The Ascription of Meaning:
Nigerian Road Building and *The Famished Road*

Roads carry a unique function because they both structurally divide territories as well as link them. Because of this duality of purpose, a road constitutes a liminal space within an environment. The “road” in literature is often the representation of a journey to a particular “place” and thus an indication of the fact that the road itself is not a “place,” at least in the sense that “place is ‘space to which meaning has been ascribed” (Buell 63). The symbolic road instead becomes a threshold that holds a unique relationship with its surrounding environment. The road is a central element within Ben Okri’s novel, *The Famished Road*, which details the life of Azaro, a Nigerian abiku child (or “spirit-child” who, in Yoruba myth, is recurrently born into the world yet destined for early death). Azaro travels many roads, both symbolic and literal, and Okri eventually presents the notion that Nigeria is also a “spirit-child”: “Dad found that all nations are children; it shocked him that ours too was an abiku nation, a spirit-child nation” (Okri 494). While “road building” began as an exploitative colonial operation, Okri’s utilization of the “road” within the novel introduces a new way to understand the history of road building within Nigeria. If Nigeria represents a national body whose story is constantly being “rewritten” like the life of an “abiku” child, then the “road” acts as the symbolic “paper” that records its history. Furthermore, while roads (especially in Nigeria) might conventionally imply a sense of liminality or lack of “place,” Okri ultimately describes a “road” as a palimpsest of human experience, where meaning is constantly ascribed and erased.
The first sentence of *The Famished Road* acts as a symbolic genealogy of the beginnings of all the roads of the world: “In the beginning there was a river. The river became a road and the road branched out to the whole world. And because the road was once a river it was always hungry” (Okri 3). This opening passage highlights the clear contrast between the “natural” river and unnatural, humanly constructed road. The “road was once a river” and so the road is “always hungry,” suggesting that, because the road was preceded by a natural element, it will be forever cursed by “famishment” or emptiness. While it is easy to assume the ecocritical stance that modernization and the destruction of the natural environment has created a sort of “emptiness” on the spaces of Nigeria, the historical and political climate of Nigeria at the time the novel is set demands for a more complex understanding of the road. The nation of Nigeria was created by British imperialist imagination: “The modern state of Nigeria was a creation of the British” (Oyebade 15). In fact, even the name “Nigeria” is reportedly a completely British creation: “It is said that the London Times invented the name Nigeria from the river which flows through it” (Weaver 147). In accordance with Okri’s explanation of the formation of all roads, Nigeria began as a “river” that then became a series of roads that branched out to the rest of the world to export Nigeria’s natural resources.

In Lawrence Buell’s environmental manifesto, *The Future of Environmental Criticism*, Buell writes that in countries (such as Nigeria) that were created solely for exportation and exploitation, the country’s sense of “place” is often disoriented: “Whereas of ‘early human societies’ it might be said that ‘place and society are fused as a unity,’ with the advent of societies based on economic exchange ‘the conceptual fusion of space and society is broken’” (Buell 64). If we agree with Buell’s assessment, Nigeria can then be described as a “society based on economic exchange,” and thus the natural “fusion” between Nigeria’s society and
“space” was fractured when Britain came and drew up its borders. *The Famished Road* uses the “road” to both illustrate the fracture of space and society and also to introduce a way in which Nigeria can use the road to “ascribe” its own meaning.

At multiple points in the novel, the road is associated with what Okri calls the “interspaces.” These areas demonstrate the broken “fusion of space and society” presented by *The Famished Road*. The word “interspace” indicates that roads are liminal areas that are “between” different worlds. They connect, but are also feared because they seem almost “place-less.” For example, when Azaro is sick and becomes unconscious for an extended period of time, a three-headed spirit guide takes him on an extensive journey down a road in the spirit world. The spirit advises Azaro not to eat because it will cause him to get stuck in the road: “If you eat anything you won’t arrive and you won’t be able to return. You’ll be stuck here in the dreaded interspaces” (Okri 334). This statement both emphasizes the liminality of the interspace, and also indicates that Azaro must be “famished” in order to travel the road. “Famishment” thus becomes a requirement for travel and progress down the road, which illustrates that “strife” or the instinctual “need” for something (like the hunger for food) is necessary for any progress to occur. The spirit guide also explains to Azaro that there are “monsters” that will eat the traveler of roads: “There are many strange things here that devour the traveler. There are many spirit-eaters and monsters of the interspaces. Keep to the solid ground” (Okri 327). Between these two passages highlighting the “interspaces,” “strife” and “solidity” are both introduced as necessary aspects for progress and travel down the road. The use of the word “interspace” in association with the “road” indicates the symbolic link that “roads” may have had with the concepts of “emptiness” or “famishment” during British imperialism. For this reason, the early history of
road building in Nigeria helps enlighten our understanding of Okri’s use of the road within the novel.

British colonization and exploitation of the natural resources of Nigeria was inextricably linked with the creation and development of roads: “The British modernized the transportation system for effective exploitation of Nigeria’s resources. Existing roads were expanded; new ones were built, as well as railway lines” (Oyebade 18). In many areas of Nigeria, roads were constructed entirely for the purposes of exploitation. Whether it was cotton in the Ekiti district or other agricultural products throughout the rest of the country, the British had only one “motivation” for road-building, and that was lucrative: “The primary aim of the British was to exploit the agricultural resources of Southwestern Nigeria for the benefit of Britain and in this early period of colonial rule, the evidence at our disposal shows that the British succeeded” (Olubomehin 399). For Nigeria, the creation of roads signified the exportation of natural resources to the rest of the world. In terms of early Nigerian economic development, roads can be symbolically characterized as the continual emptying and elimination of resources from the country. Thus, roads both create “famishment” as well as symbolize it.

With this new historical understanding of the development of Nigerian “roads,” it is now necessary to understand how this British colonization had an effect on Nigeria’s “spatial” environment. Lawrence Buell explains that due to colonization, the world’s spaces were deprived of their original “significations”: “As geographer David Harvey puts it, ‘the world’s spaces were deterritorialized, stripped of their preceding significations, and then reterritorialized according to the convenience of colonial and imperial administration.’ This process has proliferated the number and forms of displacement” (Buell 64). One could argue that Nigeria’s “spaces” underwent a similar “deterritorialization” when Britain created and colonized Nigeria. For
example, when the borders of Nigeria were being drawn up, the British paid no attention to the
natural tribal territories: “Regional barriers cut across the main tribal areas” (Weaver 149).
According to Buell, a sort of “displacement” occurs when areas are “stripped of their preceding
signification.” If this is true, then on one hand, Okri’s description of the “road” thoroughly
demonstrates this sort of “displacement” of the soul and signification of Nigeria. The road is a
place that embodies the exploitation of Nigerian resources and the consequent “famishment” of
“place-sense” that occurs as a result of this exploitation. It is an “interspace,” or a space that is
constantly being created and reshaped by the travelers that use it. However, on the other hand,
eventually the “road” comes to mean more than the loss of “place,” and instead becomes a new
place where the souls of Nigeria can write their own meanings.

While the road is described as an “interspace,” it is also described as a place that is
constantly being “rewritten” and finally a place where the “conceptual fusion of space and
society” is recreated. When Azaro is unconscious due to his sickness, Azaro and the three-
headed spirit guide observe a large group of people in the process of building a great road. In this
passage, the road becomes a written history and well as a “place” bound and created by the soul
of the “generation” that is creating it. Okri writes:

Each new generation begins with nothing and with everything. They know all the
erlier mistakes… They know the early plans, the original intentions, the earliest
dreams. Each generation has to reconnect the origins for themselves. They tend to
become a little wiser, but don’t go very far. It is possible that they now travel
slower, and will make bigger, better mistakes. That is how they are as a people.
They have an infinity of hope and an eternity of struggles. Nothing can destroy
them except themselves and they will never finish the road that is their soul and
they do not know it. (330)
Here the road is described as a palimpsest of human history. It is constantly under construction and each “new generation begins with nothing and with everything.” In a sense, the road is like a page that is constantly being erased and written over because each new generation already knows the “earlier mistakes,” the “early plans,” “the original intentions,” and the “earliest dreams.” Each new road requires that the generation “reconnect” to their own origins, indicating that each generation has a duty to find their own purpose for being. Each generation also makes “bigger, better mistakes,” suggesting that populations are growing and making mistakes that have more global implications, such as the modern international significance of Nigeria (its abundance of oil, for example.) The spirit-guide also says that the road will never be finished, as if it is in the constant process of redevelopment and transformation. The road as an everlasting and “indestructible” soul indicates that the road is more than simply a “liminal” space, but a place where meaning and history can be “ascribed.” This passage also directly links the idea of “road” and “soul,” as if they are one and the same. Through this linkage, Okri demonstrates that roads serve an even greater purpose than just connection or division.

The idea of the road as a “palimpsest” correlates with Buell’s definition of a particular type of “place-sense”: “Place-sense is a kind of palimpsest of serial place-experiences” (Buell 73). Buell’s definition adds another dimension to the image of the “generation” of road-builders that Okri paints. The road is now more than an “interspace,” but becomes a “place” that inscribes multiple “senses of place,” and constantly necessitates a sort of re-inscription of “place.” Also, during Azaro and the three-headed spirit guide’s journey, the road transforms into a bunch of “matted weeds” and finally into a river that appears to be a mirror. When they reach the “matted weeds,” Azaro’s feet begin to bleed, and his blood becomes a way that Azaro records his own history onto the road: “We travelled on. I dragged behind, my stomach flaming, my soles
wounded, and my blood no longer red but blue, like ink, inscribing my barely decipherable history on the matted weeds” (Okri 335). This section directly demonstrates the way in which the road acts as a palimpsest because Azaro’s blood literally becomes “ink” in which he “inscribes” his history. While it may be a coincidence, the fact that his “soles” are bleeding onto the road reiterates, albeit verbally, that the road is literally the record of the “souls” of each generation of people. If “history” is literally being recorded on the road, the road becomes a “palimpsest” where all meaning is “ascribed,” if only transitively.

The notion that the road is a record of the “souls” of a generation is repeated throughout the novel. When Azaro asks the spirit-guide why it is that these people will die when they finish building the road, the spirit guide responds, “I suppose they will have nothing to do, nothing to dream for, and no need for a future. They will perish of completeness, of boredom. The road is their soul, the soul of their history” (Okri 329). This passage reiterates the fact that “famishment” and “strife” are necessary for life to continue and progress to occur. If each generation ever becomes “full” or succeeds at “completing” the road, they will literally have nothing to live for. Also, it indicates that people always need a “dream” and a “purpose” and that the road (which is the creation of the “souls” of each generation’s “history”) provides a means for this purpose. The road may seem like a place (or “interspace”) where no meaning is “ascribed,” but it is actually a transitive place where meaning is constantly “ascribed” and erased over and over again.

Once again, another aspect of Buell’s definition of “place” parallels the notion that the road is a “place” with transitional and transitive meaning: “Place itself changes. It ‘is not entititative—as a foundation has to be—but eventmental, something in process” (Buell 73). Like Buell’s concept of “place,” Okri’s vision of the “road” is essentially “eventmental.” It is a constant process of destruction and creation. In this sense, while the road is partially a “non-
place,” it is also a place that is constantly fluctuating and where meaning is constantly being rewritten. This makes the road complex but important for understanding the implications of “road-building” to Nigeria’s growth as a nation within The Famished Road. In Elleke Boehmer’s article “Transfiguring: Colonial Body into Postcolonial Narrative,” he describes the understanding of the “nation” in a similar way that Buell describes the concept of “place,” or that Okri describes the “road”: “The nation is… the product, constantly in flux, of a history of risks and chances and sudden reversals, rather than the result of a smooth flow from a determinate origin to a predetermined and preferably glorious future” (Boehmer 274). Like the “road” described in The Famished Road, the nation of Nigeria is always “in flux,” always being “reversed” and rewritten by the mistakes of previous generations. The road is not a “smooth flow” from one point to the next, but a bloody, imperfect, and “eventmental” place.

With this new understanding of the “road” as a place where meaning is repeatedly “ascribed” and erased, it is now necessary to understand how this meaning of the “road” becomes an important aspect of the contemporary understanding of Nigeria’s identity as a “nation.” When we look at Nigeria’s political and economic climate at the time that The Famished Road was written (the late 1980’s), oil had already become the most sought-after resource in Nigeria due to Nigeria’s decision to join OPEC in 1971. This new major export created a new significance of Nigeria on the global scale. However, like the earlier exploitation of Nigeria’s resources by the British, the exportation of oil created new problems: “Nicos Poulantzas (1978) said the national or modern unity requires a historicity of a territory and a territorialization of history. Oil capitalism and its attendant governmentality in Nigeria has achieved neither of these requirements…Oil and identity—people and things—have produced an increasingly unimaginable community” (Watts 212). Watts argues that “modern unity” requires a
“historicity of a territory.” In other words, Nigeria’s sense of unity must have some sort of authentic connection to its “territory.” Nigerians did not get the chance to “author” or “authenticate” their own country, or create their own “significations” before Nigeria emerged as an international supplier of oil.

This argument echoes Buell’s statement that when a national “space” is colonized it is “deterritorialized” and “stripped” of its preceding significations, or “authenticity”. For Nigeria, capitalism (a system that demands competition and individuality) and oil interest did not help to create this sense of “authenticity” and made creating a “community” even more unimaginable. In 1975, The Nigerian writer Ola Oni explained the effect of oil and capitalism on Nigeria’s economy: “The brutal distortions in our economic life began with the emergence of capitalism in the world. We in Nigeria as well as peoples of the Third World have always been the 'hewers of wood and drawers of water' for the world system, the wretched producers of the world” (Oni 88). According to Oni, both the image of Nigerian people as well as the “economic life” of Nigeria was “brutally distorted” by the “emergence of capitalism.” If this is the case, then the people of Nigeria consequently held a negative understanding of their own image as well as a negative outlook toward their place in the world. Their own ability to “authenticate” their own image and their own sense of “place” or community were both lost when their economic situation changed. However, if we look to Okri’s understanding of Nigeria as an “abiku” nation, we can see that this “abiku nation” is not limited by its history of exploitation or colonization.

At the end of the novel, Okri “opens” up our understanding of the road through the voice of Azaro’s father, who describes a vision that he sees while he is asleep: “Our ancestors taught me many philosophies. My father, Priest of Roads, appeared to me and said I should keep my door open. My heart must be open. My life must be open. Our road must be open. A road that is
open is never hungry” (Okri 497). Like the palimpsest, the road must be an “open” page, constantly ready to be rewritten and reshaped. If the road embodies the “souls” of “generations,” then each generation’s heart and life must also be open to change as well. While Nigeria began as an invention of British imperialists for the purpose of exploitation, the “road” becomes a territory where “national” place-sense can be authenticated and rewritten. The idea of creating an authentic identity is also reflected by Azaro’s father’s words: “the child of our will refuses to stay till we have made propitious sacrifice and displayed our serious intent to bear the weight of a unique destiny” (Okri 494). The words “serious intent” imply self-authorization despite the “propitious sacrifices” that Nigerians may have to make.

Okri’s use of the road resists the definition of roads as solely a means for exploitation by British imperialists. Instead, the road becomes both a symbolic “place” on which Nigeria’s history can be written and embodied, and also a reflection of Nigeria’s “abiku-like” soul with its palimpsestic nature. The contemporary effect of the “road” within the text is that it creates a “place” designated for comprehending Nigeria’s cyclical (and “abiku”-like) political and economic climate. At the very beginning of the novel, the “king” of the spirit world (or God, perhaps) says to Azaro, “you have to travel many roads before you find the river of your destiny” (Okri 6). Roads are a necessary entity, no matter how long or difficult to travel they might be. In a sense, Nigeria has been reborn, and will perhaps continue to be reborn many times over before it can find its “destiny.” While Nigeria began by being named after a river by the London Times, the spirit king implies that it now must find its own way to understand, or “authenticate” its own national identity, or the “river” of its “destiny.” However, the scope of the novel expands to more than just the country of Nigeria. The novel states that “all human beings travel the same road” (Okri 70), which indicates that this book is more than an allegory for the Nigerian situation, but
it is also a story for all of humanity in this rapidly transitioning world. We must all be “hungry” for change, ready to create our own “authentic” identity, and the only way in which change will occur will be up to our own “openness” as a community of people.

Works Cited


