Step back and step aside: Rereading Caroline Rooney’s work on animism and African literature a quarter of a century later

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This indicates that the Magistrate would need to *step back* and *step aside*, to allow for a seeing besides him.

Those would be the steps to learn.[[2]](#footnote-2)

Caroline Rooney is Zimbabwean; this biographical fact matters in the present context. It explains how I (Ranka) met Caroline in the early 2000s, how I eventually came to write this piece, and how I knew what to look for in reading her thought-inspiring, intellectually demanding, funky 2000 monograph on animism, Western philosophy and African literature – first a few years after it was published, and then again nearly a quarter of a century later. *African literature, Animism and Politics* is a book about how a certain archive of Western critical thought (stretching from, say, Kant, via Hegel and Freud to Derrida and Deleuze & Guattari) misunderstands and mis-labels, yet also rubs shoulders with and could be re-constellated to acknowledge, African animist beliefs and practices; and about how such beliefs and practices have been mediated by modern African literature, which thus functions as an intellectual tradition in its own right. This is *a lot*. (It is not for nothing that the second sentence of the book’s Introduction mischievously asks its readers, ‘Have I lost you already?’ (1).) But I, too, have lived in Zimbabwe for a while and I knew long before I entered academia that “the [Western discursive] attempt to render an African culture impossible [is] itself an impossibility for there just *is* this culture in all its diversity.” (113) Back in 2000, *Afrian Literature, Animism and Politics* provided a pioneering critical discussion of how the thinkers of Europe’s second Enlightenment misread the cultural and ontological make-up of African worlds, where even some of Enlightenment’s staunchest critics-- Derrida, Spivak, Deleuze and Guattari—failed to address adequately the Africa-shaped blind spot in European thought. This blindness was enabled by Europe’s long tradition of opposing “man” to “nature”, and critical thought itself to living time. In the book’s second half, in a smile-inducing reading of John Coetzee’s 1980 novel *Waiting for the Barbarians*,[[3]](#footnote-3) Rooney analyses the social and intellectual position of the novel’s protagonist, a male imperial official confronted with a native woman whose sight has been impaired by state torture. Not entirely unlike the fathers of European philosophical thought that Rooney discusses before she turns to Coetzee, the Magistrate cannot see that what he needs to do if he truly wants to open up a line of vision between himself and an overlooked other – the native woman standing right in front of him - is to get over and beside himself. *African Literature, Animism and Politics* guides its readers through a version of “the steps to learn”. In doing so, it arguably gets beside and exceeds the very academic paradigm that engendered it.

On the final page, *African Literature, Animism and Politics* recapitulates briefly the broad direction of its own research engagement. In seeking, broadly, to re-signify the unfashionable (at the time) term “animism” – the belief in spirits identified as part of the natural world – the book touches on “African philosophies, Eastern philosophies, the mystical traditions, the study of literary creativity, psychoanalysis, modern physics and biology” (227). The book’s careful interweaving of distinct analytical strands comprises precise readings of African, postcolonial and World literary texts, treated everywhere as dialogic partners to philosophy and critical theory, rather than as illustrative material. Rooney’s takes on Amos Tutuola, Oscar Wilde, Nella Larsen, Giles Foden, Alex LaGuma and others are unlikely to leave me any time soon. (A personal favourite: the deadpan comparisons between Hegel and Tutuola’s Complete Gentleman.) Above all, this is a book that demonstrates, time and time again and in direct opposition to Aristotle and those who write after him, that intellectual activity is a form of movement: literally, spirited. Rooney’s text addresses its readers directly, leaves traces of earlier drafts, circles between topics at varying speeds, and adduces examples without insisting on an illusion of inevitability; it touches on TV shows current at the time of writing, leaves trains of thought deliberately curtailed and sprays sparkling research agendas in its wake. It seems to me that all theory books should work to make their readers laugh, but woefully few of them do. Meanwhile, Rooney - in a spoken-word Zimbabwean turn of phrase: “What I should like to say is that: me, I never have original ideas. I do not believe in original knowledge in that respect. […] The original idea is the singular ideal is the phallus.” (169) You grin, and nod, and read on. All this at the time when UK Postcolonial literary and cultural studies were (from where I was sitting) fast becoming both po-faced and ossified.

This is what Caroline has told me about the book’s genesis:

What prompted me to write the book at the time was that the new (then) field of postcolonial theory as opposed to the older field [of] ‘Commonwealth’ or ‘third world’ literature was shaped through the influences of French philosophy (Young, Spivak, Bhabha especially) where the intellectual legacies were European Enlightenment ones. Others at the time opposed this with historical materialism while I was interested in how liberation struggles were accompanied were accompanied by indigenous spiritual philosophies that were not as dualist or binary as the European tradition. Derrida was trying to deconstruct binary oppositions but he doesn’t engage with non-dualist philosophies. So I tried to put the two intellectual legacies into dialogue with each other or into counterpoint (as Said would say).[[4]](#footnote-4)

This is a clear and valuable description, with the “newness” of the field presumably referring to the 1990s, when *African Literature, Animism and Politics* was being written. To me, situated at the time on the margins of the UK university system (as a PhD student at a “new” British university in the late 1990s and early 2000s), there was much that was reified about the field, which was arguably both peaking and changing at the time Rooney’s book was published.[[5]](#footnote-5) The dynamism and playfulness of *African Literature, Animism and Politics* did not permeate (in my experience) the manner in which Postcolonial literary and cultural studies were being institutionally taken up in Britain at the time.[[6]](#footnote-6) For one thing, India remained (in the discursive sense) the jewel in the Postcolonial academic crown, just as it had been for Britain in the economic sense at the height of the materially existing British Empire. (This must be one reason why Said’s work on the Orient was uncritically deployed in African and other postcolonial contexts, as *African Literature, Animism and Politics* details.) Those of us who were seeking to enter academia professionally could hardly do so without reading and teaching Rushdie; Coetzee was the order of the day if you were interested in thinking about literary Africa.[[7]](#footnote-7) In important and insidious ways, the newly hegemonic academic paradigm had retained Eurocentric methods of measuring literary value. For another, both intellectual traditions mentioned in the email from which I’ve just quoted already had something of the quality of a *diktat* about them. While their proponents took pot-shots at one another at conferences, Postcolonialism was being institutionally embedded at the rate that seems, in retrospect, lightning fast. The early 2000s were an era of mushrooming textbook production and the growing consensus that the presence of a “generalist postcolonialist” academic staff member was a desirable supplement to otherwise unchanged UK departments of English. Such consensus was often accompanied by fast-forming clichés that had Postcolonial literature “giving voice to the voiceless” and enabling authors from the global margins to “write back” to the former imperial centre. That such formulations were one way of preserving the centre’s centrality did not, of course, go un-noticed. But the critiques went hand-in-hand with a mainstreaming and an intellectual dilution of sorts.

That *African Literature, Animism and Politics* has bypassed such trends – that it remains fresh and challenging a quarter of a century after it appeared, that it is still an enabling research tool and has the potential to be useful in teaching,[[8]](#footnote-8) is due, I think, to (at least) three interconnected sets of textual traits. I can here touch on them only briefly. Firstly, despite conforming to some early postcolonial conventions, Rooney’s book is, today, retrospectively legible as a study in comparative literature.[[9]](#footnote-9) Connecting its thickly layered argument strands is the intertextual figure of Antigone - Sophocles’ heroine who refuses to negotiate with state power whose rules she has broken while honouring a higher law, which, together with being the product of criminal desire (as the sister/daughter to Oedipus), turns her into an outcast. The suppression and death of Antigone (Rooney tells us) symbolically enables the Western system of thought, based on the law of the father and the singularity of inheritance. *African Literature, Animism and Politics* argues for a return to visibility of Antigone as the focal point of several kinds of transgressive identification. In thinking about how this figure speaks to texts that, collectively, cross the mainstream/postcolonial literary divide (and also the supposed multiple dividing lines between literature, theory/philosophy and politics), Rooney’s book treats literary texts as world-making phenomena and anticipates a dialogue with contemporary studies of African literature as world literature by the likes of Ato Quayson and Jeanne-Marie Jackson.[[10]](#footnote-10)

Secondly. Because *African Literature, Animism and Politics* was unafraid of taking as one of its main foci the (then) unfashionable term “animism”, and because it articulated with clarity and conviction what was at stake in re-thinking it, it helped to pave the way for the term’s subsequent appropriations by the coming generations of scholars intent on interrogating the supposedly disenchanted nature of global modernity. Harry Garuba’s work which draws on his own Yoruba heritage in positing the existence of animist realism in African literature is a case in point, as are Francis Nyamnjoh’s insistence on incompleteness as an African ontological virtue as exemplified by Tutuola and Brendon Nicholls’ writing on indigenous African knowledges as a form of theory.[[11]](#footnote-11)

Finally: since the time of its publication, *African Literature, Animism and Politics* has been vindicated by African literature itself. I have written elsewhere[[12]](#footnote-12) on how the literary formation that goes by a cluster of names that includes Afrofuturism, Afrikan futurism, Juju tech, African speculative fiction and more, has combined the literary inheritances left by Chinua Achebe and Amos Tutuola (who both, albeit differently, dramatized the possibility of seeing an event from several legitimate though incompatible perspectives). The novels by Nnedi Okorafor, Lauren Beukes, Tade Thompson, Sofia Samatar, Akwaeke Emezi, Suyi Davies Okungbowa and many others amplify and elaborate on Tutuola’s precedent in representing a global modernity that combines contemporary science and technology with a knowledge of spirits and an understanding that modern societies are always-already poly-ontological.[[13]](#footnote-13) These texts are, no doubt, part of the “significant paradigm shift’ that Rooney notes in the closing lines of *African Literature, Animism and Politics*: “its implications are not just epistemological ones but [also - RP] political ones, concerning the mobilisation of communist and ecological values against the hyper-forces and death drives of capitalism.” (227) For contemporary readers engaged in such mobilisation who want to know more about the deadliness of Western thought as well as its literary antidotes, Caroline Rooney’s *Literature, Animism and Politics* is still an excellent place to start.

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2. Caroline Rooney, *African Literature, Animism and Politics* (London: Routledge, 2000), 201; emphasis in the original. Future references to this book will be given in the body of the text. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. “After a while, I want to gently scoop aside the folds of such texts, to draw to one side their curtain in order to try to see the realities of others” – Rooney, 204. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. Caroline Rooney, personal e-mail communication, 23 May 2024. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. Another global paradigm was already on the rise. Franco Moretti published his influential “Conjectures on World Literature” in the first issue of the *New Left Review* in 2000. (Franco Moretti, “Conjectures on World Literature *NLR* 1, 2000, 54-68.) [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. The no-hyphen version of the term has prevailed since the publication of *African Literature, Animism and Politics*. People seemed to worry *a lot* about hyphens in the 1990s. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. For a discussion of the choke-hold that scholarship related to those two post-modernist authors had on the field as showcased by the *Journal of Commonwealth Literature* (at the time of writing, recently renamed to *Literature, Critique and Empire*), see Stephen Morton and Ranka Primorac, “2000s: Expansion and Change,” in *The Journal of Commonwealth Literature* 50.1 (2015), 353-368. [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. Look out, for example, for the single page of the text explaining the concept of “the white saviour”, or for a discussion of Tutuola’s palm-wine drinkard as a cosmopolitan, which predates by decades the recent debates around Afropolitanism. [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. The passing reference to Auerbach on Balzac on p. 146 is hardly the stuff of run-of-the mill 1990s “poco”. [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. Ato Quayson, *Tragedy and Postcolonial Literature* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2021); Jeanne-Marie Jackson, *The African Novel of Ideas* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2021). [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
11. Harry Garuba, “Explorations in Animist Realism: Notes on Reading/Writing African Literature, Culture, and Society”, *Public Culture* 15.2 (2003), 261-285; Francis Nyamnjoh, *Drinking from the Cosmic Gourd: How Amos Tutuola can Change our Minds* (Langaa RPCIG, 2017); Brendon Nicholls, “Africas of the Mind: From Indigenous Medicine to Environmental Psychoanalysis”, *Cultural Critique* 111 (2021), 52-80, [↑](#footnote-ref-11)
12. Ranka Primorac, “Descartes in his Pith Helmet: Afrofuturism and Genre Theory”, in Cajetan Iheka and Jeanne-Maria Jackson, *Intellectual Traditions of African Literature 1960-2015*, Cambridge University Press, forthcoming. [↑](#footnote-ref-12)
13. Nnedi Okorafor, *Lagoon* (London: Hodder, 2014); Lauren Beukes, *Zoo City* (Oxford: Angry Robot, 2010); Tade Thompson, *Rosewater* (London: Orbit, 2017); Sofia Samatar, *A Stranger in Olondria* (Easthampton, MA: Small Beer Press, 2013); Akwaeke Emezi, *Freshwater* (London: Faber, 2018); Suyi Davies Okungbowa, *David Mogo Godhunter* (Oxford: Abaddon Books, 2019). [↑](#footnote-ref-13)