

“Narratives of Modernity: Creolization and Early Postcolonial Style in Thomas Mofolo’s *Chaka*”

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This article revisits Thomas Mofolo’s novel Chaka (1925) in order to make an argument for a different historical approach to the field of African literatures. Often called one of the earliest African novels, I argue that how we read Chaka – especially for what Simon Gikandi calls the novel’s “early postcolonial style” – is indicative of a range of assumptions about Africa and its relationship to modernity. In the article, I explore some of the ways in which Chaka has been made to give precedence to other and mostly subsequent imaginings of both the African postcolonial struggle, as well as African ideas on modernity and national culture. Also, through a brief comparison with Chinua Achebe’s foundational Things Fall Apart, the article explores the possibilities of an African discourse on creolization in Chaka, a discourse that rejects the European colonial-encounter narrative of African and postcolonial modernity.

Keywords: Thomas Mofolo, *Chaka*, Chinua Achebe, African literature, creolization, colonial modernity

“One of the most terrible implications of the ethnographic approach is the insistence on fixing the object of scrutiny in static time, thereby removing the tangled nature of lived experience and promoting the idea of uncontaminated survival.”¹

—Édouard Glissant

Chaka and the “Problem” of African Literature

In 1912, the Paris Evangelical Missionary Society (P.E.M.S.) published *Livre d’Or de la Mission du Lessouto*,² a retrospective piece memorializing the mission’s work in

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1 Édouard Glissant, *Caribbean Discourse* (Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 1989), 14.

2 A. M. Boegner, *Livre d’Or de la Mission du Lessouto: Soixante Quinze Ans de l’Histoire d’une Tribu Sud-Africaine, 1833-1908* (Paris: Masion des Missions Évangéliques, 1912).

Morija, Lesotho, and in which the manuscript of Thomas Mofolo's *Chaka* is mentioned: "Un quatrième manuscrit, consacré par la même auteur à décrire les moeurs des Zoulous, est en moment entre les main d'un missionnaire auquel Mofolo a demandé des critiques et des conseils."³ Though it had been written between the years of 1909 and 1910, the mission press would not publish Mofolo's novel for another fifteen years (1925). If *Chaka* initially presented a problem for the missionaries responsible for its eventual publication, then this "problem"—of interpretation, of integration—would follow the *Chaka* text for the rest of the twentieth century. To this day the novel remains a strange placeholder in the body of written African fiction. The life of the novel itself, as well as Mofolo's version of the Chaka legend, chart a literary history across the African continent as well as the diaspora, from the book's beginning, which marked the inception of written prose in Sestotho,⁴ to its subsequent circulation throughout both the Anglophone and Francophone worlds. That said, the text is still marginalized in many ways. Indeed, *Chaka* is made to give precedence to other and mostly subsequent imaginings of both the African postcolonial struggle as well as African ideas on nation and national culture; and yet the text nevertheless functions as a perennial sounding board for the critical refiguring of various formations, from the field of African literature to postcolonial studies more broadly. Neil Lazarus writes about Mofolo's *Chaka* that, "the 'problem' of reading Chaka is a problem of criticism, having little to do with the text of Mofolo's novel itself."⁵ Because the recycling of *Chaka* criticism has been almost invariably written under the sign of a "problem"⁶ with the text itself, I argue instead that these returns are actually indicative of a "problem" in the general approach to African and postcolonial literatures. This problem can be measured in the distance between Western (and colonial) ideas of modernity and what is imagined to have existed in the precolonial past.

In what follows, I show how Mofolo uses the idea of South African creolization—by this I mean processes of cultural, racial, and even aesthetic or textual mixture—in order to interrogate both African and European forms of nation, as well as the narratives of modernity associated with both; narratives of modernity that were becoming functionalized by the increasingly racist South African state during the author's time. In fact, Mofolo's treatment of history is representative of a larger moment of southern African writers and thinkers at the beginning of the twentieth

3 Boegner, *Livre d'Or de la Mission du Lessouto*, 509. "A fourth manuscript by the same author [Thomas Mofolo], and dedicated to describing the customs of the Zulus, is at this moment in the hand of a missionary who Mofolo has asked for criticism and advice."

4 For a discussion of the impact of Mofolo's work on early Sesotho fiction, see Albert Gérard, *Four African Literatures: Xhosa, Sotho, Zulu, Amharic* (Berkeley and New York: University of California Press, 1972).

5 Neil Lazarus, "The Logic of Equivocation in Thomas Mofolo's *Chaka*," *English in Africa* 13.1 (May 1986): 41–60, esp. 43.

6 I am also in conversation here with Simon Gikandi's piece "Realism, Romance, and the Problem of African Literary History," *Modern Language Quarterly* 73.3 (September 2012): 309–28. Though it will be discussed in some detail following, Gikandi looks to Mofolo's *Chaka* as a way to reorient critical categorizations of genre toward paradigms more attuned to the ways in which early works of African literature display a generic syncretism that in turn unsettles postcolonial studies' paradigms of approach to literature. It will become clear in the following how I pick up on Gikandi's rhetoric of a "problem," as well as highlighting the use of Mofolo's *Chaka* as a way to think through this crisis of criticism, a function I argue haunts the text across the twentieth century.

century, writers such as Sol T. Plaatje,⁷ whose experimentation with style, genre, and form articulates a sense of futurity and modernity, and did so through an engagement with various moments of epochal shifts in the history of southern Africa. As Bhekizizwe Peterson notes, for Mofolo, Plaatje and other writers from southern Africa during the first half of twentieth century, “Narrative . . . was one ideological site that the African intelligentsia felt was, firstly, under its relative control and, secondly, allowed for contesting colonial historiography. Such a demeanour,” Peterson continues, “was necessitated by the frequency with which colonial ideologues invoked an Africa without history, culture or civilization as part of rationalizing the colonial project.”⁸ Mofolo embodies a moment that, in its “deep and permeating sense of historical focus” anticipates much of the post- and anticolonial writing of the later half of the century. This earlier moment, however, unfortunately becomes sublimated to the later aesthetics of decolonization sweeping the continent during the 1950s and 1960s.

What this historical focus means, not only for where and how we locate narratives of modernity within African writing but, perhaps more specifically, for how we read the history of African literature itself, will be explored through a comparison with Chinua Achebe’s foundational *Things Fall Apart*. I argue that, similarly to Mofolo, Achebe’s work is also driven by an “ethnographic impulse.”⁹ Achebe’s impulse constructs a particular narrative of African modernity, however; one based on the arrival of European colonialism and its cataclysmic effects to an otherwise integral African world. If Achebe’s feat as a writer is to imagine a model of the precolonial African life-world in response to the Western/colonial “denigration”¹⁰ and destruction of such spaces, then the price he pays for his novelistic recuperation of the precolonial African life-world is to henceforth link Africa’s narrative of modernity to Europe’s.

Ultimately, the popularity of Achebe’s paradigm obscures the possibility of seeing other, or earlier, genealogies of African modernity. If Achebe’s narrative of the

7 Lazarus, “The Logic of Equivocation in Thomas Mofolo’s *Chaka*,” 43. Lazarus writes that “like Sol Plaatje’s *Mhudi*, with which it is roughly contemporaneous, it [*Chaka*] can best be understood initially as an attempt to retrieve Southern African history and culture from the depredations of colonial theory.”

8 Bhekizizwe Peterson, “Black Writers and the Historical Novel: 1907–1948,” in *The Cambridge History of South African Literature*, eds. David Attwell and Derek Attridge (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press 2012), 291–307, esp. 298.

9 The phrase “ethnographic impulse,” belonging to Eleni Coundouriotis, conveys the critic’s attempt to reconcile what she sees as a representational impasse in early African literature between the discourses of history and ethnography. Coundouriotis argues that although “Ethnographic description has often repressed historical context in the effort to re-create whole cultures,” the “ethnographic impulse” registers “a desire to restore the local cultures under their observation and to revise the mastering descriptions of Western ethnography” with attention to “actual historical circumstances.” See Eleni Coundouriotis, *Claiming History: Colonialism, Ethnography, and the Novel* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1999), 23. Conceived largely in response to Clifford’s own reading of colonial anthropology as “ethnographic salvage,” Coundouriotis reads Achebe’s “autoethnography [as] affirming the contemporaneity of native cultures with those of the West” (38). The point, as Coundouriotis also makes here, is that Achebe achieves this “contemporaneity” through “the ethnographic impulse to reconstruct a whole culture,” (Coundouriotis, *Claiming History*). Coundouriotis’s larger argument is also about how Achebe’s ethnographic imaginary positions *Things Fall Apart* against a discursive backdrop of “authenticity” surrounding African literature, hence making this novel a canonical watershed. See Chinua Achebe, *Things Fall Apart* (New York: Anchor, 1994).

10 See, Abdul JanMohamed, *Manichean Aesthetics: The Politics of Literature in Africa* (Amherst, MA: University of Massachusetts Press, 1983).

transition from the precolonial to the modern African nation persistently informs critical approaches to African and postcolonial cultural production, then Mofolo's African discourse of creolization rejects the European colonial-encounter narrative of African and postcolonial modernity. I will detail following the resonances of the term *creolization*, as well as outline the relational differences to its original Caribbean articulation. But I want to suggest now that by creolization in Mofolo's writing I mean to say that the author's historical vision of the southern African ethno-scape was not a tableau of autochthonous stability. Rather, Mofolo's recuperation of an African history mediates notions of cultural and racial stasis, notions that not only form the basis of colonial ideology, but also inform much anti- and postcolonial writing.

I want to argue here that through his historical vision Mofolo offers an example of what Jean and John Comaroff call "Afromodernity [which] has lain implicit in signs and practices, dispositions and discourses, aesthetic values and indigenous ways of knowing." Nor is it best labeled an "alternative modernity." It is a *vernacular*—just as Euromodernity is a vernacular—wrought in an ongoing, geopolitically situated engagement with the unfolding history of the present. And, like Euromodernity, it takes many forms.¹¹ Mofolo's Chaka story disrupts not only colonial narratives of origins, purity, and racial stability—narratives that were increasingly becoming topographically functionalized by the post-Union South African state—but Mofolo also preemptively complicates the "ethnographic impulse . . . to restore the local cultures . . . and to revise the mastering descriptions of Western ethnography" characteristic of later African writers such as Achebe.¹² Mofolo does this by imagining an African precolonial past that is always already dynamic, and as I suggest, creolizing and debating the terms of its own modernity.¹³

Originally published in Sesotho in 1925 (though it had been written around the years 1909–1910) and later translated into English in 1931, *Chaka* is a short novel describing both the birth and life of the eponymous nineteenth-century consolidator of the Zulu peoples, their cultural customs in particular, as well as the *mfecane*, the nineteenth-century southern African demographic shift that precipitated the scattering and subsequent merging of various ethnic groups. It is largely the imaginative result of Mofolo's own travels through KwaZulu during the time of the Bambatta Rebellion against the British, taking ethnographical field notes on the customs and folklore of the amaZulu people. Blending genres ranging from Shakespearean drama to African oral epic, the novel reimagines precolonial southern Africa as a creolized disruption to the racialist segregation of South Africa during Mofolo's own time. Indeed, the novel itself is deeply aware of its historical moment. As David Attwell has convincingly shown, Mofolo's historical acuity is demonstrated in the novel's subtle reckoning with the Bamabtta rebellion of 1906–1908, roughly the time Mofolo began

11 Jean Comaroff and John Comaroff, *Theory from the South; or How Euro-America is Evolving toward Africa* (Boulder, CO, and London: Paradigm, 2011), 9.

12 Coundouriotis, *Claiming History*, 23.

13 See Samir Amin, *Global History: A View from the South* (Oxford: Pambazuka, 2011). In it Amin describes how "History is, from its inception, dealing with a system that has always been global, in the sense that the evolution of the various regions has never been determined by the interaction of forces internal to the societies in question but by forces operating on the global system" (120). Also, see Édouard Glissant, *Poetics of Relation* (Ann Arbor, MI: University of Michigan Press, 1997), 11–42.

work on the *Chaka* manuscript. Attwell writes that because the Morija mission in Lesotho, where Mofolo was based, was “not an isolated rural idyll . . . the essential features of the conflict would have been widely known.”¹⁴ What Mofolo accomplishes then with this novel is a reorientation toward the geographies of modernity. In other words, by taking a historical moment of upheaval across southern Africa as his starting point, Mofolo recenters the colonial space as one upon which the historical boundaries of what constituted an African modernity could be debated.

*Chaka*¹⁵ is the story of the antihero Chaka, born to a king, Senzagakhona, and his wife, Nandi. In Mofolo’s version, Chaka’s birth is shrouded in accusations of illegitimacy, and thus he is ostracized and eventually exiled from the community. After a series of dejections and exilic wonderings, Chaka meets the diviner/healer figure Isanusi who, through a series of medicinal interventions as well as the employment of two aides to follow Chaka, sets the would-be ruler on his way to reclaiming his father’s throne. The story of Chaka’s inner turmoil over the sacrifices he must make in the name of power unfolds as this quest leaves a trail of war and destruction across southern Africa. The novel ends in a prolonged description of the *mfecane*, the early-nineteenth century upheaval of a large portion of the population of southern Africa at the hand of the historical figure Chaka, and as a direct result of his creation of the Zulu nation. Within the novel, two interwoven narratives, one a Faustian parable of moral dilemma and the other an irrevocable shift in the geopolitical and racial landscape of southern Africa, find themselves at a moment of climax in which Mofolo rethinks the formation of the South African nation through a particularly African form of creolization discourse.

Mofolo’s return to a moment of entanglement—the *mfecane*—however, functions in his novel neither as origin myth nor proxy narrative for Western encounter as modernity. As Caribbean critic Edouard Glissant notes, *Chaka* is unique because it is “an epic that, while enacting the ‘universal’ themes of passion and man’s destiny, is not concerned with the origin of people or its early history. Such an epic¹⁶ is not a creation myth.”¹⁷ Rather than writing the origins of the Zulu, or

14 David Attwell, “Mofolo’s *Chaka* and the Bambatta Rebellion,” *Research in African Literatures* 18.1 (Spring 1987): 51–70, esp. 55.

15 Though Thomas Mofolo’s *Chaka* was not published until 1925, the archives of the Paris Evangelical Missionary Society (P.E.M.S.) show substantial documentation regarding the writing of the manuscript in 1909–1910. This is important because it coincides with the consolidation of the four southern African colonies and the formation of the Union of South African. See more in the following on this. The P.E.M.S. press at Morija was eventually responsible for the printing of *Chaka*, as well as being credited as publication vanguard of early written Sesotho literature. See, for instance, Daniel P. Kunene, *Thomas Mofolo and the Emergence of Written Sesotho Prose* (Johannesburg, South Africa: Raven, 1989). Also see Albert Gérard’s *Four African Literatures*.

16 Glissant continues regarding African epic forms—of which Mofolo’s *Chaka* is, for him, representative as follows: “The epic of these conquered heroes, which was also about that of their peoples or tribes, sometimes their beliefs, is not meant, when recounted, to reassure a community of its legitimacy in the world. *They are not creation epics*, great “books” about genesis, like the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey*, the Old Testament, the sagas, and the chansons de geste. *They are memories of cultural contact, which are put together collectively by a people before being dispersed by colonization*. There is no evidence therefore of that “naïve consciousness” that Hegel defines as the popular phase of the epic, but a strangled awareness that will remain an underlying element in the life of African peoples during the entire period of colonization” (Glissant, *Caribbean Discourse*, 135; emphasis mine).

17 Glissant, *Caribbean Discourse*, 134; emphasis mine.

even “Bantu”¹⁸ peoples, Mofolo chooses what Glissant calls “a much more dangerous moment” in order to diminish the violent affinity between nationalism and ethnic or racial identity, as well as to posit an alternative moment of modernity—one outside of European colonial contact—as formative to southern Africa.¹⁹ Not being interested in “origins,” Mofolo creates an example of what Glissant calls the “African epic,” which is, as he claims, based on “the memories of *cultural contact*.”²⁰ I want to emphasize here how Glissant’s notions of “diversion” and “reversion”²¹ are put to work by Mofolo in *Chaka*. Glissant writes that “Diversion is not a useful ploy unless it is nourished by reversion: not a return to the longing for origins, to some immutable state of Being, but a return to the point of entanglement . . . that is where we must ultimately put to work the forces of creolization, or perish.”²² In this way, I see Mofolo’s text as articulating a kind of creolization discourse, both unique to his historical and cultural circumstances but also resonant with the model of historical entanglement set out by Glissant. As will become clear following, Mofolo uses the *mfecane* as the moment of southern African historical entanglement, emphasizing Glissant’s definition of *creolization* as “relationship” and “relativity.”²³ Mofolo does so not only as foil to the colonial narratives of origin being applied by the South African state, but moreover, it is in this moment of intra-African contact, and not the trope of colonial encounter, that Mofolo locates an alternative narrative of modernity for southern Africa.

For example, in a moment of near-genocidal climax toward the novel’s end, we see the face of southern African demographics change as a result of Chaka’s violent project of nation formation:

After changing the national name, Chaka brought together the young men from Zwide’s scattered nation, as well as those from nations who owed allegiance to him, and he said to them: “Today you have no king of your own any more, nor are you any longer a nation. . . if you give up your national name as well as your language, and join my regiments, and become Zulus, then you shall live . . .” Chaka mingled them with the Zulus, especially so they become Zulus in their hearts.²⁴

Rather than a moment of timeless static identity, the reader is witness to a description of the historical crucible—Glissant’s moment of “entanglement”—in which what comes to be the Zulu nation is literally molded from an array of other cultural

18 Glissant, *Caribbean Discourse*. Note the change in the subtitles from the 1931 English translation (F. H. Dutton) to the French translation in 1940, from *Chaka, an Historical Romance* to *Chaka, une épopée bantoue*, and the growing need, within the rubrics of negritude, for the figure of Chaka to embody a more unified/unifying (racial) gesture.

19 Glissant, *Caribbean Discourse*.

20 Glissant, *Caribbean Discourse*, 135; emphasis mine.

21 Glissant, *Caribbean Discourse*, 16. Reversion, Glissant writes, “is the obsession with a single origin . . . To revert is to consecrate permanence, to negate contact.” On the other hand, diversion is a strategy, a tactical detour, which, as Glissant says, can “lead somewhere” (22). Diversion, rather than looking to mythical pasts, is a form of historical recognition.

22 Glissant, *Caribbean Discourse*, 26.

23 Glissant, *Caribbean Discourse*, 15.

24 Thomas Mofolo, *Chaka*, trans. Daniel P. Kunene (London: Heinemann, 1981), 106.

and ethnic groups. In many ways, both the historical formation of the Zulu nation in the early nineteenth century and Mofolo's twentieth-century treatment of it as a process of creolized mixture become allegories of the writer's own moment. Allegories in the political sense that Mofolo's novel offers an alternative racial and political paradigm—one of creolization—through which to interrogate the moment of national formation in southern Africa. It has to be remembered here that as Mofolo writes *Chaka*, in the years 1909–1910, that the four colonies of the Cape are in the process of uniting as the Union of South Africa. In the face of a Union that “consolidated the development of South Africa as a society structured on racial dominance,” Peterson writes that “[i]t is not surprising . . . that parts of the thematic subtexts of many of the novels [of the first half of the twentieth century] reflect on ways in which the African elite should construct its senses of group and class identity.”²⁵ Again, what makes Mofolo's style uniquely innovative is that in this very moment of South African national consolidation, he returns to another historical moment of southern African formation of a different kind. By writing an alternative mythology for the origin of South African national modernity, Mofolo is able to imagine other potential futures to the increasingly recalcitrant and racist national structures of the newly formed Union of South Africa. Moreover, it is Mofolo's style that necessitates a rereading of what is constituted as the canon of African literature, from the perspective of historical, cultural, and racial creolization in southern Africa.

If one of the epistemological projects of the colonial world was in part a re-visioning of racial and ethnic separateness back through the colonial and precolonial history of southern Africa, where moments of entanglement were refigured and reimagined through mythologies of difference, then Mofolo's creative response is the articulation of what Simon Gikandi has called an “early postcolonial style.” This is a style that in the case of *Chaka* succeeds in recasting southern Africa's past as a series of creolized encounters *between* Africans, which in turn shaped the present moment of the “modern” South African nation. In looking to the precolonial African past and not finding pristine—ethnographic, racial, or national—stability, Mofolo articulates a different genealogy or history for the postcolonial nation—one whose modernity is not predicated on an entanglement with the West. Nor is Mofolo's South Africa a nation necessarily predicated on ethnic, racial, and cultural separation.²⁶ Instead, he displaces the hegemonic significance of the colonial moment of encounter, offering an alternative historical moment as formative of South African modernity.²⁷ In this way, Mofolo's purposeful recuperation of a figure (Chaka) and a historical moment (the *mfecane*), neither of which can signify clearly, reads like

25 Peterson, “Black Writers and the Historical Novel: 1907–1948,” 291.

26 Sarah Nuttall writes that “South African studies has, for a long time, been over-determined by the reality of apartheid—as if, in the historical trajectory of that country, apartheid was inevitable, in terms of both its origins and its consequences; as if everything led to it and that everything flows as a consequence of it.” See Sarah Nuttall, “City Forms and Writing the ‘Now’ in South Africa,” *Journal of Southern African Studies* 30.4 (2004): 732. This is the hegemonic narrative in both apartheid discourse as well as post-apartheid historiographical criticism: that whether supportive of colonialism or critical of it, there is the implicit predication that the modernity of the South African nation traces a genealogy of encounter between Western and non-Western peoples.

27 Glissant, *Caribbean Discourse*, 26.

a deliberate embrace of Ato Quayson's idea that "the past becomes only an ambiguous prologue."²⁸

Another aspect of the "problem" of reading *Chaka* lies with the novel's own adept reading of the overlapping relationship between colonial anthropology and national politics in Africa. Even more problematic for Mofolo's contemporaries, critics and anthropologists alike, is the way the novel reaches back to the precolonial archive to resuscitate a figure (Chaka) who refuses to signify ethnographical clarity. Consequently, while Mofolo is highly invested in an anthropological approach, which gives his novel something of an ethnographic register (part of Gikandi's "early postcolonial style"), the precolonial life-world he harkens back to is not the predictably homogenous space of autochthonous stability that subsequently becomes a hallmark for much of anticolonial and postcolonial literature. Gikandi reads this as Mofolo's attempt to "unload the burden of referentiality," to recuperate histories of colonial subjects of difference, or, rather, as I have been suggesting through this lens of creolization, to think of the histories of colonial subjects *as* difference.²⁹ For instance, Mofolo—ethnically Mosotho—offers an ethnography of the Zulu nation's figure of origin—one that is in turn creolized/creolizing, and does so through intricate accounts of Zulu folklore and rituals followed by their Sotho equivalents, resulting in a mixture of the text's ethnographic life-worlds as well as the stylistic and aesthetic means to represent it.

For example, very early in the text the narrator offers an account of the relationship of Chaka's parents against the backdrop of an ethnographical description of traditional courtship customs. The narrator tells of a "choose-a-lover game called *ho kana*" in which young Zulu people declare publicly their affections for one another.³⁰ We are told how Senzagakhona—Chaka's father—already a chief, had designs on a young girl from another village, Nandi, to be his fourth—possibly fifth—wife and so decided to engage in the young person's courtship game. Nandi, too, we are told, loved Senzagakhona and so happily joined in so that she might declare her affections. In this description that is both plot and tableau (in the ethnographic sense of a thick description of the life-world), as the voice of the storyteller and the anthropologist become entangled in Mofolo's text, a creolized ethnographical register emerges that not only further complicates this love intrigue, between Chaka's soon-to-be parents, but will also drive much of the dramatic plot:

The *kana* is similar to the *sedia-dia* girls' dance among the Basotho, but it goes beyond the *sedia-dia* because in one sense the *kana* resembles *ho iketa* whereby a girl offers herself to a young man for marriage without waiting to be asked.³¹

This distinction becomes central to the later events surrounding the legitimacy of Chaka's birth and his succession to his father's kingship as rumors surface in the novel of how "That day Senzagakhona used strong arguments to persuade Nandi that the two of them should do an ugly deed that was against the law of nature and of man" or,

28 Ato Quayson, "Self-Writing and Existential Alienation in African Literature: Achebe's *Arrow of God*," *Research in African Literatures* 42.2 (Summer 2011): 30–45, esp. 35.

29 Gikandi, "Realism, Romance, and the Problem of African Literary History," 309.

30 Mofolo, *Chaka*, 5.

31 Mofolo, *Chaka*.

rather, to engage in premarital sex.³² In embellishing the drama of legitimacy surrounding Chaka's birth, Mofolo prefigures the auto-ethnographic style characteristic of much postcolonial writing of the later twentieth century. Only, this is not an account of his own ethnic group and the "auto" that is supposed to ethnographically explain while also storytelling becomes curiously fused somewhere between Zulu and Sotho. These groups' customs remain different in Mofolo's account, but are produced and represented here in relation to one another, close enough to be delivered by one narrative voice. Given that this is the moment surrounding Chaka's conception, the eventual forger of the Zulu nation, the fact that we are given the details surrounding this "origin" through the "ethnic" lens of two different groups but in the creolized voice of one narrator, is an example of how through his particular style Mofolo writes a history of entanglement for southern Africa.

We enter the novel through what I have referred to elsewhere as a "cartographical perspective."³³ In other words, the diegetic frame of *Chaka* opens through an aerial, telescopic survey of the southern tip of Africa. Mofolo's precolonial southern Africa is a landscape on the cusp of intense and formal colonization, and yet, according to the author's imagining, it is a world already embroiled in negotiations over what modernity (political, social, etc.) would look like. This cartographical perspective, increasingly common at this period as a novelistic trope, serves to introduce us to both the life-world of the novel's setting as well as to a strange narrative persona in Mofolo's itinerant "traveler." The novel opens:

South Africa is a large headland situated between two oceans, one to the east and one to the west.³⁴ The nations that inhabit it are numerous and greatly varied in custom and language. Yet they easily divide themselves into three large groups: the nations settled along the western Seaboard are of a yellow complexion. They are the San and the Khoi. The ones in the centre are the Batswana and the Basotho. Those to the east are the Bakone or the Matebele. The boundaries between them are prominent and visible; they are the boundaries created by God, not by man . . . These nations are markedly distinct from each other, so much so that *a person travelling from the west to the east* is immediately conscious of coming into a different country and among a strange people when he arrives among the Sotho nations in the centre, and likewise when he descends towards the Matebele nations over there beyond the Maloti mountains.³⁵

If Mofolo's geography seems to reinforce the notion of a precolonial Africa drawn with the lines of historical division, then not only does it locate such separations within the time of creation mythology, but in this character, this "person traveling

32 Mofolo, *Chaka*.

33 Kirk B. Sides, "Relating to and Through Land: An Ecology of Relations in Thomas Mofolo's *Chaka*," in *The Postcolonial World*, eds. Jyotsna Singh and David D. Kim (New York: Routledge Press, 2016), 448.

34 Note here the similarity in Sarah Nuttall's ascription of southern African geography as it relates to discourses on creolization: "Given its tri-centric location between the Indian and Atlantic worlds as well as the land mass of the African interior, further readings of this space from within a non-national geographic anthropology is likely to reinforce a *créolité* hypothesis"; see Nuttall, "City Forms and Writing the 'Now' in South Africa," 734.

35 Mofolo, *Chaka*, 1; emphasis mine.

from the west to the east” we are witness to a novelistic world already marked by geographical and racial, even ontological, transversal. As Neil Lazarus writes of this scene, “Mofolo announces his intentions, which are to resist colonial representations of Southern African history and, above all, to contest the right of colonial theory to set itself up as the keeper of the keys to scientific human inquiry.”³⁶ Mapping a landscape whose divisions are not the work of “man” (read: political boundaries), and are rather drawn only to be traversed, Mofolo imagines a southern Africa whose geography is the common ground for histories of relations across and between these places.

How then is this a narrative of modernity? It is a particular kind of historical narrative that does not think of the history of colonial spaces as divided between precolonial and postcolonial periods, nor does it index this division as a threshold to modernity. One of the ways the novel accomplishes this is through its treatment of the land; not as grid of ethnic boundaries, but rather as a space marked by the chiaroscuro of historical movements and relations across the space. Nor is Mofolo’s precolonial life-world an ontology written as empty, homogeneous ethnic space, but rather always already caught in the crucible of histories of mixture and “modernity-making.” Transgressing geographical and thus racial and cultural boundaries, “witnessing nations that are markedly distinct,” this nameless traveler sets the pace for the novel, which is at once both about difference and the relations that happen between these differences. With this nameless traveler, Mofolo writes geographical transversal as a guiding metaphor to this novel, and perhaps as well as to his own political moment.

These moments of tension in the novel, where relation and recognition come out of a common experience of the land, are not meant to be clear. Indeed, this productive tension in the novel’s setting pushes against state structures of imposed topographical clarity when it came to the delineation of peoples and their supposed ethnic and racial homes or homelands as under South African forms of segregation. Lazarus writes that “the opening of Thomas Mofolo’s *Chaka* is exemplary, inasmuch as it does not simply set the scene and place the plot into motion, but serves rather to introduce us to a whole symbolic economy—or ‘structure of feeling.’”³⁷ In Mofolo’s textual excavation of the soil, we are not meant to find clarity, but rather an opaque landscape, where a lack of clear lines delineating races, ethnicities, and cultures is an ecological precondition for forms of contact that push against segregation. One such passage follows on the cartographical telescoping of the aforementioned opening lines:

The greater portion of the land of the Bokone, which lies between the Maloti and the sea, is covered by forest. Besides, the crops there are never bitten by frost, for there are only light frosts because of the nearness of the sea. It is a land of lush greenness, and of extremely rich pasturage. Its soil is dark, and *that means* that it produces much food; its indigenous grass is the luxuriant *seboku*; its water lies in the marshes, and *that means* that its cattle grow very fat. There are numerous rivers, and *that means* that rain is plentiful. It is a land of dense mists which often clear only after the sun has risen high, and *that means* that there are no droughts since the moisture takes long to dry up.³⁸

36 Lazarus, “The Logic of Equivocation in Thomas Mofolo’s *Chaka*,” 46.

37 Neil Lazarus, *The Postcolonial Unconscious* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011), 57.

38 Mofolo, *Chaka*, 1–2.

Despite an incessant language to the contrary—“and that means . . .”—this passage offers us a writerly “ordering” of the world that is not so very ordered, especially if we take into account that this is a setting equally foreign to the writer and to the reader. If the South African state imagined the southern African landscape as articulating clear and distinct relationships between people (race) and the landscape, then Mofolo’s series of intuitive and intimate relations to unknown spaces undermines the racist cartographical clarity presumed by the state. This passage announces not simply the novel’s setting, but also an attitude toward and perhaps even a sympathetic epistemology for understanding an otherwise presumably inscrutable space. As Lazarus writes in an earlier argument on Mofolo, “*Chaka* is a work stretched on the rack of South African history. Its equivocation is an expression of its concrete situation, representing the author’s attempt to order his world. The attempt is flawed because it has to be flawed, because, ultimately, Mofolo’s was not a world that could be ordered, but only laid open in all its contradictions.”³⁹ What Lazarus reads as the novel’s “equivocation,” the unresolved (and unresolvable) tension between its structure and content or its substance and form, is what I am calling the entangled and creolized register of Mofolo’s writing. Lazarus’s historical “rack” as it were, is really a historiographical one: a colonial mode of representation that flattened the historical variegations of colonial spaces. Mofolo’s novel works to think difference back into the colonial archive. Not a mythical and original difference but, rather, a historical one.

Beginning with the *mfecane*, the nineteenth-century scattering of southern African peoples as a result of Chaka’s imperial campaigns—rather than colonial encounter or expansion—Mofolo’s novel also offers a rethinking of the genealogies of modernity in South Africa, which in turn occasions a reformulation of the landscape, especially for its use as a motif to represent group identity. In other words, a sense of modernity, especially a postcolonial modernity for southern Africa has, if we reread Mofolo, a different point of origin, both genealogically and geographically. Indeed, it is this vision of ecology that not only marks Mofolo as a prescient African writer—a quality captured again by Gikandi’s description of Mofolo’s writing as “an early postcolonial style,” but it is also Mofolo’s notion of modernity as not coming from elsewhere that makes him an important and early writer for exploring the ways in which colonial and postcolonial modernity has been negotiated on its own terms and from its own spaces of inquiry.

The Anthropology of Politics: Writing across Ethnicity and Creolized Language

In 1932, the South African Inter-University Committee for African Studies called for a subcommittee in order “to gather information upon the languages of the Union, to ascertain what research has been and is being carried out, and to make recommendations for further research and the development of literatures.”⁴⁰ The committee developed a short questionnaire regarding the study of (“indigenous”)

39 Lazarus, “The Logic of Equivocation in Thomas Mofolo’s *Chaka*,” 43.

40 C. M. Doke, “A Preliminary Investigation into the State of the Native Languages of South Africa with Suggestions as to Research and the Development of Literature,” *Bantu Studies: A Journal devoted to the Scientific Study of Bantu, Hottentot and Bushmen*. 7.1 (1933): 1; henceforth, “Preliminary Investigation.”

languages and literatures, with responses to be directed toward such categorical headings as “Grammatical,” “Lexicographical,” “Folklore,” “Ethnology,” “History,” and so forth. The questionnaire was then disseminated to intellectuals deemed experts within given language groups. A sort of “State of the Union” and its languages, the proposed study seemed innocuous enough given the patronizing anthropological discourse of the day. These “experts” were to offer a survey of the field regarding all “available literature” and “linguistic field work” being done, as well as to offer opinions on “What linguistic research . . . should be done?” and “In what direction should the literary development of the language be encouraged?”⁴¹

The result of the study was a lengthy compendium, edited by C. M. Doke, then Director of Bantu Studies at University of the Witwatersrand, fully titled “A Preliminary Investigation into the State of the Native Languages of South Africa with Suggestions as to Research and the Development of Literature.” The report was adopted by the committee in January 1933 and published in *Bantu Studies* in March of the same year as cited previously. The study itself labors to address two predicaments, namely the “difficulty encountered” in classifying the languages of the South African state and what to do about the growing phenomenon where “the Natives themselves are really beginning to make their contribution to the literature.”⁴² These “Native” contributions, such as Thomas Mofolo’s work, however, actually disrupt the taxonomical impulse of the investigation itself. Precisely because *Chaka* thinks of cultural production as an act of creolization, the report, although left with no choice but to praise Mofolo, cannot help but belie a certain discomfort with what the author had actually produced.

Although Doke’s “Preliminary Investigation” names Thomas Mofolo’s “great historical novel, *Chaka*” as giving the Southern Sotho dialect a literature, on the whole the report seems unable to assimilate either Mofolo or his literature into its schema. Doke not only gives just as much credit to F. H. Dutton, Mofolo’s first English translator, but also patronizingly recommends that Mofolo be commissioned to write a “Life of Moshesh,” the legendary nineteenth-century consolidator and ruler of the Basotho, Mofolo’s own ethnic group. Doke argues that “Mofolo could be induced to undertake this if an outline, *especially regarding origins*,⁴³ were given to him to work upon.”⁴⁴ Aside from invalidating the large amount of ethnographical fieldwork—but on Zulu customs—Thomas Mofolo had already demonstrated in the creation of *Chaka*, the desire expressed by this recommendation again belies the investigation’s need for a neater relationship between the various “types” of “Bantu Peoples” and respective “Bantu literatures,” especially where “origin” narratives are concerned.

41 Doke, Preliminary Investigation,” 2.

42 Doke, Preliminary Investigation,” 3.

43 There are two further mentions of Mofolo in the Investigations section on recommendations for southern Sotho, calling for: “(i) Preparation of a ‘Life of Moshesh.’ [T. Mofolo to be approached to write this, provided an outlined be supplied, particularly regarding origins];” “(ii) Preparation of the “Story of Mohlomi” from a collection of the legends [Mofolo to be consulted].” See Doke, “Preliminary Investigation,” 30.

44 Doke, “Preliminary Investigation,” 19; emphasis mine.

But even before this literary recommendation, when the report comes to the linguistic quality of Southern Sesotho itself (the language in which Thomas Mofolo writes), Doke explains how:

It is acknowledged that Southern Sotho (*Sesotho sa ha Moshoeshoe*)⁴⁵ is much more mixed in origin than either Tswana or Northern Sotho, but owing to its strategic position in regard to missionary work it has built up a literature far outstriding [sic] the other members of the cluster.⁴⁶

The animating, if implicit, claim Doke makes about the relationship between linguistic purity and literary production is clear: that languages otherwise creolized (“mixed in origin”) are less capable of developing a national (read: ethnic/racial) literature except in exceptional cases and, in this instance, because of the cultivation of a robust missionary presence across the Transvaal and Lesotho. If Doke’s Eurocentric ascription of literary production in Southern Sesotho to missionary instruction is bracketed, then perhaps it is possible to imagine that the rise of a literary corpus in this language might be directly attributable to its characteristic creolization. In any case, Mofolo’s *Chaka* is hardly the neat, autochthonous, and racially authentic narrative Doke’s “Investigation” had prescribed.

An Allegory of the Colony: How Achebe’s *Things Fall Apart* Invented African Culture

Mofolo’s creolized history also places him in comparative tension with the later generations of “decolonizing” African writers, whose returns to histories of stable racial and ethnic homogeneity served as foundational to the field of African literature. Progenitor of the Zulu people and military tyrant of a large portion of southern Africa, Mofolo’s Chaka-figure not only inaugurates a form of violent unification, but the writer also uses the *mfecane* as a moment in which to think political, cultural, and racial creolization back into the precolonial archive of South Africa. As will be discussed following, if Achebe’s aesthetic response to colonial oppression was to imagine a historical integrity and cohesion to the precolonial African political and cultural body, Mofolo tries instead to think about the African nation as a mixed, entangled, and creolized form, and one whose sense of modernity precedes the coming of formal colonization. Consequently, *Chaka* un-thinks the segregationist mythologies attendant to the union of Mofolo’s own time, as well as preempting much of the resistance writing of the African continent by nearly half a century.

In *Wretched of the Earth*, Franz Fanon’s poignant critic of colonial and neocolonial culture, he writes that “colonialism is not satisfied merely with holding a people in its grip and emptying the native’s brain of all form and content. By a kind of perverted logic, it turns to the past of the oppressed people, distorts, disfigures, and

45 Doke, “Preliminary Investigation.” Note here that even the anthropological classification of the language is based on the nineteenth-century ruler of the Basotho as the embodiment of a linguistic, cultural, and ethnic origin.

46 Doke, “Preliminary Investigation,” 18.

destroys it.”⁴⁷ In his first novel, *Things Fall Apart* (1958),⁴⁸ Chinua Achebe responds to the Western narrative of Africa and its inhabitants that Fanon describes. By returning to the precolonial African past, Achebe’s “inaugural gesture”⁴⁹ imagines a historical world of Africa inhabited by clusters of coherent cultural logics, previously undisturbed until the coming of the colonial machine.⁵⁰ It is worth noting here that Achebe’s first novel is unique and specific in this effect of precolonial historical coherence. In other words, *Things Fall Apart* is predicated upon a cultural and social “unanimity,” a homogeneity of both ontological and epistemological relations across the peoples of Umuofia that links the group historically, while also dramatically prefiguring the unraveling of its foundations later in the novel, after the successful incursions of the colonial agents of the novel.⁵¹ Indeed, by the time Achebe writes *Arrow of God*, the final installment in the trilogy, the earlier relief of social and cultural unanimity against which the plot of *Things Fall Apart* is enacted has all but disappeared. The “ambiguation”—of collective and individual notions of the past—that Quayson locates as an index of modernity has fully permeated the conflict between the Okperi and Umuaro.⁵²

To return to *Things Fall Apart*, I do not dispute the monumental impact Achebe’s work had—and continues to have—on both the imagination of the decolonizing and postcolonial worlds, as well as on the English language in general. Nor do I take issue with the canonicity of Achebe’s first novel. I do, however, want to point out that the persistent marking of it as the “inaugural moment” of African fiction has meant that what it obtains is a certain view of Africa in the Western imagination. Achebe’s rendering of the Igbo life-world, its past, its traditions, has become so ingrained through the institutionalization⁵³ of the work as to become an allegory of colonization across the African continent, as well as the larger postcolonial world. As Gikandi notes, because the canonical quality of *Things Fall Apart* rests less on the literariness of Achebe’s work, and more in the text’s image of Africa and its relation to the world, “Achebe is the person who invented African culture as it is now circulated within the institutions of interpretation.”⁵⁴ The novel unfolds along a simple narrative arc in which “things” were once together and then disintegrated; but under this arc is implied a cosmology of Africa within the world. The persistent critical import of the work is certainly in part because Achebe succeeds in figuring the colony as well as the colonized as contemporaries to the West.⁵⁵ Because the work retains such canonicity, however, its vision of Africa has created certain blind spots to narratives that do not

47 Frantz Fanon, *Wretched of the Earth* (New York: Grove, 2004), 210.

48 Achebe, *Things Fall Apart*.

49 Coundouriotis, *Claiming History*, 1. Coundouriotis writes: “Every gesture to inaugurate anew is profoundly revisionist...the inaugural gesture creates the opportunity to reinvent the authentically African and cast pall of inauthenticity on the writers that preceded them.”

50 Coundouriotis, *Claiming History*, 1.

51 “Quayson, “Self-Writing and Existential Alienation in African Literature,” 41.

52 “Quayson, “Self-Writing and Existential Alienation in African Literature,” 40.

53 For a description of the impact on intellectual institutions, pedagogy, and the “common cultural project” of a decolonizing Africa, see Simon Gikandi, “Chinua Achebe and the Invention of African Culture,” *Research in African Literatures* 32.2 (2001): 3–8.

54 Gikandi, “Chinua Achebe and the Invention of African Culture,” 7.

55 Coundouriotis, *Claiming History*, 38. Coundouriotis writes that “Achebe’s auto-ethnography aims at affirming the contemporaneity of native cultures with those of the West.”

conform to its canonical representations of both Africa and Africa's relationship to modernity.

Things Fall Apart opens *in media res* with a physical description of its protagonist, Okonkwo, which clearly marks the character as the embodiment of his group's cultural logic, while also imparting a sense of historical density to this life-world:

That was many years ago, twenty or more, and during this time Okonkwo's fame had grown like a bush-fire in the harmattan. He was tall and huge, and his bushy eyebrows and wide nose gave him a very severe look. He breathed heavily, and it was said that, when he slept, his wives and children in their houses could hear him breathe. When he walked, his heels hardly touched the ground and he seemed to walk on springs, as if he was going to pounce on somebody. And he did pounce on people quite often.⁵⁶

The opening scene bares significance not solely for its unique engagement with literary realism,⁵⁷ but also for the novel's "production" of cultural and racial cohesion vis-à-vis a colonial Other.⁵⁸ Though this article doesn't allow the space to elaborate, I want to simply gesture to the ways in which the question of realism is an integral one in the context of African literature precisely because of the complicit relationship with anthropological discourses. Moreover, scenes such as this in *Things Fall Apart* construct the novel's narrative of modernity, one that is based on the collusion of two radically—and racially—different life-worlds. Okonkwo's presence is proud, awe-inspiring, and his prowess is compared to an element of nature, "like a bush-fire." Indeed, even his breathing becomes part of the night's sounds that make up the world of this novel. Achebe gives us a glimpse into a system, a cultural/ethnic organism.⁵⁹ In terms of narrative structure, the ontological cohesion forms the dramatic relief for the implosion of this life-world, seen in the coming of the colonial invasion at the novel's end. The novel's dramatic arc highlights two major interventions of Achebe's literature: the first is to articulate a critique of colonialism that moved beyond the economic and instead drew attention to the corrosive effect of colonization upon the cultural logics of subjugated peoples. The second is to construct a postcolonial narrative of modernity based upon the collusion of two opposing cultural logics.

By the end of Okonkwo's fight to maintain the centripetal forces that have held the village of Umuofia together for generations, the harsh realities of a colonial modernity present themselves as decisive breaks from the governing principles of this cultural group, breaks occasioned by colonial intervention. As the novel

56 Achebe, *Things Fall Apart*, 4.

57 See Ato Quayson, "Realism, Criticism, and the Disguises of Both: A Reading of Chinua Achebe's *Things Fall Apart* with an Evaluation of the Criticism Relating to It," *Research in African Literatures* 25.4 (1994): 117–36.

58 Quayson, "Realism, Criticism, and the Disguises of Both," 123.

59 Compare this to the "ambiguation" of the opening of *Arrow of God*, where Ezeulu is written under the sign of distinction and difference from the start. For a fuller account of how this ambiguation functions, see Quayson, "Self-Writing and Existential Alienation in African Literature."

closes, a group of elder clansmen debates their radically new place in this (now) colonized world:

We who are here this morning have remained true to our fathers, but our brothers have deserted us and joined a stranger to soil their fatherland. If we fight the stranger we shall hit our brothers and perhaps shed the blood of a clansman. But we must do it. Our fathers never dreamed of such a thing, they never killed their brother. But a white man never came to them. So we must do what our father would never have done.⁶⁰

By being given access earlier into the life-world of Umuofia's cultural foundations, we are made to understand the tragedy of this rupture. And the tragedy, we understand, reverberates all the louder because of the realistic description of cohesion given to the Igbo people early on in this tale. At this moment in the text, not only do the elders of Umuofia see the unfolding of a postcolonial modernity before them—a modernity we are fully immersed within from the very start of *Arrow of God*—but also *Things Fall Apart* itself bares witness to how these newly colonized people will succumb to a larger battle over representational styles. As we see in the novel's closing moment, the district commissioner, who has effectively subdued the rebellion of Umuofia, muses that "In the many years in which he had toiled to bring civilization to different parts of Africa he had learned a number of things . . ." and as such he planned to write a book on the topic. Indeed, he thinks to himself that the story of our protagonist Okonkwo, "of a man who had killed a messenger and hanged himself would make interesting reading. One could almost write a whole chapter on him. Perhaps not a whole chapter but a reasonable paragraph at any rate . . . one must be firm in cutting out details. He had already chosen a title of the book, after much thought: The Pacification of the Primitive Tribes of the Lower Niger."⁶¹

Achebe's writing of the coming of the colonial encounter leaves the villagers of Umuofia—and the whole of Nigeria by extension—a footnote in the narrative of modernity in Africa. Postcolonial modernity being from this moment forward a negotiation of the colonial archive and its modes of representation of colonial spaces and formerly colonized people. It is a postcolonial modernity that by the time we get to *Arrow of God* has completely permeated the Umuaro society forcing internal riffs in the historical fabric of it people. And this is precisely the point, that for Achebe the advent of the colonial moment is an originary point for the postcolonial modernity that follows. If *Things Fall Apart* closes in the collapsing of the foundations of Umuofia, *Chaka*, on the other hand, ends in a grand and prophetic gesture outward, toward the colonial world and its encroachment offering a version of what Glissant calls a "prophetic vision of the past."⁶² As the novel closes in a moment of fratricidal climax, Chaka speaks his dying words to his brothers: "You are killing me in the hope that you will be kings when I am dead, whereas you are wrong, that is not the way it will be because, *umlungu* the white man, is coming, and it is he who will rule you, and you will be his servants."⁶³ Even as Mofolo has remained firmly grounded in the life-

60 Achebe, *Things Fall Apart*, 203.

61 Achebe, *Things Fall Apart*, 203.

62 Glissant, *Caribbean Discourse*, 64.

63 Mofolo, *Chaka*, 167.

world of this novel's setting, in this final moment he gestures toward a coming empire; an intensification of imperial presence that by the time he writes in the early twentieth century had seen the effective military subjugation of most nonwhites in South Africa, as well as the political foundations laid for nearly a century of violent racial governance. Consequently, Mofolo's novel presents an interestingly converse narrative to Achebe's, whereby the colonial encounter, and indeed even colonial agents themselves, become a footnote in an intra-African negotiation of modernity.

If the intervention of a writer such as Achebe is the historical imagining of a cohesive precolonial African life-world as the *mise-en-scène* of a drama where "things fall apart" in direct response to colonialism, then Mofolo's novel is set against a less clearly delineated tableau of the precolonial African world. Indeed, nineteenth-century southern Africa in Mofolo's imagining is not an ethnically and culturally integrated (read: authentic) space, as already in Chaka's time the striations of political turmoil and imperial (Chaka, the Zulu emperor) oppression are made textually evident. This is also why Mofolo seems less concerned with formal literary realism—much less historical reality—in his historical fiction. The price Achebe pays for his realism is to create a drama of categorical shifts where the ideas of modernity, mixture, and relationality among Africans can only be thought about as a function of European and colonial intervention. On the other hand, denying an imagined moment of originary racial purity as an ideological relief against which to paint the crimes of colonization, Mofolo instead displaces this racially idyllic fantasy to outside of the diegetic boundaries of the novel itself. The action of the novel *Chaka* is subsequent to an imagined precolonial, autochthonous, or indigenous peace. Any such fantasy in Mofolo's telling is relegated to "the olden days when the people were still settled upon the land. The nations were living in peace, each one in its own original territory where it had been from the day that Nkulunkulu, the Great-Great One, caused the people to emerge from a bed of reeds."⁶⁴ Racialized geography, that is the imaginary clarity of a relationship between the land and a (racial, ethnic, or cultural) group in Mofolo's text, is a thing of prehistory, indeed linked to the time of creation mythology.

Postcoloniality, as a discourse of modernity, is predicated on the fiction—but-tressed in Achebe's case by an incisive realism—that an originary moment of encounter acts as a threshold to modernity; before is the clarity of indigenous cultural logics and tradition, and after is postcolonialism's familiar and persistent trajectory of mimeticism, hybridity, and globalization. Whereas Achebe's postcolonial modernity measures itself in the distance between the disintegration of one integral reality and the imposition of another, Mofolo imagines a picture of southern Africa on the brink of intense colonization that looks neither very integrated nor unmarked by histories of migratory flows, experiences of difference, and ultimately by creolization. Because the novel unsettles narratives of where and when things are "supposed" to be in relation to both Africa and its place within a Western narrative of modernity, I argue that the perennial "problem" of reading *Chaka* is our problem of approach to African and postcolonial literatures as fields. *Chaka* neither reinscribes the lines of modernity as running solely between the West and non-West, nor does it allow us any nostalgic imaginings of the precolonial past. In doing so, Mofolo shows us that our expectations

64 Mofolo, *Chaka*, 4.

of the African precolonial past have more to do with imaginative constructions than historical realities. African cultures, Mofolo tells us, were not uncivilized or even unmodern before the experience of formal colonization. But nor did they rest in the pristine, unchanged, and homogenous halls of ethnographic time. Mofolo's novelistic return to the Chaka story demonstrates that precolonial political models indeed have bearing on the "modern" African nation-state, as well as to show that these models were borne of their own moments of entanglement, their own clashes with the creolizing forces of mixture and modernity.

I want to conclude by returning to Glissant's epigraph that opened this piece. In Mofolo's African past, we do not find "uncontaminated survival" but rather the becoming of a place imbricated in "the tangled nature of lived experience." If *Chaka* inaugurates anything, it is a call from the beginning of the twentieth century, directed toward the start of the following century, to reread the history of African literature as a story not of something else, not an allegorical relief of the West's march toward modernity but as an imagining of an *African* modernity itself. A vision of African modernity in which a southern African landscape is the site of both historical relations and entanglement, which drives the historical movement of a modern South Africa. Within this call, Mofolo outlines a relationship between literary style and the colonial state, between anti- and postcolonial national consciousness and the aesthetics for representing it.