

Narrativising Community, Surviving Contagion: Orality in Véronique Tadjo's *In the Company of Men*

Sreya Mallika Datta

Generative moments

Two 'moments' — both emerging from the felt experiences of the COVID-19 pandemic — inspire the brief reflections to follow. In July 2020, I co-organised an online panel for *Sanglap's* 'Considerations' Series, which was produced during the conditions of the pandemic. In those first few months of the pandemic, the UK was in the midst of its first 'lockdown', a concept that was a grim novelty at the time for those of us whose lives had never been significantly altered by disease. Aptly titled, the project (now inactive, but whose archive remains online on YouTube) hosted and coordinated a series of webinars, each reflecting on the impact of the pandemic on education, engagement, and activism in transnational contexts, both within and outside the classroom. The Series, in my mind, adopted what was essentially a communal call-and-response model. Reflected in the time span of its activity, it responded to the immediate demand for critical and collective thinking around and about the unfolding crisis.

Responding to the call, our panel, titled "Forging Solidarities: Community and the COVID-19 Pandemic", took stock of the changing contexts of community, care, and health within transnational contexts of global inequality, drawing perspectives from activists, scholars, and students located in UK, South Africa, and India. Reflecting on the panel now and revisiting its YouTube recording, I am struck by the loss of memory surrounding the series of steps that led from the conception of the event to its ultimate production. This first 'moment' — a recognition of the traumas yet to be processed collectively but nevertheless crystallised as communicable experience in Benjaminian terms — struck me as a contradiction. In many ways, the structure of the digital panel allowed this contradiction to exist. Within those urgent conversations emerged a form of community that attempted to connect the everyday experiences of the pandemic to global, ongoing issues of social justice and inequality. In an essay titled "The pandemic is a portal," which appeared in *Financial Times* in April 2020, Indian author and activist Arundhati Roy described the pandemic in world-historical terms as "a portal, a gateway between one world and the next" (45). Written almost immediately after India went into lockdown, Roy's essay articulated a cautiously optimistic stance, balancing her fine-tuned critique of intensifying state authoritarianism and its exacerbation of existing social inequalities with an expansive political vision of critical solidarity; the ruptures created by the pandemic bore historical potential precisely because they brought the immense "engine of capitalism to a juddering halt" (Roy), providing at least the temporary opportunity to collectively examine capitalism's seemingly uncontainable spread. A sense of historicising the present moment as an act of being in relation thus marked a majority of critical reflections emerging from the contexts of the pandemic. But what was this attempt at mobilising collective thinking around the pandemic trying to do in the longer term?

Nearly three years on, I am still unsure. In one sense, the attempt was to capture and preserve a memory of the very possibility of collective thinking within contexts of isolation and uncertainty. That work was crucial because it was documenting a memory that would necessarily need to be forgotten or at least temporarily pushed aside in order for 'normalcy' to resume. The events that unfolded from 2020 onwards saw places like the UK, where I am currently located, racing to return to normative standards of 'freedom', those very standards which had exposed the lie of a privileged and hyper-individualised liberal conception of the self. From the 'new normal' — the standard phrase used to define the experience of living with COVID-19 regulations — to the imposition of normalcy as the perceived end of the pandemic, tectonic shifts were taking place that are yet to be fully understood on a collective level. The first generative 'moment', then, was the need to interrogate the conditions within which it

became possible to imagine the 'normal' in an era where the possibility of the next pandemic was firmly embedded in the collective consciousness. What is not being healed in the return to normalcy?

The second 'moment', which is the chief subject of my reflections on what is to follow, took the shape of an individual experience. Even though time had suddenly been 'freed up' by the successive lockdowns, I struggled to read lengthy works of fiction, recalling Rob Nixon's argument that "one of the most pressing challenges of our age is how to adjust our rapidly eroding attention spans to the slow erosions of environmental justice" (8). It was within these contexts that I read Véronique Tadjo's slim book, *In the Company of Men* (hereafter *Company*), ordered from a second-hand online bookstore. My interest in this book was sparked by its subtitle, "The Ebola Tales." Written in the aftermath of the 2014-2016 Ebola outbreak in West Africa, it was originally published in French as *En compagnie des hommes* (2017). It appeared in English translation in 2021 (jointly translated by Tadjo and John Cullen) at the height of the COVID-19 pandemic. Despite its startling topicality for our present age and Tadjo's renown as an author, much has not been written about this text. Combining meticulous research and literary invention, Tadjo offers a detailed account of the epidemic within the span of less than 150 pages. In the story, the voices of human and nonhuman actors play equal parts, dramatising the tragedy to humanise the thousands who lost their lives to the deadly disease. In its uncanny parallelisms with the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic and a strong emphasis on a hopeful future, the book appeared to be a manual of the times, a corrective to the global "derangement" (Amitav Ghosh) that marks our present historical moment. The creative labour involved in re-creating a memory of the devastating epidemic demands corresponding ongoing labour on the readers' part. Like many others, no doubt, I have found it extremely difficult to metaphorically 're/turn' to the pandemic. My reading of the novel and the reflective style of the piece is thus weaved through with the memory of a time that appears both distant as well as imminent, both disjunctive as well as hopeful.

In what follows, I examine how Tadjo's genre-bending work registers the "derangement" of climate change at the level of form (part-fable, part-elegy, part-journalistic reportage, part-novel), which disrupts the linear temporality of an autonomous inner novelistic subjectivity. I argue that the book offers a multi-level, enlarged version of solidarity, which encompasses both the "ordinary" narratives of conviviality and resilience and the deep time of horizontal cohabitation between humans and nonhumans. In this reconciliation of the mundane and the cosmological, the oral and the literary, the fabular and the real, Tadjo's powerful narrativisation of community comes to the fore as a template for the very survival of the planet. In the first section, I will assess how Tadjo's portrayal of the Ebola crisis extends Ghosh's critique of realism and the novel form. The novel invests in and activates other archives of literary culture and realism in the African context, particularly traditions of orality, to argue for reparative models of collective address and testimony. In the second section, I analyse how narratives of solidarity in the novel offer a reconciliation of the spiritual or cosmological and the 'ordinary' or the 'everyday'. I will conclude by retracing the 'moments' that led to the production of this piece and the reflections contained within it — rupture, derangement, and reconciliation — as an opening out to the 'reckoning', that is yet to come.

Derangement

One of the central interventions of Amitav Ghosh's compelling *The Great Derangement* is its critique of the temporal closures enacted by the realist novel. Tracing its provenance to the rise of bourgeois subjectivity and invoking the Weberian thesis of rationalisation in industrialising societies, Ghosh writes:

Before the birth of the modern novel, wherever stories were told, fiction delighted in the unheard-of and the unlikely... This, after all, is how storytelling must necessarily proceed, inasmuch as it is a recounting of "what happened" — for such an inquiry can

arise only in relation to something out of the ordinary, which is but another way of saying “exceptional” or “unlikely”...Novels too proceed in this fashion, but what is distinctive about the form is precisely the concealment of those exceptional moments that serve as the motor of the narrative. (Ghosh 16-17)

Ghosh’s central argument here is that the form of the modern novel forecloses enchantment. In this, Ghosh follows the foundational scholarship of Ian Watts, Nancy Armstrong, and Benedict Anderson, among others, who variously argue that the ‘imagined community’ cohered by the modern realist novel closely aligns with the secularising and individualising drive of capitalist modernity. This, according to Ghosh, refers to the “irony of the “realist” novel: the very gestures with which it conjures up reality are actually a concealment of the real” (23). In this sense, the realist novel does not only ‘conceal’ reality; rather, it *creates* a ‘knowable community’ (to borrow from Raymond Williams) whose coherence relies on this concealment. Referring to novels as “knowable communities” (“The Knowable Community” 239), Williams invokes community “as a guiding principle in the general conception of the novel form itself” (Alcalá 118). Williams underscores the dialectical implications of the “knowability” of community. “Indeed, it is in just this problem of knowing a community,” Williams writes, “of finding a standpoint from which a community can be known,” that the operations of literary criticality can be perceived (“The Knowable Community” 255). In other words, knowability is “not only a function of objects — of what is there to be known” (Williams, *The Country and the City* 240) but also of the process of how a community is realised in the artwork. How, then, is a literary community imagined when the knowability of the community cohered by realist fiction confronts the historical reality of environmental catastrophe? Can realism even accommodate that which is ‘unlikely’ or ‘exceptional’, or does it signal the exhaustion and unsustainability of the bourgeois novel in our contemporary moment?

What appears to be Ghosh’s categorical excoriation of the modern realist novel is, in fact, a call to its reorigination. This is evident to an extent in the passage quoted above, where Ghosh reads the realist novel in tandem with its predecessor, the wonder-inducing story. These are not read as mutually opposed but locked within a hierarchical relationship of concealment and exposure, enclosure and potential. The sign of the ‘realist’ novel, then, is not absolute but unstable. As Ghosh argues, what has become radically unsustainable is not so much the novel form itself as the “individual moral adventure” (77), which purportedly served as the organising framework for novelistic subjectivity. Within the global contemporary, when challenges such as global warming, climate change, and pandemics take on a distinctive “collective predicament,” Ghosh resists a “dominant culture in which the idea of the collective has been exiled from politics, economics, and literature alike” (80). Ultimately, a key takeaway from the volume is that the imperative to restore community is no less than the imperative for survival itself. Those orders of temporality that have hitherto been excluded from the imaginations of the real take shape once again in the reorganisation of the very sign of realism.

In this regard, however, Ghosh’s argument requires further probing. While his demand for new forms of literary representation, particularly those that take on a distinctively collective outlook, is well taken, his position on the mimetic relationship between climate change and fictional representation is somewhat ambivalent. In order to represent the “time” of climate change realistically, fiction needs to detach from realism that inherits the individualism of bourgeois modernity. Yet, in equating literary realism almost exclusively with secular individualism (which also informs the rather troubling terms of a distinction between “serious”/realist fiction and science fiction), Ghosh’s argument is, to an extent, self-limiting. As a long tradition of postcolonial scholarship on literary realism has demonstrated, realism is never a stable category or inherently derivative of “western” traditions of individualism. Meenakshi Mukherjee and Susan Andrade’s works on the Indian and African novel, respectively, have demonstrated that realism in postcolonial fictions signifies a mutative (Mukherjee’s term in *Realism and Reality*, and rather suggestive in the context of the present discussion) rather than historically unchanging relationship between literary form and social

reality. Andrade's focus is on the construction of literary history and the "calcified model[s]" of analyses which create categorical divisions, such as that between realism and modernism, in teleological terms (290); Mukherjee's is on the historical temporality of early Indian novels that produce a complex interplay between indigenous aesthetics and colonially inherited modes of literary realism. Both critics attach an expansive value to realism precisely by disturbing the functionalism of the mimetic contract. This is to say that the new forms of realism that need to be invented or innovated in an era of climate change cannot succeed by virtue of their representational function alone (climate change in the "real world" finds expression as an unmediated "reality" in the contemporary novel). Rather, the most politically active forms of realism dissolve a narrow mode of representationalism that defines postcolonial texts as either always compromised or transparently mimetic. What is at stake in Ghosh's discussion of the contemporary novel is thus not so much the realistic representation of climate change, per se, but the renewed resignification of the very terms of literary realism.

Tadjo's work returns us to Ghosh's emphasis on storytelling and "the significant role that 'stories' can play in understanding the urgent issue and building solidarity and resistance based politics on a global scale" (Bhattacharya and Chatterjee 2). Far from signifying a residual or archaic function, 'storytelling' gains a distinctive political and ethical charge in Tadjo's works as an expansive framework for balancing competing models of narrative temporality and projecting a broader and historically situated version of realism. Welding the political ethos of the fabular and allegorical (encapsulated by the Baobab's framing narrative) with the proto-scientific rationality of journalistic coverage, documentation, and archiving of oral testimony (whether 'real' or imagined), the hybridity of the *Company's* narrative structure balances two competing frames of temporal designation that are conventionally placed in opposition to one another. *Company's* realism is heavily reliant on the conscious disruption of a conservative view of novelistic temporality, defined by the Lukácsian antagonism between "historic time" (the time of secular individualism and alienation) and "mythic time" (cosmological, cyclical time) (Mukherjee 9). The social, historical, and political crises of the epidemic (and pandemic) and attendant notions of reality thus find full narrative expression in the utilisation of the political power of storytelling. What might it mean, then, for the contemporary novel to rely on the so-called archaic origins of the story? How does this attempt go beyond the diagnostics of exhaustion and toward a critical politics of affirmation?

What makes *Company* exemplary is its self-conscious and deliberate attempt to trace its provenance to the oral traditions of West Africa. Many, and even Tadjo herself, would hesitate to call this text a "novel" without qualifications. As Rachael Nevins argues, "Tadjo's novel spins the scientific, sociological, personal, and mythic into a polyvocal visionary tale about the outbreak of Ebola virus disease that began in late December 2013 in Guinea" (Nevins). Antonia Wimbush has also argued that "the text can be considered a piece of art in its own right as well as an educational tool" (231), gesturing toward Ghosh's argument about the pedagogical value of literary realism in an age of climate catastrophe. Unencumbered by conventions of plot, character, and temporal progression, the text wholly situates itself in the originating moment of crisis. In doing so, it presents its own crisis of interpretation, necessarily so. The book is organised into five broad sections (sixteen sub-sections in total), each casting light on a different aspect of the epidemic and the historical trajectories of its emergence. Opening as a cautionary tale, it locates the "patient zero" of the epidemic: "Two mischievous young boys from a village on the edge of the forest" (Tadjo, *In the Company* 2) who go out hunting and contract the virus from bushmeat, dying shortly after. Their sister, who contracts the virus too, is instructed by her father to leave the village and travel to the capital. The next section focuses on the voice of the Baobab, "the first tree, the everlasting tree, the totem tree" (Tadjo, *In the Company* 11). The Baobab approximates the function of the griot or storyteller, the repository of communal knowledge. It provides a longer historical frame for the crisis, delivering a parable on the intertwined temporalities of human and nonhuman existence. The Baobab mourns the loss of an organic relationship between humanity and the natural environment, nevertheless situating itself as a "symbol for the close link between Nature and

Man" (Tadjo, *In the Company* 15). The disease, for the Baobab, follows the symbolic and material rupture of this link. The third section moves into a chorus of voices, including a doctor, nurse, community healthcare worker, gravedigger, and volunteer, fighting at the frontlines of the epidemic. They are not fully defined as characters with elaborate backstories. Their individual meditations, taken together, highlight those vital practices of service, care, and solidarity on the ground that remain largely invisible from global narratives of aid and disease control. The penultimate section brings the voices of the bat and the virus to the fore, asserting the "uncanny intimacy of our [humanity's] relationship with the nonhuman" (Ghosh 22). The conflicting voices of the bat and virus articulate the heterogeneity of the nonhuman world, contrasting the impersonal 'lawlessness' of the virus with the sympathetic view of the bat as close kin of humans. The final section leads us back to the Baobab, reinstating its position as the custodian of the narrative's temporality. The Baobab adjudicates the various voices of the narrative, accommodating the polyvocality of articulation into a collective framework of regeneration. The narrative concludes with an imperative towards reconciliation, involving the repair of cosmological and material ties as an un-working of anthropocentric motives of control, dominion, and possession.

Tadjo radically pluralises the origins of the novel; in an interview with Davina Philomena Kawuma for *Africa in Words*, she explains: "I had a Greek chorus in mind and the narrative structure of African oral traditions. I was interested in projecting a more holistic view of the world in which nonhumans are on the same par with humans" (Kawuma). The framework of novelistic subjectivity shifts from the workings of the interior psyche to the "acknowledgement of the vulnerability of our existence." What is implicit in Tadjo's project is also a questioning of the readerly demands of the novel. *Company* can be variously classified as a collection of tales (indicated in its subtitle), imaginative reportage, prose poetry, or even philosophical discourse on the interrelationship between human and nonhuman time. On the one hand, it is entirely possible to read the narrative as a rejection of the usual conventions of the novel. Its organising impulse is the recursive temporality of cyclical time as opposed to the progressive temporality of developmental time. Yet, it is also impossible to reject the realism of its form, which has typically been associated with the modern novel. In its endorsement of the book, *World Literature Today* calls *Company* "[r]ealistic, painterly, and poetic," an "impeccably structured polyvocal novel [which] registers the urgency, despair, commitment, dedication, and solidarity that Ebola provokes" (Davies Cordova). Written in the aftermath of the Ebola epidemic, *Company* operates on the 'motor' of a critical imagination that constructs the deadly disease as both 'unlikely' and 'exceptional' as well as expected and inevitable. Evading categorisation and purposefully inhabiting the instability that Ghosh identifies in the novel form, it nevertheless participates in the re-imagining of the novel by adapting novelistic conventions to oral formations as a critical matrix for collective perceptions of crisis.

In the African literary-critical context, debates on the novel similar to the ones Ghosh brings up have been going on for decades. In fact, the very constitution of the field has hinged on the seeming tension between the oral and the literary, tradition and modernity. In some variants of this debate, orality has been viewed as a marker of African literary authenticity or as a distinctively "African" mode of resistance to the colonialist imposition of novelistic sensibilities. Abiola Irele and Emmanuel Obiechina, for instance, studied how early African writing adapted traditional forms of orality in the novel, the literary medium of Western modernity. For instance, Irele asserted that "oral literature represents the basic intertext of the African imagination" (56) and that the mark of truly authentic African writing was its experimentation with the fundamental matrix of already-existing oral literatures. Similarly, Obiechina's work focused on the synthesis of oral and literary traditions in African literature, exploring how the modern novel's deference to traditional orality represented its ideological commitments to "traditional solidarities" and its espousal of "values, beliefs, and attitudes conditioned and nourished by the oral tradition" (124). Such debates lend further depth to Ghosh's critique of realism in postcolonial fictions, which tends to create rather neat temporal

divisions between “the Western novel and other, older forms of narrative” (18), the former straightforwardly superseding or overcoming the latter.

In other variants of the debate, this treatment of orality has received criticism on the grounds that it equates orality with premodern traditionality or analyses it primarily as an authenticating device. It inscribes orality within an “essential ‘black difference’ which would surface necessarily in Euro-language writing from Africa” (Julien 127). Orality, therefore, has been shorn of its full participation in the project of African realism, offering a supporting role, for instance, within meta-narratives of anticolonial realism. As Eileen Julien also argues:

Far from unchanging immemorial traditions handed down word for word from father to son, oral artistic forms are and have always been supple and absolutely contemporaneous. Professional and occasional performers are immersed in the political dynamics and social life of the communities in which they perform. Moreover the oral text is created in the moment of its enunciation and reception, the moment when an audience invests the narrative fabric with meaning. The oral text, writes Senegalese historian Mamadou Diouf, takes shape ‘dans le décodage’ [in its decoding] (Diouf 1991,36). For this reason, oral traditions are, above all, of their time. (Julien 123)

Julien here offers a corrective to a dominant understanding of African literary modernity, which traditionally views the exchange between the oral and the literary in terms of a one-way transfer. The oral validates the literary with the mark of an essential African difference while itself being divested of a fully active or adaptive role in the formation of novelistic subjectivities. Refuting this view, Julien asserts the political commitments that undergird the emergence of the oral as a contemporaneous genre. In different ways from the literary, Julien appears to suggest orality is connected to the grassroots, emerging from collective demand rather than the private practice of the individual artist. The question then emerges: can the individual artist produce communal forms? If so, who is the audience?

Tadjo, broadly speaking, aligns with Julien’s view. As she argues:

Oral tradition in Africa has improperly been labelled “traditional.” But in reality, there is nothing *that* “traditional” about it. As Makhily Gassama, the Senegalese literary critic points out, it is still practised today by the majority of people in Africa. It is an evolving form that modernises itself by taking on the preoccupations of our times. (“Cartography” 13)

This is a significant statement from a contemporary writer who is primarily a literary artist. Tadjo is of dual heritage (French and Ivorian), highly educated (with a Ph.D. from Sorbonne and a Fulbright Fellowship from Howard University), and well-travelled (she has lived in Abidjan, South Africa, the UK, and the USA, among other places). While Tadjo is certainly not the only contemporary African writer who is seriously invested in oral forms, *Company* is distinctive as a prose narrative in its mobilisation of orality to address the current climate crisis and its acceleration of contagion on a global scale. Tadjo challenges the racialised narrative of Africa as a hopeless continent, demonstrating the robustness and adaptability of indigenous knowledge systems within contemporaneous experiences of modernity instead. Instead of adapting orality to the novel form, Tadjo, I would argue, does the opposite. She adjusts readerly expectations from the start by insisting on the universality of oral literatures, on reviving a memory of orality that is intrinsic to all cultures. “It is a genre,” she says, “that is well known on the African continent — and in all cultures for that matter. It allows the storyteller to call on prose, poetry, history, political speech, and even music” (“Reading List”). In this sense, orality is the very fabric of reality, the register of universal resonance. The generic modifications of the novel de-emphasise the primacy of autonomous subjectivity and reconstitute the multiple actors and forms that have been excluded from the “human” story. This, too, is a “real” story. The validity of this story relies less on addressing a specifically African or “local” audience and more on emphasising Africa’s interconnectedness with the world and with its own ecosystems.

The nonhuman actors of the story, however, do not quite form the “animist unconscious” of the text. In his highly influential essay, “Explorations in Animist Materialism,” Harry Garuba argues that the spiritual substructures of most African societies are materially expressed in ‘animist’ cultures. The animist unconscious, according to Garuba, “is a form of collective subjectivity that structures being and consciousness in predominantly animist societies and cultures” (269). Garuba calls this the persistence of animist structures in modernity, or what he terms the “re-traditionalisation” of the modern. Re-traditionalisation refers to the two-way process by which modern forms are assimilated into traditional practices and traditional forms are recuperated and incorporated into the forms of Western modernity (Garuba 265). The dual implication posits that animist sensibilities not only utilise modern technologies but often become the technology for modernist self-apprehension, where time itself can be conceived as a “continual re-enchantment of the world” (Garuba 265). While this is similar to what I am arguing, there is an inherent contradiction in Garuba’s thinking which is insufficiently addressed in his essay.

On the one hand, Garuba categorically rejects the Weberian thesis of modernity as disenchantment, one that Ghosh identifies as constitutive of the modern realist novel. Garuba traces how the lived realities of erstwhile colonised countries directly contradict this thesis and prove it to be unsuitable for arriving at a general definition of modernity. Using the framework of “alternative modernities” — the claim that experiences of modernity in postcolonial cultures are not beholden to Western trajectories of development — Garuba argues that re-traditionalisation is the “obverse” of the disenchanting process, determined by the co-terminity of the animist/premodern and the secular/modern. On the other hand, this rejection itself is premised on the acceptance of Weber’s understanding of modernity as secularisation: if these societies have *always* eluded binarist divisions, then the question remains, what is being *re-traditionalised* or, alternatively, *re-traditionalised*. The contradiction, apparent in the framing of his argument, leaves us with the gaps one encounters when processes of obversion inform the continual re-enchantment of the world.

In my reading, the re-enchantment of the world stems less from a process of obversion than from processes of intersection or interconnection, where what is being deconstructed is the theory of disenchantment itself and the instability of systems that attempt to construct the difference between tradition and modernity. What is emphasised here is not the rupture from African cosmology but the possibility of its reconstitution in modernity. Indeed, Garuba’s theory challenges postcolonial approaches, which hinge on qualifying the tension between tradition (putatively African, static) and modernity (Western, developmental). At the same time, his emphasis on the alternative rationalities of animist cultures is not fully qualified, partly because he presents these cultures as both always-existing and always-emergent. The Warwick Research Collective’s (WReC) recent scholarship, drawing from Franco Moretti and Frederic Jameson, addresses this apparent contradiction in their thesis on ‘combined and uneven development’ within a “single but radically uneven world-system” (49). The “singular modernity” of the world-system is conceived in terms of a spatialised core-periphery model relating to the unevenness of temporal experience in the peripheral zones of capitalist modernity. The co-presence of the archaic and the modern (which is Garuba’s general thesis) can be understood, then, not in terms of cultural celebration but symptomatically, as a registration of capitalism’s global expansion. “Generic discontinuities” in the formal structures of peripheral literary works thus draw attention to the “modernities where traditional and emergent social and cultural values coexisted and clashed” (Parry 32). While WReC’s work tempers the potential dangers of cultural exceptionalism or the harmonisation of animist cultural beliefs with capitalism, I argue that Tadjó’s work evades both celebratory animism and paradigmatic exposition. *Company*’s generic modifications posit a critical framework of temporality that challenges the spatialised logic of capitalist development. The Baobab’s rootedness offers a counter to this logic, and the ascription of literary value to its ‘story’ provides agency to nonhuman temporalities. Ultimately, *Company*’s social critique adopts a

restorative approach to 'tradition', which neither waits to be celebrated for its own sake nor emerges as the residue of pre-capitalist cultures.

Tadjo's view of the coeval relationship between tradition and modernity critiques the *metropolitan* orientation that Garuba internalises while remaining alive to the possibility of a critical and mutually confirming relationship between metropolitan and 'village' cultures. For instance, while Garuba draws his real-life examples majorly from material urban cultures, Tadjo acknowledges her formative experiences as a schoolteacher in remote Korhogo, which deserves quoting in length:

I remained in Korhogo for a couple of years, teaching English in a secondary school. It became the place where I was able to witness, first hand, the resilience of oral tradition. It came from the mythological world of the Senoufo people who inhabit the region, a universe filled with extraordinary creatures and beliefs and an ancestral religion rich in spirituality. This environment fed my imagination in ways that would not have been the same had I stayed put in Abidjan or in Paris. I knew that among my students, there were many who would go through the initiation rites and spend prolonged time in the sacred forest. And yet, there they were, sitting at their school desks trying hard to acquire a new knowledge that would take them far away from where they came. I felt a deep bond with these teenagers at the crossroads of many truths. It made me wonder how many would be successful at merging these two opposite world views. Would they lose their culture, cast it aside to enter modernity wholeheartedly or would they manage to find a balance? Looking at them, talking to them, teaching them, this was a question I kept asking myself. ("Cartography" 11-12)

In part, Tadjo's novelistic craft is an attempt to find this balance, to level tradition and modernity on the same plane. Tadjo is not so much concerned with the relationship between the spiritual and techno-structures of modernity as she is with healing the very conception of time itself as a domain where a relation can still be possible. This is perhaps a more politically active imagination than what Garuba's theory offers. To re-enchant the world is not only to *identify* the hybrid and assimilative structures of orality but also to *organise* it as the basis of a collective political imagination. This is what distinguishes an already-existing collective subjectivity residing in animist cultures from the type of collective imagination which emerges when the very conditions of its temporal existence appear entirely contingent, finite, and terminal.

Reconciliation

Company opens with a human premise. Two insignificant, unnamed human actors go into the forest and sling their arrows at "everything that move[s]" (Tadjo, *In the Company* 2). A bat falls prey to the arrows, thudding painfully and slowly to the ground. There is no ritual to the capture of the bat; it is hunted out of necessity as the "villagers live amid great natural beauty and utter destitution" (Tadjo, *In the Company* 2). More than the actual act of capture and consumption itself, the indiscriminateness of the action appears to bring life, and time itself, to a halt. Less than a month later, the two young brothers lie "at death's door," blood "flowing out of every orifice in their bodies" (Tadjo, *In the Company* 3). The novel imitates the virus' pace: there is no time to describe the sickness because the virus infiltrates the human body and then the larger social body very quickly. Two ideations of time — a fatal error and the "sinister premonition" (Tadjo, *In the Company* 5) — are augured by the boys' death structure of the novel's opening. Error and premonition are not often considered temporal markers of novelistic time; they would fall into the realm of the 'unlikely' or 'exceptional', as Ghosh would argue. Yet, these are the very coordinates that inform the unsentimental yet harrowing realism of the novel. What does it mean, the novel asks, to move *with* the virus?

This question is difficult, almost impossible, to pose because it implies tracking the trajectory of one's own imminent demise. The novel opens with a risk to its own survival — in the absence of humans, who forms the community of its address? This is a necessary risk to take because it pushes the novel out of a representational paradigm where exceptional or

catastrophic events simply “happen” or occur in the lives of human characters. Instead, the novel balances two competing frames of reference. On the one hand, it appears to emerge from the kind of topical, collective demand that Julien observes is the basis of communal creation. Tadjó’s literary career demonstrates her commitment to this form of writing. For instance, her novel *L’Ombre d’Imana* (2000, Engl. trans. *The Shadow of Imana*, 2002) on the 1994 Rwandan genocide emerged from a collective project called “Rwanda: écrire par devoir de mémoire” (roughly translated as “Rwanda: Writing as a Duty to Memory”). This project involved a group of eight African writers who were invited to visit Kigali and reflect on the genocide and produce literary responses memorialising the event. The project and the writings produced out of it underscored cultural memorialisation as a form of communal address and healing, restitution of humanity in the aftermath of mass extermination. *Company*, in many ways, is a similarly urgent project, responding to the specificities of its local context (the West African experience of Ebola) and to the universalities of the global context (climate change and the COVID-19 situation). On the other hand, it is also predicated upon the imagined *absence* of a human audience — a collective absence now imagined on a planetary scale — who would otherwise “invest the narrative fabric with meaning” (Julien 123). The novel’s temporality reorganises orality’s critical impulse towards communal creation. Memorialising the time of the epidemic, Tadjó suggests, involves the activation of a different register of orality, one that implicates human time within its own disappearance. Only in locating human time within its radical vulnerability can other conceptions of time (including nonhuman time) be inherited as frameworks of cultural survival.

In “The Chronopolitics of the Anthropocene”, Dipesh Chakrabarty writes: “because of the multiple ways in which the planetary environmental crisis we call the Anthropocene plays out on different scales of time and space, both human and nonhuman, the Anthropocene, it seems to me, fragments human futures in unprecedented ways” (326). Epidemics and pandemics fragment the very concept of the future. The survival of time itself requires other frameworks of restitution, which, in this novel, attain a distinctly communal and cosmological register. The Baobab tree, “the *griot*, the storyteller, the central figure” of the novel (quoted in Solarin-Sodara and Ogwo), provides the expansive historical framework that explains the novel’s title:

(W)hen men murder us, they must know that they are breaking the chains of existence. Animals can no longer find food. Bats can no longer find food, can no longer find the wild fruit they like so much. Then they migrate to the villages, where there are mango, guava, papaya, and avocado trees, with their soft, sweet fruits. The bats seek the company of Men. (Tadjó, *In the Company* 13-14)

It situates the ‘error’ of the brothers’ indiscriminate hunting within a cosmological framework of “slow violence,” related to the disruption of the original kinship shared between humans and trees. The Baobab does not stand in as an allegory of Nature as a whole but as the culturally specific figure of the *griot*. *Griots* in West African traditions are important members of the community “who fulfil vital social and cultural roles as performers and interpreters, as praise-singers, oral historians, storytellers, singers, dancers, and drummers” (Newell 59). *Griots* ensure cultural survival as figures who can interpret and modify historical truth in the service and interests of the community they address. The Baobab replaces the human *griot* as it mourns the loss of human life — “I watched helplessly as the disease spread like wildfire” (Tadjó, *In the Company* 21) — keeping alive the “memory of centuries gone by” (Tadjó, *In the Company* 18). The Baobab’s elegy thus creates a structure of mourning for the loss of human life in the absence of a human memory that can mourn humanity’s severance from nature.

Against this mythic time, the Baobab also registers a more recent memory of extraction. “When gold was discovered in our region,” the Baobab declares, “my village changed from one day to the next. It became warped, disfigured, because raw gold was up for grabs” (Tadjó, *In the Company* 19). The devastation of a human sense of time is correlated to the geopolitics of resource extraction:

I know that not all humans are alike...Only some of them run industrial-scale palm oil, rubber, cocoa, coffee and eucalyptus plantations for financial gain; only a few buy up entire harvests, loading them onto enormous container barges that sail across the seas and unload their cargoes somewhere in the West after the London, Paris and New York stock exchanges have decided on the world market prices. (Tadjo, *In the Company* 14)

The Baobab's cautionary tale against capital illuminates the detritus of human life, its reduction to "nothing but flesh and viscosity" (Tadjo, *In the Company* 23). This is what Achille Mbembe in *Critique of Black Reason* has evocatively termed a 'Becoming-Black-of-the-World', or a new form of collective humanity, now imagined as excess or surplus to the operations of racial capital. If, "in early capitalism, the term "Black" referred only to the condition imposed on peoples of African origin," the contemporary order of capitalism "institutionalise[s] a new norm of existence" now "expanded to the entire planet" (Tadjo, *In the Company* 5–6). The "new fungibility" and "solubility" (6) of human life liquifies not only the human body itself but also dissolves the social and cosmological ties of kinship, the sacred and intimate rituals of life, death, and rebirth that otherwise affirm the very possibility of relation.

Yet, Tadjo's approach to the Anthropocene (and her choice of the central figure of the Baobab) bears a deeply humanist vision, which retains belief in "humanity's ability to reform itself" (quoted in Solarin-Sodara and Ogwo). Against grand diagnostic concepts such as the chronopolitics of the Anthropocene or the Becoming-Black-of-the-World, reformist ideas of humanism might itself appear woefully inadequate in our current age. However, what Tadjo suggests as humanist reformation is the opposite of a conception of 'Man' whose provenance is solely human. It aligns more closely with what Francis Nyamnjoh has called "conviviality." This is a mode of African self-fashioning premised upon the championing of interconnections and relatedness, which "collapse[s] dichotomies and build[s] bridges...between nature and culture, the visible and the invisible, tradition and modernity, Africa and Europe, gods, spirits, ghosts, animals and kindred creatures of the bushes and humans" (Nyamnjoh 6–7). A philosophy of conviviality captures what is left of the remainder of human life and reveals its radical interconnectedness with what a normative notion of humanity excludes. The Baobab takes up the reigns of the human story as one "we haven't yet finished telling" (Tadjo, *In the Company* 23), not only mourning the loss of human life but also narrating the conditions under which life survives.

The 'story' the Baobab tells as a *griot* is one of *ubuntu*, the extraordinary courage, and resilience of "ordinary" men and women, several of whom lost their lives in acts of service and care. As a philosophical framework of solidarity, humanitarianism, and community, *ubuntu* encodes a "concept of social responsibility" (Chigangaidze et al. 323). Tadjo integrates the oral aspects of *ubuntu* within her text, drawing many of her stories from real-life testimonials and reports as well as from the domain of public knowledge. These include, among others, narratives of a "doctor in a spacesuit [who] discovers a new universe" (Tadjo, *In the Company* 27), a chlorine sprayer who disinfects the bodies of the dead, an Ebola survivor who fights ostracism and stigmatisation of the disease in the community, a grandmother who takes in an orphaned child, and the Congolese researcher who first discovered the Ebola virus in 1976. These cast of characters ventriloquise Tadjo's own voice, but the narrative itself is unmediated by any direct intervention of authorial voice into the story. The cumulative, choral effect disbands any hierarchy of voices (voices of the mother, lover, researcher, doctor, nurse, etc., all blend into one another), depicting the fight against the virus as a truly common one. In this sense, the novel is an act of ongoing, democratic public creation, an invitation to collaborate beyond the text.

Representations of *ubuntu* in the novel do not posit it as a homogenous, timeless aspect of African societies or even as an abstract moral philosophy. Its representation in the novel is, I would argue, largely pragmatic and epistemological. In a pragmatic sense, *ubuntu* provides the only realistic framework for human survival within the crises occasioned by

epidemics and pandemics. As the Congolese researcher advises, “in the fight against Ebola, human beings have always been more important than anything else. They are the agents of their own recovery, their own protection” (Tadjo, *In the Company* 105). The practical philosophy of *ubuntu* that emerges from the actual practices of solidarity on the ground has no other locus of enunciation than the one in which the value of human life is rescued from its dissolution. This is expressed, for instance, in the prefect’s tale. The prefect leads outreach teams that “spend entire days talking to the people” (Tadjo, *In the Company* 77) and make them understand that erstwhile practices of *ubuntu*, including physical touch, embrace, and bodily care of the sick, now have to be abandoned. Without prescribing a dogmatic idea of “culture,” the prefect works towards a form of solidarity that refuses to see human beings as “just vectors of infection” (Tadjo, *In the Company* 74). Instead, the prefect outlines the slow, painstaking work of *ubuntu* through which an entire community of actors can resituate their collective practices towards the goal of collective survival.

Tadjo refuses to equate *ubuntu* with African exceptionalism or an identitarian project: the volunteer from the West who risks his life to fight the virus participates in *ubuntu* from a position of humility — “I’d found a humanity here that made me question my outlook on life” (Tadjo, *In the Company* 83) — rather than from the position of saviourism. The narrative, therefore, crucially centres on what Ghosh laments have been exiled from the dominant culture; that is, the very possibility of the collective. At an epistemological level, the ordinariness of *ubuntu* and its de-linking from an identitarian project resignifies the sign of ‘Africa’. In other words, the convivial framework of *ubuntu* challenges the very paradigm of racialisation, one of whose earliest manifestations is the production of Blackness as an absolute difference. Nanjala Nyabola astutely observes that “a big reason why the African COVID-19 response has been so remarkable is that it has to be, because when disaster strikes, “the world” does not always respond with solidarity” (68). Far from the romanticisation of Africa, Nyabola argues, “solidarity is a beautiful constitutive practice to give meaning to the idea of “Africa”” (75). Above all, the practice of solidarity radically challenges the foundational narrative of Africa as “the cradle of untold suffering” (Tadjo, *In the Company* 22), and of Africans as perpetual victims (of disease, of their governments, and of history itself).

This narrative of *ubuntu* in the novel is impossible without the mediating voice of the Baobab (or, indeed, of the virus and the bat). The “I” voices of the cast of human characters are placeholders in the sense that they do not actually “exist” outside of the Baobab’s perspective. The Baobab bears witness to these stories as a way of “honour[ing] their bravery” “no matter where they are” (Tadjo, *In the Company* 23). The latter phrase indicates a darker reality that these stories of resilience are perhaps addressed as much to the dead as they are to the living. The Baobab’s concluding remarks — “the wheel of fortune and disaster never ceases to turn” (Tadjo, *In the Company* 132) — foreclose any possibility of a return to a nostalgic time of organic kinship. Instead, they foretell the inevitability of an inter-implicated time. The Baobab observes that the “destiny of Man will become one with ours” (Tadjo, *In the Company* 132). This is not a prediction but a memory.

Conclusion

In this essay, I have stayed closely with Véronique Tadjo’s vision of solidarity in *Company*. Like the recuperating patient who leans close to the Baobab tree and senses its “life-giving vibrations” (Tadjo, *In the Company* 68), I have tried to route (and root) my argument through the multiple vibrational accounts of the community documented in this narrative. Ultimately, I write from a position of vulnerability. The time of the pandemic that I have survived, along with those of you who are reading this, is a time that will return if we are to listen to the Baobab tree. Others have been lost to this time. Living with this form of derangement as a permanent feature of modern life demands an overhaul of the critical, affective, and intellectual

frameworks through which we understand our reality and our common predicament. I have tried to modify, as much as possible, the conventional parameters of academic critique and argumentative rationality simply because the time for that has not yet come. The version of reconciliation that I suggest in this essay, therefore, approaches an immanent reading of the text as a way of “learn[ing] again how to live” (Tadjo, *In the Company* 132).

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Sreya Mallika Datta
Alan Price Postdoctoral Fellow
University of Liverpool
S.M.Datta@liverpool.ac.uk

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