

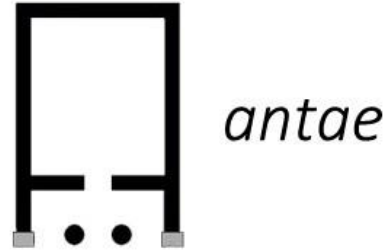
**Re-thinking Beginning:  
Okri's *The Famished Road* and the Crisis of the Postcolonial Nation**

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## Re-thinking Beginning: Okri's *The Famished Road* and the Crisis of the Postcolonial Nation

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### Introduction

Perhaps we should say without equivocation that time, following the adventures of colonialism and imperialism, has always-already been the dominant trope in anticolonial and postcolonial discourses on nation formation and redemption. This is because, for postcolonial people, time is a site of domination and contestation. Colonialism marked the subjugation and overthrow of indigenous constituent forms of temporality and the introduction of temporalities of domination which made possible the emergence of coloniality of power and being.<sup>1</sup> Hence Frantz Fanon's declaration of decolonisation as 'always a violent phenomenon', in a very profound way, points to a dismantling of a form of agonising temporality and spatial governmentality that produces the wretched of the earth.<sup>2</sup> Decolonial time, in this strong Fanonian sense, then, is an act of constituting a radical beginning and nomos. However, the failure of the anticolonial nationalist project has exposed the naivety of such a paradigm of thought, which is why theorists such as David Scott have repeatedly argued for a different understanding of temporality as it relates to the postcolonial condition.<sup>3</sup>

In *Omens of Adversity: Tragedy, Time, Memory, Justice*, Scott describes the epoch in which we live as a constellation of 'catastrophic aftermaths' in which are clear 'the temporal disjunctures of living *on* in the wake of past political time, amid the ruins of [...] postcolonial future pasts'.<sup>4</sup> This state of affairs has two implications, according to Scott. First, it implies the crisis or obsolescence of *Romance* as a narrative form for envisioning postcolonial national redemption.<sup>5</sup> Secondly, it points to the emergence of a tragic consciousness or sensibility for grasping the postcolonial condition. While this characterisation is historically perceptive, and constitutes the ground for Scott's deployment of *tragedy* as a conceptual and analytical apparatus for 'thinking about the *temporality of action*', it is nonetheless problematic.<sup>6</sup> This is because the productive or generative potential of Scott's representation of tragedy is compromised by a refusal of alternative

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<sup>1</sup> See especially Anibal Quijano, 'Coloniality of Power, Eurocentrism and Latin America', *Nepantla*, 1(3), (2000), 533-580, and Nelson Maldonado-Torres, 'On The Coloniality of Being', *Cultural Studies*, 21(2-3), (2007), 240-270.

<sup>2</sup> Frantz Fanon, *The Wretched of the Earth* (London: Penguin Books, 1967), p. 27. Henceforth cited in text and footnotes as (*WE*, page number/s).

<sup>3</sup> See David Scott, *Refashioning Futures: Criticism after Postcoloniality* (Princeton, NJ, and Chichester: Princeton University Press, 1999); *Conscripts of Modernity: Tragedy and Colonial Enlightenment* (Durham, NC, and London: Duke University Press, 2004); *Omens of Adversity: Tragedy, Time, Memory, Justice* (Durham, NC, and London: Duke University Press, 2014); and 'Tragic Vision in Postcolonial Time', *PMLA*, 129(4), (2014), 799-808.

<sup>4</sup> Scott, *Omens and Adversity*, p. 2.

<sup>5</sup> On *Romance* as an anticolonial narrative form, see Scott, *Conscripts of Modernity*, p. 7-8.

<sup>6</sup> Scott, *Omens of Adversity*, p. 3.

postcolonial imaginaries. In fact, Scott goes so far as to claim that we are 'stranded' in the present, in a temporal crisis: a limbotopia in which the possibility of alternative futures is exhausted.<sup>7</sup> It is pertinent, however, to pause and ask whether the exhaustion of anticolonial narratives of redemption necessarily inaugurate a temporality of crisis. As Alain Badiou's argues in a different context, '[m]an is sustained by the incalculable and unpossessed'; therefore, to imprison the individual in a 'stalled present'<sup>8</sup> that forbids him to imagine, think, or work towards alternative realities is 'to forbid him his humanity'.<sup>9</sup>

I raise these concerns not to jettison the interpretive utility of Scott's idea of the tragic consciousness but to suggest that perhaps this needs to be supplemented with other idioms articulated from different postcolonial ecologies or localities that reconceptualise time differently. To do that, however, will require that we pose a slightly different question: what if, contrary to Scott, the predominant sensibility of the present historical conjuncture, especially from the perspective of postcolonial African writers, is not a heightened experience of time as 'out of joint' but a problematisation or revision of ways of thinking about beginning?<sup>10</sup> The pertinence of this query derives from the contention that anticolonial nationalists' discourse and African literature are haunted by *beginning*, not as a narratological concept but as an epochal act of discontinuity from 'imperial modes of agency' and thought.<sup>11</sup> It is precisely within this context that I propose that we see Ben Okri's Man Booker Prize novel, *The Famished Road*,<sup>12</sup> as participating in the discourse on the national question in African literature. The national question encapsulates a constellation of ideas and material conditions such as nationalism, sovereignty, freedom, time and history, territory, national culture, and language which the postcolonial nation-state, as the paradigmatic figure of decolonisation, is called upon to instantiate. However, my interest in this essay is quite narrow, limited to a specific interest in the historicist orientation of the national question in anticolonial and nationalist rhetoric, one in which *beginning* is figured as an authoritative rupture or a transformative event of historical and symbolic significance. From this perspective, "beginning" has to do with national beginning and national time, and has therefore generally been understood as referring to the moment of formal declaration of independence. Thus, for many African scholars and especially African writers, the tragedy of the nation-state in Africa is its failure to instantiate a radical beginning. This accounts for the persistence of the quest for alternative beginnings, visions, and realities in African literature. As this essay shall demonstrate, while *The Famished Road* enacts a tragic sensibility, this is supplemented by an unrelenting quest for alternative futures that counters Scott's refusal of alternative postcolonial imaginaries.

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<sup>7</sup> Scott, *Omens of Adversity*, p. 71.

<sup>8</sup> *ibid.*, p. 6

<sup>9</sup> Alain Badiou, *Ethics: An Essay on the Understanding of Evil* (London and New York, NY: Verso, 2001), p. 14.

<sup>10</sup> Scott, *Omens of Adversity*, p. 2.

<sup>11</sup> Simone Bignall, *Postcolonial Agency: Critique and Constructivism* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2010), p. 4

<sup>12</sup> Ben Okri, *The Famished Road* (London: Vintage, 2003). Henceforth cited in text and footnotes as (*FR*, page number/s).

I focus on this aspect of *The Famished Road* because although it has over the years generated a significant corpus of critical literature, Okri's interrogation of the anticolonial notion of beginning and his reconceptualisation of the time of the nation as a complex mixture of chaos, order, re-commencement, and transformation has rarely been adumbrated. The relationship between temporality and vision has been identified as crucial to the narrative dynamics of the novel and Okri's overall ethical horizon.<sup>13</sup> Jesse Matz has recently argued that *The Famished Road* proposes 'a postcolonial [...] polite temporality of patience', the actualisation of which is contingent on a genuine democratic space.<sup>14</sup> Furthermore, scholars interested in the mythic dimension of Okri's aesthetics have drawn attention to the significance of mythic beginning in *The Famished Road* especially in relation to the famous opening lines: 'In the beginning there was a river. The river became a road and the road branched out to the whole world. And because the road was once a river it was always hungry' (*FR*, 3). Nonetheless, critics hardly ever place Okri's novel within the context of the crisis of beginning that has haunted the postcolonial nation-state in Africa. The result is that Okri's interrogation of the anticolonial rhetoric of independence as constituting a radical beginning has not received the attention commensurate with its centrality in not only *The Famished Road* but the abiku trilogy in general.<sup>15</sup> This essay, therefore, addresses this lacuna. It focuses on two key sites in the novel to advance its argument: Azaro's journey with the three-headed spirit in the second chapter of Book Five, and chapters nine through to twelve of Book Seven. Specifically, I argue that Okri's exploration of beginning through a refiguration of the postcolonial nation-state as abiku can be fruitfully read as a critical dialogue with Fanon.

For Okri, rethinking time and historical progress in the postcolonial nation-state requires a critical dialogue with Fanon. Fanon is essential to Okri's project because *The Wretched of Earth* puts forward a narrative of national liberation and beginning that has been contradicted by the real conditions in the postcolonial nation-state. Furthermore, Fanon undertakes a rigorous critique of the postcolonial nation-state that has not only turned out to be prescient, but also one engaging with concepts and ideas for reanimating discussions on hope in the postcolony. As the present analysis will show, contrary to Scott, an 'attunement to *tragedy*, contingency and chance' does not necessarily lead to a closure of alternative futures.<sup>16</sup> In fact, I claim that Okri's novel presents an attunement to time that supplements Scott's.

I begin in the next section by situating Okri's novel in its historical context as a prelude to understanding the Fanonian subtext. This is followed, in the second section, by a critical reading of the chapters indicated above with the view to demonstrating how Okri not only explores the crisis of postcolonial beginning or transition but also how he presents an alternative vision of national beginning not as a singular event we leave behind but as a moment of audacity that emerges from the conception of Time as an extraordinarily complex sequence of paradoxes,

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<sup>13</sup> See, for instance, Ato Quayson, *Strategic Transformations in Nigerian Writing* (Oxford: James Curry, 1997), and Mahdi Teimouri, 'Time and Vision in Ben Okri's *The Famished Road*', *Sarjana*, 26(2), (2011), 1-14.

<sup>14</sup> Jesse Matz, *Modernist Time Ecology* (Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2019), p. 196.

<sup>15</sup> The other two texts that form the abiku trilogy are *Songs of Enchantment* (1993) and *Infinite Riches* (1998).

<sup>16</sup> Scott, *Omens of Adversity*, p. 2.

contradictions, and possibilities. I draw on Fanon's conception of beginning and the fragility or crisis of beginning as articulated in 'The Pitfalls of National Consciousness', and draw too on Walter Benjamin to clarify aspects of Fanon's idea of revolutionary-becoming that Okri re-articulates as a necessary response to the crisis of beginning. I conclude by reflecting on how Okri's novel helps us reflect on literature and crisis.

### **Historicising *The Famished Road***

To grasp the centrality of beginning in *The Famished Road* it is useful to understand the historical context of the novel's emergence. This is necessary not only because literary texts are historical products but also because, as Fredric Jameson shows, historicising a text permits us to pay attention to its dialogical dimension.<sup>17</sup> Published in 1991 and set in the crucial moment of Nigeria's emergence from colonial domination, *The Famished Road* explores the transition to national liberation or, in other words, the politics of nation formation. Consequently, it casts a critical glance at the socio-political conditions of Nigeria as a travesty of Fanon's promise of what decolonisation instantiates. The novel is narrated by Azaro, an abiku-child, whose birth, like Salim in Salman Rushdie's *Midnight's Children*, coincides with the birth of the new nation. Having decided to break his pact with his abiku companions partly because the coming independence heralds 'the annunciation of wonderful events', Azaro is ironically forced to grapple with an emerging monstrous and dystopian nation (*FR*, 4-7). In a kind of parody of Fanon, Okri shows a Nigeria which also functions as a microcosm of postcolonial Africa, one mired in *inessentiality* and struggling for the emergence of *privileged actors* who will engender a genuine coming-into-being of new ethos, a new language, and a new humanity. Much of the novel's action takes place in the ghetto and tracks how its dwellers, particularly the Azaro family, eke out a living and respond to the sordid poverty, violence, and exploitation that constitute the politics of nation formation.

Okri's location of the political-economic struggles and the gratuitous violence at the heart of the ghetto is significant for two reasons. First, as it is set at the transition to independence, it conforms to colonial spatial rationality wherein the ghetto is the habitation of the native. As Fanon argues, the colonial world is a Manichean world with the native consigned to the ghetto, 'a place of ill fame, peopled by men of evil repute [...] without spaciousness' (*WE*, 28). In the ghetto the wretchedness of the people is displayed in all of its abysmal forms. However, far from being merely the site of impoverishment, a 'zone of occult instability' and 'collective auto-destruction', the ghetto is also the place for the awakening of a new national and socio-political consciousness (*WE*, 182, 42). Moreover, the ghetto accords with the novel's emphasis on *hunger*, explicitly captured by "famished" in the title. Here too the connection to Fanon is invoked. According to Fanon, 'the native town is a hungry town' (*WE*, 130). Hunger is not just the absence of

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<sup>17</sup> Fredric Jameson, *The Political Unconscious: Narrative as a socially symbolic act* (London and New York, NY: Routledge, 1983).

nourishment; it signifies anguish, humiliation, and powerlessness. In *The Famished Road*, hunger also designates the ontological and existential longing of the postcolonial subject for a future that surpasses the existing order of things.

Historically, the 1980s, the decade preceding the publication of *The Famished Road*, was a terrible period for Africa. The continent was mired in severe economic and political crisis. This was exacerbated by drought and famine in Ethiopia and the Sahelian nations of West Africa that led to the loss of millions of lives.<sup>18</sup> The result was that poverty became endemic, resulting in the classification of many of these countries as among the poorest countries in the world. To save these African countries from economic collapse and therefore avert political chaos, the International Monetary Fund and The World Bank intervened through the introduction of austere Structural Adjustment Programs.<sup>19</sup> The 1980s was therefore the era of radical Afro-pessimism.<sup>20</sup> The cloud of pessimism about the future of Africa can be gleaned from the writings of Basil Davidson who, contrary to his declaration in 1987 that he was ‘an unrepentant optimist, an observer convinced of the grandeur of Africa’s self-transformation’, would in 1994 admit otherwise.

Thirty years or so earlier there had seemed, for Africans, to be time and opportunity for everything while the beckoning threshold of anticolonial independence opened out, as it appeared, upon endless possibilities of progress. By the outset of the 1990s, in one of history’s reversals, these possibilities could appear all too completely to have vanished from the scene.<sup>21</sup>

Okri’s novel can therefore be seen as an intervention in a double sense: it registers the grim poverty and disillusionment with the nation-state in Africa as well as provides new concepts, idioms, and frameworks for re-imagining time, beginnings, and redemption at the level of the nation-state and the individual.

It is within this historical conjuncture that we must see *The Famished Road* as a return to Fanon’s insight on decolonisation and the nation-state as the event of the emergence of a new people. For Fanon, decolonisation marked a radical beginning for colonised people. His figuration or narrative of national beginning revolved around the emergence of a new men from their state of imposed ‘inessentiality’. The claim of postcolonial national beginning to authority and historical validity,

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<sup>18</sup> See Frances Moore Lappé, Joseph Collins, and Peter Rosset, *World Hunger (12 Myths)* (New York, NY: Grove Press, 1998). Of particular interest is the introduction, ‘Beyond Guilt and Fear’, pp. 1-7. This book is also significant because it identifies hunger as a fundamental problem in sub-Saharan Africa with particular emphasis on specific famines that devastated the continent the decade preceding the publication of *The Famished Road*.

<sup>19</sup> On the IMF and policies in Africa during the period under discussion see, for example, Kwame Akonor, *Africa and IMF Conditionality: The Unevenness of Compliance, 1983-2000* (New York, NY: Taylor and Francis, 2006).

<sup>20</sup> On the origins and impact of “Afro-pessimism” as the dominant idiom of framing Africa, see, among others, Simon Gikandi, ‘Foreword’, in *Negotiating Afropolitanism: Essays on Borders and Contemporary African Literature and Folklore*, ed. by Jennifer Wawrzinek and J.K.S. Makokha (Amsterdam and New York, NY: Rodopi, 2010), 1-12; and Nothias Toussaint, ‘Definition and Scope of Afro-pessimism: Mapping the Concept and its Usefulness for Analysing News Media Coverage of Africa’, *Leeds African Studies Bulletin*, 74, (2012), 54–62.

<sup>21</sup> As cited in Robin Derricourt, *Inventing Africa: History, Archaeology and Ideas* (London and New York, NY: Pluto Press, 2011), p. 135.

as articulated by Fanon, derives from the fact that it introduces new forms of consciousness and socio-political organisation. Only in these terms can national beginning be understood as setting in motion a new humanism. However, by the 1990s and with the twenty-first century beckoning, when it had become apparent that Africa was anything but a place of hope, Okri returns to the basic questions that animate Fanon's work on the fragility of postcolonial nation-state: how can the postcolonial nation-state *betray* colonial epistemology and governmentality without *betraying* decolonisation as the historical and revolutionary event of beginning? Why has the nation-state in Africa failed to deliver on the promise of decolonisation? Is there the possibility of beginning anew, and how is this to be thought? How can a dehumanised and betrayed people create a liberated human society?<sup>22</sup> For Okri, the key to these questions lies in revising the whole anticolonial axiomatics of time, especially beginning and historical progress. To undertake this project, however, Okri must first present to his readers the crisis of postcolonial national transition or the pitfalls of national consciousness.

One may wonder why, at fin de siècle of the twentieth century, the moment of emergence or beginning of the nation becomes a crucial thematic for Okri. The answer, I suggest, can be found in *Songs of Enchantment*, the second book in the abiku trilogy. There Azaro puts forward two justifications for a problematisation of national time and beginning, firstly by making the radical claim that nothing is truly ever concluded. In this way Okri redefines decolonisation as a permanent struggle that does not terminate with the formal declaration of independence. Secondly, by showing that the upheavals and chaos that followed independence exposed the disjunction between articulated vision and reality: 'we didn't sense the upheavals to come, upheavals that were in fact already in our midst, waiting to burst into flames. We didn't see the chaos growing', he goes on; 'we were unprepared for an era twisted out of natural proportions, unprepared when *our road* began to speak in bizarre languages of violence and transformations'.<sup>23</sup> It is obvious, through this sentiments, that for Azaro the founding of the postcolonial nation-state in Africa was stained by two forms of blindness: the naïve belief that decolonisation as "beginning" is a singular act brought into being at the moment of independence, and the failure to realise the artificiality of the postcolonial nation as the composition of fragmented and antagonistic ethnic and factional forces and interests. The exposure of this blindness and how to overcome it constitutes the political and ethical horizon of Okri's novel.

### **Reconfiguring the crisis of postcolonial beginning and time**

I have been suggesting, thus far, that at the heart of Okri's project in *The Famished Road* is the question of rethinking the anticolonial idea of beginning, hence the significance of the crisis of

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<sup>22</sup> These questions has been variously explored by the first generation African writers. For example, Ayi Kwei Armah's *The Beautiful Are Not Yet Born* (1968) and *Two Thousand Seasons* (1973), and Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o's *Petals of Blood* (1977).

<sup>23</sup> Ben Okri, *Songs of Enchantment* (London: Vintage, 2003), p. 3.

transition in the novel. Central to Okri's representation of the crisis of transition or the emergence of Nigeria as a nation-state are the activities of the Party of the Rich, the Party of the Poor, and Madam Koto, the enterprising capitalist matriarch. These forces constitute the focus of Okri's critique of the politics of postcolonial representation and economics. The retreat of colonialism is marked by the advent of political parties.

Ideally, political parties mobilise the people by forging national consciousness and articulating possible futures. Political parties, then, are not mere addendums to democratic culture but rather the 'all-embracing crystallization of the innermost hopes of the whole people' (*WE*, 193). However, *The Famished Road* presents the violent and divisive activities of the political parties, the exploitative capitalist machinations of Madam Koto, and the eventual unholy alliance of politics and capital into a monstrous force as the uncanny repetition or reincarnation of the rampaging impulses of domination, exploitation, injustice, and violence that constitute the ontological negativity of the abiku phenomenon.<sup>24</sup> The activities of the two political parties polarise the ghetto dwellers into warring camps and politicise the public space along party and tribal lines. For instance, people are dismissed from their jobs because they belong to the wrong side of politics; Azaro's mother is denied space in the market on political grounds; Dad's landlord coerces his tenants to vote for the Party of the Rich which he supports; Jeremiah, the photographer, whose pictures capture for the present and posterity the violence in the community, is forced into exile and anonymity as his studio is attacked and vandalised by political thugs.

The result is a deep sense of disillusionment, as aptly expressed by Dad: 'They have begun to spoil everything with politics' (*FR*, 96). Dad is not alone. In Madam Koto's bar, a client remarks how '[t]his independence has brought only trouble' (*FR*, 199). After witnessing an afternoon of extreme violence, Azaro is convinced that he had 'recognised [...] the recurrence of ancient antagonisms, secret histories', and 'heard the slaking of the road's unquenchable thirst. And blood was a new kind of libation. The road was young but its hunger was old. And its hunger had been reopened' (*FR*, 484). The young road represents the nascent Nigeria as a modern postcolonial nation-state. However, as Azaro realises, the problem with this Nigeria is its failure to inaugurate a fundamental break with the violent and oppressive king of the road. As the novel progresses, the new nation increasingly appears as a monstrous deviation from the creative impulse of beginning; rather, it assumes the figure of the destructive and vampiric King of the Road who unleashes madness, hunger, war, and blood. Okri presents this scandal as the failure of postcolonial politics of beginning and representation. Contrary to the grandiose rhetoric of prosperity espoused by the political parties, in reality they are machines of terror inflicting pain and hunger on the people whose votes they seek. For instance, after promising to bring new roads, electricity, schools, hospitals, food, free education, and prosperity to the ghetto dwellers, the Party of the Rich rounded off their campaign by distributing free milk that, ironically, ended up poisoning the majority of the

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<sup>24</sup> The abiku phenomenon as reimagined by Okri can be understood as functioning at two interpretive levels: (i) as a recuperative site for utopian sensibility, especially in relation to the esoteric temporality; (ii) as embodying the ancient negative impulses that are reborn in the emerging postcolonial nation.



people who took it. The Party of the Poor is not any different.<sup>25</sup> The overall impression is that the incipient nation is stillborn and its political parties are a voracious caste incapable of inventiveness. The grim poverty combined with the omnipresent politics of violence, shame, humiliation, and hopelessness presents us with a dystopian landscape of tragic proportions. What Nigeria lacks, as a nation-state, is a fundamental commitment to ethicality.

To circumvent the dystopian postcolonial condition that has tarnished the transition to liberation and to re-inscribe a utopian impulse of possibility, Okri not only re-configures the nation-state as an abiku-child but also presents the abiku phenomenon as the logic of history, time, and beginning. By emphasising eternal recurrence of contingency and chance, Okri simultaneously demises the teleological orientation of time that characterises anticolonial notions of progress and rewrites Scott's tragic consciousness theory. As Ade, the other abiku child, tells Azaro, '[o]ur country is an abiku country. Like the spirit-child, it keeps coming and going. One day it will decide to remain. It will become strong' (*FR*, 559). Contrary to Scott's idea of being stranded in a temporality of crisis, Okri suggests that the 'riddle of living, the mystery of being' and time is that 'there are never really any beginnings and endings' (*FR*, 559). Far from a being a denial of beginnings and endings *tout court*, we must understand it as Okri's contestation of the teleological view of human transformation embedded in anticolonial nationalists' rhetoric of decolonisation as national redemption. In place of this pseudo-Enlightenment conception of history, Okri presents a new theology of time that revolves around limitations, paradoxes and eternal changes. Here, then, lies Okri's revision of anticolonial time and beginning.

Okri's conception of time and beginning is fully articulated in the second chapter of Book Five, especially in the dialogue between Azaro and the three-headed spirit that attempted to lure him back to the world of the Unborn. On their journey, they come across a community of 'strange beings' who, although they have been building a road for two thousand years, have in fact not gone beyond two feet. The road, according to their prophet, was to lead them to a place he called Heaven, but in actual fact the road represents 'their soul, the soul of their history' (*FR*, 378). What the people do not know, and which Azaro is given privileged insight into, is that the road will never be complete. In other words, real progress and transformation is not in the completion of the project but lies in the strategies they adopt to confront and overcome the challenges that occasionally impede or becloud the original vision of redemption. This is why the beautiful road is subject to recurrent destruction. The result is that 'a new generation comes along and begins again from the wreckage' (*FR*, 379). This conception of beginning carries with it generational responsibility. Rather than limit postcolonial beginning to the moment of independence, Okri suggests that we should see beginnings as recurrent potentialities plucked out of the paradox of time. As the three-headed spirit puts it:

Each new generation begins with nothing and everything. They know all the earlier mistakes. They may not know they know, but they do. They know the earlier plans, the

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<sup>25</sup> See *FR* 199, 205-239.

original intentions, the earliest dreams. Each generation has to reconnect the origins themselves. They tend to become a little wiser, but don't go very far. It is possible that they now travel slower, and will make bigger, better mistakes. That's how they become a people. They have an infinity of hope and an eternity of struggles. Nothing can destroy them except themselves and they will never finish the road that is their soul and they do not know it (*FR*, 379).

The dialogue between Azaro and the three-headed spirit on the nature of historical progress can therefore be described as Okri's own parable of time, beginning, and ontology of being. Within this parable of time, Scott's crisis of temporality is not a state of exception but an integral dynamic of the paradox of time. Within this grammar of beginning, the issue at stake is not a heightened experience of time "out of joint" but an awakening to the realisation that 'anything is possible' (*FR*, 559), and that completeness only results in boredom and death (see *FR*, 378). From this Okrian perspective, tragic consciousness, contrary to Scott, is the state of 'forgetfulness' of the paradox of time and reconfigured as the condition of living under the illusion of *telos* (*FR*, 379).

This is precisely the education intended for Dad, Azaro's father. The critical consensus is that Dad, Black Tyger, is the source of the utopian impulse in the novel. This is a partial reading of Dad's role in the abiku trilogy. Dad embodies the anticolonial sensibility of beginning, time, and redemption. His utopian redreaming of the world must be seen as a parody of anticolonial nationalists' rhetoric of progress and radical change, which is why he is shocked to learn that the nation is 'an abiku nation, a spirit-child nation' that is subject to 'being reborn after each birth' (*FR*, 567). Once he attains the epiphany that time is inherently paradoxical in its actualisations, his education is complete. Ade emphasises the inherent paradoxical unfolding of time when he assures Azaro that there will be both chaotic times as well as wonderful changes which will give meaning to struggle and hope; then things will degenerate again.<sup>26</sup> It is within this state of affairs that Scott's emphasis on the temporality of action becomes relevant. For if time is paradoxical rather than teleological, what agentive acts are ethico-politically appropriate? As I will show later, Okri proffers a form of revolutionary-becoming that can be understood within the context of Fanon and Benjamin.

I have earlier suggested that Fanon's *The Wretched of the Earth* functions as a subtext in or the unconscious of *The Famished Road*. For purposes of clarity, I will restrict Okri's critical engagement with Fanon to three key issues: the strategy for liberation; the pitfalls of national consciousness; and betrayal and the question of the revolutionary becoming. First, unlike Fanon for whom the road to liberation was violence, Okri foregrounds perspectival change and imagination. Put differently, if, for Fanon, 'violence alone [...] committed by the people, violence organized and educated by [their] leaders' against colonialism 'makes it possible for the masses to understand social truths and gives the key them', Okri counters that violence debases the people

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<sup>26</sup> See *FR*, 559.

and undermines the promise of the transition to the nation-state (*WE*, 118).<sup>27</sup> Hence one important characteristic of *The Famished Road* is that, although it is about the emergence of the nation from colonial domination, very little space is given to colonialism as such. The ghetto world is a totally “native” world and the violence we see is perpetrated by “natives” on “natives”. In spite of the difference, Okri’s critique of representation parallels Fanon’s analysis of the pitfalls of national consciousness or the crisis of the transition to national liberation. Fanon traces the ‘unutterable treason’ or betrayal at the heart of the postcolonial nation-state to the activities of political parties (*WE*, 134).

The living party, which ought to make possible the free exchange of ideas which have been elaborated according to the real needs of the mass of the people [...]. This party which of its will proclaims that it is a national party, and which claims to speak in the name of the totality of the people, secretly, sometimes even openly organizes an authentic ethnical dictatorship. We no longer see the rise of a bourgeois dictatorship but to a tribal dictatorship [...] and not anger but shame is felt when we are faced with such stupidity, such an imposture, such intellectual and spiritual poverty. These heads of government are the true traitors of Africa, for they sell their country to the most terrifying of all its enemies: stupidity (*WE*, 136, 147-8).

Fanon raises two issues in the above passage that are relevant to our analysis of politics in Okri’s novel. The first has to do with why political parties in the African nation-state operate as factions or gangs. The problem, according to Fanon, is that they are run on the basis of the ‘same ethnological group’ or “family” ideology that ‘go[es] back to the old laws of inbreeding’ (*WE*, 147). We have already seen the factional character of the political parties in Okri’s novel. The second issue has to do with the figure of the “traitor”. “Traitor”, as Fanon uses it, is the highest form of negativity as it obviates the possibility of a genuine national formation. Fanon insists that ‘treason’ makes its appearance in the postcolonial nation-state when the people realise that the ‘iniquitous fact of exploitation can wear a black face or an Arab one’ (*WE*, 116). In these instances Fanon follows the dominant conceptualisation of “treason” and “traitor” as pathological and therefore incompatible with national aspiration. However, I argue that a nuanced reading of Fanon’s essay suggests this is only one aspect of Fanon’s usage of “treason” and “traitor”. For Fanon, both terms have two meanings: anti-liberation and revolutionary-becoming, or ethical subjectivity. And it is this second meaning that constitutes authentic action and establishes an essential affinity between Okri and Fanon. Okri proffers the possibility of a postcolonial ethical act through Azaro’s betrayal of his spirit companions. In so doing, Azaro has not only become an exile but a traitor. The traitor figure in Okri’s novel has not been examined in the literature. This is surprising, as it is fundamental to Okri’s reexamination of beginning and the temporality of

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<sup>27</sup> It is important to stress that Fanon’s emphasis on violence was influenced by the Algerian war of independence against French colonialism. However, his conceptualisation of violence as pitching the colonised against the coloniser presented the false impression that the colonised were a homogeneous front. Okri’s exploration of violence in the transition to independence therefore returns to a crucial space that Fanon paid little attention.

action. Only from this perspective can we come to the realisation that the problem with the postcolonial nation is its failure to enact Azaro's revolutionary act of becoming-traitor.

In his analysis of Fanon's 'The Pitfalls of National Consciousness', Timothy Bewes argues that the passage cited above reveals, in spite of Fanon's rejection of Hegel, the conjunction of Hegel, Adorno, and Fanon.<sup>28</sup> According to Bewes, Fanon's crucial insight is that 'politics is by definition betrayal; real, historical decolonization is an impossibility; the "pitfalls of national consciousness" are a consequence of not just a failed or premature transition to independence, but of transition *tout court*'.<sup>29</sup> What is of interest to me in Bewes's analysis, especially in relation to the connection between Okri's rethinking of beginning and the temporality of action, is not only Bewes's contention that the fundamental problem at the heart of Fanon's thought on 'transition to liberation' is that he conceives of 'transcendence and reality, or fidelity and betrayal, as static, oppositional categories—which means that 'real change remain[s] permanently outside the realm of possibility'—but the question that inevitably follows from this conclusion: 'Is it possible to keep faith with the revolution without one's faith becoming a betrayal of it?'<sup>30</sup>

Bewes is right in linking shame and betrayal, but his reading misses the revolutionary aspect of Fanon's analysis of betrayal which Okri takes up in *The Famished Road*. In posing the question in the way he does, Bewes forecloses the possibility of seeing "betrayal" as revolutionary-becoming. Contrary to Bewes, therefore, I want to suggest that the essential insight in Fanon's 'The Pitfalls of National Consciousness', which is crucial to shedding light on Azaro's becoming- traitor, is that the national middle class and political parties have failed to *betray* their historical calling. Betrayal in this context ceases to be in static opposition to fidelity; instead, *betrayal* is radical *fidelity*. This reading calls for a re-interpretation of Bewes's assertion that for Fanon 'politics is by definition betrayal'.<sup>31</sup> Such a move requires that we move outside the Hegelian logic Bewes assigns Fanon and relocate Fanon's second meaning of *betrayal* within the framework of Walter Benjamin's argument on the difference between *transmission* and *production*, as presented in 'The Author as Producer'.<sup>32</sup>

Here, Benjamin positions betrayal as fundamental to rethinking and inaugurating beginning in a way that illuminates Fanon's take on betrayal as that which is lacking in postcolonial conceptions of national beginning. Writing at the height of socialist wave in Europe—a time of deep controversy over the role of the intellectual/writer in the process of production—Benjamin argues that the intellectual/writer needs to move beyond mere ideological solidarity with the proletariat and become a producer or engineer of a new way of knowing and doing things. This transition, however, is contingent on the resolution of the paradoxical position of the intellectual in a

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<sup>28</sup> See Frantz Fanon, 'The Pitfalls of National Consciousness', in *The Wretched of the Earth*, trans. by Constance Farrington (London: Penguin Books, 1967), pp. 119-165.

<sup>29</sup> Timothy Bewes, *The Event of Postcolonial Shame* (Princeton, NJ, and Oxford: Princeton University Press, 2011), p. 106.

<sup>30</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>31</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>32</sup> Walter Benjamin, 'The Author as Producer', trans. by John Heckma, *New Left Review*, 0(62), (1970), 83-96.

bourgeois culture. The paradox, as Benjamin saw it, was that the intellectual's means of production is made possible and sustained by the bourgeois culture or class. The intellectual/writer is, therefore, 'on the basis of the privilege of culture solidary with it, even more so it with him'.<sup>33</sup> Benjamin's solution to this compromising position was that 'the revolutionary intellectual' must become 'a traitor to his class of origin'.<sup>34</sup> This strategic dislocation represents, for Benjamin, the most radical approach to disrupting the capitalist system. It is important to note that Benjamin is not using traitor and betrayal in its juridical sense. As he puts it, 'this betrayal consists, in the case of the writer, in behaviour which changes him from a reproducer of the apparatus of production into an engineer who sees his task as the effort of adapting that apparatus to the aims of the proletarian revolution'.<sup>35</sup> Betrayal thus acquires a positive meaning in this context.

While it is true that 'The Author as Producer' is burdened with notions such as "class struggle" and "proletarian revolution" that now appear somewhat passé, the critical insight pertinent to our analysis is Benjamin's understanding of beginning in terms of transmission and production. By this, Benjamin makes a distinction between inauthentic and genuine beginning. Radical or genuine beginning is a productive event or moment that sets in motion a new paradigm of thought and action. It is here that betrayal emerges as fundamental to rethinking beginning. Beginning without betrayal is superficial as it merely re-configures the apparatus for the transmission of the existing structure of things without any foundational change. This is also the Fanonian insight that Bewes overlooks in his Hegelian interpretation of betrayal in Fanon's essay. In fact, the crucial argument in Fanon's essay is that:

Under the colonial system, a middle class which accumulates capital is an impossible phenomenon. Now, precisely, it would seem that the historical vocation of an authentic national middle class in an underdeveloped country is to repudiate its own nature in so far as it is bourgeois, that is to say in so far as it is the tool of capitalism, and to make itself the willing slave of that revolutionary capital which is the people. In an under-developed country an authentic national middle class ought to consider as its bounden duty to betray the calling fate has marked out for it, and to put itself to school with the people: in other words to put at the people's disposal the intellectual and technical capital that it has snatched when going through colonial universities.<sup>36</sup>

Throughout 'The Pitfalls of National Consciousness', Fanon pursues the implications of the 'shocking' deviation from this authentic act or, as he calls it, the #heroic, positive, fruitful and just path'.<sup>37</sup> Echoing Benjamin's assertion that the intellectual is not a transmitter of the capitalist apparatus of capture but a producer of a new people, Fanon argues that the national middles class, instead of 'transforming the nation', has become the 'transmission [line] between the nation and

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<sup>33</sup> Benjamin, 'The Author As Producer', p. 96.

<sup>34</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>35</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>36</sup> Fanon, 'The Pitfalls of National Consciousness', p. 120.

<sup>37</sup> *ibid.*, p. 120.

capitalism'.<sup>38</sup> It is this radical re-conceptualisation of *betrayal* as *fidelity* to national liberation/redemption and egalitarian ethos that is at the crux of Okri's strategy of rethinking the temporality of action. Azaro's fidelity is signalled by his repeated refusal to rejoin his spirit companions. In so doing, he is refusing to be a transmitter of an exploitative system that loots from the material world. This is contrasted with the failure of Madam Koto and the political parties to betray the colonial apparatus and ancient régime of domination, exploitation, and violence. From this analysis, "beginning" constitutes an act of fundamental betrayal. In other words, there can be no genuine beginning without betrayal. This is the insight invoked in Ade's metaphor of the nation as an abiku country. For Ade the defining moment in the abiku cyclical rebellion is the *decision* to remain in the material world. That decision, as I am suggesting, can be described as betrayal: a radical refusal to be a transmitter of the apparatus of domination and exploitation. There can be no miracle of the new; the nation cannot become a producer of new values and new men without the ethico-political act of becoming-traitor to the existing order of things.

## Conclusion

In this essay I have attempted an analysis of beginning not as a narratological category but as a dominant motif in postcolonial conceptualisations of national formation and transition. I have argued that central to the crisis or fragility of the postcolonial nation-state in *The Famished Road* is Okri's attempt to rethink beginning and temporality of action. The overall aim was to show that Okri's novel can be placed within the broader anticolonial nationalists' discourse of radical beginning and the crisis of beginning.

One implication of this contextualisation of *The Famished Road* is that it allows us to tease out the dialogical dimension and hidden polemic in the novel. Specifically, therefore, I have drawn attention to how focusing on Okri's critical dialogue with Fanon, in particular, enables us to re-read *The Famished Road* as simultaneously a contestation of anticolonial nationalists' notions of national transition and a re-articulation of becoming-traitor as the precondition for beginning. Using this two-pronged strategy Okri re-inscribes a politics of hope in a seemingly hopeless postcolonial condition through a re-configuration of time as a complex process of order and disorder. Within this state of affairs, national beginning is instantiated through a betrayal of the forces of negation of being and a fidelity to the emancipatory ethic and practice of decolonisation. Decolonisation, in this context, transcends the narrow notion of physical or formal foreign domination or imperialism to encompass new forms the overcoming of domination, oppression, and disposability that put into question the humanity of those at the margins of empire. Contrary to the anticolonial notion of national beginning as the moment of formal declaration of independence or the expulsion of the colonial masters, therefore, Okri presents beginning as an epochal moment snatched out of the chaos or paradox of time through the agential act of becoming-traitor to the existing apparatus of subjugation. Okri thus allows us to see "beginning" not

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<sup>38</sup> Fanon, 'The Pitfalls of National Consciousness', p. 122.

necessarily in terms of a logical series or sequence that inscribes the notion of teleology; rather, we are encouraged to see national beginning in terms of ruptures that temporarily destabilise the inherent contradictory logic of time.

From this perspective, beginning is conceptualised as intimately related to human agency, generational responsibility, collective invention, and definition. Far from referring to an originary moment of national emergence located in a definite historical moment or national past, beginning for Okri represents a moment of realisation and accomplishment that can be instantiated any time a people become aware of their historical duty to the present and the past. Tragic consciousness, then, is a condition of existence that is still burdened by the anticolonial notion of beginning as primarily the moment of formal declaration of independence. To rise above this tragic sensibility constitutes the emancipatory ethic in *The Famished Road* and the entirety of the abiku trilogy. If we understand decolonisation as an eternal process of speaking truth to the forces of domination and the quest for a radical reorganisation of socio-economic and political relations, then we can appreciate the insight in Okri's reinterpretation of beginning as an ever-present potentiality that can be brought into being at any time. "Beginning" thus emerges as a veritable moment of reinvention and reaffirmation of an original emancipatory idea(s).

It is also important to note that our analysis has profound implications for David Scott's ruminations on the crisis of temporality. Indeed, Scott's notion of tragic consciousness is grounded on the notion that time is "out of joint". However, as I have suggested, placed within Okri's recalibration of time as paradoxical (and therefore devoid of teleology), the notion of the crisis of temporality may itself be a symptom of a conception of time wherein pessimism and hopelessness constitutes an inexorable dynamic. Within the Okrian notion of beginning as endless recommencement and reinvention, the crisis of temporality is not an exception for which we ought to despair.

Finally, the essay has shown that beyond narratological analysis, beginning may constitute an important conceptual and thematic dynamic in literary analysis, especially from the perspective of national beginning and reinvention. Fortunately, there have been significant narratological theories and discussions on narrative beginnings.<sup>39</sup> Perhaps the time has come to supplement this with a rigorous analysis of the concept of beginning within the context of national time and nation formation and redemption. We can tentatively speculate that this approach may prove useful in re-orienting our understanding of texts from embattled locations where time continuous to be a site of domination and contestation.

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<sup>39</sup> See, for instance, Edward Said, *Beginnings: Intention and Method* (New York, NY: Basic Books Inc., Publishers, 1975), and *Narrative Beginnings: Theories and Practices*, ed. by Brian Richardson (Lincoln, NE, and London: University of Nebraska Press, 2008)

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