


BOOK FORUM

“Undoing the Laws of the Universe”: Reading Jeanne-Marie Jackson’s *The African Novel of Ideas after #FeesMustFall*

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I. Lightning and Gravity

On October 12, 2016, #FeesMustFall student leaders at the University of Cape Town gathered to discuss the decolonization of science. A video-recording of this event offers an illuminating perspective of the high-stakes involved in the decolonial debate: “If I personally were committed to enforcing decolonization,” declares the primary speaker, “science as a whole is a product of Western modernity and the whole thing should be scratched off.”¹ Despite the ensuing laughter, the speaker continues, insisting that “we have to restart science from ... an African perspective, from our perspective of how we’ve experienced science.”² She then proceeds to develop this idea with reference to a place in Kwazulu-Natal where people believe that it is possible, through black magic or witchcraft, “to send lightning to strike someone,” before clinching her point with the challenging question: “Can you explain that scientifically?”³

Amid the concatenation of voices raised either in affirmation or protest in response to the speaker’s claim, a member of the audience can be heard saying, “It’s not true.”⁴ At this point, the chair calls the audience to order and addresses

¹ “Scrap Science and Start All Over: #FeesMustFall students,” *BusinessTech*, October, 14, 2016 (<https://businesstech.co.za/news/lifestyle/140093/scrap-science-and-start-all-over-feesmustfall-students/>).

² “Scrap Science and Start All Over.”

³ “Scrap Science and Start All Over.”

⁴ “Scrap Science and Start All Over.”

the voice of dissent directly. “When we started this,” she begins, “we agreed on certain house rules. By doing that”—by which she presumably means negating the speaker’s claim—“you are disrespecting the sacredness of this space.”⁵ The chair then calls upon the addressee to apologize to the speaker and to agree to respect the house rules, after which the speaker is invited to continue. “That very response,” she says, “is the reason I am not in the Science Faculty... . Western modernity is the direct antagonistic factor to decolonisation because Western knowledge is totalizing... . We are going to decolonize by having knowledge that is produced by us.”⁶

As I reflect on this exchange now, more than five years later, I remain struck by the complex overlays of conflicting desire that the exchange exposed: superstition versus science; spaces of education transformed into sacred spaces; attempts to find decolonial alternatives to presumably stultifying conventions of learning offset by the punitive mimicry of those selfsame institutional processes; the emboldened response by the speaker, whereby interpersonal disagreement becomes symptomatically typical of a presumably more general institutional embargo imposed upon decolonial experience and thought; education as the neo-colonization of the mind; assumptions about Western totalization versus decolonial multiplicity; the irony that an event designed to foreground local and decolonial forms of knowledge creation, while refusing colonially marked *épis-témès* and *dispositifs*, still occurs in English rather than any of South Africa’s other eleven official languages.

I find myself thinking that #Fallists had, perhaps unwittingly, set themselves the unenviable task of undoing the laws of the universe. Or, perhaps, that they simply wished to couch the laws of the universe in more familiar localities and idioms. At one point, in an attempt to illustrate what she means by the West’s totalizing force, the speaker offers a garbled account of Newton’s law of universal gravitation. “Reason, rationality, whatever,” she says, grasping at ideas.⁷ I wonder if she would grasp as desperately or as dismissively were these laws available to her in a different, more local linguistic idiom. “Gravity” is “umxhuzulane” in isiXhosa; “amandla adonsela phansi” in isiZulu; “matla a kholeli” in Southern Sotho. But, I wonder, are these words equivalent to the Newtonian context, or do they simply connote matters of extreme importance, seriousness, the gravity of situations? The medium of education at the University of the Witwatersrand, where I work, is English, and the same is true for many if not all other spaces of higher education across South Africa. Although many of our students are more than proficient in the language, I wonder if part of the #Fallist desire was for a less totalizing medium of education, an alternative to the English world medium. Is there a Venda translation of Newton’s *Philosophiæ Naturalis Principia Mathematica*? Is this necessary? Is it desired? Who shall be the arbiter of necessity and desire?

More concretely, I also think, now, of the opening paragraphs of the late Harry Garuba’s 2002 essay, “Explorations in Animist Materialism: Notes on Reading/Writing African Literature, Culture, and Society”:

⁵ “Scrap Science and Start All Over.”

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⁷ “Scrap Science and Start All Over.”

In front of the National Electric Power Authority of Nigeria headquarters is a larger-than-life statue of Sango, the Yoruba god of lightning, clad in his traditional outfit, presiding, as it were, over the offices of the major power generation and distribution corporation of the country. Sango, a sixteenth-century ruler of Oyo, is an anthropomorphic deity who was in his lifetime reputed to have had the ability to “call down” lightning to destroy his enemies and burn their houses and homesteads. The Sango myth ... provided an avenue through which the new elite could reconnect with its historical and cultural heritage [and] was particularly meaningful to the new “educated” leaders who were supposedly alienated from their traditions by their Western education. For them, Sango was not only a figure from the historical past; he was more importantly a symbol of the meeting point between “tradition” and “modernity”... . For his present-day adherents, the details of his life story are ... irrelevant when set beside his “discovery” of electricity... . It is this association with electricity that has made Sango the patron god of electricians and the deity who presides over Nigeria’s power corporation.⁸

II. Fantasy and Philosophy

The #Fallist exchange and Garuba’s essay returned to my thoughts as I worked my way through Jean-Marie Jackson’s *The African Novel of Ideas: Philosophy and Individualism in the Age of Global Writing*. Jackson’s study proposes to foreground a figure she believes to be unjustly marginalized within the broader terrain of African literary studies: the philosophically or intellectually inclined subject that has too frequently been confined to the Western canon of liberal humanism. Jackson’s introduction does a fair deal of conceptual heavy lifting as she attempts to clear a space for the rehabilitation of this subject. In her view, more conventional treatments of African literature focused on “political resistance and cultural representation can sometimes serve as blunt instruments, dull blades taken to fresh voices.”⁹ At the same time, she sidesteps more recent methodological frameworks prioritizing “networks, ecology [or] the transmission of popular genres,” arguing that the novel’s “scalar versatility ... means that it is an unreliable social diagnostic tool.”¹⁰ Doubling down on this point, Jackson asserts that the novel’s “fantasized space” makes it resistant to “disciplines more widely identified with Africanist scholarship and its penchant for broad social structures, such as history or anthropology,” adding that the novel remains a form capable of saying something about “the representative individual.”¹¹ It is “philosophy”—“more systematic than theory and less self-reifying than

⁸ Harry Garuba, “Explorations in Animist Materialism: Notes on Reading/Writing African Literature, Culture, and Society,” *Public Culture* 15.2 (2003): 261–85, esp. 261–63.

⁹ Jean-Marie Jackson, *The African Novel of Ideas: Philosophy and Individualism in the Age of Global Writing* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2021), 2.

¹⁰ Jackson, *The African Novel of Ideas*, 4.

¹¹ Jackson, *The African Novel of Ideas*, 4.

culture”—that therefore emerges as the conceptual framework best suited to her investigation of the novel’s particular ability to “pivot between the embedded thinker and abstract thought.”¹²

Jackson’s dissatisfaction with the methodological tools conventionally applied to African literature (and literature more generally), along with her attempt to negotiate a space within the contested terrain of African literary studies on the one hand, and world literature on the other, culminates in an elegant and even modest proposal: “philosophy—accessed [... through] its individual novelistic avatars—is an important investment for *some* very interesting African novelists that has been obscured by previous debates about African literature’s difference from Western models.”¹³

Clearly, Jackson feels that investment in African literature has been unfairly skewed against the individual subject and that rehabilitation of interest in this figure is necessary. At the same time, I find somewhat troubling her subsequent suggestion that:

The crucial question that this book pursues, and which the writers it features also address, is that of how what we might call liberal notions such as individuality, universality, rationality, sovereignty, civility and even *philosophy itself* are informed by the contexts of their emergence *outside* the West.¹⁴

What, I wonder, are the stakes involved in retaining the association between individual subjectivity and “liberalism” or of the further enframing of “liberal subjectivity” within the broader parameters of a “philosophy” that is itself enframed as the natural extension of a specifically “Western humanism”?

In fact, Jackson proceeds to demonstrate how African writers *have* contributed to notions of localized reason while retaining the a priori “idea” as a means by which to reject obeisance to an authority.¹⁵ This is worth noting, and it is germane to her project’s commitment to localized African expressions of reason and rationality. At the same time, however, Jackson arguably walks a precarious tightrope between this admirable ideal and her frequent, if subtle and suggestive, attempts to bracket off the larger specter of the Enlightenment’s production of Africa as a space in which subjects preoccupied with its categories should necessarily emerge precisely because of colonialism’s impact. This is plainly evident in the title of her introductory chapter: “Disaggregating Liberalism,” and it is concretized by her suggestion that she looks to “narrativised instances of both ‘reason’ and ‘autonomous selfhood’ whose complicity with imperial models is not foreordained” and her claim that there are in fact African contexts “where liberalism is *not* ... dominant in the sense of having been painfully and lucratively exported around the world.”¹⁶ The

¹² Jackson, *The African Novel of Ideas*, 4.

¹³ Jackson, *The African Novel of Ideas*, 10.

¹⁴ Jackson, *The African Novel of Ideas*, 11.

¹⁵ Jackson, *The African Novel of Ideas*, 113.

¹⁶ Jackson, *The African Novel of Ideas*, 8.

question this raises, however, is whether the West—within the narrow ambit of the largely Anglophone African literary traditions with which Jackson remains preoccupied, that is—has an outside. After colonialism, it is difficult to believe that this could be the case. Yet it appears that Jackson wishes to assert precisely this: that Enlightenment ideals might be separated from the Enlightenment as an event grounded in historical materialities, and that this ideal might reemerge in altered form in various postcolonial localities.¹⁷

Jackson does not offer any instances of precolonial African contexts against which her claims may be tested. The only example that appears to suggest otherwise arrives in the form of *Kintu*'s fictionalized reimagining of a precolonial African context. Not that this should matter much: the myth that individual subjectivity did not inhere in precolonial Africa has and continues to be challenged: Monroe has recently discussed the importance of individual entrepreneurial agency to the formation of precolonial statecraft,¹⁸ while scholars have elsewhere noted that precolonial Africa's response to economic stimuli have been "rational."¹⁹

Indeed, the possibility that "the Western critic sometimes seems to be attributing the differences he observes in African literature as opposed to Western literature to an absolute difference of the African and Western psyches," has long been noted.²⁰ A similar idea is suggested by Chatterjee in his 2013 debate with Chibber (which Jackson flags early on),²¹ albeit in the context of rural South Asian peasantry. Following his summation of Chakrabarti's attempt to distinguish peasant consciousness from Western secularism, Chatterjee states that:

¹⁷ The attempt to disaggregate "ideas" from social, cultural, or historical contexts is perhaps an effect of Jackson's commitment to philosophy as defined by Justin E. H. Smith (Jackson, 3) as an exercise in a priori forms of reflection. This disaggregation also separates Jackson's work from two recent investigations into African literature—Magalí Armillas-Tiseyra's *The Dictator Novel: Writers and Politics in the Global South* and Monica Popescu's *At Penpoint: African Literatures, Postcolonial Studies, and the Cold War*, in which the question of the postcolonial African subject's entanglement with and embeddedness in specifically Cold War (rather than more generally "imperial" or "colonial") assumptions are brought sharply to the fore. See Magalí Armillas-Tiseyra, *The Dictator Novel: Writers and Politics in the Global South* (Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, 2019), and Monica Popescu, *At Penpoint: African Literatures, Postcolonial Studies, and the Cold War* (Durham, NC, and London: Duke University Press, 2020).

¹⁸ J. Cameron Monroe, "Power and Agency in Precolonial African States," *The Annual Review of Anthropology* 42 (2013): 17–35.

¹⁹ David E. Ault and Gilbert L. Rutman, "The Development of Individual Rights to Property in Tribal Africa," *The Journal of Law & Economics* 22.1 (1979): 163–82, esp. 163.

²⁰ See, for example, J. Z. Kronenfeld, "The 'Communalistic' African and the 'Individualistic' Westerner: Some Comments on Misleading Generalizations in Western Criticism of Soyinka and Achebe," *Research in African Literatures* 6.2 (Autumn 1975): 199–225.

²¹ Jackson, *The African Novel of Ideas*, 4. Jackson does not take a clear position in the Chibber/Chatterjee debate, but her subsequent citation of Ato Sekyi-Otu's interest in "shared human necessities" (Jackson, 7) suggests that her own investments are closer to Chibber's position than to Chatterjee's.

No one familiar with the Bengal countryside and its agrarian history will argue that peasants have little or no consideration for their individual self-interest. The sense of individual property was well developed in agrarian Bengal even before the colonial land settlements.²²

Together, these studies suggest two things germane to this discussion: First, they demonstrate that the myth associating Africa with collective affiliations at the expense of individual agency—a myth strengthened under the colonial sign of Enlightenment modernity—remains strong even in the face of clear evidence refuting its assumptions. Second, they indicate what Chatterjee describes as a feature of “liberal historiography” precisely designed to establish liberal humanism as a foundationally “Western” project, but only by virtue of strategically erasing or eliding alternative emanations of similar ideals found across the precolonial world. Simply put: it is in the West’s interests to falsely present precolonial Africa as the collectivized other to its own individualistic norm.²³

Of course, it may well be that this is precisely Jackson’s point. Yet if some idea of individual human nature does precede the Enlightenment’s definitional categorization of its nature, this still leaves us with the question of whether Enlightenment terms—marred as they are by colonial affiliations—should be adequate to its discussion or elaboration. This question is precisely the one subtending Chatterjee’s debate with Chibber, and it is also one from which the study of African literature has emerged and with which it continues to grapple.

To her credit, Jackson does appear to concede the difficulty involved in finding new terms by which to frame her discussion before shuttling back to the individual. “I am ... struck by the difficulty I have faced in finding a critical language to make sense of ... a life in which self-determination featured equally as richly as affiliation,” she declares, only to add that “it is easier to do away with individualism as a theoretical position than to relinquish its foundational lived power.”²⁴ Coming as it does after an account of how the Enlightenment has come to be seen, that is, as a project emerging in lockstep with assimilationist and colonial values, I think this conclusion could easily be misread as implying a degree of concession to Enlightenment (and therefore colonial) philosophical categories. This is not only questionable, but also precisely the condition against which subaltern studies argues.²⁵ At the same time, it should not be surprising to

²² “Debate: Marxism & the Legacy of Subaltern Studies—Historical Materialism NY 2013,” *YouTube*, May 6, 2013 (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=xbM8HJrxSJ4>).

²³ Susan Buck-Morss makes a similar point with reference to the Black Jacobins of Saint-Domingue, who “surpassed the metropole in actively realizing the Enlightenment goal of human liberty, seeming to give proof that the French Revolution was not simply a European phenomenon but world-historical in its implications. If we have become accustomed to different narratives, ones that place colonial events on the margins of European history, we have been seriously misled.” See Susan Buck-Morss, “Hegel and Haiti,” *Critical Inquiry* 26.4 (Summer 2000): 821–65.

²⁴ Jackson, *The African Novel of Ideas*, 5, 6.

²⁵ An interesting example outside of the field of African or subaltern studies, but similarly committed to questioning Enlightenment restrictions on the conditions of liberal humanist modes of subjectivity arrives in an article by Kristen Grogan and Grace Lavery about lesbian factory workers in the mid-twentieth-century United States. According to this study, individual subjectivity is shown

find elements of ideals largely claimed by the West and for the West as part of the purview of Anglophone African literature, even if these ideas frequently vie with the remnants of presumably non-Western African traditions (which, following Ranger and Hobsbawm, may themselves be understood largely as invented traditions).²⁶

III. Subjects and Subjugation

Jackson appears to believe that the novel is a mode in which some idea of subjectivity or personhood inheres. This belief, in turn, prompts her subsequent prioritization of the European Enlightenment as the pinnacle of philosophical thought and the liberal humanist subject as its primary theme. If this is the case (and I think it is), there are two ways in which to approach her project. The first is to question the assumption that persons or personhood are represented by the fantasized space of the novel, a technology that, if not entirely premised on the idea of *writing* as *différance*, remains susceptible to skepticism regarding its referential certainties. From this vantage point, it is difficult to reconcile the Enlightenment's perception of the unified subject with the idea that the narrativised subject is a fragmentary tissue of textual effects derived from a carefully selected archive of linguistic, social, cultural, and historical forces. It is difficult, in other words, to disaggregate the unified subject from writing's space of difference and deferral, or to extricate subjective inwardness from Western-led networks of colonial power. Yet this is arguably the proposal that Jackson asks us to entertain.

Somewhat puzzlingly, despite attempts to disaggregate liberalism from the Enlightenment, Jackson also asks us to entertain the idea that assumptions derived from the Western humanist conceptualization of the subject in general, and of the Kantian acme of European Enlightenment in particular, must act as the categorical basis for its understanding and evaluation. This is a daring gambit, and one that challenges the perspective of those who have come to regard Enlightenment ideals as reductively equivalent to colonial immiseration. Jackson's attempt to salvage the Enlightenment's most noble ideals is admirably heroic. Still, by recentering Enlightenment ideas as the point at which these ideals presumably originate, she risks overlooking the possibility—and this returns us to Chibber's argument with Chatterjee—that Enlightenment categories may be neither desired by those upon whom they have been imposed nor at all capable of accounting for forms of life, political or otherwise, emerging prior to and continuing alongside and beyond the presumably idealized purview of the human which they supposedly instantiate.

The second approach would be to suggest that it matters little whether ideas such as the unified subject, liberalism, the Enlightenment, a priori and a

to emerge more completely at work and in relation to labour and others rather than in the private domestic, and repressive cloisters of the home. See Kristin Grogan and Grace Lavery, "Blood Pink," *SocialText Online* (July 9, 2020) retrieved from <https://socialtextjournal.org/blood-pink/> on 27 february, 2020.

²⁶ Terence Ranger, "The Invention of Tradition in Colonial Africa," *The Invention of Tradition*, ed. Eric Hobsbawm and Terence Ranger (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1983): 211–62.

posteriori logic—philosophy itself—are little more than specters emerging from the scene of writing itself. The fantasy-space of writing, in other words, sets in motion the ideas that for the basis of Jackson’s concern. From this vantage point, her project emerges as a useful, if ultimately heuristic, methodological premise.

To this end, it is possible to appreciate Jackson’s presentation of Casely Halford’s *Ethiopia Unbound* as a work “committed to rigorous forms of argument and private reflection because his self-styled identity as a philosopher is what grants him the confidence and presence of mind to navigate the colonial social worlds from which he seeks liberation.”²⁷ Similarly, one recognizes the worth of her nuanced readings of a wide range of novels tracking the plight of individual subjectivity as it wanes away from Hayford’s ideal, transitioning away from “celebratory brand[s] ... cosmopolitanism to ... more critical one[s]”²⁸ represented by Ama Ata Aidoo’s *Our Sister Killjoy*, Ayi Kwei Armah’s *Fragments*, Stanley Nyamfukudza’s *The Non-Believer’s Journey*, and Dambudzo Marechera’s *Black Sunlight*. In Aidoo’s case, Jackson deftly distinguishes between Hayford’s dialogical “subjectivity” and Aidoo’s “individualism,” which, she claims, emerges in the form of a private interior monologue.²⁹

Although this distinction is elaborated with respect to Samkange’s work, it is interesting to note that both subjective intellection or individualistic passion frequently lead to similarly moribund ends. Consider, for example, Jackson’s take on Nyamfukudza’s *The Non-Believer’s Journey*, which depicts “an English teacher [Sam] who chooses a life of debased sensory pleasure over one of “joining up” to fight minority rule.”³⁰ Given her earlier distinction between subjectivity and individualism, one suspects that Jackson’s adjective, “debased,” is designed to imply that a retreat into feeling rather than intellection is the lesser part of the “liberal” humanism for which she advocates. Citing a scene in which Sam “fails to show obeisance” to a group of Rhodesian soldiers, allowing a “passenger who is labelled a terrorist” to escape, Jackson acknowledges Nyamfukudza’s familiarity with the ways in which thoughtlessly reactive forms of individual rebellion may in fact have contributed to “hinder[ing] the struggle.”³¹ This is followed by another example demonstrating how Sam’s selfish commitment to individual pleasure (as opposed to subjective intellection) implies that “a meaningful life is found by conforming one’s behavior to some sort of larger code.”³² Yet because subjectivity rather than collectivity is Jackson’s concern, she is obliged to add that despite the “meaningful life” suggested by collective political commitment, there is “no clear alternative to [Sam’s] cynicism.”³³

It is difficult to know what to make of this, especially since it is entirely arguable that Nyamfukudza’s intention is to suggest that political commitment is precisely the alternative to colonial repression on the one hand and

²⁷ Jackson, *The African Novel of Ideas*, 22.

²⁸ Jackson, *The African Novel of Ideas*, 24.

²⁹ Jackson, *The African Novel of Ideas*, 25.

³⁰ Jackson, *The African Novel of Ideas*, 98.

³¹ Jackson, *The African Novel of Ideas*, 99.

³² Jackson, *The African Novel of Ideas*, 100.

³³ Jackson, *The African Novel of Ideas*.

individualistic decadence on the other. It is as difficult to account for Jackson's suggestion, when a similar eruption of rebellion leads to Sam's death, that "his corpse is unceremoniously picked up and carried home, with the Chimurenga soldiers as indifferent to it as most readers will be."³⁴ The point, one feels, is precisely that decadent individualism is meaningless but that collective political commitment is not: yet where this leaves Jackson's intellectual subject remains unclear. It is hard to accept, in other words, that subjective or intellectualized "compartment"³⁵ would fare any better in the face of repressive violence except, perhaps, as a form of quietism.

Jackson's dismissal of *The Non-Believer's Journey* feels especially harsh, especially when set in relation to the similarly moribund fates of the intellectualizing subjects that she proceeds to consider in the ensuing chapters, where the intellectualized subject's failure emerges repeatedly. In Jackson's reading of Jennifer Nansubuga Makumbi's *Kintu*, for example, the Westernized thinking subject is set—and ultimately fails—the challenge of reconciling itself with African beliefs. Jackson's remarks on more recent novels—Tendai Huchu's *The Maestro, the Magistrate, and the Mathematician of Harare*, Imraan Coovadia's *High, Low and In-Between*, and Masande Ntshange's *The Reactive*—are marked by a similar tension between compellingly nuanced insights and a frustrating sense that her observations are saying more than her argument's presiding commitments are willing to allow.

For Jackson, all three novels map the plight of the philosopher, intellectual, and thinker as figures increasingly maligned and marginalized by an emergent globality virulently opposed to all and any kind of intellection. This is a compelling thesis, but it is here that the framing of these figures as proxies for a similarly maligned "liberalism" makes both the most sense and the least. On the one hand, it is clearly possible to see liberalism as the fading force in an increasingly illiberal world in which identitarianism and belief appear to be winning out over humanism and reason. On the other hand, it is similarly possible to imagine that liberalism is precisely the motor that drives the idea of a common global humanity ironically beset by increasingly fragmented explorations and expressions of atomized difference. From this latter vantage point, it is no wonder that the liberal humanist thinkers in these novels are frequently associated with isolation and death: the dialectical end of its own ideals has reproduced liberalism as its own ironic inversion in ways that neutralize its ability to respond. This is another example of liberalism's internal contradictions, and it is no more surprising for being located in modern Africa than in the West. If anything, Jackson's project has illuminated liberalism's exhaustion as a cogent political project, and this is its worth.

If Jackson's reading of these works reveals the liberal humanist subject's failure to take root in African soil, and if her project appears to lament the failure of Enlightenment rationality, it is nevertheless animated by her earlier discussion of Emmanuel Chukwudi Eze, a philosopher who represents a broader

³⁴ Jackson, *The African Novel of Ideas*, 100.

³⁵ Jackson, *The African Novel of Ideas*, 101.

turn toward modifying Kantian categories such that they accord more readily with the localities within which rationality operates and from which reason might emerge. Jackson remains more persuaded by the failure of localized forms of rationality to treat as reasonable beliefs in the supernatural—she is less interested in moments where “traditional explanations” are treated as “social truisms” rather than as “points of interpretive decision making”³⁶ as in the case of Goretto Kyomuhendo’s *Waiting* or Peter Kimani’s *Dance of the Jacaranda*. Yet it is worth suggesting that the existential moment of decision may well have already taken place in these latter examples and that the appeal to traditional explanations may already validate Eze’s theories of localized modes of reason.

Despite her presiding lament for the failure of Enlightenment mores, one feels the shadowy implications of this localized reason as an alternative optic through which *Kintu* might be read. From this vantage point, in other words, *Kintu* becomes a parable not for the failure of Enlightenment thought so much as for its continuance in modified form as a means by which to regard even seemingly irrational beliefs as reasonable responses.

At this point, it is worth returning to Garuba’s appeal to animist materialism as a useful alternative to a mode of reading that seems at times slightly too willing to ignore dilemmas of hybridity and to lapse into a long-discredited theory of Enlightenment humanism’s universal values as the ground from which any treatment of African literature should proceed. As Jennifer Wentzel has recently noted, Garuba’s essay would be seminal were it not for the fact that “the questions it provokes about the relationship between cosmology/ontology and literary representation remain unresolved.”³⁷ Yet Garuba’s generous inversion of the power dynamic whereby the Enlightenment begets and produces Africa into one in which Africa is animated by its assimilationist potential in ways capable of absorbing Enlightenment ideals in transformative conjunction with local knowledges suggests that this gap promises much for further and continued exploration.

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³⁶ Jackson, *The African Novel of Ideas*, 26.

³⁷ Jennifer Wentzel, “Toward Insubordinate Nature,” *Cambridge Journal of Postcolonial Literary Inquiry* 6.2 (March 2019): 272–78 (published online).

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