



MYTH, ORALITY, AND THE POLITICS OF MAGIC REALISM IN BEN OKRI'S *THE FAMISHED ROAD*

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ABSTRACT

This article argues that the persistent critical labelling of Ben Okri's *The Famished Road* (1991) as a work of magic realism constitutes not merely an aesthetic misreading but an epistemic imposition, an act of what Walter Mignolo terms "colonial difference" applied within the domain of literary genre. Departing from the well-worn paths of postcolonial allegory and Yoruba oral cosmology that have structured Okri scholarship, from Ato Quayson's *Strategic Transformations in Nigerian Writing* (1997) to Mark Mathuray's theory of "sacred realism" and Elizabeth Syrkin's account of "trans-realism," this paper interrogates the particular conditions under which the "magical" is produced as a critical category for African fiction. By attending to the triple displacement structuring Okri's authorial position, namely his Urhobo ethnicity, his Yoruba mythological borrowing, and his metropolitan reception, the article proposes that the novel's orality is not the recovered speech of an indigenous tradition but a literary construction of mythic Africanness shaped by the demands of metropolitan literary culture and the aesthetics expected by the prize-giving apparatus that awarded Okri the Booker Prize in 1991. Drawing on Mignolo's theory of epistemic disobedience, Walter Ong's foundational analysis of orality and literacy, and Isidore Okpewho's scholarship on African oral performance, the article reads the formal properties of *The Famished Road* not as the "magical" eruption of the supernatural into realism, but as the disciplined transposition of oral poetics into novelistic form. The consequence of this rereading is significant, for what Western criticism has designated "magic" is, in large measure, the formal signature of a non-literate temporal and cosmological consciousness that the novel's written English medium simultaneously evokes and domesticates. The political stakes of this argument reach beyond Okri to the wider institutional politics of comparative literature and postcolonial prize culture.

KEYWORDS: Ben Okri; *The Famished Road*; magic realism; orality; epistemic disobedience; postcolonial prize culture; Yoruba myth; Urhobo; Walter Mignolo; African literature

INTRODUCTION

The Genre Trap – Naming African Fiction from the Outside

When Chinua Achebe cautioned, in his celebrated essay "An Image of Africa," that the Western critical gaze systematically reduces African subjectivity to a foil for European anxieties, he identified a dynamic that extends well beyond the case of Joseph Conrad and reaches into the very apparatus through which African literary production is read, canonised, and institutionally accommodated. The ascription of "magic realism" to Ben Okri's *The Famished Road* offers a conspicuous instance of this dynamic, one that has persisted with remarkable tenacity across three decades of scholarship. Against Okri's own repeated and unambiguous objections, and without adequate attention to either the ethnic composition of his authorial identity or the formal logic of the novel's narrative structure, the label has been applied, modified, contested, and re-applied as "sacred realism" (Mathuray), as "animist realism" (Quayson, following Harry Garuba), as "trans-realism" (Syrkin, following Okri's own coinage), and as "spiritual realism" (Appiah). The proliferation of competing refinements does not displace but rather confirms the problem. The "realism" half of the equation is never abandoned,

and the "magic" or its equivalent remains the container into which the novel's ontological difference is deposited.

The present article does not seek to adjudicate among these competing nominations. It argues, instead, that the entire critical project of locating *The Famished Road* within a "realism-plus" framework reveals less about the novel than about the epistemological protocols that govern how Western and Western-trained postcolonial critics read African fiction. Taking Walter Mignolo's concept of epistemic disobedience as its theoretical fulcrum, and bringing it into sustained dialogue with Walter Ong's analysis of the psychodynamics of orality and Isidore Okpewho's foundational scholarship on African oral performance, this article argues that the formal properties that criticism designates as "magical" in Okri's novel are, in the main, the transposed and necessarily distorted properties of oral poetics, among them the additive accumulation of episodes, the suspension of teleological narrative closure, the embedding of tales within tales, and the treatment of the spoken word as event and as power. Far from constituting evidence of a literature that supplements realism with the supernatural, these formal signatures constitute the trace of an alternative epistemological order, one that the novel simultaneously inhabits and makes



available to a metropolitan readership trained to find “African magic” where it actually encounters oral cognitive structure.

This argument has a second, inseparably political dimension. Okri is Urhobo by paternity and Igbo by maternity; he attended Urhobo College in Warri. The Yoruba abiku mythology that structures *The Famished Road* was not, therefore, Okri’s inherited tradition in any lived communal sense. As Ato Quayson concedes in *Strategic Transformations in Nigerian Writing*, Okri “was raised in Urhobo traditions,” though he argues that Yoruba orality had come to inform a more general modern Nigerian consciousness, a concession that is made rapidly and never theorised with the seriousness it demands (qtd. in Mesher). If the novel’s oral mythic world is not Okri’s own in any straightforward biographical or communal sense, then the “orality” of *The Famished Road* is not a recovered indigenous speech but a literary performance of Africanness, strategic, mediated, and shaped, at least in part, by the reading publics and prize-giving committees of metropolitan London. The politics of magic realism in Okri’s novel are, in this light, not only aesthetic but institutional and, ultimately, colonial.

The Abiku and the Ethnic Problem: Whose Orality?

The spirit child, the abiku, occupies the structural and cosmological centre of *The Famished Road*. Azaro, the narrator-protagonist, is a being defined by the Yoruba mythological complex as a child who belongs more fully to the spirit world than to the world of the living, who is repeatedly born and who repeatedly dies, drawn back by the fellowship of spirit companions who pull at him from across the threshold of existence. The world of the novel is constituted by Azaro’s dual citizenship. “In the spirit world I was known as one who loved the beautiful life of matter and the roads and the rain and the sunlight and the rich variety of faces,” he explains at the novel’s opening (Okri 3). This duality generates the novel’s distinctive temporal and ontological texture, its refusal of the clean boundary between the world as it is measurably given and the world as it is cosmologically inhabited.

Critics have consistently grounded their reading of this mythological complex in Yoruba oral culture. Quayson’s landmark study devotes its most substantial chapters to Ben Okri, arguing that the abiku figure is drawn from the “conceptual resource-base” of Yoruba oral tradition and that Okri’s deployment of it constitutes what Quayson calls an “indiscursive” relationship between orality and literary form, a relationship that is not intertextual but structural and cultural. Quayson proposes the term “interdiscursivity” to describe this feature of Nigerian writing, arguing that the novel’s fusion of the esoteric and the real reflects a syncretic attempt to articulate a post-Independence Nigerian identity that “emphasizes hybridity, ambiguity and chaos” (qtd. in “Review of Strategic Transformations”). Cooper, for her part, reads the abiku as emblematic of a specifically West African magical realism rooted in animist cosmology, arguing that African writers “very often adhere to this animism, incorporate spirits, ancestors and talking animals, in stories, both adapted

folktales and newly invented yarns, in order to express their passions, their aesthetics and their politics” (Cooper 40).

What this scholarship consistently elides is a biographical and cultural fact that should be central to any analysis of the novel’s relationship to orality. Ben Okri, born Sir Ben Golden Emuobowho Okri, is a member of the Urhobo people; his father was Urhobo, and his mother was half-Igbo. He attended Urhobo College in Warri. The abiku tradition, by contrast, is Yoruba in origin, related in distinct form to the Ijaw tradition, and cognate with but not identical to the Igbo *ogbanje*. As Quayson acknowledges, Okri’s deployment of the abiku involves cross-ethnic appropriation; yet Quayson subsumes this admission into the argument that Yoruba orality had become a kind of pan-Nigerian cultural resource. This appeal to a generalised Nigerian consciousness requires scrutiny. What it papers over is the fact that Okri accessed Yoruba mythological material not through lived participation in Yoruba oral culture but through the mediating distance of literary Lagos, secondary written sources, and a literary formation in England. His novel is thus doubly removed from the oral tradition it nominally inhabits, removed by ethnic distance and removed by the mediation of print.

This double remove is not a minor biographical detail; it is the constitutive condition of the novel’s orality. Okri, writing in English in a Notting Hill flat rented from the publisher Margaret Busby, was not transcribing or adapting a living oral tradition in the manner of D. O. Fagunwa or Amos Tutuola, whose relationships to Yoruba oral culture were direct and embodied. He was constructing a mythological world from reading, imaginative recreation, and the particular pressure of a literary career seeking a new formal register. Okri himself has spoken of the philosophical formation that shaped his sensibility, noting in a *Granta* interview his deep affection for the essays of Francis Bacon, whose writings he encountered through his father’s library, alongside those of Michel de Montaigne, whose more expository and fluid style represented, in Okri’s own words, “the complete opposite of Bacon” (Okri, “Granta Interview”). These are not the intellectual companions of a writer steeped in an unbroken oral tradition. The orality of *The Famished Road* is therefore what we might call, drawing on a distinction latent in Quayson’s own account, not a “contextual orality” but a “literary orality,” a formal and imaginative reconstruction of oral thought-patterns by a writer whose primary formation was in European print culture.

The novel’s “orality,” in other words, is an artefact of the same order as the novel’s “Africanness,” constructed, mediated, and performing, for a readership that expected African mythological depth, precisely the depth that readership was prepared to receive. This is not to say that the novel is inauthentic or aesthetically deficient; it is, on the contrary, a novel of extraordinary imaginative power. But the source of that power is not the unmediated transmission of an oral tradition. It is the disciplined literary transformation of oral poetic logic into a novel form that retains the formal signatures of orality while submitting to the



material conditions of print. This is a distinction with major critical and political consequences, and it is one that the existing scholarship, in its eagerness to celebrate *The Famished Road* as African, has not adequately made.

Epistemic Disobedience and the Genre Label: The Colonial Difference in Literary Theory

The concept of epistemic disobedience, developed by Walter D. Mignolo in his 2009 essay and extended in his 2011 manifesto “Epistemic Disobedience and the Decolonial Option,” describes the practice of refusing to know the world through the categories and frameworks imposed by Western modernity and its colonial extensions. For Mignolo, the “colonial difference” designates the hierarchical structure through which Western knowledge systems are made to appear universal while other knowledge traditions are assigned the status of the merely local, the particular, the cultural. “The first world has knowledge,” Mignolo writes with deliberate bluntness, “the third world has culture; Native Americans have wisdom, Anglo Americans have science” (“Epistemic Disobedience” 162). This structural asymmetry operates not only in the social sciences but in the literary humanities, where the epistemological framework of the European novel tradition, its commitment to realism as the transparent window onto social reality, its construction of character as autonomous interiority, its teleological narrative temporality, is treated as the unmarked universal norm against which other literatures define themselves.

Magic realism, as a genre category, is a product of precisely this asymmetry. The term was coined by the German art critic Franz Roh in 1925 to describe a post-expressionist movement in European painting, before migrating into the literary field through the reception of Gabriel García Márquez in the Anglophone literary world of the 1970s and 1980s. Wendy B. Faris, in her comprehensive theoretical account *Ordinary Enchantments* (2004), defines magic realism through five key characteristics, among them the irreducible element of the magical that cannot be explained by the laws of the conventional world, the extensive use of realist detail, and a phenomenal world presented from an authorial perspective that does not privilege one ontological order over another. The critical application of this framework to African fiction, and to Okri in particular, is presented as an act of generous inclusion, a recognition of African literary achievement within the global field of postcolonial literature. What it actually performs is an act of disciplinary domestication. It assimilates an African ontological framework, the understanding, rooted in multiple West African cultures, that the living and the dead, the born and the unborn, the human and the spirit are co-participants in a single, continuous reality, into a Western genre category invented to describe a particular mode of ironic, allegorical engagement with European rationalism’s failures.

Okri himself has resisted this domestication with remarkable consistency. As Vanessa Guignery’s *Conversations with Ben Okri* (2024) demonstrates through twenty-six interviews spanning 1986 to 2023, and as Okri’s own official statements confirm, he has “always maintained that the categorisation of his work as Magical Realism is the result of laziness by critics” (Ben

Okri Official Site). He likens the gesture to observing that a horse has four legs and a tail, which may be accurate but entirely fails to describe the creature. In his own positive formulation, his fiction obeys a kind of “dream logic” grounded in a tradition where “there are simply more dimensions to reality: legends and myths and ancestors and spirits and death” (qtd. in Ben Okri Official Site). In an interview for *Brittlepaper* in 2020, he was yet more categorical:

“Realism is not reality. For reality is vaster than realism. This is because realism is limited to the assumptions that we make about what constitutes human reality. What if our reality is much wider, much stranger, and much more complicated than the standard model of realism?” (Okri, “Giving the World”).

The formulation is not mystical evasion; it is a statement of ontological plurality, of the kind of world-understanding that Mignolo associates with the decolonial option.

That Okri’s resistance has been systematically overridden by critics who continue to apply the label or its successors is itself a significant critical event. Syrkin’s genuinely illuminating essay on trans-realism opens by noting that Okri “has repeatedly resisted these attempts to label his writing, suggesting in his collection of essays *A Way of Being Free* that neat categorisations have a tendency to ‘conceal’ and ‘reduce’ reality” (Syrkin), yet proceeds to situate the novel within a comparative framework of non-realist aesthetic categories, among them magical, spiritual, sacred, animist, and trans-realism, whose shared assumption is that Okri’s fiction constitutes a variant of European narrative realism enriched by non-rational supplementation. The essay’s awareness of its own procedure does not alter the procedure itself. The machinery of genre classification continues to operate, and the colonial difference is reproduced at the level of form. African ontological multiplicity becomes a literary “mode,” catalogued and compared alongside Latin American and South Asian instances of the same broad category.

Even Mathuray’s sophisticated intervention illustrates the difficulty. His proposal of “sacred realism” as more appropriate than magic realism is motivated by genuine critical sensitivity. He argues that Okri is engaged in a rewriting of realism itself, from within an African philosophical and religious tradition, rather than merely supplementing it. Yet even “sacred realism” retains the “realism” term, confirming the European novelistic tradition as the baseline against which African fiction’s difference must be measured and named. The “sacred” is, within this framework, the supplement; the “realism” is the given. This is precisely the colonial difference Mignolo identifies, wherein the metropolitan standard is naturalised and the African variant is theorised as its modification.

Oral Poetics and Narrative Form: What the “Magical” Actually Performs

Walter Ong’s *Orality and Literacy: The Technologizing of the Word*, first published in 1982 and reissued in a thirtieth anniversary edition edited by John Hartley in 2012, remains the



most comprehensive theoretical account of the cognitive and formal differences between oral and chirographic cultures. Ong's analysis is not without its critics, as his tendency toward a binary opposition between "primary oral cultures" and literate ones has been challenged for the rigidity of its historical schema, and his implicit teleological assumptions about the "evolution of consciousness" have been questioned. Nevertheless, the formal characteristics that Ong identifies as specific to oral thought, what he calls the "psychodynamics of orality," offer a precise and verifiable descriptive account of the narrative organisation of *The Famished Road*, one that is systematically more adequate than the genre framework of magic realism.

Ong identifies several key features of orally based thought and expression that are directly relevant here. Oral thought, he argues, is "additive rather than subordinative" in that, rather than organising experience through the subordinating logic of analytic prose, which embeds clauses within clauses and builds hierarchical argumentative structures, oral narration accumulates experience by coordination, adding episode to episode without the structural pressure to subordinate the earlier to the later. Oral thought is also "aggregative rather than analytic," relying on formulaic clusters and epithetic piling rather than the precise, isolated meanings of the chirographic word. It is "redundant or copious," returning repeatedly to what has already been said because oral performance, unlike the printed page, cannot be reread at will. And oral thought is "close to the human lifeworld," situating knowledge within the experiential and communal rather than within the abstract and systematised (Ong 36-57).

Each of these formal characteristics is manifested in *The Famished Road* with a consistency that has been noted, and consistently misread, by critics. The novel's notorious resistance to plot summary, the way in which critics regularly find themselves unable to provide a coherent account of its progression, is not the obscurity of postmodern indeterminacy or the irrationalism of the supernatural; it is the formal signature of additive oral accumulation. Azaro does not move through a story in the teleological sense demanded by the European novel tradition; he accumulates experience. The novel's opening makes this orientation manifest:

In the beginning there was a river. The river became a road and the road branched out to the whole world. And because the road was once a river it was always hungry. (Okri 3)

The beginning that is announced here is not a novelistic beginning in the Aristotelian sense of an action that initiates a structured sequence leading to resolution; it is a cosmogonic origin-statement of the kind that characterises oral mythological discourse. The repetition of "road" across the novel's enormous length, the road as metaphor, as literal space, as cosmic symbol, as the title's central image, is not symbolist poetic refinement but the aggregative, formulaic repetition that Ong identifies as constitutive of oral memory and narration. Isidore Okpewho, whose *African Oral Literature: Backgrounds, Character, and*

Continuity (1992) remains the authoritative scholarship on the formal properties of oral performance in Africa, identifies repetition, parallelism, and "piling and association" as core stylistic qualities of the oral artist. These are not rhetorical ornaments but structural necessities in a medium where memory must be aided and where meaning is built through the accumulation of related images rather than through the hierarchical subordination of a logical argument (Okpewho 67-80).

The novel's treatment of the spirit world enacts the same formal logic. Azaro's journeys into the spirit realm do not constitute the irruption of the supernatural into a realist fictional world, which is precisely what magic realism describes, but rather the movement between different levels of a single, continuous, undivided reality. When Azaro reports, with the flat certainty of oral cosmological statement, that he "moved between the worlds without any sense of crossing a border" and that it was "only the human world that insisted on the distinction" (Okri 11), this is not a fantastic supplement to realism. It is a statement about the nature of reality articulated from within a cosmological framework that does not accept the Cartesian division between the material and the spiritual, the visible and the invisible, the living and the dead. Ong's observation that in oral cultures words are conceived as powerful, as events, and as "necessarily power-driven" (Ong 32) illuminates the ontological weight that the spirit world's communicative acts carry in Okri's novel. The spirits who call to Azaro, the voices that instruct and threaten, are not supernatural interventions in a natural order but natural communications within a world in which the sonic, the verbal, and the spiritual are inseparable.

Okpewho's account of the oral artist's compositional method emphasises what he calls "digression," by which he means the embedding of subsidiary narratives within the main performance, the expansion of episodes through associated stories, and the willingness to return to a theme without the pressure of forward momentum. The oral artist, Okpewho argues, is not telling a story in the way a novelist does but performing one, and the performance is shaped by the associative logic of communal memory, not by the internal logic of a written plot (Okpewho 71). This distinction is essential. *The Famished Road* is not, at the level of its deep formal organisation, a novel that has supplemented realism with magic; it is a performance that has been imperfectly translated into novel form, retaining the associative, redundant, additive logic of oral narrative even as it submits to the material constraints of the printed English text.

Consider the extended sequences in which Azaro's father, known simply as "Dad" throughout the novel, participates in a series of physical contests in the clearing outside the bar. The sequence accumulates over many pages, refusing to resolve into either the narrative economy of a climactic scene or the allegorical closure of a political fable. Dad fights, loses, recovers, fights again. His opponents multiply and transform. The episode resists the logic of progressive complication and resolution that the European



novel demands, and instead performs the logic of oral heroic narrative, the agonistic confrontation that is repeated with variation, whose meaning lies not in its outcome but in the endurance and moral quality it demonstrates. As the narrator observes:

He fought without rest, without mercy, against new combinations of men who came at him from the air, who emerged from the earth, who changed into animals and then back into men, who were sometimes only shapes of darkness. (Okri 196)

This is not the “magical” as an ironic distancing device or a Bakhtinian carnivalesque disruption of the real. It is the agonistic heroic contest of the oral epic, in which the opponents of the hero multiply and morph because oral heroic narrative is not concerned with the realistic enumeration of adversaries but with the qualitative representation of the hero’s moral and physical endurance. The transformation of human opponents into animals and shapes of darkness is, in Okpewho’s terms, a performance of the heroic imagination’s capacity to render the enormity of the test. Quayson’s taxonomy of the four modes of interweaving the esoteric and the real is a sophisticated formal account, but it misidentifies the genre of the performance it is analysing. The novel’s modes of interweaving are not four controlled authorial choices; they are the natural consequences of an oral heroic narrative inhabiting a print medium that it imperfectly occupies.

Metropolitan Reception and the Booker Effect: The Institution Performs Its Africanness

The publication and reception of *The Famished Road* cannot be adequately understood apart from its institutional context. Okri won the Booker Prize in 1991, becoming the first Black African writer to do so. The prize was awarded not to Okri’s early social realist fiction, the novels *Flowers and Shadows* (1980) and *The Landscapes Within* (1981), which engage the corruption and social disintegration of postcolonial Nigeria in recognisably realist terms, but to the work that most fully performed, for a metropolitan literary audience, the markers of an imagined “African” literary sensibility, namely the spirit world, the mythological depth, the cosmological plurality, and the ancestral presence. This performance was made possible, in part, by the generic framework of magic realism, which had, by 1991, been thoroughly domesticated within the Anglophone literary establishment through the reception of García Márquez and, especially, Salman Rushdie’s *Midnight’s Children*. The category provided a ready-made framework within which Okri’s novel could be read as extraordinary without being incomprehensible, as African without being alien, as spiritually profound without requiring the reader to abandon the aesthetic protocols of European literary fiction.

The political economy of this reception is not reducible to simple bad faith on the part of critics or prize committees. It operates through what Pierre Bourdieu’s sociology of literary fields would describe as the homologies between the habitus of literary producers and the field of reception, that is to say, the categories through which a text becomes legible and prized are the

categories already available within the receiving literary culture. Magic realism was available; Yoruba oral cosmology in its full cultural specificity was not. Cooper’s important study *Magical Realism in West African Fiction: Seeing with a Third Eye* (1998) treats Okri, Syl Cheney-Coker, and B. Kojo Laing as “pioneers” of a West African magical realist tradition contextualised in relation to García Márquez and Rushdie. Its central premise, however, is precisely the kind of globalising inclusion this article interrogates. The West African writers are positioned as regional inflections of a global genre whose origins and theoretical elaboration are Latin American and European. The “local colour” that Cooper identifies in Okri, the Yoruba abiku, the Lagos slum, the political corruption of the independence period, is precisely local; the underlying formal and ontological logic is assimilated to the global framework of magical realism, and the specificity of West African oral cosmology is dissolved into the generic.

The institutional dimension of this problem is sharpened further when we consider Okri’s own account of his artistic development. In the 2020 *Brittlepaper* interview, Okri describes the transformation of African literature over three decades in terms that make plain his awareness of the global literary marketplace:

Then you see the lie in the assertion that there is one way of seeing the world, that all our novels should follow the western model, that realism is the true way of expressing reality. Realism is not reality. ... You can’t shoehorn a lion’s consciousness into a dog’s form. The form shapes the experience. (Okri, “Giving the World”)

The image of the shoehorn is precise and diagnostic. It captures the operation that the magic realism label performs on African fiction, forcing a cosmological lion into a generic dog’s form. What is remarkable is that Okri has articulated this critique publicly and repeatedly across his career, and the scholarship has not responded to the challenge. The genre debate continues, the label proliferates in its variants, and the lion continues to be described in canine terms. This is the politics of magic realism in its institutional dimension, not a conspiracy but a structural condition of the global literary field in which African fiction is produced and received.

Towards an Epistemic Reading of African Oral Fiction

What this article has proposed is not a claim about Okri’s cultural authenticity or a critique of his imaginative achievement. *The Famished Road* is a novel of formidable power and formal originality. What it has proposed is a reorientation of the critical question, away from the inquiry into what kind of realism this might be, and towards the inquiry into what kind of knowledge this formal organisation embodies. The first question accepts the epistemological framework of the European novel as the baseline from which African fiction’s difference must be measured; the second suspends that framework and asks what the formal properties of the novel itself are doing and what tradition they draw upon. When the second question is posed, the answer that emerges, grounded in Ong’s analysis of oral psychodynamics and



Okpewho's account of African oral performance, is not "magic realism" but something more specific and more politically consequential, namely the formal transposition of oral poetics into novelistic form, a transposition that is constitutively imperfect because the two modes of organisation are incommensurable.

This incommensurability is not a failure but a productive tension, one that constitutes what is most original and most generative in the novel's aesthetic. The "beauty and horror" that the novel's narrative voice moves between without transition, the "spirits and political thugs" who occupy the same narrative space without ontological hierarchy (Okri 104), the mother who endures without resolution and the father who fights without victory, these are not the paradoxes of a magic realist irony but the condition of a consciousness that inhabits simultaneously the oral world of mythic permanence and the modern world of historical contingency. Okri's formal achievement is to have found a novelistic shape for this simultaneity, which means also to have found a way of making the oral epistemology of West African cosmology available to a readership formed by European print culture, not by translating it but by reproducing its formal logic in a medium that can only imperfectly contain it.

The political implications extend beyond the single novel. The case of *The Famished Road* is a symptomatic instance of a wider disciplinary condition in postcolonial literary studies, one in which the Western academy's frameworks for understanding literary difference are systematically inadequate to the traditions they claim to accommodate. The magic realism label, applied against the author's explicit resistance and grounded in a comparative framework that positions African fiction as a regional variant of a global genre, performs, however inadvertently, the epistemological violence that Mignolo associates with the colonial difference. The discipline of postcolonial literary studies has done important work in contesting the aesthetic hierarchies of European literary culture; it has been less successful in contesting the epistemological hierarchies that structure its own critical categories. The case of Okri's magic realism is an invitation, three decades overdue, to begin that harder work.

Ato Quayson's proposal of "interdiscursivity" represents the most serious attempt within Okri scholarship to theorise the relationship between orality and literary form without reducing the oral to the textual; it should be recovered and extended, not with the purpose of assigning Okri to one tradition or another, but with the purpose of understanding how the formal properties of the novel embody an epistemological pluralism that no single genre label can contain. Vanessa Guignery's work, including *Conversations with Ben Okri* and her monograph *Seeing and Being: Ben Okri's "The Famished Road"*, represents the most comprehensive recent scholarship and makes available, for the first time in a single volume, Okri's own sustained and philosophically serious reflections on his work, reflections that the discipline of postcolonial literary studies has an obligation to

engage rather than override. The obligation is not merely academic; it is the obligation of epistemic justice, of reading African fiction in terms that do not repeat, at the level of genre theory, the colonial assimilation they claim to resist.

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