and politically inert. When attacked by Baye Ndene and his acolytes, only Nguirane deigns to try to help him. But like the people described in Ngũgĩ's novel, the people of Niarela, daunted by the regime's brutality, prefer to act in the interests of the corrupt local authorities rather than to rally behind Ali Kaboye's call for revolutionary actions. That is why Ali constantly reminds the community of their guilt, as he tells them when they shun him on one occasion:

Of course you can leave! Just go! May the wind speed up your steps! But if that's because you don't want to hear me anymore, let me tell you it will be in vain. No matter how far away you go, my voice will fill your hearts with shame. (Diop 155)

Thus, all three characters want to bring the attention of their communities to their full responsibilities in the difficult situations in which they are living. To do so, they must invoke the painful past their fellow citizens would rather forget. For this purpose, Ali, Matigari, and Beloved resort to devices such as storytelling, and a particular language, in order to unravel the pasts of their nations.

## STORYTELLING AS CONSCIOUSNESS RAISING

The relationship between magic realism and history plays an important role in many magic realist narratives. One of the greatest technical achievements in the three novels discussed here is the creation of characters unbound by time and space. Ali and Matigari stroll through the different phases of their country's history—precolonial, colonial, and post-independence—whereas Beloved can relive events as early as the Middle Passage. Thus, they constitute temporal links among past, present, and future generations, which gives authority and credibility to their stories. Indeed, Beloved can recall the founding of the African diaspora in America, Matigari says he is as old as Kenya, and Ali boasts he is a commander of time overlapping past and future centuries: “I alone, Ali Kaboye, have been given the power to traverse time and crisscross the seas. I hear everything. I see everything. My skull harbors past centuries and those still to come. They are lying there, slumbering, but at my behest they will jump up and cower at my feet” (Diop 244). These mythic characters are masters of time and space, to the extent that their persons merge with the history of the founding of their respective countries.

201

By crafting these types of mythic characters, Ngũgĩ, Diop, and Morrison aim to deliver counter-discourses opposed to the mainstream Western versions of history. Matigari, Ali, and Beloved are posited as the valiant guardians of the African and African-American collective memory who can revise and offer an alternative view to the colonizers' official history. The use of memory allows the reconstitution of the personal and collective history of the colonized that is absent in or neglected by the official discourse. The idea is the use of a grassroots “reconstructed memory” as opposed to Western “deconstructed history” (Sivaraj and Bharathi 2014). Indeed, history is written by the conqueror, and thus minimizes, if not erases, the deeds and achievements of the conquered.

The revisionist discourse that underpins the institutions of slavery and colonization necessitated the development of postcolonial theories such as orientalism (Said) and deconstruction (Derrida), as well as seminal essays such as *The Empire Writes Back* (Ashcroft, Gareths, and Tiffin), *Can the Subaltern Speak?* (Spivak), *Moving the Center* and *Decolonizing the Mind* (Ngũgĩ), and *Africa beyond the Mirror* (Diop). It explains also why colonized peoples resort to non-official channels and non-conventional genres or non-scientific methods such as literature and art to regenerate and perpetuate their own history. For instance, postcolonized orality and literature, relying on memory, are used to produce history that acknowledges the existence and vitality of the precolonial civilization of these communities; hence Achebe's declaration that the main purpose of his novels is to “teach [his] readers that their past—with all its imperfection—was not one long night of savagery from which the first Europeans acting on God's behalf delivered them” (44).

However, since the history of the conquered is replete with shame and pain, both the colonized and the deported Africans suffer from the past and ongoing conse-

quences of Africa's encounter with Europe. Therefore, most of the characters in these three novels are not always ready to face their memory, often leading to a conflicting relationship between the storyteller and their audience. Matigari and Ali Kaboye are fabulous storytellers committed to an ideological conditioning of their communities through stories. As masters in the art of storytelling, they create the characters, situations, and ingredients needed to explain a given situation. Thus, in answering a seemingly trite question from Ngarũro wa Kĩrĩro that is related to his identity, Matigari creates a long tale, as though to say that his single person is insignificant when isolated from the rest of his community. The evolution of the novel is punctuated by this fable. The basic plot on which the fable rests is a man who slaves to build a house but who is robbed of the fruit of his labour by Settler Williams. He then begins an armed struggle to recover his property and suffers painfully before he manages to overthrow the settler and his servant John Boy. Even though the protagonist of the story is anonymous, he is recognized as Matigari himself.

**202** During the quest to gather his family, which constitutes the first part of the novel, Matigari tells the story, in turn, to Ngarũro wa Kĩrĩro, Gũthera, John Boy Jr., and to his prison inmates. In the second part, the same story is told to the priest, then to the Minister of Truth and Justice before a large assembly of employers and workers. It is worth noting that at each occurrence, the tale becomes longer and more intense as it is fuelled by more recent events. Thus, the most finished version adds that the man who had come out of the forest, victorious over Williams and Boy, discovers bitterly that the house for which he fought so ardently at the risk of his life is now the property of the heirs of his former oppressors (Karagöz 2015). Ironically, Matigari is quickly incarcerated—first in a prison cell and then in a psychiatric hospital—forn insisently claiming his right and ownership.

In summary, the story is pedagogical, as Matigari weaves the imagery of the ups and downs of his country's history of oppression, exploitation, and disappointment over derailed independence. The metaphor of the stolen house, therefore, refers metonymically to Kenya. As a result, the first phase of the confiscation of the house represents colonization. Matigari, who tries to reclaim his house, is the epitome of the Mau Mau movement, fighting for independence, whereas Settler Williams and John Boy represent the colonizer/collaborator, and their heirs stand for equally wormy, though more subtly exploitative neocolonialists. In addition, Robert Williams, heir to the house upon his father's death, selling it to John Boy Jr. represents independence as confiscated and disguised. The collaborators are put in power instead of the true patriots who took up arms for independence, leading to a continuation of colonization through the subtle and sophisticated mechanisms of neocolonialism. If, by the end of the story, Matigari decides to set the house on fire rather than allow the usurpers to continue living in it, this suggests that another insurrection is indispensable for a second and true independence. The idea is given impetus as children, peasants, workers, and all the forces of the nation join him in this struggle for a final victory.

Like Matigari, annoyed by his fellow citizens' lack of civic and political commit-

ment, Ali Kaboye uses narrative to call them to action. Through an entangled story echoing other events, more distant in time and space and with a backdrop of a quest for identity, he invites his people to a better understanding of the stakes of modern history. As a ubiquitous character, Ali Kaboye tells a firsthand story of Ndimboye's colonization in the eighteenth century. His narration showcases the colonizer playing on the egocentrism of the Senegalese kings to set them against one another to subjugate the country more easily. Similarly, he tells the story of the merchant of souls who displayed his soul for sale to foreigners at the market. These narratives, which refer to slavery and colonization, focus on the responsibility of his fellow Africans, who are quick to wage internal wars on absurd pretexts while displaying shameful generosity towards foreigners who seek to colonize them. Furthermore, it is with the aim to point to Africans' responsibility that Ali Kaboye narrates the assassination of Patrice Lumumba to the people of Niarela to shake them out of their inertia or at least, as he puts it, to thwart the excuse of saying they did not know (Diop 200). His intention of disturbing Niarela's conscience with the story of Lumumba shows his desire to see them take their destiny into their own hands. For him, the whole world has expressed indignation at Lumumba's heinous and vindictive murder, whereas the inhabitants of Niarela have not showed the slightest concern about this tragic event.

203

Much like Ali Kaboye and Matigari, *Beloved* aims to transform her people through stories of the past; to some extent, she is the embodiment of that past. In fact, according to Claude Le Fustec, "in *Beloved*, Morrison makes this past an actual person, literally sitting at the character's table, as Morrison once put it, and demanding to be heard" (132). As a magic character, she plays an important role as a trigger and catalyzer of memory. She causes Sethe and the community of Cincinnati to relive the tragic individual and collective past they would rather forget. For example, Sethe does not want to remember her slave life in Sweet Home plantation and her infanticide after fleeing slavery. Her survival attitude, as she admits, rests "in keeping the past at bay" (Morrison 42). However, this strategy is fruitless because Sethe is constantly weighed down by the heavy load of shame and guilt: "That she is trapped in trauma and cannot escape is due, ironically, to her repudiation of that trauma by avoiding any discussion of it" (Soon Ng 237).

Like Sethe, the black community suffers from their past as slaves and, above all, because of their betrayal of Baby Suggs and Sethe, which led to the killing of *Beloved*. However, Sethe's and the community's shunning the memory of that tragic event does not allow any healing of the trauma. Instead of processing the past and moving forward, they surrender to it as prisoners and accept self-flagellation as expiation for past sins. However, Bautista dismisses such an attitude as unproductive: "a real problem arises [...] when the memory of slavery turns into victimology, where one can only be authentically 'black' if one has suffered and, worse yet, continues to suffer" (180). *Beloved*'s reappearance is, in this respect, a literary trick to give these characters not only an occasion to process the past, but also a chance to make up for their tragic errors. Yet, even if remembering—or "rememory" as Morrison calls it in this

novel—is a cathartic remedy, it is a daunting exercise that requires re-experiencing the traumatic event; as Amy Denver says to Sethe, “anything dead coming back to life hurts” (Morrison 35). Therefore, the message that these three mythic characters seek to bring home is that remembering the traumatizing episode is a necessary violence insofar as it is compulsory for healing.

Since remembering the past may entail consciousness and action, it is perceived as standing against the agenda of the authorities whose hegemony lies in the ignorance of their people. In *Doomi Golo* and *Matigari*, the neocolonial authorities’ attempts to reduce Ali Kaboye and Matigari to an eternal silence prove that the latter’s stories are seditious, as they valorize resisters and castigate the oppressors and their collaborators. Indicative of the neocolonial power’s will to erase all traces of these two characters are the efforts made to annihilate any counterhegemonic discourse. The silencing enterprise is pushed to the edge of buffoonery when the respective governments hire specialists in misinformation to theorize with great difficulty that Ali Kaboye and Matigari have never existed. In fact, a man going by the title of “the Commander of Dreams” says to the people of Niarela: “In actual fact, let me tell you that the man named Ali Kaboye never existed! You have all dreamed him up in broad daylight, since in this day and age, where vice has gained the upper hand, entire nations can lose their sense of reality!” (Diop 213). According to Gehrman, “in Diop’s novel, oral narration is often politically subversive and involves dangerous consequences” (2005). The authorities are fully aware of the engaging power of oral history on African communities, and therefore do not want to take any risk with people like Ali Kaboye. It is obvious, then, that “the assassination and the attempts to throw Ali Kaboye into oblivion show the desire to silence the collective memory and oral history” (Ngom 203).

Likewise, in *Matigari*, the Minister of Truth and Justice goes further by proposing a rewriting of Kenya’s history by historians of “parrotry,” with the goal of completely eradicating the episode of the Mau Mau Resistance. He argues that all freedom fighters have come out of the forest the very day the country gained independence. Moreover, this movement should no longer be mentioned in a free, independent, and democratic Kenya:

Let us now forget that such people as Matigari ma Njiruungi ever existed. Let us with one accord, like loyal parrots, agree that Matigari ma Njiruungi was just a bad dream. That bit of history was just a bad dream, a nightmare in fact. We have qualified professors here who can write new history for us. [...] Down with Matigari ma Njiruungi! Down with songs from the history of our nightmare! (Ngũgĩ 118-19)

The minister is truly obsessed with eradicating the history of resistance: “No song, no story or play or riddle or proverbs mentioning Matigari ma Njiruungi will be tolerated” (Ngũgĩ 118). But his obsession reveals that his regime is aware of having betrayed Kenya’s hard-won independence to the point of being averse to any sign reminiscent of the Mau Mau resistance. It is obvious, then, why the regime is not inclined to let the people take inspiration from the feats of the violent anticolonial

resistance that brought independence. In fact, in his essay “In Harap Moi’s Kenya History Is Subversive” (114-19), Ngũgĩ shows the paradoxically conflicting relationship that African post-independence leaders such as the former Kenyan president have with the heroic history of their country. They are fully aware that the conditions that had triggered rebellion have not improved, and thus do not want those stories to inspire the present generation. These leaders rewrite history from the colonialist standpoint, as suggested by the Minister’s enterprise with his permanent professors and PhDs in history and in parrotology (117).

In this manner, memory and the oral genres, such as tales and riddles, which give it impetus stand as means of resistance against the neocolonial subjugation enterprise. The fight against oblivion and the celebration of the heroic deeds of the past are vital for the community. The choice of magic realist characters to carry out this mission is highly effective because, unbound by time and space, they journey back through history with the goal of shedding light on the present of their contemporaries. Moreover, these enigmatic characters’ passing down of their message often occurs through a particular language full of images.

205

## MYTH, LANGUAGE, AND SYMBOLISM

The issue of language is worth considering in the African and African-American literary experience because it is a bone of contention between the empire and the subaltern. It can be both a tool of assimilation/alienation and a means of resistance against that alienation/assimilation (Ashcroft et al.). In *Matigari* and *Doomi Golo*, the language issue is obvious, as each novel was written in its author’s native tongue before being translated into English, and both novels explicitly valorize native languages and culture. In *Beloved*, the eponymous character can recall her experience of the Middle Passage and says that in the boat, the slaves were speaking a language different from English. Naan and Sethe’s mother still spoke an African language in America. Therefore, Sethe’s inability to remember her mother’s language illustrates the exiled Africans’ loss of identity as they are cut from their roots and thus more susceptible to subjugation. That is why Verma sustains that the reconstruction of the African-American should necessarily occur through “an authentic portrayal of history” that relies on “memories,” which depends on language (50).

Ngũgĩ, Diop, and Morrison make their characters, most of all the mythic ones, speak in a purified language that is figurative, full of symbolism and imagery. As Lilian Kestlout and Bassirou Dieng contend, one of the main functions of symbolism is to suggest the inexpressible (193). Because symbolism adapts language so as to speak unspeakable pains and sufferings, symbolic language is allusive and metaphorical. It is synecdochical, mentioning one to suggest many, a part standing in for the whole. The metaphors constructed around cosmic elements intensify the mythical dimension of the characters Beloved, Matigari, and Ali Kaboye. For instance, the

topoi of water, forest, and the house are often used to symbolize those characters' being and foretell their destiny.

Matigari speaks in biblical parables, giving his story and character a Christ-like breadth. The whole country and the churchman are in turmoil, expecting the second coming of Christ, even as rumours spread that Matigari is the Messiah. He uses archetypes and stereotypes such as the wandering orphan child and raped woman, symbols of Africa, and the police officer as guardian of neocolonialism. When a policeman proudly declares being a guardian of peace and stability, Matigari retorts: "The peace and the stability to ensure theft and robbery?" (Ngũgĩ 31). In John Boy he sees the epitome of all intellectuals who benefited from the help of the country to continue their studies in the West and who in return betrayed their people. For the same reason, his claims of ownership of the house and the plantation are discarded as a lunatic's delirium. Ultimately, his is a metaphorizing of the nationalist discourse. Burning the house rather than letting it be occupied by Boy testifies to the idea of

**206** ending the neocolonialist state, if necessary, with a second armed struggle for a true liberation of the oppressed people.

Ali Kaboye is also often misunderstood because he speaks allusively. The mirror he claims to use to voyage through time adds to the mysterious dimension of his character. He relates, in a thinly allusive language, what he sees in the mirror about the political scandals and social prevarications of his fellows in Niarela. The opacity of the language in which Ali frames the stories of the merchant of his own soul and the self-imitator are somewhat disconcerting; yet, they contain the philosophy and morality put forward in the novel: the love of oneself deriving from the quest for one's identity. Ali explains mimicry as a lack of self-esteem that compels those around him to imitate other people, killing their own civilization and culture. This is the cultural suicide he conceptualizes as merchandising one's soul. In the same vein, he refutes the propensity of seeking refuge in the past as a way of affirming one's identity.

Beloved's language is enigmatic for it is inarticulate—like that of the toddler she was when she died—and poignant because of the horrors she narrates. Chapters 22 and 23 capture the particularity of this language, presenting her extended monologue that reveals her identity, experience, and troubled sentiments. Chapter 22 begins with the statement, "I am Beloved and she is mine" (210-13). Excluding this first sentence, the chapter has no other punctuation. The reader must try to decipher the language in the face of the total absence of proper syntax and the somewhat inappropriate word choice. In fact, Beloved seems to be describing experiences beyond the scope of her language. As such, she resorts to descriptive expressions and metaphors. Her narration of the Middle Passage is replete with tropes such as the "men without skin" (the whites) (214), the slaves who "leave their bodies behind" (die) (210), and the white men's "morning water" (urine) (210).

All three mythical figures maintain a close relationship with water, whether its peaceful and benevolent state or its violent and destructive nature. The first time Beloved appears in her human shape, she is metaphorically associated with water,

and throughout her narrative water occupies an important place as a synecdoche. When Sethe and Paul D. first stumble upon her frail body, Beloved was soaking wet from walking out of the water, yet she was dying with thirst. The oppositional images that the narrator confronts—of Beloved gulping mug after mug of water and Sethe urinating her body dry—herald the tragedy that later unfolds. This juxtaposition suggests that Beloved is literally and figuratively draining life out of Sethe who, overjoyed by the recovery of the lost child, wants to amend and make up for her sin. Later, however, Beloved makes her mother suffer for the infanticide. The grudge-bearing baby has siphoned everything that mattered for Sethe: her health, work, savings, and her partner Paul D. Furthermore, when Beloved is conjured by a group of thirty women of the Cincinnati community, the event is also narrated through the metaphor of the holy water:

the voices of women searched for the right combination, the key, the code, the sound that broke the back of words. Building voice upon voice until they found it, and when they did it was a wave of sound wide enough to sound deep water and knock the pods off chestnut trees. It broke over Sethe and she trembled like the baptized in its wash. (Morrison 261)

207

The reference to water in this passage is multifaceted because it is at once evocative of the powerful and deep water of the wavy sea, the holy water of baptism, and the water used in traditional African exorcism rituals that inflicts a trance on the devil-possessed patient with the hope of freeing him/her.

Another instance of the tropical use of water in *Beloved* is its evocation of the transatlantic slave trade. Beloved describes the crammed slave boats, the heat that causes her to suffocate, and the dirt and indescribable noise of hundreds of people shouting their lungs out in indiscernible blare. The slaves' entanglement in the boat recalls the heat of the grave she experienced as well, with the haunting, faceless living-dead. Beloved is the embodiment of the first slaves in America, the founding fathers and mothers of what will become the African-American diaspora. As Suprajitno notes, "Beloved is both an individual and a collective being. She also functions as the crucial link that connects Africa and America for the enslaved women" (63). Beloved and the women in the novel, particularly Baby Suggs and the female members of the community of Cincinnati, stand as proof of Morrison's commitment to describing women as custodians of African-American history and culture.

By the same token, Matigari's and Ali's relationships with water are symbolic of the founding myths of their respective nations. Gilbert Durand's *mythanalysis* elucidates the extent to which the historical context irrigates and maintains rich exchanges with the mythical imaginary. If people create myth, myth in turn governs them and shapes their experiences and relation to the world. Thus, if we consider the *mythemes* of the narrative as semiotic signs, we see how the motif of water, associated with the founding myth of a nation, informs the stories of these novels. In many ways, Ali Kaboye resembles Ndiadiane Ndiaye, the founding father of the Wolof nation. Lilian Kestlout and Bassirou Dieng suggest that if Ndiadiane Ndiaye were removed from Senegal's

history, nothing else would be left (193). Indeed, the myth of the origin of the nation arcs back to this figure who, after a long stay in the waters, emerges to preside over the destinies of his fellow citizens. According to the myth of Ndiadiane, because of a family humiliation, young Ndiadiane took refuge in the river. After a long stay in the waters, he ended up forgetting human language, but during one of his sporadic visits to the mainland, he proved a legendary wisdom in dealing with quarreling women. He is crowned king of Djolof, in accordance with an ancient prophecy.

The fictional Ali Kaboye's myth is a variation on the actual Ndiadiane Ndiaye's, in that, when Ali is killed for his seditious personality, his body is thrown into the depths of the Koussoum sea. Like Ndiadiane, he makes sporadic visits to the mainland, sometimes in human shape and other times by metamorphosing into other beings. Although Ali does not end up forgetting the language of his people, he is no longer up to date with it. Thus, he has the royal tam-tam beaten by the town crier to summon all the inhabitants of Niarela to the public square instead of using modern communication methods like television or radio, emphasizing his duality and his representation of both tradition and modernity. Indeed, "Aali Kébóoy is actually a legendary figure who remains part of the urban folklore of Dakar" (Repinecz 64). Moreover, by juxtaposing the ancient royal drum with modern technologies in his mythical narrative, Diop creates magic realism that confirms that a founding myth is neither static nor stable: "For Diop, because they are always adaptable to new situations, traditional heroic models are sites on which to imagine new heroisms" (Repinecz 57). The founding myth is subject to modification according to the people's contemporary concerns.

Similarly, Matigari collides with the history of Kenya, declaring himself as old as the country. He personifies the mythic founding father Gikuyu, who, with Mumbi, forms the original couple in Kenyan cosmogony. In fact, the veteran of the independence war is associated with the re-creation of the nation that had collapsed due to colonial tyranny. The symbolism of water is related to the myth of creation, as Matigari is first seen standing at the bank of the river ridding himself of his war garment to resume his civilian life. As he washes his hands and face in the river, he remembers instances of the glorious past associated with water. Among those occasions is the rite of circumcision, during which the boys would bathe early in morning in the river to anesthetize their skin before bravely going through the rite of passage to manhood. Like Ali and Beloved, Matigari emerges from the water and comes out of the forest like a founder: "I have now girded myself with a belt of peace. I shall go back to my house and rebuild my home" (Ngũgĩ 5). Matigari's home is the epitome of the Kenyan nation, while he is a replica of the founding father, rebuilding Kenya from the chaos of colonialism and the ashes of the liberation war.

From the beginning of the novel, Matigari is engaged in a relentless search for his family. As soon as he meets Gũcera the prostitute and Mũriũki the street child, he is unable to part with them. In so doing, Ngũgĩ shows the importance he places on the outcasts of society in whom he sees, despite their superficial corruption, a profound

purity for which people valued by society are often found wanting. In fact, Gúcera refuses the offer to sacrifice her virginity to save her biological father's life, whereas, without being solicited, she takes the initiative to break her principles and sleep with the prison constable to help Matigari escape from prison.

In the final scene, Matigari and Gúcera, chased down and wounded by the police dogs, refuse to let go of each other. In a symbolically suggestive manner, their flesh and blood mingle and along with the rain infiltrate the earth. This image represents the metaphor of regeneration, signifying that Matigari and Gúcera, as the original couple of Gikuyu and Mumbi, are the seed that must die to give birth to a new vigorous tree. This is connected with the germination of a brighter future through Mũriũki the child, who plays a central role, backing up Matigari, helping him many times to escape his assaulters, and taking over after his death by reaching to the Mugumo tree and taking up the arms. The text ends with a symbolic victory against neocolonialism, led by this child who succeeds to reunite the remainder of society to set fire to the exploiters' properties.

209

Beloved, Ali, and Matigari are associated with the motif of a deity emerging from water to accomplish important tasks, symbolizing the founding figures of their nations. It is worth noting that Ngũgĩ, Diop, and Morrison build other images around spatial elements, such as the house and the forest, to further emphasize the mythic dimension of these characters and their missions. The spatial motif of the house, representative of a wider space, is another element of imagery associated with these three mythic characters. The house is more than a shelter, a mere passive setting for the action; it interplays with the characters' being and actions. Matigari conceives his house as the country, the nation. For that reason, he tries to get everybody to build it, but would rather burn it down than let the white man and his servant confiscate the product of his labour. In this way, he metaphorically hints at the insurrection and the civil war launched by the Mau Mau to overthrow white settlement.

In *Doomi Golo*, Ali Kaboye's shack plays a prominent role as a spatial configuration of the tragedy of post-independence. The politicians, from both the ruling and the opposition parties, nightly sneaking into his shack to offer him money in exchange for him denigrating their opponents is emblematic of the politicians' self-interest. When the politicians kill Ali for publicly exposing their treacherous ploy, the shack stands still as a visible reminder that torments the local authorities' consciences. Unable to confront the image of their betrayal reflected by the shack, they decide to raze it and burn it under the false pretext that it houses a big rat. Here, too, the tragedy that plays out is bewildering, as whoever tries to uproot the shack is hit dead by an unseen force, believed to be Ali Kaboye's magical power.

In Morrison's novel, the house at 124 Bluestone Road is the theatre in which the drama of the baby ghost tormenting her mother plays out. The ghostly presence in the house triggers bitter memories of Sweet Home that are, in turn, reminders of all the plantations of the South. The house represents various identical places to show the oppressiveness of slavery in America: "124 Bluestone is unmistakably an

architecture that reifies pastness and entrapment” (Soon Ng 231). From the start, the house is meant to look very intriguing, since Morrison personifies it with cynical and gruesome attributes. As the incipit of the novel reads, “124 was spiteful” (3). The bitterness of the child ghost is transposed to the house, in an osmosis between the house and the ghost that inhabits it. The missing digit in the house address is, according to many critics, suggestive of Sethe’s third child that she killed eighteen years ago and who is now haunting the house (Soon Ng 233). This absence/presence of the digit 3 parallels *Beloved* and, to some extent, all the victims of slavery, and stands as the symbol of loss and mourning.

Another setting of prime importance in the three novels is the forest, which hosts important motifs and actions. In *Matigari*, the forest is a terrain of cultural and armed resistance, the hideout of the Mau Mau fighters, where they lived for years alongside wild beasts during the insurrection. The forest represents liberty, in contrast to the oppressive cities and villages in which the colonial army and their loyal servants would kill anybody on the mere suspicion of rebellion against the British settlement. The hard conditions faced in the forest due to scarcity, hostile weather, animals, and diseases made the guerrilla fighters more reliant on one another. Hence, their rallying cry: “we would share even the bean which fell on to the ground” (Ngũgĩ 16). This form of solidarity during harsh times shapes the communal and socialist way of living *Matigari* advocates when he later resumes his civilian life. He displays supreme generosity, giving his strength, belongings, food, and ultimately his own life for the well-being of the community.

In *Beloved*, the forest is also used as a metaphor of liberty, since it represents a wide space suggestive of emancipation. It is the theatre of the Underground Railroad through which many slaves escaped the plantations of the South to reach the North or, in the case of Sethe, Cincinnati. Sethe’s escape is dramatized with a focus on the crossing of the forest. Alone and pregnant with Denver, she is running away after having already conveyed her first three children. It is where she gives birth while haphazardly found by Amy Denver, a white indentured servant who is fleeing her servitude to go to Boston for better opportunities. Amy Denver’s assistance to Sethe despite their racial difference is evocative of the solidarity between poor people who are oppressed by the same system. It is no surprise, then, that Sethe names her baby after Denver in expression of gratitude.

In *Doomi Golo*, the forest plays a paramount role in developing Ali Kaboy’s personality. As he later tells Badou, he learned most in life when he was a child, playing with his age-mates in the Forest of Kagne. This transformative event, the myth of two gorillas who fought to death against their own images in the mirror, reveals the schemes and machinery the colonial power used to fool the gorillas, a metaphor for African kings, into fighting each other. The two gorillas appear in the first place to be resisters—an allusion to Lat Dior, the Senegalese national hero—because they were sabotaging the building of the colonial railroad line. On the one hand, the myth proves the deception of the colonist by the politics of divide and rule, through

corruption by the mirror and the bottles of wine. On the other hand, it shows the selfishness and narcissism of the gorillas who cannot bear their own image in the mirror, thinking other gorillas are trespassing on their territories. Overall, the three novels discussed here form a voice against self-destruction; they foster self-respect through the knowledge of one's history and culture, driven by memory and symbolical language that retrace the history of the African and African-American communities and emphasize their achievements.

## CONCLUSION

Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o, Boubabacar Boris Diop, and Toni Morrison represent the African and Afrodiasporic experience of slavery and colonization as an unreal reality; "unreal" in the sense of inconceivability and unspeakability. The strategy of magic realism used by these writers sheds light on this historical past. The axiological opposites of realism and myth are translated in the duality of the official records and the individual and collective memory. However, since memory is central to these novels dealing with history, it disturbs the pattern of the writing, as "[t]he narrative structure becomes the representation of memory of the characters" (Verma 51). The stories are sometimes allusive, circular, and repetitive, as though following the hesitation, reluctance, and digression of characters unwilling to face, let alone share their memories. The reconfiguration of the matrix of the writing gives birth to an unconventional genre hosting the elements of the novel and aspects of orality. For this reason, the aesthetics of magic realism enables "spaces where 'potentialities for resistance increase'" (Nedae 41). Magic realism in African and Afrodiasporic literatures, with its mythic characters unbound by time and space, explores and emphasizes the full potential of oral culture as an alternative to Western mainstream discourses and as an effective tool against the erasure of the subaltern voice and the revisionist enterprise of neocolonialism.

211

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## NOTE

1. The book was originally published in the Wolof language in 2003 and later translated into English in 2017 as *Doomi Golo, The Hidden Notebooks*. This article is based on the English version of the novel.

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