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Mask, Music and the Semiotics of The Road

Russell McDougall

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Abstract
An important political aspect of Wole Soyinka's drama is its deliberate non-exclusivity. Implicitly collapsing the borders and mental boundaries which facilitate alienation in all its forms, The Road embodies what Soyinka calls elsewhere 'the virtues of complementarity'. Alive in motion, its central image has that active potentiality which makes it appropriate to sub-Saharan African aesthetic contexts; but Western designers of cities also have found in the road's encasement of movement a rich source of dynamic form, and it is a conventional motif in the picaresque tradition of English literature, as well as a determining image of the literature of the United States. While the road acknowledges, at least in symbolic potential, the politics of division - driving on the left or right, in one direction or another- it also links places and peoples, past and future. This, of course, is a matter of movement, which makes it an appropriate metaphor also for the masking mode of the play, and to its exploration of the relativities of perception. More particularly, as a kinetic and culturally multivalent image the road provides an apt focus for Soyinka's dramatization of the arbitrariness of signs, not least by its self-consciously locating the text itself simultaneously in two broad traditions as a fused form. The Road is 'double-voiced', as Henry Louis Gates Jr. argues is the nature of the Black canonical text; its 'signifying' is, by definition, two-toned? More generally, though, it has the characteristic hybridity of the post-colonial cultural situation, and it partakes of the distinctive mixed mode of post-colonial textuality .3
To ignore this simple route to a common humanity and pursue the alternative route of negation is, for whatever motives, an attempt to perpetuate the external subjugation of the black continent.

(Soyinka, *Myth, Literature and the African World*, xii)

An important political aspect of Wole Soyinka's drama is its deliberate non-exclusivity. Implicitly collapsing the borders and mental boundaries which facilitate alienation in all its forms, *The Road* embodies what Soyinka calls elsewhere 'the virtues of complementarity'. 1 Alive in motion, its central image has that active potentiality which makes it appropriate to sub-Saharan African aesthetic contexts; but Western designers of cities also have found in the road's encasement of movement a rich source of dynamic form, and it is a conventional motif in the picaresque tradition of English literature, as well as a determining image of the literature of the United States. While the road acknowledges, at least in symbolic potential, the politics of division – driving on the left or right, in one direction or another – it also links places and peoples, past and future. This, of course, is a matter of movement, which makes it an appropriate metaphor also for the masking mode of the play, and to its exploration of the relativities of perception. More particularly, as a kinetic and culturally multivalent image the road provides an apt focus for Soyinka's dramatization of the arbitrariness of signs, not least by its self-consciously locating the text itself simultaneously in two broad traditions as a fused form. *The Road* is 'double-voiced', as Henry Louis Gates Jr. argues is the nature of the Black canonical text; its 'signifying' is, by definition, two-toned. More generally, though, it has the characteristic hybridity of the post-colonial cultural situation, and it partakes of the distinctive mixed mode of post-colonial textuality.

Central to *The Road* is a metaphor of collision. It is not only 'on the level of sardonic comedy', as Gerald Moore argues 4 , that the play dramatizes a metaphysical quest for the Word in terms of the systematic looting of the wrecks and victims of the road. If language is only able to signify 'truth' arbitrarily, by 'accidental' coincidence of sign and referent, what better demonstration than the Professor's pulling up of road-signs! According to
the Professor, the word grows from the earth; but the word is a sign—'Bend', accompanied by a squiggle— which gives meaning to an object: a signpost. The meaning which the Professor attaches to this object, as 'almost a miracle', derives from its having been 'hidden' from view, 'sprouted in secret for heaven knows how long' (8) — a reference perhaps to its being covered by weeds, like many signs on the accident-ridden Lagos-Ibadan road. Invisible to the traffic on the road, the sign had only absent meaning. Uprooted by the Professor, this absence is activated for its audience as the sign of potential death and disaster. But we must balance this meaning against the impression which the Professor creates by his relocating the signpost—'you would think he was Adam replanting the Tree of Life'—for we cannot, like him, move around corpses 'as if they didn't exist' (21). The possibility that the Professor's speech is all just 'mumbo-jumbo' (32), as Salubi says, conveys the same semiotic principle of relationship. Words are not masks—unless, by definition of the African masking traditions, the mask constitutes rather than conceals 'reality'.

The mask idiom of The Road, as specified in the prefatory note for the producer, derives from the Agemo 'religious cult of flesh dissolution'. The Dance of Death which concludes the play is 'the movement of transition', Soyinka advises, 'a visual suspension of death'. It is a dance of possession, emanating from the trance-like state of egungun ritual. The bearer of the egungun mask is Murano, who, in the masquerade to celebrate the Drivers' Festival (before the play begins) has also been the masked mount for Ogun, the God of the Road. In that ceremonial role, however, he has been run down by a lorry. Thus his presence upon stage (at the conclusion of the play) is, as Soyinka says, 'a dramatic embodiment' of the suspension of death, since at the time of the accident he had already entered the agemo phase of the ceremony—that is, the liminal phase of transition from the human to the divine. It is this that enables Murano to function for Soyinka as 'an arrest of time:' he is a creature in limbo.

It is appropriate perhaps that Soyinka should heap this burden of symbolism upon the figure of a palm-wine tapster, whose profession keeps him poised between earth and sky. Indeed, the symbolic tableau of redemption at the conclusion of A Dance of the Forests, where Demoke falls from a totem-tree into the arms of Ogun, is recalled in the Professor's dictum concerning the quest for the Word.

SAMSON [disinterested]: Where does one find it Professor?
PROF: Where? Where ascent is broken and a winged secret plummets back to earth. (45)

But the quest structure of The Road is an exercise in parody; and it is the professorial quester's own use of words—bludgeoning, yet obfuscating—that promotes Samson's disinterest.
In revisionist terms, the parody refers most immediately to Conrad’s *Heart of Darkness*, where the journey into depth, into Africa, is indeed to discover the all-important, but inexplicable Word – ‘Horror!’ Pregnant with undivulged meaning, this is a deconstructive figure of enlightenment on the rhetorical subject of darkness: it signifies all, yet nothing, so that in a sense what lies at the heart of the novel is neither darkness nor light, but the Word. In *The Road*, however, although the Professor’s logocentric quest is ironically a parody of the Eurocentric attitudes of colonialism it is also linked to the indigenous need of Murano to achieve personal immortality. Should Murano fail, not only will he be condemned to a permanent state of non-existence, forever a zombie, he will also spell death and disaster for his whole ‘family’ (presented here by that absurdly parodic microcosm, the brotherhood of drivers).

Wilson Harris, then, is surely right: *The Road* moves beyond parody without ever denying it. The profound distinction between the unscrupulous Professor and Conrad’s Kurtz – the two are, as Harris observes, psychically related – is ‘that the professor’s faith in ‘the chrysalis of the Word’ prepared him for a descent into the fertility of the African mask’. That descent, or journey into depth, is the meaning of the Dance of Death at the end of the play. If Murano is ‘guardian’ of the Word, as the Professor believes, it is because, having entered the *agemo* phase of the rites of Ogun, he has gained access to a mystery that is perhaps beyond words. In the context of parody, it is supremely ironic that the play’s sole custodian of the Word should be a mute. Moving beyond parody, however, the absence of speech is entirely appropriate to the masking idiom. First, having died before his time is up, and thus remaining on earth only as a zombie, traditional belief would allow Murano to talk only to people who have not known him previously – and there are none such in the play. Second, silence is one of the cardinal principles of that traditional philosophy of ‘coolness’ by which a person might transform him or herself into a purified source of power and so gain proximity to the gods.

PROF: Deep. Silent but deep. Oh my friend, beware the pity of those that have no tongue for they have been proclaimed sole guardians of the Word. They have slept beyond the portals of secrets. They have pierced the guard of eternity and unearthed the Word, a golden nugget on the tongue. And so their tongue hangs heavy and they are forever silenced. Do you mean you do not see that Murano has one leg longer than the other?

Murano is not only dumb; he is lame as well. But this serves only to confirm his special status. In *A Dance of the Forests*, it is the Lame One, Aroni, who sees through the Questioner and the Figure in Red to the truth of the mask, and whose role it is to mediate between the divine and the human. The Professor explains Murano’s limp: ‘When a man has one leg in each world, his legs are never the same’ (45).
These two elements – the inarticulation of body and voice – come together in the theme of sacrifice:

KOTONU: If I may ask, Professor, where did you find Murano?
PROF: Neglected in the back of a hearse. And dying. Moaned like a dog whose legs have been broken by a motor car. (44)

As Samson tells Kotonu, ‘a dog is Ogun’s meat’ (19). The God of the Road is also the God of the Hunt, and the dog is his drivers’ usual sacrificial offering. So Murano is the metaphorical vehicle of sacrifice.

This ghostly existence of Murano as a dramatic embodiment of time’s suspension places the semiotic issue – the relation of signifier to signified – in the context of image in relation to body. The Professor warns: ‘Avoid mirages’ (35). At the beginning of the play, when Murano awakes and leaves the Aksident Store to do his day’s wine-tapping, Samson tries to follow him with his eyes but has to give up. We are not told why. Perhaps this is part of the parody, the ghost-story. But again we move beyond parody. In Tutuola’s novel, The Palm-Wine Drinker, a dead tapster returns to the place of those who knew him previously; but he has not yet ‘qualified as a full dead man’, and so they ‘did not see him’ – and he spoke to them, but they ‘did not answer’. Or, as the Professor tells Samson: ‘Those who are not equipped for strange sights – fools like you – go mad or blind when their curiosity is pursued. First find the Word. It is not enough to follow Murano at dawn and spy on him like a vulgar housewife. Find the Word’ (45). So the physical ‘presence’ of Murano functions as an index of perception.

The Road offers multiple interpretations of Murano, and as he is the central figure of the Mask, from the varying perspectives of its community of characters. Like those of Noah by the Interpreters (in Soyinka’s novel of the same name), these interpenetrate in terms of the indigenous ontology of the Mask: truth is defined relatively, by shifting perspectives, by as many configurations as there are vantage points on the hermeneutic circle of the dance or the choral ring. And since Murano is the focal figure of the Mask, the solo figure at the centre of The Road’s communal circle, these differing perspectives of him repay detailed explanation. Without them, he has no meaning at all. What follows, then, is again an implicit demonstration of the semiotic principle: only in relationship does the sign signify.

The Professor’s ‘sight and vision’ is ‘only for the Word’ (10). Parody equates this with his pariah-like materialism, as a scavenger of the road. But he also sees Murano as ‘the god-apparent’ (90). That the god should be manifest in a tapster only serves to confirm this doubleness of the Professor’s perception: ‘it came to the same thing, that I held a god captive, that his hands held out the day’s communion’ (90). Soyinka provides a rationalization of this, the Professor’s intuition, in his comparative essay,
'The Fourth Stage', where he seeks to link the African god, Ogun, with the European god, Dionysus: 'Ogun, in proud acceptance of the need to create a challenge for the constant exercise of will and control, enjoins the liberal joy of wine. The palm fronds are a symbol of his wilful, ecstatic being' (Myth, 159). But the play differs from the essay by the ironic mode of its double-voicing. The Professor may be right in his perception of Murano, but the parody remains, tightly focused in the final episode upon the Christian Sacrament, whereby the blood of the god is wine. The pun is obvious: ‘Murano with the spirit of a god in him’ (90) is the image of both divine possession and inebriation. Consider also the Professor's explanation of Palm Sunday: 'God painted the sign of the rainbow, a promise that the world shall not perish from floods. Just as he also carved the symbol of the palm, a covenant that the world shall not perish from thirst' (89). The absence of bread is a satiric comment perhaps upon Christianity's denial of the body,11 and Samson tells us that Murano has become the Professor's 'evensong' (38). But the communion rite at the end of the day (at the end of the play) issues in the Mask rather than in 'prayer' as such. Other perceptions of Murano (by Drivers, Touts or Thugs) are less profound. Kotonu gropes toward understanding throughout the play; and, just before the final Mask, his questions are rewarded with an answer by the Professor. From that moment, Kotonu is completely silent, his tongue weighed down, perhaps, by his knowledge of the mystery of Murano; but because he is silent, we cannot know what he knows. Samson's blind perspective I have noted briefly already, and will discuss in detail in a moment. His visual inability to keep track of Murano at the beginning of the play, as the tapster sets out in the morning for the palm grove, structurally anticipates, however, Say Tokyo Kid's attitude of confusion at the end of the play, when Murano returns with the wine for the evening sacrament:

[Footsteps approaching.]
KOTONU: Somebody is coming.
[Say Tokyo spins around, imaginary pistol at the draw.]
SAY T.: You just stay right there and don't move.
[Enter Murano, bearing a large, outsize gourd. White froth topped. SAY T. gives a huge leap in the air, tosses the "gun" in the air. Catches and fires several shots in all directions...]
(88)

Audience uncertainty about the substance of the spectacle extends the theme of corporeality in a deliberately ambiguous and convoluted manner. The action suggests that Say Tokyo Kid is aware of Murano's presence but cannot see his body – unless, as the invisible 'gun' might equally imply, the whole episode is an arrogant charade by the captain of thugs. In either case, the relation of body to spirit operates by a clever inversion of Eurocentric expectations with regard to signification: the spirit is the signifier (not the signified) of the body.
Samson, on the other hand, prefers ignorance to knowledge:

KOTONU: The road and the spider lie gloating, then the fly buzzes along like a happy fool ...
SAMSON [very hurriedly]: All right all right.
...
KOTONU: What's the matter? I was only trying to understand.
SAMSON: I don't want to know... (34)

The motto on his passenger-lorry, 'No Danger No Delay,' is elaborated in his rhetorical tactics as King of Touts, which are in turn the acting out of his attitude to life:

I'm all right ... Light travellers only: no burdens of sin! ... quick service, we are senior service ... Come on ma'am we are moving off this moment ... we are taking off this instant ... Service is first class, everything provided .... No delay! What's that you say? I said no delay. (99, n. 92)

Murano, by his symbolic function as an arrest of time, contradicts Samson's whole philosophy. Translated into more worldly terms – for the King of Touts is also a miser, who buries his savings in a graveyard – Murano represents the potential loss of Samson’s income, for Kotonu, his driver, has given up driving since running down Murano.

SAMSON: But Professor, what about us? Our livelihood! I asked you to convince him to return to the road but you want to cut him out altogether. What will we live on?
PROF: He will find the Word.
SAMSON: The Word? Will that fill his belly or mine? (46-47)

For Samson, time is money, and nothing but the business of the road matters. He expects time to serve him as he serves his customers, without delay. Thus, during the communion rite at the end of the play, where Murano pours the wine, Samson insists: 'I'm all right. Murano. Service me man. God bless you, man devil or whatever you are, God bless you. Murano? Where's he gone?' (92). Samson sees only the body, not the spirit.

The opposition of ideas embodied in Samson (time is money) and Murano (arrest of time) is taken to the point of an absurd confrontation by Salubi. A trainee-driver, rather than a tout, he 'mistakes' Murano for a thief, and so physically tries to 'arrest' the arrester. Literal and the figural levels of the play slide into one another. This incident occurs at the end of Part One, when Murano returns prematurely for the evening sacrament, misled by the sounds of the organ and of singing from the church. It is not surprising that he should respond to the chorus. As a creature with a foot in two worlds, each with its different kind of time, he is, as I
have already indicated, the focal ‘figure’ of the dance; and by this trope of African performance, the chorus is the ground of custom on which he must tread. But, since the play itself is ‘two-toned’, deriving its performance principles from more than one cultural and theatrical tradition, the ground of custom may not be what it seems. Murano confuses ‘morning ... the time for funerals’ (53) with evening, the Professor’s time for communion. At this point, of his own confusion, Murano becomes a tragi-comic figure, his wandering in limbo like a saxophone in a string quartet, for the chorus to which he responds is not that of a Yoruba Mask but of a Christian funeral. Again, this is partly parody, but not entirely.

Salubi assumes Murano is a thief, seeing him sneak into the store when it is apparently deserted with his tapster’s ‘cradle’ over his shoulder. But the Professor, anxious that Murano not be seen in the light of day and identified as the abducted god, hides him just before Salubi arrives on the scene. With his satirical rhetoric, he soon has Salubi so bamboozled that he thinks he has been seeing things. But just as he is about to leave, Salubi spies part of Murano obtruding from his hiding place, and so, motioning to the Professor to be silent, he begins to stalk the intruder – moving backwards (like the inhabitants of the Dead’s Town in The Palm-Wine Drinkard):

Salubi ... pulls a knife and tip-toes backwards out of the room. Professor waits, listening hard, signs to Murano to go out the same way as Salubi. Murano moves a few steps but another sound arrests his escape – Salubi arriving to trap him from behind. Murano stays on the other side of the store. Enter Salubi, knife at the ready.

Murano tip-toes round the store and comes up behind Salubi. Salubi listens, then lifts the tarpaulin suddenly and sweeps the knife in a wide curve into the space. Murano throws the cradle loop over his head and twists it. The knife drops and Salubi, his back still turned to his assailant, struggles to tear the trope from his neck. Desperate with fear, he flails towards Professor, moaning for help. (53-54)

At this point the Professor extracts a promise from Salubi, in return for his life, that he will not look at his aggressor: ‘so that you could not recognize him at an identification parade’ (54). Thus Part One ends with Murano’s swift disappearance: Salubi, staggering towards the Professor, is told to take the body (‘carrion’) out of sight.

Choreography here ritualizes violence, in anticipation of the Mask that concludes the play. The circling movement looks forward to the kinetic mode of egungun: ‘the mask spins, spins ... ’ (96). Walking backwards, too, is an omen of death – as movement on tip-toes is of the spirit – for the living normally walk, as Tutuola writes, ‘with ... [the] face’ (The Palm-Wine Drinkard, p. 96). Note that the Professor’s final transfiguration, his entry into the spirituality of the Mask, occurs when he is stabbed in the back – with the same knife that Salubi uses to stalk Murano. In the end, the Professor’s ‘face masked in pain’ (95) is the sign of his entry into the spirituality of the Mask, of the blurring of person into transcendent presence. The
world, Chinua Achebe tells us in *Arrow of God*, is ‘like a Mask dancing’. One perception of Murano slides into another, by a kind of kinetic sub-facetting of dramatic form and structure. Thus, long before the final dance of death Salubi again misapprehends Murano, mistaking him this time for a thug rather than a thief:

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SALUBI: [leaping up suddenly]: Murano!
PROF: Sit down you fool. Murano makes no sound.
[Enter Say Tokyo Kid.]
SAY T.: [looks round a little worriedly]: I ain’t late am I?
SALUBI: Say Tokyo! Say Tokyo Kid! (76)
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The appropriateness of this misapprehension flows from a dramatic irony: the audience has seen Murano with a strang­le-hold on Salubi; but the identity of the attacker is unknown to the victim. From the audience’s point of view, then, the performance obtains the condition of dance – not only by its shifting, interpenetrating perspectives, but also by the very slippery self-consciousness of the drama itself: for example, Say Tokyo Kid’s concern (which operates on two levels) when he thinks he has missed his cue; or the play with Salubi’s perception of Murano.

Under the heading ‘Style in Africa,’ where he discusses ‘the rhythmic framework of a specific event’ in dance, John Miller Chernoff writes: “In a context of multiple rhythms people distinguish themselves from each other while they remain dynamically related.” This is as true of *The Road* as it is, more obviously, of Soyinka’s novel, *The Interpreters*. In terms of the play’s rhythm of design, Say Tokyo Kid is linked with Murano, destined to lock in combat with the masked figure at the danced conclusion: ‘With no sound but hissed breaths they heave and gripe at each other in a tense elastic control’ (95). Salubi watches intently, waiting for the moment when Say Tokyo Kid is ‘well placed’ to take the knife; but neither Salubi, Say Tokyo Kid nor Murano can foresee any of this beforehand. Rhythm is not the same as meaning. Drummers in Africa can beat languages they do not themselves know. Similarly, the characters cannot be aware that they demonstrate, in their interaction throughout the play, the fundamental principles of sub-Saharan African music.

Salubi’s greeting (quoted above) anticipates the entry of Murano; but it is Say Tokyo who appears, saying ‘I ain’t late am I?’ No sooner do we grasp the possibility of one than we hear another. Murano’s absence is relative to Say Tokyo’s presence. The principle is of cross-rhythmic apart-playing: Murano is Salubi’s assailant, Say Tokyo is the King of Thugs: thus do separate rhythms of violence cross. The percussive effect evokes an appreciation of the whole complex presentation, which is reinforced by the coming together of all three characters in the ritualized violence of the final rhythmic statement of the Mask.
In the traditional context, too, 'the overlapping of call-and response yields intriguing accents' (African Rhythm and African Sensibility, 123). Obviously this is true of the exchange between Salubi and Say Tokyo Kid, with its call-and-response patterning of the unexpected. But this is not merely a matter of structure in the play. It realizes or reaffirms relationships in the traditional manner:

SALUBI: Say Tokyo! Say Tokyo Kid!
SAY T.: Salubi Salubility! Say man, everybody garrered round the goorold place. How’s business kid?
SALUBI: Say Tokyo Charranooga Shoe-Shine Boy!
SAY T.: Thas me. I’m allright boy...
SAMSON: Say Tokyo!
SAY T.: I say boy it sure is good to be back among friendly faces. (76)

African music varies the dynamic tension of its conflicting rhythms through the appropriate timing of dramatic gestures (African Rhythm and African Sensibility, 123). The sudden and unexpected self-consciousness of the King of Thugs, looking around worriedly as he enters on stage and asking if he is too late, functions similarly. His is one of many dramatic gestures throughout the play which alter the balance of the drama between its disparate modalities: between acting and being, or structure and improvisation. But dramatic gestures, rather than subverting form, enliven it by their off-beat phrasing, and are further evidence of Soyinka’s concentration on precision and control.

Such concentration, in traditional African musical performance, stabilizes the expansion of feeling; and this too is true of The Road. Consider, for example, the interlinking of ‘events.’ I have noted already how, towards the end of the play, when Murano returns for his communion ‘service’, Say Tokyo Kid’s behaviour recalls the opening scene, where Samson is unable to follow Murano with his eyes:

PROF.: ... [Brings out his watch.] And now Murano should arrive...
[Footsteps approaching.]
KOTONU: Somebody is coming. [Say Tokyo spins round, imaginary pistol at the draw.]
SAY T.: You just stay right there and don’t move.
[Enter Murano, bearing a large outsize gourd. White froth topped. Say T. gives a huge leap in the air, tosses the ’gun’ in the air. Catches and fires several shots in all directions. General relaxation and hum of contentment.]
PROF.: [looks at his watch.] On time as usual my boy. Welcome. (88)

The Professor’s comment here recalls, too, Say Tokyo’s own arrival on the scene, early, but worried about being late. The irony is in the context of parody, akin to Murano’s being literally right ‘on time’ (88) when he functions symbolically as an ‘arrest’ of time. But the interlinking of events, the structural precision, is obvious; and, despite the parody, it functions as the
basis for expanding feeling, building toward the final moments of the play, where it is the sudden absence of sound and movement that underscores and rhythmically intensifies the action. First, Say Tokyo Kid confronts masked Murano: ‘suddenly still ... they both stand motionless ... no sound but hissed breaths’ (95). Then, after the Professor has been stabbed in the back: ‘a dead stillness of several moments’ (95). These are, I think, the most intensely felt moments of the play, their depth revealed in the extended improvisational organization that precedes them.

Form is preserved, as I have indicated, by its being suspended at various moments throughout the play – enlivened, as in much African music, by a kind of ‘off-beat’ phrasing. The force of the conclusion is, after all, a matter of deliberate timing, the stress on silence and stillness ‘staggering’ the action. In this sense, the literal stab of the conclusion may be considered in relation to the traditional performance principle of ‘killing the song’ or ‘cutting the dance’, where the final gesture brings into focus, like the couplet of a Shakespearian sonnet, the whole pattern that precedes it. The mixing of metaphors by an indigenous critic, reported by J. David Sapir in an article on funeral praise-singing in Senegal, is particularly apt in this context: ‘Should you speed up and forego the killing it will not be good. The singer ... looks for the road by which he is to kill so that everyone in the ensemble will hear the song and remember it.’

In a fundamental way, Africa has influenced Black literature and thought throughout the diaspora of the New World. But it is also true, as Eldred Jones and some other critics have observed that the Americas have had their ‘complementary influence on the writing of Africans in Africa’. At the end of the play, as an absence, the body is the key to freedom, the emptiness of the mask a metaphor for spiritual translation. This might be seen as an anticipation of ‘America’. After all, disembodiment, the symbolic mode of slavery, is central to an understanding of the Middle Passage and to the transformations of African identity in the heterocosm of the New World. With this in mind, the double-voicing of the play becomes particularly significant.

Like Ogun, plunging into the abyss, bridging the void between humanity and its gods, The Road connects Africa in transition to America. Certainly the Professor is the spiritual twin of Kerouac’s ‘mad Ahab at the wheel’. His death-speech about coiling oneself in dreams and breathing like the road, being the road, has much in common with Sal’s internalization of the quest for America in Kerouac’s novel, On the Road: ‘now I could feel the road unfurling and flying and hissing ... When I closed my eyes all I could see was the road unwinding into me.’ The differences are so obvious that the affinities between Soyinka’s play and Kerouac’s novel are startling. For instance, Sal’s dream of death as a shrouded Traveller, or later as a force that pushes from behind to stimulate a movement toward
visionary experience, is not unlike *The Road*’s conceptualization. Thus in Soyinka’s ‘Death in the Dawn’, a poem obviously related to the play, we read:

Traveller you must set forth  
At dawn  
I promise marvels of the holy hour

The road, as George Bowering observes in relation to Kerouac, is the alternative to the clock’s regulation and routine. Similarly, *The Road* presents a continuum of experience that defies time, so that the Professor’s benedictory gesture at the end looks back ironically to the beginning, at dawn, where Samson shakes his fist at the tower clock for awakening him. In both works the idealism of the road is attached to a recognition of the human body as a spiritual icon. And both are concerned with alienation. The Professor’s disciples, rejects of the road, would not be out of place in Kerouac’s world.

The figure of Joe Golder in *The Interpreters*, journeying back to Africa to discover his roots but having his Black consciousness undermined by the knowledge that he is half-white, reveals Soyinka’s awareness of the international outlook that Black Americans, following the Harlem Renaissance of the 1920s, distilled from W.E.B. DuBois, Marcus Garvey, Malcolm X and Frantz Fanon in the ’60s. And it is worth keeping in mind that the global aspirations of the revolutionary Black Power movement in America at that time are historically coincidental with the composition not only of *The Interpreters* but also of *The Road*. It is also worth keeping in mind that passage from Kerouac’s novel, naive though it may at first seem, where Sal wanders drearily through the ‘coloured’ section of Denver: ‘wishing I were a Negro, feeling that the best the white world had offered was not enough ecstasy for me, not enough life, joy, kicks, darkness, music, not enough right’ (*On the Road*, 169). The soul of the real America, Kerouac seems to be saying, is Black. And it is Soyinka himself who points out that ‘soul’ has become synonymous with Black America, a cultural metaphor that is generally defined in musical terms. It is a short step from that realization to *The Road*, for a playwright who states: ‘Music, whose nature lends itself to largely idealist striving, is not static; on the contrary, the interiority of its language provokes a constant dialectic with the world of reality – which is action, development, motion’ (*The Critic and Society*, 49).

If at the ‘end’ the Dance of Death marks ‘the movement of transition’, its active image is the road itself, which spans the Middle Passage. For the road, as an ideal, goes to the heart of the self-defining myth of ‘America’. In a sense Soyinka’s achievement in this play is no less than the redefinition of both ‘Africa’ and ‘America’, each in terms of the other. The importance of the travelling musician in Black American iconography is well
known. After Emancipation, as Ben Sidran says, ‘freedom was equated
with mobility’. Taking to the road established ‘a pattern which was to
become part of the black self-image in America’. Symbolically, even Huck
Finn gains spiritual sustenance from the Black quest for freedom, in terms
of movement, and there is little difference in this respect between a road
and a river. The Road connects precisely with this tradition, as a model of
continuity and movement through the Middle Passage. But its own move­
ment is two-directional, or more accurately one of free play. The semiotic
theme – the quest for the Word – owes nothing to universalizing, Euro­
centric theories of language, unless it is in terms of the parody of that
quest. Rather, the seriousness of the theme is grounded upon African aes­
thetic traditions of danced art, masking traditions, which are constitutive
rather than reflective, and intrinsically linked to the abiding political ques­
tion of power – personal, communal, spiritual. These were exported with
slaves, were in many ways their key to freedom, were modified, trans­
formed, shipped back and forth many times over in the cultural exchange
of succeeding generations – until, in a profoundly metaphoric sense, they
became the road that runs between. The ‘signifying’ of The Road, then, is
like that of Ogun, or of Murano himself, enabled even under pain of
silence, even from the grave, precisely because it has a foot each in two
worlds.

NOTES

bridge University Press, 1979), p. xii. Further references are given in the text.
3. For general reading, see Bill Ashcroft, Gareth Griffiths, Helen Tiffin, The Empire
pp. 33-37.
Further references are given in the text.
Literatures, 12, 1 (Spring, 1981), p. 90.
8. The most complete discussion is in Thompson, ‘An Aesthetic of the Cool: West
African Dance’, African Forum, 2, 2 (Fall 1966), pp. 85-102. See also Thompson, Black
Gods and Kings: Yoruba Art at UCLA (Los Angeles: University of California Museum
and Laboratories of Ethnic Art and Technology, 1971), p. 2/2; and by the same
author, Flash of the Spirit – African and Afro-American Art and Philosophy (New York:

11. In this there is possibly an ironic allusion to the repression of dancing in Africa by Protestant missionaries on the spurious ground that it was nothing but an excuse for an orgy – all body and no spirit. Consider the iconography of the church revealed earlier in the play: ‘the lectern, a bronze eagle on whose outstretched wings rests a huge tome’ (14). A bird of prey, the eagle is the image of conquest, weighed down here by the Word of God as a composite symbol of neo-colonialism. The conception of spiritual imperialism in terms of repression of movement is historically apt – notwithstanding the barbed irony, in this case, of restricting particularly the movement of ascent.


