

1 African Literature and the Aesthetics of Proximity

In the Introduction, I showed how Enlightenment principles embedded in the project of modernity undermined, if not severed, the relationship between human and more-than-human worlds in many African societies. These African communities take seriously Marisol de la Cadena's point that we appreciate and respect the full spectrum of "earth beings," which she alternatively terms "Other-than-humans includ[ing] animals, plants, and the landscape."¹ The notion of earth beings speaks to the vitality of nonhuman forms and emphasizes the ways they are always implicated in human activities and actions. Although de la Cadena writes of indigenous communities in Latin America, her notion of earth beings is relevant for African extrapolation because of shared beliefs in the force of nature and the inseparability of human from nonhuman nature. Joni Adamson and Harry Garuba, in their work on the Americas and Africa, respectively, have also captured this shared value. According to Adamson, "specific indigenous movements have long formed around the notion of the earth as a sentient being" and as a site "where human and other-than-humans coexist."² Garuba on his part reports on the "animist unconscious" in many parts of Africa, which primarily entails the "continual re-enchantment of the world."³ Like de la Cadena and Adamson, Garuba illustrates that this animist sensibility is a spiritual phenomenon that is equally "embedded within the processes of material, economic activities and then reproduces itself within the sphere of culture and social life."⁴

Although the spread of Christianity and capitalist objectification of every imaginable thing has marginalized this animist sensibility, the mindset endures in the cultural practices of African societies to varying degrees. In this scheme of things, nonhumans can be considered important members of the biosphere worth human respect even when they seem nonresponsive like the mountains in Adamson's quote. De la Cadena in fact adds that these earth beings insert themselves into politics in ways that call for the reconfiguration of an anthropocentric sense of politics. It should be clear from the foregoing argument that the need to respect

nonhuman beings, both biotic and abiotic, is at the core of the interventions of thinkers like Adamson and de la Cadena. These scholars join a broader conversation on multispecies networks, a conversation interested in redefining human relationships to Others with whom they share certain characteristics as well as the world.

Following the works of these scholars, this chapter investigates the ways African literary expressive cultures articulate the coexistence and imbrication of human and nonhuman lives. In other words, if colonial modernity elevated the human as the avatar, the center of the universe, often to the detriment of the nonhuman worlds, both seen and unseen, how has African literature reinstated the nonhuman in relation to the human? How does the pluriverse—the agglomeration of worlds, human and non-human—appear in African literature? In answering these questions, I claim that alongside those African literary works that relegate the nonhuman world to mere backdrop or setting for human exploration, there exists another body of literature characterized by an *aesthetics of proximity*.

Defining Proximity

Proximity has two connotations here: namely, a spatial sense of nearness as well as a form of proximity brought about by similarities and shared characteristics. To understand the first form of proximity being charted here is to consider the narrative structures that allow the blurring of spatial distances in the texts under scrutiny. At one level, humans share their environment with plants, animals, and other material forms. Moreover, although the supernatural world is generally understood as the “great beyond,” outside the reach of humans, many of the texts in this chapter problematize this distance by bringing both material and immaterial worlds closely together. Relying on the genre of magical realism, which juxtaposes the real and the supernatural in ways that dissolve or obfuscate the barriers between them and thereby rewrites the conventions of the social realist script (often solely focused on humans), the authors I discuss in this chapter show that existing closely alongside humans in African environments are ordinary nonhuman and supernatural entities demanding recognition of their interconnectivity in our reading practices.

If spatiality is critical to the first notion of proximity, the second form of nearness is predicated on similar or shared attributes that bring humans closer to other components of the ecosystem. For most humanistic and social science disciplines, human beings have always been the primary object of inquiry because of the classification of this species as distinct, capable of ethics, and imbued with political and creative capabilities

unlike other life forms often relegated to the status of Agamben's "bare life"—without rights, intellect, and other superior endowments.⁵ The second notion of proximity puts pressure on the ideas of human exceptionalism and absolute distinctions from other forms of life. This ethic of multispecies entanglement is particularly attentive to the ways African literary and cultural practices stage the enmeshment of human and non-human lives and the implications of said enmeshment for ecological justice. So rather than foreground the differences between a human and an animal—say, a man named John and a dog named Jane—the concept of proximity allows us to focus not on their peculiarities but on their common attributes, including suffering and mortality. Dwelling on these common characteristics does not eclipse the differences between the components of the ecosystem; it instantiates parallels that problematize the kind of strong anthropocentrism under critique in this book. Focusing on the vulnerabilities of death in both humans and other animals, for instance, allows for contemplating the human body in relation to other bodies easily commodified and disposable.

Taken together, aesthetics of proximity refers to the processes by which African literary artifacts depict the interconnectedness of human lives with Others in the environment. The narratives here insist that we cannot separate human beings from their environments and that a complex engagement with these texts should be attentive to the closeness and similarities among the different aspects of the ecological community. This aesthetic practice insists on pondering the place of the nonhuman in African literature more seriously and on examining the possibilities for the alternative sustainable world these texts often embody.

That said, I now come to the four dimensions that proximity takes in African literature. Through their genre, diction, narrative voice, and thematic preoccupation, the narratives demonstrate (1) multispecies presence, (2) interspecies relationship, (3) distributed agency, and, ultimately, (4) indistinction between human and nonhuman entities. Of these four headings under which we can understand the aesthetics of proximity, multispecies presence illuminates the spatial sense of nearness. Distributed agency as well as the strategy of indistinction, that is, blurring differences between humans and other beings, fall primarily within the ambit of the second notion of proximity, precisely the notion that there are shared characteristics between humans and nonhumans. The point is not to undermine differences but to problematize the idea that humans are the locus of existence and should occupy the center of literary and cultural analysis. Straddling both notions of proximity is the strategy of interspecies interaction that on the one hand is steeped in the spatial sense

of proximity but that also exhibits instances of shared attributes such as communicative traits.

It is also important to note the overlapping tendencies of the previously mentioned dimensions of proximity and therefore understand them as conceptual categories that allow for bringing together human and nonhuman worlds rather than treat them as discrete entities. Why is this idea of proximity important? The aesthetic practice I elaborate is useful for rethinking our approach to African literature and the accents on human concerns in the critical engagement with these texts. The idea of proximity encourages us to read African literary texts in innovative ways with attention to the fact that nonhuman forms are often implicated in the concerns of the text even when they are not explicitly stated.

Furthermore, the idea of aesthetics is clearly elaborated in politics. Whether it is in the texts I examine in some detail—Amos Tutuola's *The Palmwine Drinkard*⁶ and *My Life in the Bush of Ghosts*,⁷ Ben Okri's *The Famished Road*,⁸ and Zakes Mda's *The Whale Caller*⁹—or the ones I explore more briefly, such as Patrice Nganang's *Dog Days*¹⁰ and Katie Kitamura's *Gone to the Forest*,¹¹ the emphasis is on inserting nonhuman concerns into politics and ultimately projecting alternative lifeworlds critical of human exploitation of the environment. The narratives under study are preoccupied with nonhuman otherness and are attentive to the claims and rights of and obligations to these Others even as they are invested in intimate interspecies relations with resonances for broader conversations on the state of the environment in Africa and elsewhere. Given the concerns over global warming and climate change, there is no more urgent task than to consider human imbrications with fellow travelers in the ecological sphere, especially in an African context where the matrix of elite failure and the forces of neocolonialism and globalization continue to subjugate its inhabitants—read broadly to include human beings and nonhumans alike.

In elucidating the aesthetics of proximity, I complicate the dominant interpretation of representations of nonhumans in African literature. Scholars often ignore these Others to focus on the human characters; or where they do engage these other life forms, especially nonhuman animals, it is primarily to demonstrate how they function as symbols for humans—especially subordinate or oppressed ones. The problem with such a critical approach, as Laura Wright, among others, has pointed out, is that it “refuses to acknowledge the animal as deserving of the same kinds of respect human beings *should* grant to other humans.”¹² Take the instance of *Dog Days* by Patrice Nganang, a narrative analyzed later in the chapter. Nganang's novel was published in the early years of the twenty-first century, an era characterized by heightened awareness of not just

human rights but also the plight of animals and the larger environment. Moreover, its title and its mode of narration (the narrator-protagonist Mboudjak is a dog) invite a consideration of the novel's uniqueness, its singular mode of expanding the space of the political in Cameroon to include animals like Mboudjak. Yet most readings of the novel have primarily focused on the human dimensions of the text.¹³

There is no problem with such readings if we remain tied to the unacknowledged anthropocentric logic that subtends most African literary criticism. But once we open the critical space to embrace an ecological angle of vision, it becomes possible to accommodate the perspective of Mboudjak in Nganang's novel, where the dog demonstrates signs of resistance and showcases, again and again, parallels between the oppression of the human masses by the elites and the exploitation of animals by their human "masters." My goal here is less about censuring a way of reading and more about offering an alternative to the usual treatment of animals as allegories for humans in African literary criticism.

The dominant form of anthropocentric analysis raises a fundamental question: can we conceive of the dog—dogs, animals, or other life forms—as full beings in our reading and writing practices? As I will show later when I engage with Nganang's novel and throughout this book, we can do so without reducing nonhuman presences to symbols and metaphors that merely shed light on the human world. This mode of reading is significant because it does not obviate nonhuman beings or block what Neel Ahuja describes as the "transspecies relations underlying representation."¹⁴ By recognizing that the human body is only one component of the ecosystem and that the nonhuman can indeed suffer, I suggest that we transcend the strong forms of anthropocentrism predominant in African literary criticism and embrace a more inclusive view of our environment.

Accordingly, the rest of this chapter, divided into four sections, one for each, develops the four dimensions or strategies of proximity. The first section, devoted to multispecies presence, discusses the ecological composition of African literature. Here African literary texts make central the presence of nonhuman life forms—material and supernatural—as important constituents of Africa's ecosystems. My reading reinstates the nonhuman as an integral component of Africa's ecologies and as a key player in the narrative movement of the texts. In the second section, I build on the preceding discussion by examining the relationship between humans and nonhumans in Africa's ecologies, highlighting in the process both benign forms of interspecies interaction and the more prevalent exploitative relationships often at the expense of nonhumans. When humans interact with nonhumans around them as is clear from the second section, agency and production of effects are not restricted to

humans even if our anthropocentric orientation limits our perception of nonhuman agency. The third section accentuates the agency shared by both humans and nonhumans in African literary texts. While the first three sections highlight the similarities between humans and other members of the environment, the distinctions between them are very much intact. What we find in the final segment of the chapter are those moments when differences are obfuscated or blurred to achieve the highest point of proximity.

Multispecies Presence

Amos Tutuola's *The Palmwine Drinkard* and *My Life in the Bush of Ghosts* provide a fine starting point for discussing multispecies presence as one dimension of the aesthetics of proximity. *The Palmwine Drinkard* instantiates a multispecies world, where humans share the environment with nonhumans, a world teeming with various life forms that are as important as the human. As such, Tutuola's writing has been compared to D. O. Fagunwa's work, especially the well-known *Forest of a Thousand Daemons*, whose fame outside a Yoruba readership is owed largely to Wole Soyinka's English translation.¹⁵ Throughout *The Palmwine Drinkard*, Tutuola's narrator is conscious of the different species that populate his world. As he leaves the Unreturnable Heaven, for instance, he narrates the appearance of different creatures drawn to the extraordinary musical accomplishment of Drum, Song, and Dance. In this moment and at other points in the text, we are drawn to a pluriverse of creatures, plants and animals, human and nonhuman, secular and spiritual. As Achille Mbembe describes it, Tutuola's writing is a "spectacle of a world in motion, ever reborn, made of fold upon fold, of landscapes and topographies, figures, circles, spirals and fractures, colors, sounds, and noises."¹⁶

In short, the narrative's uniqueness is a result of Tutuola's departure from the anthropocentrism that often characterizes the "rational," realist novel. While these realist accounts insist on sociocultural human challenges and zooms in on human characters, Tutuola's narrative shows an ecological community where the nonhuman is always present and visible with the human. Chris Dunton has noted that Tutuola's oeuvre stages the "fragility" of the human condition and the ways supernatural forces are implicated in the affairs of humans.¹⁷ The limitations that Dunton identifies in Tutuola's account of the human condition speak to the author's repudiation of the notion of a self-sufficient human subjectivity and his insistence on human entanglement with more-than-human presences. A fine illustration can be found in the major activity of the narrative: palmwine drinking. Readers familiar with the text will recall that its

journey motif arises because of the Drinkard's quest to find his dead palmwine tapper. Palmwine, of course, is a product of the palm tree, a nonhuman life form. Therefore, the narrative is already orienting readers to the nonhuman world as early as its first page. The text's central problem thus arises when the tapster is unavailable to provide the fine wine, and as the Drinkard embarks on the quest to find his tapster, the reader is introduced to multiple worlds that are apart yet close to one another, to different creatures that permeate these worlds, and to the different shapes and forms these creatures take.

Tutuola's account is particularly significant if we consider the time of its publication in Nigerian history: amid the fervent nationalist striving for independence of the 1950s. The text was published in 1952, a year before the irrepressible nationalist Anthony Enahoro first moved the failed motion for independence. The agitation for independence was driven by the assertion of self-government abilities and of the mastery of the accoutrements of modern life. As Quayson explains it, Tutuola's writing was enraging "for an African intelligentsia poised for self-rule and eager to express their capacity for rationalistic engagement with the problems of the real world."¹⁸ Yet Tutuola's narrative emerges at this moment to foreground that which is elided in the emphasis on human subjectivity—a mode of being that foregrounds human imbrication with the nonhuman. At a time when the modern subject was keen to convince the colonial authorities of his or her distance from nature, it is no wonder that the narrative generated controversy over its language and subject matter among Nigerians ashamed of its supposed exoticism. Bernth Lindfors has written about how the narrative was received as a "local embarrassment" by Nigerians despite the enthusiasm of Western critics.¹⁹ The language, as has been rightly described, introduced a tinge of local color to the nationalist question. Yet it is Tutuola's subject that raised the greatest challenge to the modernist vision of the 1950s. Tutuola is invoking a Yoruba cosmology consisting of the worlds of the living, the dead, the unborn, and the transitional abyss.²⁰ By taking on the vision of his Yoruba pluriverse, Tutuola challenges the human-centricity of his time.

One great achievement of Tutuola's narrative is that it reinstates an ecosystem receding in the secular imagination of the Enlightenment-inspired modernity that colonialism brought to Africa. If African traditional societies were largely attuned to a relationship between humans and nonhumans, a worldview threatened by colonialist modernity, it makes sense to argue that *The Palmwine Drinkard's* anticolonial resistance resides precisely in naturalizing Africa, by yoking together the human and nonhuman worlds threatened by colonialist, rational ideology. Tutuola's text foregrounds other rationalities by depicting a world attentive to a myriad of species.

The narrative shows that the quest for human progress cannot be divorced from broader ecological considerations, even as it exposes the different Yoruba lifeworlds—the living (human and nonhuman), dead, unborn, and transitional.

Like *The Palmwine Drinkard* before it, Tutuola's *My Life in the Bush of Ghosts* exhibits different species characterized by spatial closeness. It is remarkable that very early in the text, as the narrator begins the journey into the bush of ghosts, he exposes the different creatures present in the town:

So when we could not bear it [gunfire from the war] then we left our mother's room for the veranda, but we met nobody there, and then we ran from there to the portico of the house, but the town was also empty except the domestic animals as sheep, pigs, goats and fowls and also some of the bush animals as monkeys, wolves, deer and lions who were driven from the bush that surrounded the town to the town by the fearful noises of the enemies' guns.²¹

The narrator describes the chaos surrounding the outbreak of war and the desertion of the town by the human community. Even in this chaos, however, he is mindful of the different animals. Notice the attention to the heterogeneity of the nonhuman animals; there is an effort at taxonomical classification as the animals are deemed as either domestic or "bush." As we follow the specific listing across two lines, we are led to imagine a multispecies scene. Clearly it is easy to see how the narrative stages the displacement of the young boys by war; nevertheless, the passage insists the reader also pay attention to other life forms equally displaced by the conflict. The narrator and his brother are not privileged by this passage, which asks us to imagine a desolate town, "the domestic animals," and "the bush animals" as among the war victims.²²

The introduction of the bush in this passage foreshadows the narrator's engagement with different living beings in the text, but it also opens the word "bush" for unpacking to reveal the different lifeworlds it encompasses. In a reading of Mahasweta Devi's "Dhowli," Jennifer Wenzel refers to "the forest as a thoroughly and self-consciously cultural space," as a place that has "always been peopled by lovers, misfits, and fantastic creatures."²³ Wenzel's work is relevant because her theorization of the forest space as culturally inscribed applies directly to Tutuola's bush, where in addition to the different animals the narrator mentions, we also find a variety of plants, shrubs, and trees. Beyond the ordinary, material components, Tutuola's forest is also littered with extraordinary ghosts, or "fantastic creatures" as Wenzel describes them. Although *My Life* follows the narrator's journeys, which makes it seem like a text focused on the human condition, the protagonist's limitations and the complexity of the forest with which he engages reveal the extent to which

the narrative is less about a personal journey and more of an exposé of ecologies, a treatise of the way that humans are co-inhabitants of the world. Tutuola's narrative is not only a place where "memory is destabilized," as Mbembe has argued; it is also a place where multiple worlds intersect and destabilize.²⁴

The exciting journey the narrator embarks upon brings closer the material and spiritual planes of existence. The Yoruba cosmology from which Tutuola's oeuvre draws significance is particular about the transitions between the world of the living, dead, and unborn, but it is also specific about the gaps between them; that is, the separation critical to maintain a cosmic whole. It is no wonder that Chinua Achebe writes about boundaries as an important theme in Tutuola's *The Palmwine Drinkard*.²⁵ But *My Life* is also about crossing boundaries to stage connections and proximities. That is why the narrator can enter the bush of ghosts forbidden to humans, relate with the ghosts, whom Quayson has aptly described as "a species of supernatural denizens of the other world," and even marry twice therein.²⁶ By so doing, he physicalizes even the immaterial realm that is always beyond human comprehension. As a text demonstrating a spatial form of proximity, Tutuola's *My Life*, like *The Palmwine Drinkard* before it, brings the different planes of existence together so close that we can see the composition of Tutuola's Yoruba ecologies.

Interspecies Relationships

If the previous section enlarges the angle of vision of African literary texts by adumbrating the significant presence of nonhuman life forms and their spatial closeness to humans, it leaves unaddressed the question of the kind of relationships that ensue between them. This section explores the question of interspecies relationship that occurs when species are brought close together, such as in the Tutuola narratives discussed earlier. Different species inhabiting the African world do not exist in isolation, since they are always in relation to others. Here, I am interested in the ways that these narratives dramatize the relationship of humans with nonhumans, especially since the sites of such interactions provide a contact zone for proximity or closeness.²⁷ Furthermore, these interactive moments provide opportunities for contrasting various forms of the human relationship to the nonhuman world. A benign relationship that is mutual and reciprocal in nature is quite rare because of the prevailing exploitative thrust of human relations with the nonhuman world; however, a non-exploitative model of behavior could exist side by side with an exploitative relationship, which is often portrayed in such a way as to call

for ethical reflection on the part of humans regarding their obligations to the Other(s), broadly conceived. Depictions of exploitative relationships provide avenues for critiquing the abuse of the nonhuman worlds as well as amplifying such abuse for the reading public. It is to the way these interactions play out in African literary texts that I now turn in a reading of Okri's *The Famished Road*, Mda's *The Whale Caller*, and Nganang's *Dog Days*.

Ben Okri's *The Famished Road*, like Tutuola's works, is steeped in a Yoruba cosmological vision; it parades before readers different realms of existence including the living, the dead, the unborn, and the transitional abyss. In his reading of the novel, Quayson rightly points to the fact that "the real world and that of spirits is explored . . . in not an either/or framework."²⁸ For Erin James, Azaro, the novel's child protagonist, has the "ability to dissolve ontological boundaries" between the worlds of the living and of the spirits.²⁹ I agree with these scholars on the boundless movements and possibilities in Okri's novel but will add an additional claim: the intermingling of different realms serves an ecological function in the novel, namely to explicate the interactions of different species. In these interactions, Okri stages multispecies presence but also the interrelationship at the heart of this segment.

Azaro is an *Abiku* child, meaning he remains connected to the spirit world, which haunts him throughout the novel. As Douglas McCabe explains it, the concept refers to "children who have secret plans to die at a certain time in their upbringing, only to be born again soon afterwards, repeating this itinerary of death and birth."³⁰ For the love of his mother, the *Abiku* child refuses to die despite the taunting of colleagues from the spirit world who constantly visit him. In other words, the novel's disclosure of the permeability of the worlds of the living and of the spirits suggests their closeness, a kind of fractious intimacy that is always already there. As the narrator tells us early in the text, "In that land of beginnings spirits mingled with the unborn. We could assume numerous forms. Many of us were birds. We knew no boundaries . . . And we sorrowed much because there were always those amongst us who had just returned from the world of the Living."³¹

The passage depicts movements and connections that transcend boundaries; it also permits proximity. One feature of the novel, as McCabe points out in an essay wherein he offers a new ageist interpretation of the novel, is "its intractable heterogeneity;"³² this multiplicity, I believe, is operative in the way spirits, humans, animals, plants, and yet-to-be-formed humans are bound together in a web of connectivity and flux. But more importantly, the *Abiku* child constitutes the nodal point of

contact between the different realms in the novel: “We were the ones who kept coming and going, unwilling to come to terms with life.”³³ The *Abiku* is a spirit-child, embodying the valences of meanings of both conceptual categories at once. In this privileged position, the child occupies the highest point of contact. We see the clashing of the physical and the spiritual in the struggle for Azaro’s life each time he collapses and wanders between the living and nonliving worlds. At these moments, both worlds touch and collide as the herbalist frantically calls the child back to the world of the living. As *Abiku*, Azaro is also privileged to observe the activities of other-than-human constellations and lifeworlds.

Even when the other characters are unaware of the invisible happenings around them, Azaro is able to identify the different ontological systems at work; his subject position as “an abiku spirit-child narrator,” to quote Esther de Bruijn, allows him to focalize the closeness of the various realms, their interpermeability, and their contiguity.³⁴ The novel presents one such moment early on when Azaro observes spirits in the market: “That was the first time I realized it wasn’t just humans who came to the marketplaces of the world. Spirits and other beings come there too. They buy and sell, browse and investigate. They wander amongst the fruits of the earth and sea.”³⁵ Azaro makes this observation after he sees the man with red wings and girl with fish gills in the market. The market is positioned as a contact zone for human and otherworldly interactions, not unlike the kind we saw in *The Palmwine Drinkard* where the later wife of the Drinkard meets the Skull disguised as a man in the market.

To return to *The Famished Road*, we see the staging of closeness, as anyone familiar with an African market knows the crowdedness and jostling that characterize it. The African marketplace is a place where bodies touch freely and consistently. It is a confluence of animals, natural produce, herbal remedies, technologies, and, for the lack of a better word, things, which one handles, inspects, ingests, or puts on in the incessant mixing and mingling that takes place in the space. The African market is also a place where buying and selling involves the art of haggling and other forms of negotiation. Quayson explains that the “predicative economic logic” that is characteristic of formal economies is circumscribed within “an essential dimension of cultural logic” in informal markets such as the one where Azaro finds himself.³⁶ The cultural logic, for Quayson, involves the processes of “haggling with all the consequent cultural rhetorical fluencies that are called into play.”³⁷ The improvisational dimension of the informal market is pertinent for understanding how the market in Okri’s novel allows for the nearness of human beings with other creatures, seen and invisible. The negotiative character of the African market—read as haggling and informal conversation patterns—makes for

closeness and interaction between these otherworldly creatures and their human counterparts.

Okri's *The Famished Road* also makes possible the entanglement of humans with earthly nonhumans. To put it differently, we can make a claim of interconnection for the novel's articulation of the relations between humans and other living beings around them. Writing on the setting of *The Famished Road*, Brenda Cooper identifies three primary sites in the novel: The first is the wild forest where spirits, animals, and plant life congregate. The second site, according to Cooper, is "the road, which clears and encroaches on this bush and brings Western technology and 'progress,' while exposing and thereby annihilating the hiding spirits."³⁸ Madam Koto's bar is the third primary site in the novel. Of importance is the physical nearness of each primary site to the others. The immediacy of the forest location to the road, to Azaro's house, and to Madam Koto's bar significantly buttresses Diana Adesola Mafe's claim (in a reading of Helen Oyeyemi's *The Icarus Girl*) that "although nature is integral to the bush, buildings, villages, and even cities figure within that space as well."³⁹ The forest or bush is often constituted as that space outside the town, with clear demarcations between them, as the "problematic 'Other' harbouring all sorts of supernatural forces," as Quayson describes it;⁴⁰ Okri's novel, however, literarily brings them together. We see the ease with which Azaro, his father, and even other characters move in and out of the forest in the novel. This literal closeness is one way that the novel allows for interspecies interactions.

We should add that the forest, just like the market discussed earlier, serves as a contact zone in the novel for human and nonhuman interactions. Azaro and other characters encounter spirits and otherworldly creatures in the forest; the forest also serves as the location for interacting with other earthly beings: "An owl flew over my head and watched me from a branch. I heard footsteps approaching and I could have sworn that they belonged to a heavy man, but when I looked I saw an antelope. It came up to me, stopped near the pole, and stared at me. Then it came closer and licked my feet."⁴¹ The reversion of the human gaze in this passage is noteworthy. Instead of focusing on his perceptions of the nonhuman animals, Azaro's narration centers on the gaze the animals return. There is a looking and a look returned, a mutual seeing and responding, so to speak. While he is positioned as the object of observation, the passage's action is concentrated on the owl and antelope that "flew," "watched," "stared," "came," and "licked." That part of the novel continues to describe the antelope scampering away and the rain water "collected at my [Azaro's] feet."⁴² A page later, the narrator states: "A millipede climbed up my leg and I did not disturb it. I saw the black cat again. It came towards

me, slunk past, and ran off in the direction we had originally come from.”⁴³ The narration, in addition to highlighting the different species that inhabit this forest, also shows the forest as a stage of human contact with nonhuman others. What we see is a demonstration of what Amitav Ghosh calls a “species of visual contact, of beholding and being beheld” by nonhumans.⁴⁴ Nonhuman animals gaze at and respond to Azaro’s presence just as the cat gazes at the self-consciously nude Derrida in “The Animal That Therefore I Am.”⁴⁵ As the animals and Azaro view/touch each other (i.e., the antelope licks his feet), there is an inkling of a form of interaction devoid of hierarchy and the ecological violence often associated with it.

As *The Famished Road* progresses, we can contrast the benign form of interaction with the exploitative attitude toward the forest. The novel begins with the forest near Azaro’s household, allowing the reader to encounter a transformation when Azaro notes: “It took longer to get far into the forest. It seemed that the trees, feeling that they were losing the argument with human beings, had simply walked deeper into the forest. The deeper in I went, the more I noticed the difference.”⁴⁶ With the cutting of trees for the construction of houses and roads, the forest has shrunk in size and seems farther than Azaro recalls. Human exploitation, in this context, widens the gap between humans and nonhumans. An argument indicates some form of interaction between the involved parties, in this case between the humans and the trees. Not surprisingly, this interaction is an exploitative one that leaves the forest on the losing side. In the end, Azaro points to the devastation wrought upon the forest:

Steadily, over days and months, the paths had been widening. Bushes were being burnt, tall grasses cleared, tree stumps uprooted. The area was changing. Places that were thick with bush and low trees were now becoming open spaces of soft river-sand. In the distance I could hear the sounds of dredging, of engines, of road builders, forest clearers, and workmen chanting as they strained their muscles. Each day the area seemed different. Houses appeared where parts of the forest had been.⁴⁷

There is a radical change involving the destruction of forest life forms for human “progress.” Development is at work here with engines, road builders, and other contraptions of modernity; unfortunately for the forest, development occurs at its expense. To fully understand the loss implicated here, one must decipher the storm that follows this section of the novel where the forest has lost its “argument” with the technical, rational human beings. I explore the storm in more detail later, in the section on distributed agency, but it should suffice to state that as the storm ravages the neighborhood, the impact of deforestation becomes

apparent. As deforestation severs the proximity of humans to the environment, reterritorialization caused by the displacement of the forest beings instantiates other forms of closeness. Earlier in the novel, Azaro has to be in the forest to encounter millipedes and similar creatures, but with the storm, these organisms literally move into the protagonist's house: "Millipedes and slugs and little snails climbed up the wall."⁴⁸ As we trace the slow movement of these creatures on the wall, we are given an indication of those displaced by deforestation: the other-than-humans left homeless by the flooding rain following the decimation of the forests. That the novel restores some form of nearness even in this catastrophic moment is significant. Azaro does not need the forests to encounter other beings anymore. The millipedes and snails join the rats and mosquitoes that already form part of his household.

These creatures transform the one-room apartment into a multispecies stage. With the room's crowdedness, with the different creatures sharing a small space, the novel forces us to visualize a micro ecosystem. The novel asks us "to imagine that we had been sharing our lives with so many rats," in the words of Azaro's mother after the photographer's poison kills the many rodents that were living so intimately with them, in the one-room space.⁴⁹ The lexical choice of "sharing" is interesting because unlike the forest, which is generally understood to house different nonhuman creatures, the house is considered an abode for humans, and maybe their pets. In this configuration, the rodents are normally written out of the list of residents. Even when they are included, it is usually to portray them as a nuisance. In forcing us to imagine sharing lives with rats, Okri's novel challenges the anthropocentric conception of the inhabitants of homes; we are urged to see the so-called human spaces as sites for realizing that humans are always commingled with nonhumans.

The analysis of Okri's novel so far has focused on the role that the forest and market play in facilitating the interactivity and spatial nearness of humans with other beings in the text. Okri's terrestrial locations are imbued with the possibility of providing a network point for the inter-related components of the novel's complex ecosystem. If terrestrial spaces allow for interactivity in Okri's narrative, the following reading of Zakes Mda's *The Whale Caller* is an exposé on interrelationship between ocean and land, between aquatic species and terrestrial ones.

In Mda's work, the beach functions as a space for showcasing the closeness of human and aquatic creatures, and for exploring the human-dolphin interrelationship. Set in Hermanus, in South Africa's Western Cape, the novel portrays the intimate relationship of the Whale Caller with a whale named Sharisha, on the one hand, and the Caller's tortuous relationship with fellow humans, on the other. Hermanus is reputed for

southern right whale watching, which attracts tourists to the town. The portrayal of the whale in Mda's narrative seems consistent with Jonathan Steinwand's position that postcolonial literature turns to whales and dolphins "for guidance in how human animals participate in postcolonial ecology" and to show "the liminal positions of both cetaceans and humans."⁵⁰ The Whale Caller is enamored by Sharisha, with whom he communicates using a horn. Sharisha in turn responds with rhythmic dance and gestures. One can say that the horn presents a means of communication between both parties. As Wendy Woodward puts it, "The man and the whale make music together."⁵¹ The Whale Caller prefers to spend time with Sharisha and remains obsessed with the mammal even after she has migrated to better climate conditions.

Mda presents at least three versions of human-nonhuman relations in the novel. The first and most complex is typified by the Whale Caller and Sharisha, on whom he dotes. In the introduction to their collection on the writings of Zakes Mda, *Ways of Writing: Critical Essays on Zakes Mda*, David Bell and J. U. Jacobs disclose the "closely paired siblings or actual twinning" strategy or motif in Mda's work.⁵² Their examples include the twin brothers from Mda's most studied novel, *Heart of Redness*, the white man and black man whose lives are intertwined through their shared half-sister in *The Madonna of Excelsior*, and the two slave half-brothers in *Cion*. Mda's largely understudied novel *The Whale Caller* is not left out as Bell and Jacobs also mention the "destructive twin children" in the text.⁵³ While these examples typify a human-based manifestation of the motif in Mda's writing, the Caller and the whale reflect an interspecies instance of pairing not included in Bell and Jacobs's list. Bell and Jacobs see the twinning only in human pairings, but that motif is not reserved for humans alone in Mda's work, which is known for its border crossings. The twinning motif enshrines the connection between the Caller and the whale, Sharisha, implying an intimacy like the human twinning in other texts. Throughout the novel, Sharisha serves as the impetus of the Whale Caller's life. He is always delighted to see Sharisha and blows his horn to welcome and communicate with the whale whenever she arrives. When she arrives later than expected, the Whale Caller is troubled and wonders if the whale has been hurt by poachers or some other danger in the sea.

Both beings are so in sync that the Whale Caller hears Sharisha announce her departure in a nightmare. Their love is so strong that it interferes with the Whale Caller's relationship with his girlfriend, Saluni. Readers of the novel will recall how what would have been his first sexual encounter with Saluni is truncated when images of Sharisha creep into the Whale Caller's thoughts. The narrator notes, "Without further to-do he strips naked and shyly creeps into bed. She shifts against the wall to create

more space for him on the single bed. Her body immediately charges him with electric currents. But images of whales interfere at that moment of excitement and he goes limp.”⁵⁴ The Whale Caller goes limp at the thought of the whale as a cheating husband might when images of his beautiful wife flash through his mind before he commences an escapade. The Whale Caller remains devoted to the whale despite Saluni’s ultimatum to choose her or the animal, their constant fights, and her threats to end the relationship. Nevertheless, Saluni’s threats do nothing to disrupt the human-whale relationship. In fact, this unnamed *Homo sapiens* specimen is defined in relation to the whale and not by a given name. He lives to care for and worry about Sharisha even when the animal is away in the winter months.

Moreover, the Caller’s affection extends to other nonhumans as well, and to the larger environment. He critiques Saluni’s purchase of a fur, bringing to fore the destroyed animal life. He refuses to litter the environment and scolds Saluni for doing so. The Whale Caller also introduces the reader to another form of interspecies relationship: as he worries over Sharisha’s lateness at the beginning of the novel, he laments the exploitation of the sea by pirates and poachers. To do this, he provides a history of whale hunting dating back to the eighteenth century, noting the “two-hundred-year-old stench from the slaughter of the southern rights by French, American and British whalers at St Helena Bay in 1785 . . . Seasons of mass killings! The smell still haunts these shores.”⁵⁵ The enduring stench and haunting smell resonate with contemporary forms of exploitation despite the protection laws banning whale hunting. The Whale Caller is delighted when Sharisha eventually shows up: “Sharisha has returned. She has braved man-created dangers to be with me. She has risked ships’ propellers that slice curious whales at this time of the year. She has defied fishing gear entanglements and explosives from oil exploration activity to be here, Mr Yodd. To be with yours truly. She has returned, Mr Yodd, she has returned!”⁵⁶

In his euphoria over Sharisha’s return, which again indicates his devotion to the whale, the Caller draws attention to the challenges faced by Sharisha and other sea creatures. Although the novel, as Gabeba Baderoon has pointed out, “reclaims a relation of bounty, reciprocity and ritual to the sea in South Africa,”⁵⁷ it also dramatizes the ravages of the sea wrought by shipping operations and the rapacious activities of oil explorers offshore. The Caller’s lamentation positions the sea as, in Elizabeth DeLoughrey’s words, “a new frontier for capital,” where increasing state legislation on marine life is coterminous with increasing sea ravages by capitalist interests prospecting for oil or engaged in other endangering practices.⁵⁸ The dual roles performed by Mda’s previous

passage, of both celebrating nonhuman life and highlighting the devastation to sea life, mirror the different forms of interspecies relations that the novel documents. A relationship anchored in love like what we saw with the Caller and his beloved Sharisha versus the exploitative attitude that the oil explorers and poachers have toward nonhuman lives in the sea.

Of course, there is a third kind of relationship to which the novel also alludes. It is that of the tourists who besiege Hermanus to enjoy the sighting of the whales. The choice of words to describe the tourists in the novel is significant: invader, voyeur, and more. The Whale Caller is uncomfortable with the “gawkers” who have taken over their quiet town and increased the cost of making a living. Unlike him, they do not care about the animals’ well-being but only for their entertainment value, effectively regarding them as commodities. Although they do not hurt the animals like the poachers and pirates do, the tourists also manifest a relationship lacking consideration for the whales’ interests. We see how the tourists on the boat tours, for example, trespass the boundaries placed to protect the whales. They do this to achieve the satisfaction of having touched or being close to a whale.

Yet the Caller’s benevolent relationship with Sharisha is not without its problems. According to Roman Bartosch, “As a result of the Whale Caller forcing his ideas of love and attachment onto the animal, Sharisha loses her life, Saluni her sight, and the Whale Caller his dwelling place.”⁵⁹ While the novel stages exemplary moments of human-animal relations, Bartosch is right about the grotesque dimension of some instances of interspecies relations it portrays. Readers will recall the Caller’s ejaculation after one such moment of entertaining the exuberant Sharisha with his horn and the whale’s death because of being stuck on the shore as she responds to the Caller. The Caller’s relationship is knotty even if it contains positive examples of human-animal relations. For Harry Sewllall, the act of naming constitutes another problem in the human-whale relationship of Mda’s novel. Sewllall contends that the whale evokes the Biblical creation story in Genesis where Adam is empowered to name the different creatures “and establishes his dominion over them.”⁶⁰ For Sewllall, the Caller “exercises authority and ownership over her [Sharisha]” through the act of naming.⁶¹ Sewllall’s point about the appropriative function of naming is astute, but such reading ignores the individuality and specificity conferred on the whale by the naming. It seems to me that the naming brings Sharisha closer to the humans, an act consistent with the goal of bridging the gap between humans and other beings.

Nevertheless, the Caller’s devotion to the more-than-human world appears at the expense of his relationship to fellow humans. The novel exposes the lopsidedness of the Whale Caller’s relationships even as it

problematizes the efforts at finding a balance between a genuine concern for fellow humans and other lives sharing the environment. Earlier I pointed to the difficulty the Caller faces as he tries to consummate his relationship with Saluni. Yet when the relationship is later consummated and the couple seems to be making progress, Sharisha always appears to interfere. The Caller has no human friend before Saluni forces herself into his life, and he makes no friends afterward, not even with the twin girls Saluni befriends. I want to suggest that the novel stages the Whale Caller's attitude toward humans to critique his obsessive devotion to the whale. Human affection for whales is in order; the problem is rather that the obsessive and excessive relationship blocks or interferes with a meaningful engagement with fellow humans.

Saluni captures this succinctly when she tells the Caller that "you can hear your whales a hundred miles away but cannot hear a boy only a few meters below us."⁶² Saluni is referring to the boy singer Lunga Tubu who sings for a pittance from the tourists. Saluni goes on to educate him on the challenges faced by Lunga and others like him. The passage is worth quoting at length:

Lunga Tubu's presence here destabilizes the serenity of Hermanus—a sanctified playground of the rich. Lunga Tubu is disturbing the peace of the world. His tiny frame nags the delicate souls with what they would rather forget: that only a few kilometers away there is another world that is not at peace with itself—a whole festering world of the disillusioned, those who have no stake in the much talked about black economic empowerment, which is really the issue of the black middle class rather than of people like Lunga Tubu. While the town of Hermanus is raking in fortunes from tourism, the mothers and fathers of Zwelihle are unemployed. It is a world where people have lost all faith in politicians.⁶³

Saluni foregrounds the problem of poverty still prevalent in the so-called New South Africa, the disillusionment of the masses, and the gap between the wealthy and the poor. Saluni reminds us of the link between nonhuman forms of exploitation and the challenges of the human masses living in abjection despite the promises of a more egalitarian postapartheid society. Saluni's commentary balances the ecological work of the novel by shifting the focus from the whale to the experiences of the vulnerable human Other. Although the novel's title is suggestive of a relationship between a whale and the Caller, Saluni introduces another ecological relationship by her presence and actions. Mda's novel heeds Michael Lundblad's warning about the dangers of silencing human concerns in our efforts to "speak" for nature in literature. Drawing from Achebe's notions of malignant and beneficent fictions, Lundblad opines that "any environmentalist narrative that fails to take into account the human rights issues involved" is an instance of malignant fiction.⁶⁴

Before Saluni shifts the narrative to Lunga, the Whale Caller mainly focuses on nonhuman life forms and their sufferings. From him, we learn of the poachers and pirates as well as the oil explorers destroying the South African environment. Yet the novel's protagonist is silent concerning the human poor, including people like Lunga, until Saluni interjects their experience. At this moment, we see Saluni's character at its most developed form in a novel where she comes across mostly as a drunk and jealous, needy lover. The passage is also remarkable because of its seeming transformative effect on the Whale Caller. As we learn afterward, "it seems to the Whale Caller that Saluni's influence has now made him hear the songs of humans as well. It has also made him see things that he has never noticed before, although they have been around him all the time."⁶⁵ The novel moves toward Lundblad's classification of a beneficent ecocritical fiction as the Caller develops awareness of the plight of poor humans.

Steinwand is therefore right that although Mda's novel provides "guidance for thinking about nonhumans," it is also concerned with "the lives, the knowledge, the arts, the values, and the beliefs of the people who live among these species."⁶⁶ From his singular attention to the song of the whale, the Whale Caller seems poised to hear the voice of fellow humans as well, especially those who remain socially and economically disadvantaged in postapartheid South Africa. Unfortunately for Sharisha, the Whale Caller is unable to ultimately balance the relationships. As he runs away from quarreling with Saluni, the Whale Caller goes to find solace with Sharisha, who comes near the shore as he plays the horn. The Caller seeks to replace his girlfriend with Sharisha as he approaches the beach on this occasion. If the beach has functioned as a contact zone for interspecies relationship so far in the novel, in the end, it becomes a deathbed as Sharisha beaches on shore and cannot return to the ocean. The reader is left to ponder the implications of Sharisha's death when all efforts to rescue her fail. At the novel's end, Sharisha becomes the ultimate sacrifice or the cost of the protagonist's failure to effectively balance the relationships he has with woman and whale. In staging these complex relationships, Mda's novel manifests an interest in probing the basis and justifications of human relationships with others (fellow human beings, animals, the larger environment). The novel's contention appears to be that closeness or proximity to nonhuman lives should not be achieved at the expense of maintaining relationships with fellow humans. Mda's narrative justifies the need for vigilance so that one is not sacrificed for the other, either intentionally or accidentally.

In both Mda's and Okri's novels, the relationships between human and nonhuman beings are restricted to the different species brought together

as characters in the narratives. Patrice Nganang's *Dog Days: An Animal Chronicle*, the final text examined in this section, introduces another form of interspecies relationship. Although it retains interspecies relationships between characters as both Mda's and Okri's works do, it also establishes a connection between the human reader and the nonhuman dog that is the narrator-protagonist. Whereas the foregoing analysis has pointed to interspecies relationships among characters, Nganang extends this relationship to the reader, who is interpellated by the animal narrator. A parallel is drawn between the narrator's maltreatment and the repressive treatment of the human Cameroonians by their authoritarian rulers. By so doing, Nganang's work provides an answer to the cogent question, "Can the nonhuman speak?" posed by S. Eben Kirksey and Stefan Helmreich in their introduction to a special issue of *Cultural Anthropology* on multispecies ethnography.⁶⁷ The act of reading therefore becomes not only an important point of interspecies communication between the narrator and the reader; the act of language shared by both parties in this instance also serves to reduce the gap between the different species and further elucidates the notion of proximity being charted in this chapter.

Nganang's novel explores life in Cameroon under President Paul Biya from the perspective of Mboudjak. Mboudjak is a pet dog of Massa Yo, a civil servant whose privileges are withdrawn when he is laid off from his job because of austere economic measures. Mboudjak is no longer well fed and does not enjoy the luxury of being walked around the neighborhood. In his new state, Mboudjak becomes a victim of Massa Yo's frustration at his socioeconomic decline. Mboudjak's condition is exacerbated by the fact that he is humiliated not only by Massa Yo but also by the master's son, Soumi, who tries to kill him, as well as the schoolchildren who are customers of Massa's wife, Mama Mado. Even the customers of Massa Yo in his new bar, opened after his layoff, humiliate and kick the dog around. The only exception is Crow, the writer, who visits the bar and silently records the activities around him. He is interested in the lives of ordinary people and has written a book titled *Dog Days*. He speaks lovingly to Mboudjak and congratulates the dog for speaking out against oppression when the police commissioner arrests the cigarette vendor for calling him Etienne. On that occasion, everybody except the writer drifts away without intervening. The writer asks the police commissioner if he has an arrest warrant and is detained for his effrontery. Mboudjak is outraged and attacks the police commissioner for abusing his power. The writer berates the witnesses for remaining silent in the face of oppression and refuses the free beer Massa Yo offers to compensate for his cowardice. It takes the killing of

Takou, the young son of the engineer, for the community to mobilize itself against tyranny.

Nganang's novel underscores not only the human angle of a failed state, but the implications for nonhumans as well. While the novel has been read for its portrayal of the socioeconomic impacts of structural adjustment on Cameroonians, the place of the nonhuman animal in this highly political text has not been sufficiently addressed. In her review of the novel, Ngwarsungu Chiwengo writes about the novel as a political allegory that provides a counterdiscourse to the government's official discourse.⁶⁸ Although she admits the novel is presented from the perspective of a dog, she does not address this other voice in the novel and the possibility of such a narrative perspective for the reconfiguration of the text's politics. Ken Harrow's reading of the novel as one where allegorical characters depict the human "wretched of the earth; once colonized, now the small ones in a country run by big men" also forecloses the possibility of an interpretation cognizant of the nonhuman.⁶⁹

Nevertheless, Nganang's novel seems to echo Jacques Derrida's sentiment that animals can suffer. Derrida's work demands that the animal be considered among the victims of such dictator-led states as Cameroon. It is significant that Mboudjak's problems begin immediately after Massa loses his job. The narrative could have become engrossed with the impact of the layoff on just the humans—Massa Yo, his wife, and their son—but *Dog Days* undermines the grand narrative of human-centeredness by not only highlighting the impact of the situation on the dog but also bringing us the narrative from his perspective. As we follow Mboudjak as he traverses the poor neighborhood of Yaoundé where his master lives, we see a clear inscription of poverty on the people, on a hungry Mboudjak, and on the stray dogs whose plight seems worse than that of our protagonist. The only well-fed dogs are those of Mini Manor, whose wealth is the subject of the community's gossip. Her dogs reflect the extension of the social divide to the animals as well.

In focusing attention on the plight of Mboudjak, who is hungry and whose point of view is hardly considered by Massa Yo, the novel underscores the consequences of political and economic instability in Cameroon not just for humans but also for the nonhuman population.

Mboudjak, therefore, functions as a subaltern figure whose speech is ignored. The only exception is the writer who congratulates the dog for attacking the menacing police commissioner. It is remarkable that the writer is named Crow, after a bird believed to have greater than average intelligence and the capacity to respond to calls from other species. The writer's name not only problematizes human-animal distinctions; his ability to decipher Mboudjak's act of resistance and

respond to the dog-narrator highlights the astuteness of his name. Unfortunately, Massa Yo does not recognize the resistance implicated in Mboudjak's action when he challenges the police boss. According to the narrator: "One voice alone, which I recognized as my master's, convinced me I was still alive. The voice was cruelly giving me an order I already knew by heart: 'Mboudjak, get out.'"⁷⁰ The dog's growls for food are easily dismissed by Massa Yo, who normally asks him to "get out" on such occasions. The problem is that the humans, Massa Yo and his son among them, fail to "meet dogs as strangers, as significant others," as Donna Haraway advises.⁷¹ Haraway's sense of strangers and significant others is interesting because generally we owe both groups care. We are supposed to bear some responsibility and hospitality toward strangers, as Anthony Appiah reminds us in *Cosmopolitanism*, but our significant others require love, respect, and the kind of caring response that Mboudjak does not receive.⁷² After Soumi's attempt to kill him, Mboudjak tries to explain the situation to Massa, who would not listen:

I howled that it was a lie; I laid out the twists and turns of my aborted assassination, but Massa Yo didn't even listen to my overly loud version of things. I heard him say I had the nerve to come back and bark at him after disappearing "yet again" without a trace. He was hopping mad and grabbed me by the scruff of my neck. I yelled that it was all a misunderstanding, but he didn't even listen to me. He gave my rear a rhythmic walloping. "Where were you?" he asked with every blow. I tearfully barked my explanation, but he didn't believe me. "Where were you?" I wailed out my suffering, but to no avail. "Where were you?"⁷³

Interestingly, while Massa did not listen, fellow animals—dogs, hens, lizards, and so on—as well as the man named Crow constitute an attentive audience. Although the animals disagree and quarrel regularly, they at least listen to one another's perspectives, unlike the humans whose stock in trade is bullying the animals. Nganang's novel also escapes the homogeneous categorization of animals by distinguishing them. The only times Massa Yo shows affection for the dog is whenever he wants to claim him as his possession, his property. He constantly refers to Mboudjak as "my dog" in such instances. Fortunately for Massa Yo, he does not suffer the fate of the animal catcher Fidow, who is attacked by an elephant, in Farah's *Secrets*, a novel I discuss in the next chapter. This "silencing of the subaltern," to borrow Gayatri Spivak's phrase, engenders Mboudjak's reflection on man's inhumanity after Soumi's attempted murder: "To tell the truth, once I had gotten over my amusement, I realized I had come back to this criminal house less to laugh at Soumi's bumbling flights than

to learn how and why a man (or a child, what's the difference!) could be so inhuman."⁷⁴

The novel recommends compassion toward nonhuman animals and ties such an ethical obligation to the core of what it means to be human. Mboudjak is positioned to foreground animals' suffering as well as to demand a reconsideration of treating them as mere objects. Significantly, it is the animal that intervenes when the humans, except for Crow, refuse to get involved in the police commissioner's arrest of the cigarette vendor. The novel exposes the so-called human to ridicule for his inhumanity through Panther, one of the bar's regular patrons:

Didn't I say you had nothing but beers in your head? Money's your only friend, right? I'm sure one day we're gonna hear you've sold Soumi to Famla. Here's a guy you spend all your days with. You see the police haul him off, and you stay calm. As for the rest of you, didn't you all turn your stories to the writer? He was arrested right in front of your eyes, and why? Because he wanted to defend one of you. You let him get hauled off and did nothing about it. Yeah, and you call yourselves men!⁷⁵

Although Panther refuses to act supposedly because of his age, his testimony is a powerful indictment of Massa and the bar patrons. As Mboudjak did in a passage cited earlier, Panther, whose name also evokes an animal, challenges the humanity of Massa and others who watch the police drag Crow away. Both the dog and Panther are redefining what it means to be human in their society. They both insist that the ability to care for the Other, human and nonhuman, is a basic requirement for participating in the human project. Humanity here is not a pre-constituted identity but a status based on one's attitudes toward *homo sapiens* and other beings.

The novel insists that the dictatorship suffocating the lives of Cameroonians is coterminous with human tyranny against other vulnerable beings in the environment. Therefore, it is unsurprising that the revolutionary vision of the novel brings together the subaltern characters, both human and animal, to challenge their oppressors: "I tore myself from my seclusion and, marched along with him, ran on ahead of him. United we were, Man and me, in the spasmodic rush of our language: our barks. We marched, not only to bring somebody else's child back to life, but above all and foremost to chase out the crazed lion. We marched, hunters in the urban jungle."⁷⁶ Both human and dog are in concert to dethrone the autocrat under whose watch they have suffered. In this march, "Man and me" form a collective. That Mboudjak does not discriminate between his barks and human language is remarkable as it

permits the recognition of a shared communicative trait between the human and animal characters, on the one hand, and the animal-narrator and the reader, on the other. By replacing language with barks, the reader is challenged to acknowledge the dog's communicative abilities. Nanganang's narrative recommends listening to the dogs around us and acknowledging their resistance and agency.

Distributed Agency

In accentuating the ways that African literature portrays multispecies ecologies and the interrelationships that characterize these complex ecosystems, I have started to hint at an important characteristic of nonhuman life forms often denied expression and consideration: their participation or contribution to what is normally considered human agency. To put it baldly, the nonhuman can act and therefore has agency. The problem, as I showed in the Introduction, is the emphasis on human agency expressed in terms of linguistic and political subjectivities all rooted in the idea of intentionality. Typically discounted in such accounts of agency are the roles that nonhumans play even in connection to human agency and the multifarious effects that they produce. Work being done on animist cosmologies, and the new materialisms has already shown the critical importance of nonhuman matter in expanding the understanding of environmental actors. I take up these works more closely in Chapter 2 where Nuruddin Farah's war ecologies come into clear focus. For now, however, I show the ways that nonhuman actors participate in pushing narratives forward and the impacts they have on humans in the process. While intentionality is not altogether jettisoned in this conception of agency, the stress is placed on effects so that nonhuman elements can receive the credit they deserve for their roles in the production of agency.

Garuba has noted that the animist narrative "devolves into a representational strategy that involves giving the abstract or metaphorical a material realization."⁷⁷ One form of this material realization entails imbuing nonhuman aspects of the environment with specific agentic capacities. Take land and trees, for example. In secular terms, both land and tree are categorized as life forms even if their actions are not properly accounted for because they lack intentionality. These nonhuman life forms are also regarded as vital life forces in various African and other non-Western cultures. Both secular and indigenous understandings of these life forms recognize their vitality and lay the foundation for exploring the actions or effects they produce in the world. The rest of this section not only dramatizes the vitality of these nonhuman forms but also shows their involvement as

actors in narratives. By so doing, I highlight one more shared characteristic between humans and other beings in the environment, beginning with textual illustrations from Tutuola's *The Palmwine Drinkard*, which is then followed by a brief discussion of Okri's *The Famished Road* and Kitamura's *Gone to the Forest*.

It is already clear, from the earlier section on multispecies presence, that the Drinkard shares the environment of Tutuola's narrative with the different creatures inhabiting that space. Besides acknowledging their presence, it is equally crucial to attend to their involvement in the actions of the protagonist and narrative movement. Throughout his journeys, the Drinkard encounters different creatures, who play prominent roles in his activities. For instance, the juju provided him by his spirit friend, a nonhuman, propels his ability to escape from different forms of danger in the forest. In his encounters with the Skulls that imprison his future wife, the magic is significant for the Drinkard's transformation into a bird that can fly away. When he needs money, his mercantile endeavor is enabled again by the spirit's juju that allows him to turn into a canoe to ferry passengers for a fee. In his reading of the canoe incident, Steven M. Tobias suggests that the transformation of the text's protagonist into objects parallels the objectification and dispossession of colonized people.⁷⁸ The incident can be read differently by attending to the ecological interactions missing in Tobias's analysis. The indelible hands of nonhumans are decipherable in the canoe incident: the tree from which the paddle and canoe are made is important and so is the river that necessitates the ferry and serves as the means of transport. Man's action is dependent on nonhumans here.

Although there seems to be a manifestation of what Simon Estok has described as ecophobia—that is, an aversion toward nature in the handling of the forests and bushes by the narrator—these lively spaces also shelter and sustain the protagonist.⁷⁹ Tutuola's narrator tells us as he embarks on the journey that he “was travelling from bushes to bushes and from forests to forests and sleeping inside it for many days and months, I was sleeping on the branches of trees” to avoid spirits and other dangers.⁸⁰ In the absence of roads in most instances, the forest provides the travel infrastructure that propels his movement and drives his narrative forward.

In Tutuola's narrative, the environment is not a mere background for the setting of human anxieties and desires. The relationality that the text emphasizes makes visible the agency of nonhumans. The example of the eagle brought to pluck the eyes of the Drinkard and his wife is worthy of mention. Not only does the eagle stare at the victims as if expressing compassion for them; this creature also chases away the villagers gathered

to punish the narrator and his wife. If the townspeople plan to kill the two strangers for “trespassing,” the eagle’s actions thwart their nocturnal plan and facilitate the Drinkard’s escape. In short, Tutuola’s narrative is relevant for an ecological analysis because of its implication of both human and nonhuman actions at important points of the narrative.

Therefore, it is important to qualify Quayson’s reading of heroism in Tutuola’s fiction. Quayson eloquently emphasizes the heroic characteristics of the Drinkard and the shift from a personal to a communal ethic toward the end of the work. However, Quayson’s celebration of the narrative’s “multivalent type of heroism,” at both the individual and communal levels, elides the role of the nonhuman in the novel’s heroic exploits: the juju from the gods, the eagle discussed earlier, the trees in the forest, and so on.⁸¹ The point is that the narrative resists a linear account of human agency. Peter Kalliney anticipates my reading when he notes that the flatness of his character makes him lack the interiority expected of such a hero, not to mention the requisite “valor and tactical acumen.”⁸² The limitations that Kalliney identifies in Tutuola’s narrator lend support to the fact that he is not designed to be a self-sufficient subject. Tutuola’s text, rather, invites a reading that recognizes the place of the nonhuman—material and metaphysical—in the analysis of the text’s heroic endeavors. It is important to acknowledge the nonhuman efforts that are critical for pushing forward the Drinkard’s narrative.

In the discussion of the human and nonhuman interactions in Okri’s *The Famished Road* in the preceding section, I hinted at certain effects produced by nonhuman life, for instance the active verbs used to depict the owl’s and antelope’s actions. There is also the dog that “led me [Azaro] through the forest” after the kidnapping from Madam Koto’s bar. Although she does not couch it in agentic terms, Arlene A. Elder gestures toward nonhuman agency in Okri’s narrative when she writes that “Okri’s landscapes threaten sojourners both physically and psychologically by emphasizing the life-giving/life-taking qualities of water with which his road is associated.”⁸³ The threats of the landscape and the deification of water and the road—with the power to give and take life—all point to concrete materializations of forces beyond the human. Similarly, even if he is more interested in the “realistic” aspects of the novel and believes that the nonhumans “do not shape the major situations, influence character, or determine the overall structure and meaning of events” in *The Famished Road*, Ben Obumsele concedes that “Okri indeed grants some power of agency to his supernaturals.”⁸⁴ The supernatural and more material nonhumans in Okri’s work are imbued with significant agency.

Readers can recall the elemental vitality of the storm, which comes amid the destruction of the forest by construction workers. As Azaro

tells us, “The freshly laid tarmac had been swept away. Bushes floated on the river. Road-workers’ tents had been blown everywhere and all those who were building the road intended to connect the highway had fled for cover and were nowhere to be seen.”⁸⁵ Notice again the action words in past tense used to describe the storm’s fury, including *swept*, *floated*, *blown*, *fled*. In washing away the tarmac and the tents, the rain thwarts the human agenda poised for further environmental devastation.

Continuing, Azaro notes:

The rain and wind forced me on to the forest edge, to the pit where they dredged up sand. The white man stood there with his foot on the log. He wore a thick yellow raincoat and black boots. He was looking through a pair of binoculars at something on the other side of the pit. Suddenly the path turned into a ditch. The earth moved. Floodwaters from the forest poured underneath us. I clung to a stump. The white man shouted, his binoculars flew into the air, and I saw him slide away from view. He slid down slowly into the pit, as a stream of water washed him away. The log moved. The earth gave way in clumps and covered him as he disappeared.⁸⁶

This passage reveals the agentic powers of the elements for reterritorialization and control. Azaro does not say that he moved toward the forest edge, as he does many times in the text. Rather, he is submissive to the pull of the storm and in the process, witnesses the sad end of the white man who stands for the destroyers of the environment. With the storm, the role is reversed. The white engineer loses control of his binoculars, an important component of his mastery, and ultimately loses control of himself as he slides into the watery pit. The attacker has become the attacked as he is swallowed and covered up. Thus, while Kim Anderson Sasser sees Okri’s novel as one that promotes humanism, as a text that “utilizes magic to elevate the real, both the code of realism and its constitutive elements, human being and the human plane,”⁸⁷ the passage shows that the text is indeed exposing the limits of an anthropocentric humanism.

It is tempting to read the storm as nature’s retributive justice against those who exploit her, but it is more significant for my purposes to observe that human design is subordinate to the agentic prowess of the elements. As the agglomeration of the rain and wind terrorize the neighborhoods and the workers, it is possible to ask whether the forest would have weathered the storm without the deforestation threat. As the storm blows, we see the vulnerability to which the forest is exposed because of the cutting of trees and dredging of sand. In the end, the storm’s larger statement may be the point made by Azaro’s dad as the novel ends: “All creatures must be treated with respect from now on.”⁸⁸

If Okri's novel inscribes nonhuman agency in the storm, Katie Kitamura's *Gone to the Forest* uses a mountain explosion and the following ash storm to reflect the force in other-than-human aspects of the ecology. *Gone to the Forest*, which explores life in an unnamed colonial society, tracks the relationship of an old settler, his son Tom, and the indigenous people who work for them. The novel examines the experiences of the settlers as their colonial world is being redrawn by anticolonial revolutionaries bent on land redistribution. When the narrative opens, we learn that the old man arrived and claimed a large expanse of land seemingly belonging to nobody. The old man does not hesitate to put the local inhabitants to work on the land, which served as a farm. But as the novel progresses, the government has begun to make land concessions to the indigenous population that has formed a rebel movement and taken to the forest to strategize and execute violent campaigns against the colonial establishment. This movement shares basic characteristics with the Kenyan Mau Mau insurrection discussed in the final chapter and the anticolonial struggle in Zimbabwe. The novel's fictional rendition of anticolonial revolution is similar to the historical instances in Zimbabwe and Kenya where the movements incorporated oath-taking to ensure secrecy concerning their operations. Yet the most important shared characteristic is the people's resolve to combat colonialism and the land-grab it engenders. It is these aspects of African colonial history that motivate my interpretation of the novel as depicting anticolonial struggle and agitation for land redistribution in Africa.

But the revolutionary agents in the novel are not the indigenous people alone. In fact, the novel inscribes nonhuman agency with two specific incidents. The first incident is the mountain explosion, which occurs early in the text: "Across the border there is a mountain—and one morning the mountain explodes. First there is an enormous boom. The boom is not hollow but dense with noise. The natives come out of their quarters. They are standing outside, looking and listening, when the boom repeats and then dissolves into a rumble. They are watching when the top of the mountain opens and disgorges fire."⁸⁹ It would not be misleading to want to read the explosion here as a revolutionary action of the forest fighters, given their activities in the novel. Such a reading would be supported by the violent activities of the rebels that we witness toward the novel's end. The problem with such a reading, however, is that there is no human action implicated in this scene. Rather, the narrator indicates that "the mountain had been silent for a thousand years. They did not know it could explode. They had been trained to worry about other things. The ravages of colonialism. Man-made apocalypse, nuclear disaster—they have seen pictures, they have heard stories."⁹⁰

The passage distinguishes between the things “to worry about,” all human-made problems, and things they did not know they should worry about such as the inert mountain. The human inhabitants instantiate the idea of humans as agents, those with the repository of action, while validating the notion of silent nonhuman objects. However, the mountain, a subaltern, in this instance, speaks. In exploding and disgorging fire, the mountain registers its vital force, reminding the natives and the reader of its capacities. In the process, the mountain rewrites the script of a narrative that has hitherto positioned humans alone as agents.

The second event in *Gone to the Forest* that establishes nonhuman action is the “ash storm.” The narrator tells us that ash “covers everywhere and everything” following the explosion:

The ash continues to fall and the layer grows higher. It does not freeze into solid tranches. It does no melting of any kind. It only accumulates. The roads and tracks close themselves up. The car motors eat up dust and die. The bicycle wheels do not turn. They try to clear paths but the ash keeps falling. It is up to their waists, up to their necks. Two children disappear into the ash and are not found.⁹¹

As the ash comes down, we are left to imagine its provenance in death, destruction, or ruin. It is tempting to read this ash storm and even the mountain explosion that preceded it as events anticipating the human revolution at the end. After all, ash suggests death or ruin. Yet what is very striking is the way the ash “covers everywhere and everything” including the land that is the symbol of white power and wealth. The settlers, like the old man, rely on the land and the wealth it brings, but as the ash falls the old man’s power recedes. The land is beyond his reach and mastery at this point of the text. Similarly, the efforts of the men clearing the ash are in vain as it quickly refills the spaces they clear. In the ash storm, humans are subject to the whim of their environment. Two children, as the preceding passage tells us, are swallowed by the storm. The old man, too, is covered up in the “ash storm” so that it takes the intervention of his son and servant for him to be rescued. In short, the shrinking of his land anticipates his decreased landholding due to the land reform embarked on by the government. Taken together, the ash storm and the mountain explosion preceding it allow for deciphering the power of the nonhuman to overwhelm the human. The reader is oriented in this narrative to look outside the human for signs of agency.

The foregoing textual examples illuminate ways that African literature foregrounds the impacts of nonhumans on Africa’s environments. If anthropocentric thinking has often placed humans as agents and the nonhuman as object, inert and passive, illuminating this shared characteristic reveals one more point of convergence between humans and

nonhumans. Narratives make things easier to apprehend, and the ones examined here permit us to narrativize nonhuman agency as a cause/effect, as a factor of futurity that doesn't require linearity or intentionality. The analysis in this section accentuates the second connotation of proximity by its insistence on a shared trait between human and other nonhuman forces: agency in this case. Yet there are scenarios when the distinctions between the different life forms are radically blurred more than they are in this section where we can still easily separate the nonhuman from the human. Those radical moments of indistinction, as they appear in African literature, constitute the subject of the final section.

Indistinction between Human and Nonhuman Forms

If it is possible to distinguish clearly between humans and nonhumans in the three dimensions of proximity discussed previously (multispecies presence, interspecies relationship, and distributed agency), this final dimension, hinged on indistinction, is radically different because those clear lines of demarcations are obfuscated. All four dimensions share an opposition to anthropocentrism, yet the clarity of the distinction between humans and other forms of life characterizing the initial three stages of analyses gives way here for Homi Bhabha's notion of sameness but not quite. The poststructural premise of Bhabha's work allows him to show that identity is not pre-given or pre-established.⁹² Bhabha's hybrid zone is a subversive space where both the colonialist authority and traditional knowledge are challenged and disfigured. Binary thinking that supposes the clear distinction between the colonized and the colonizer is undermined as Bhabha embarks on a psychoanalytic elucidation of split subjectivity and identity, while in the process deconstructing the Enlightenment presuppositions of fixed identity. In his deconstruction of fixed notion of identity, Bhabha maps a space for rethinking the well-constructed and pervasive idea of human superiority.

Although Bhabha's work does not consider the larger ecological system beyond the humans implicated in colonial relations, his analytical insights allow for understanding the way human identity formation also proceeds in relation to other beings. As is already clear from the Introduction, the human has always defined himself or herself as distinct from nonhuman nature, just as the colonizer's identity in Bhabha's work is constructed in relation to the colonized. It is worth mentioning that to traffic in similarities and indistinctions, as I do here, is not altogether to elide difference or simply equate one species with another. Rather, the point is to work against the notion of human exceptionalism that sanctions the brutalization of other members of the biosphere, as well as to

encourage a relational disposition toward other beings, who are not always human.

Tutuola's *The Palmwine Drinkard* exemplifies indistinction at those moments when the protagonist is in danger and needs rescue. One instance will be when the Drinkard turns into a canoe and later into a pebble to escape the mountain creatures. There are also instances where he turns into animals such as a bird or when his future wife is turned into a kitten or doll. If so far we have explored humans and nonhumans as separate entities that are yet interlinked, these examples show that, in the words of Richard Grusin, "the human is characterized precisely by this indistinction from the nonhuman."⁹³ Take the pebble moment, for instance: the Drinkard runs the risk of being captured by the mountain creatures, but in turning into a pebble that can cross a river, a feat neither the human Drinkard nor the mountain creatures can perform, our protagonist-cum-narrator escapes his assailants. Here the pebble, a stone, confirms Jeffrey Jerome Cohen's argument on the "lithic activeness" of stone, its vivacity, and its ability to shield humans.⁹⁴ More specifically, as the Drinkard and the pebble engage in what, following Cohen, can be described as an "epochal embrace," the pebble keeps the Drinkard safe from his detractors bent on capturing him.⁹⁵

This example undermines the notion of human exceptionalism; more importantly, it points to the difficulty (if not impossibility) of extricating the human from the nonhuman. The text brings to the fore a range of ecological components while troubling any effort to clearly distinguish between them: is this pebble a nonhuman or human? If it is a pebble, what about the Drinkard? To want to resolve this conundrum satisfactorily is not to be attuned to the workings of the ecosystem—the interrelationships it engenders, its strangeness, and its chaos.

Tutuola's narrative further problematizes strict categorical differentiations with the description of various creatures such as the Red Lady who leads the Drinkard to the Red Town. Although the Red Lady's name suggests a human identity, the Drinkard's wife tells the reader: "She was not a human-being and she was not a spirit but what was she?"⁹⁶ The unanswered question invites the reader to consider a response. But the work of the reader is made difficult by the fact that the narrator has eliminated two important possibilities: being human and spirit. By projecting an indistinct figure, the passage frustrates a clear effort at dichotomizing or categorizing. The reader is confronted with neither/nor identities complicating clear distinctions and exploding conventional identitarian categories. Tutuola's deployment of indistinction—that is, same but not quite—is useful for undermining and calling into question distinct boundaries. The intermixings that characterize Tutuola's

descriptions confirm Robert Stam's point that, in hybridity, "once secure boundaries become more porous due to the forms of fluidity and crossing."⁹⁷

Like *The Palmwine Drinkard* before it, *My Life in the Bush of Ghosts* is a testament to the blurring of boundaries between humans and nonhumans, but this time with implications for critiquing animal exploitation and relating their suffering to that of humans. The narrator of *My Life* is transformed into different animals by the Smelling Ghost who kidnaps him early in the narrative. Readers of the text will recall two transformational instances, first as a horse and later as a cow, when the narrator declares, "I could not eat the grasses because I am not a real cow."⁹⁸ Not a real cow and not quite human, he is subjected to exploitation by humans tending the animals. In such moments of ambiguity, the human-cow or human-horse trudges forward as a complex character imbued with both human and nonhuman features; as a creature that complicates simple, linear categorizations; the narrator invites readers to reflect closely on the kinship possibilities with these nonhuman Others.

If it is easy to ignore the suffering of the animals caught in "enemy fire" early in *My Life*, that is, those animals discussed as casualties of war in the earlier section on multispecies presence, the suffering of the human-turned-animal narrator corrals the reader's focus onto animal exploitation in the text. The "terrified" animals encountered in the first chapter of the text cannot speak or be heard, but the privilege of narration offered to the human/horse, the human/monkey, or even the human/cow allows for the dramatization of animal suffering: "In the presence of these guests, my boss was changing me to some kind of creatures. First of all he changed me to a monkey, then I began to climb fruit trees and pluck fruits down for them. After that he changed me to a lion, then to a horse, to a camel, to a cow or bull with horns on its head and at last to my former form."⁹⁹

It is striking that the narrator uses "boss" to describe the Smelling Ghost. The lexical choice indicates a superior-subordinate relationship that mirrors human superiority over nonhumans. The Ghost perceives the animal as beast of burden and transforms the narrator into animals mainly for utilitarian purposes. As a monkey, he is expected to climb trees and pluck fruits. Later, he becomes a means of transportation as a horse, ferrying his "boss" to different locations. The narrator poignantly depicts the pains involved with this arduous task: "then the attendants loosened me from the stump, so he mounted me and the two attendants were following him with whips in their hands and flogging me along in the bush. As he was dressed with these leaves and mounted me mercilessly I felt as if he was half a ton weight."¹⁰⁰

In addition to enduring the weight of the master, the narrator is also subject to the whipping of the attendants. He is also left “in the sun which was shining severely”¹⁰¹ and is exposed to cold and mosquitoes at night. Clearly the Ghost is in charge while the different animals serve at his whim. The later scene when the narrator is transformed into a cow is not very different as he is also brutalized and starved by the handlers. Why does the narrative repeatedly feature the brutalization of animals, and why does this mainly happen with the transformed animals?

Laura Murphy leads in the direction of an answer when she writes that the “protagonist has not only been made a slave, but quite literally metamorphosed into a work animal.”¹⁰² Murphy’s reading of this passage is consistent with her interest in the echoes of the slave trade in the text. My sense is that the brutalization of the human/animal who doubles as the narrator does more than demonstrate human slavery; it also uniquely stages the exploitation of animals in the narrative. It is possible that the earlier scene where the animals are terrified by the gunfire may not interpellate the reader, specifically the reader concerned with human suffering; similarly, the animals eaten or captured by the Smelling Ghost are easily dismissed, but when our narrator (albeit in a nonhuman form) is subjected to suffering—being used as a beast of burden, exposed to the elements, and “reduced to his labor alone,” as Murphy aptly captures it—the reader is likely to sympathize with the indignities.¹⁰³ The text draws attention to some power dynamics here: human tendency to treat animals and other nonhuman forms as we wish. By infusing the low-valued animals with human forms, Tutuola projects an example of what Stam calls “redemption of detritus”; that is, the rendering of a negative or trashy object in positive terms.¹⁰⁴ The process of redemption involves the revaluation of an otherwise worthless thing, “the strategic redemption of the low, the despised, the imperfect, and the ‘trashy’ as part of a social overturning.”¹⁰⁵

Within an anthropocentric frame, the animals in Tutuola’s narrative are not granted the special status or recognition that humans enjoy. They are lower in status or value when compared to the higher beings in the human family, which explains why readers of the work readily mention the war that displaces the narrator at the beginning without recalling the animals implicated in that early scene. But when abuse is meted out to a human/cow or human/horse, the text forces us to bridge the distance between these bodies, and to imagine the impact of such punishment on our human bodies by way of appreciating the abuse often suffered by nonhuman life forms. The animal body takes on a recognizable special significance when it commingles with the human one normatively ascribed higher value. Tutuola’s text concretizes a point that Allison

Carruth has made in the context of J. M. Coetzee's work, namely that "compassion for animals . . . depends on our ability not just to think about animals or just to codify their rights but also to imagine our bodies in terms of theirs."¹⁰⁶ As we imagine the narrator suffering in the guise of an animal, we are asked to ponder our ethical practices toward Others—especially the nonhumans often subject to human violence.

If Tutuola's *My Life* centers on shared suffering as it blurs the distinction between human and nonhuman animals, Mda's *The Whale Caller* as well as Kitamura's *Gone to the Forest* extend the indistinction to other shared biological characteristics, namely a common mammalian classification and the vulnerability of death. While Mda's novel, for the most part, maintains the boundaries between humans and whales as is clear from the earlier discussion of the interrelationship between the Caller and Sharisha, it does problematize the boundaries as well. One major strategy the novel uses is to insist on communication between Sharisha and the Whale Caller. If the dog-narrator Mboudjak is endowed with human language to communicate in Nganang's novel discussed earlier, the horn serves as the technology of communication between the Whale Caller and Sharisha. As the whale responds to the Caller, she diminishes the gap existing between man and animal.

Yet there is a sharper effort to blur this gap on the part of the Whale Caller when he corrects Saluni, who calls Sharisha a fish: "A whale is not a fish, Saluni. It is a mammal . . . like you and me."¹⁰⁷ A jealous Saluni maliciously calls Sharisha a fish due to the Caller's devotion to the whale at the expense of their relationship. But the Caller's response is instructive. Unlike in other instances when he differentiates between a fish and a whale, he takes a different approach, one that brings human and animal together. In grouping the animal and humans under the mammalian taxonomical class, the Whale Caller implores Saluni and the reader to focus less on differences. The Caller is underlining what Mbembe has described as "a zone of relative indistinction."¹⁰⁸ Indistinction, in this case, is a consequence of shared biological characteristics—mammary glands, brain capacity, largeness, similar reproductive systems, and so on—as well as shared social conditions, including being victims of the commodification of bodies in a late-capitalist dispensation. The mammalian classification discloses an effort to instantiate similarities to creatures like Sharisha, similarities beyond the fact that both Saluni and Sharisha are females and that both of their names start with an *S*.

While Mda's *Whale Caller* dissolves the human-nonhuman boundary with his emphasis on a shared mammalian classification, Kitamura achieves a similar feat with another mutual biological characteristic: the vulnerability of various life forms in the face of death. If in the

previous section, Kitamura's narrative posits agency as one feature shared by both humans and nonhumans, her novel's insistence on shared mortality seems calculated to further blur distinctions between humans and Others with whom they share the environment. As the old man declines from his position as the strong lord of the manor to a dying man in *Gone to the Forest*, his estranged son, Tom, is left baffled at his dad's frailty: "Once his father owned everything as far as he could see. Now it was three rooms and even those rooms would go. He gave ground—each foot, every inch, signaled what was coming. It was in this way that Tom realized the old man was dying. Animals died in the same way. Their territory taken away. Cattle retreating into their stalls. Wild dogs cowered in a corner. The look of it indistinguishable."¹⁰⁹

Notice the way the passage moves quickly from a realization of the patriarch's impending death to a comparison with animals. The passage does not say animals die in a similar way; the idea of "sameness" blurs whatever boundaries we can identify between the dying man and the dying animals. Like the old man, we see that the animals lose their "territory" as they die. The last word of the passage, "indistinguishable," signals undifferentiation. As the old man withers during the rebellion, the novel dramatizes his vulnerabilities at length. Here we see a man who cannot speak, who shits in his pants. Although the novel early on shows the old man's mastery over his son, women, the colonized population, the land, and the animals, the distinction between him and the animals becomes less clear as we follow his son's reflection on the patriarch's fragility and gradual disintegration. If he occupies a hierarchical distance away from the animals and other beings when the novel opens, on his deathbed as the text draws to a close, he is brought closer, "indistinguishable" from the beings he lorded over in his prime.

Conclusion

This chapter is an attempt to understand how African literature embraces the imbrication of humans and other life forms alongside the invisible entities constituting the African pluriverse. The aesthetics of proximity challenge a human-centered literary world by positing scenarios where various beings interact. It is no surprise that humans transform into nonhumans or that nonhumans take up supposedly unique human characteristics such as language or even that they are implicated in a network of actions or distributed agency. As Jane Bennett has eloquently suggested, these convergences between humans and Others remind us to contemplate the many ways that we are similar to nonhuman forms and to downplay the exceptionalism and airs of human superiority that often

characterize human relationships with other inhabitants of their shared ecosystem.¹¹⁰ I continue the exposition of proximity in the subsequent chapters of this book. In Chapter 2, I examine how the notion of proximity plays out in Nuruddin Farah's fictional representations of Somalia's war ecologies. More specifically, the chapter addresses more fully the question of distributed agency introduced in this chapter by seeking to account for the interactions of human actors with nonhuman ones in a wartime scenario and the implications of said interdependences for undermining anthropocentric conceptions of agency in African and post-colonial studies.