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Achebe's Evil Forest: Space, Violence, and Order in *Things Fall Apart*

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This essay argues for reading Chinua Achebe's Things Fall Apart *as an intervention in the political philosophical discourse on the structural relation that links violence and order. This argument is built on the evil forest as the means through which violence is instrumentalized and brought under a system of value and order in* Things Fall Apart. *In the figure of the Evil Forest as the center of a legal and narrative economy built on the management of violence, Achebe introduces an African paradigm of law and order that rivals Hobbes's state of nature, challenges Hegel's notion of African unreason, and, thus, serves as the grounds on which the order inherent to the African world can be made visible.*

Keywords: Chinua Achebe, law, African novel, empire, clan, evil forest, violence, order, political philosophy

The "Evil Forest"[1] in Chinua Achebe's *Things Fall Apart* is a physical geographic space reserved for threatening and abominable objects and bodies. Although the Evil Forest[2] is not the only "zone of prohibition"[3] in the novel, it is the only one completely closed off to any form of collective life. Its two essential features are, as the narrator specifies, its status as "dumping ground" and the fact of its being "alive with sinister forces and powers of darkness."[4] As a space associated primarily with death and violence, the Evil Forest stands out in the topography of Achebe's novel as a spatial void. Yet, in spite of this singularity, the Evil Forest organizes the texts in interesting

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1 Chinua Achebe, *The African Trilogy* (New York: Penguin, 2017), 113.

2 There are other occurrences of the forest as a paradigm of narrative space in the African literary canon. Wole Soyinka builds his theory of Yoruba tragic aesthetics on a similar spatial concept, which in "The Fourth Stage" he calls "an area of terror." There are also the magical "grove" in *The Ozidi Saga* (1991), the tikoloshe-infested forest in Thomas Mofolo's *Chaka* (1925), the "savage and frightening . . . forest" in Mongo Beti's *Poor Christ of Bomba* (1956), the "endless forest" in Amos Tutuola's *The Palm-Wine Drinkard* (1952), the savage expanse of J. M. Coetzee's "The Narrative of Jacobus Coetzee" (1974) the "forest of Shadows" in Ben Okri's *The Famished Road* (1991), the "aquatic forest" in Nnedi Okorafor's first-contact sci-fi novel *Lagoon* (2014), and the animal-infested Johannesburg of Lauren Beukes' *Zoo City* (2010).

3 Simon Gikandi, *Reading Chinua Achebe* (Oxford: James Currey, 1991), 48.

4 Gikandi, *Reading Chinua Achebe*.

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ways. For one thing, it is an elusive thread that ties all the main characters in the novel together. The deity who takes the Evil Forest as her primary domain is called The Goddess of the Earth and guarantees the complex of laws having to do with life and death. In the confrontation with the colonial order, the Evil Forest is designated as "the real battlefield."[5] The objective of this essay is to bring this space into focus by examining it as a complex political and literary paradigm through which the fictional world of the novel derives its form and order.

Scholars of Achebe's work have typically approached the Evil Forest as a cultural curiosity. In *Reading Chinua Achebe*, Simon Gikandi lumps the Evil Forest with other "zones of prohibition and exclusion" through which the clan[6] "deals with the unknown and the unseen."[7] The Evil Forest is thus constituted as a mythic element through which the clan sublimates what it cannot fully assume. Sofia Samatar's attempt to frame the Evil Forest within a "pycho-spiritual"[8] framework yields interesting analysis. But she treats the Evil Forest as one among other cultural elements that reflects the clan's "moral universe."[9] Even Harry Olufunwa who begins with the argument that the Evil Forest is linked to spatial order concludes with the notion that it represents a belief system. At first, he defines the Evil Forest as a principle of "chaos"[10] internal to the clan's "temporal and spatial framework."[11] But the moment he sets up the Evil Forest in relation to colonial discourse, the Evil Forest goes from being an instrument of the political to a symbol of a belief system threatened by Christianity. What all these commentaries have in common is that they take the Evil Forest simply as a cultural and anthropological fact of Achebe's fictional world instead of approaching it as a problem of political order and narrative form. The formal and aesthetic uses of this spatial formation cannot be understood as long as it is articulated in cultural and anthropological terms.

The present study moves away from the notion of the Evil Forest as an aspect of a belief system or the mythical remnant of historical process in order to examine it as an organizing principle structuring the spatial configuration of the clan and the novel's narrative logic. If the Evil Forest organizes the clan as a place where order is visible, it can, therefore, not be as Gikandi imagines it, the clan's means of "deal[ing] with the unknown and the unseen."[12] It is instead how the clan deals with making what is known visible. In what follows, the Evil Forest is shown to mark the clan's moment

5 Gikandi, *Reading Chinua Achebe*.

6 *Things Fall Apart* is set in a region consisting in a network of clans. When I use the word *clan* in phrases such as "clan power," "clan world," "clan order," "clan law," and so on, I am referring to Umuofia because it is the primary setting of the novel, but I am also, more generally, referring to the clan as an abstract idea of a political community. The same goes for "Evil Forest." Although each clan presumably has its own Evil Forest, I use the term to refer to the abstract concept of the space in the novel's political imaginary.

7 Gikandi, *Reading Chinua Achebe*, 48.

8 Sofia Samatar, "Charting the Constellation: Past and Present in Things Fall Apart," *Research in African Literatures* 42.2 (Summer 2011): 62.

9 Samatar, "Charting the Constellation: Past and Present in Things Fall Apart," 65.

10 Harry Olufunwa, "Achebe's Spatial Temporalities: Literary Chronotopes in "Things Fall Apart" and "Arrow of God," *Critical Survey*, 17.3 (2005), 49–65.

11 Olufunwa, "Achebe's Spatial Temporatities" and "Arrow of God."

12 Gikandi, *Reading Chinua Achebe*, 48.

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of arising, "determine juridical and territorial ordering,"[13] transform violence into a power-making principle, ascribe political value to life and objects, and provide the context for the constitution of the colonial order. Ultimately, the objective of this study is to reimagine the Evil Forest as a key element in the logical structure of clan power.

The Priestess's Binary

The term "Evil Forest"[14] appears twenty-five times in the novel, twenty-eight if we add the Igbo term "Ajofia"[15] and thirty if we include those times it is referred to simply as "bush."[16] But it is not until the second part of the novel, after the advent of colonial power, that it is given a clear definition.

> An Evil Forest was where the clan buried all those who died of the really evil diseases, like leprosy and smallpox. It was also the dumping ground for highly potent fetishes of great medicine men when they died. An Evil Forest was, therefore, alive with sinister forces and powers of darkness. It was such a forest that, the rulers of Mbanta gave to the missionaries. They did not really want them near to the clan, and so they made them that offer which nobody in his right senses would accept.[17]

"Potent fetish of great medicine men" bristling with residual daemonic powers are exiled there. Bodies infected with the highly contagious, disfiguring, and deadly variola virus capable of wiping out an entire population are discarded there. Twin newborns are abandoned in the forest. Corpses of infants considered to be Ogbanje, of adults thought to have died abominably, of suicides, and of ritual outcasts are thrown into the Evil Forest.[18]

One way to identify what is unique to the Evil Forest is to distinguish it from other spaces in the novel that are closed off to profane use. Take for example the "sacred cave,"[19] a remote part of Umuofia's landscape set apart as the "house"[20] of the "Oracle of the Hills and the Caves."[21] As the abode of Agbala, a divine figure of power, the cave is structured as a shrine. Only the priestess who is consecrated to the god is permitted in the cave and, as is common with shrines and sacred groves dedicated to a god, there is a ritual for approaching the cave.[22] In that beautifully dramatic scene, Chielo the Priestess of Agbala has to walk the length of the entire clan all the way to

13 Giorgio Agamben, *Homo Sacer: Sovereign Power and Bare Life* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1998), 19.
14 The study of the Evil Forest in this paper is limited to *Things Fall Apart*, even though the spatial formation appears in *The Arrow of God*. This is, in part, due to the monumentality of *Things Fall Apart* in the African novel canon and in Achebe's oeuvre.
15 Achebe, *The African Trilogy*, 144.
16 Achebe, *The African Trilogy*, 112.
17 Achebe, *The African Trilogy*, 113.
18 Remigius Nwabueze, "Dead Bodies in Nigerian Jurisprudence," *Journal of African Law* 51.1 (2007): 141.
19 Nwabueze, "Dead Bodies in Nigerian Jurisprudence," 79.
20 Nwabueze, "Dead Bodies in Nigerian Jurisprudence," 77.
21 Nwabueze, "Dead Bodies in Nigerian Jurisprudence," 44.
22 Elizabeth Colson, "Places of Power and Shrines of the Land," *Paideuma: Mitteilungen zur Kulturkunde* 43 (1997): 51.

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the farthest village before she makes her way back to the caves. Agbala's cave is clearly an extramundane space, but it is one that is continuous with the sites of everyday life. The idea of a cave that is also an abode for a deity belongs to the registers of the domestic. The fact that Chielo is able to carry Ezinma from her mother's hut to the cave and back to her mother's hut tells us that there is some kind of continuity between both spaces in spite of their apparent difference. What Ekwefi feels as she waits outside the caves is awe and veneration tinged with fear not the hair-raising horror and disgust that Nwoye feels when he finds himself under the shadows of the Evil Forest. Unlike sacred groves and shrines, the Evil Forest is not committed to the residence of a particular deity, neither is it under the care of any priest. The discourse of care[23] that underlies other zones of prohibition does not apply to the Evil Forest because it is primarily a "dumping ground,"[24] a landfill of sorts where disposable things and bodies are deposited to "rot away above the earth."[25] Thus, in contrast to ancestral groves and shrines, which are constituted as dwellings, the Evil Forest is a zone of radical exposure and abandonment. Obierika recalls his twins who he says are "thrown away,"[26] disposed of like trash, abandoned to nature, and completely exposed to the dangers of the forest. Unoka is carried out of his "house" and denied a grave so that he can "rot above the earth." If the clan is the place where human, animal, and divine life is protected in huts and caves and groves and where even at death the body continues to be protected in the "bowels"[27] of the Earth Goddess, the Evil Forest is this radically exterior world where forms of life and things that have been extracted from all economies of value are exposed to pure violence.

The only deity associated with the Evil Forest is Ani, the Goddess of the Earth. As the Mbanta Elders remind us, the Earth Goddess is the one who brings judgment on those who, like the missionaries, violate the boundaries of the Evil Forest. Ani, the narrator remarks, "played a greater part in the life of the people than any other deity."[28] She is the "source of all fertility,"[29] "the judge of morality and conduct,"[30] but she is also the deity capable of "wiping out whole families"[31] and "ruin[ing] a whole clan."[32] She is simultaneously the reproductive principle and the figure of mass destruction. In addition, she guarantees the distinction between legitimate and illegitimate violence. The legitimacy of Unoka's banishment to the Evil Forest and eventual death derives from the fact that his swollen body is "an abomination to the earth goddess,"[33] whereas Okonkwo's killing of Ezeudu's son is considered illegitimate because it is "a crime against the Earth goddess."[34] The capacity to guarantee the

23 See Colson, "Places of Power and Shrines of the Land." The little house bordering the ancestral grove is "scrubbed" and decorated with "many-coloured patterns and drawings."
24 Achebe, *The African Trilogy*, 113.
25 Achebe, *The African Trilogy*, 16.
26 Achebe, *The African Trilogy*, 95.
27 Achebe, *The African Trilogy*, 16.
28 Achebe, *The African Trilogy*, 30.
29 Achebe, *The African Trilogy*.
30 Achebe, *The African Trilogy*.
31 Achebe, *The African Trilogy*, 52.
32 Achebe, *The African Trilogy*, 25.
33 Achebe, *The African Trilogy*, 16.
34 Achebe, *The African Trilogy*, 94.

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distinction between sanctioned and nonsanctioned violence places the Earth Goddess at the heart of the clan's juridical order, which leads us to conclude that the reason she presides over the Evil Forest is because the Evil Forest is what stands outside the law. The Evil Forest is the location outside of the law where bodies and objects are exposed to pure violence, but without which the status of the clan as the site where life, body, and things exist under the protection of the law cannot take form.

It is important to clarify the nature of the opposition between the Evil Forest and the clan so that we don't fall into the error of seeing it as the clan's dialectical other. This aspect of the Evil Forest is best illustrated by specifying what distinguishes the Evil Forest from a wild, naturally occurring forest. In her indicting address to Unoka, Priestess Chika makes a distinction between "virgin forest" and "exhausted farms."[35] Virgin forest is reminiscent of John Locke's common.[36] It is the idea of nature as something available for appropriation and transformation into property. The Evil Forest is virgin forest in the sense that it is "untouched by the axe and the bush-fire."[37] Nwoye describes it as "thick forest."[38] Yet it is excluded from the agrarian apparatus that transforms "virgin forest" into "exhausted farms." We can, thus, think of the forest as a third space outside of the priestess's topographical opposition of virgin forest and exhausted farm. Instead of dialectically taking the two orders of space to a higher form,[39] however, the Evil Forest is what breaks down the binary division by virtue of its being simultaneously virgin forest —"untouched by the axe bush-fire"—and wasteland, into which is "trashed all manner of social, medicinal, and ritual spent material."[40] By blurring the distinction between uncultivated forest and exhausted farms, the Evil Forest stands in opposition to but also serves as presupposition of the Priestess's binary logic of space.

To imagine the Evil Forest as uncultivated nature that precedes the civilizing process is to miss the extent of its singularity and, thus, its logical function. Ikem Okoye undercuts that line of thought when he alludes, in his brilliant study on space in Igbo land, to an interesting contradiction:

> Ajofia [the Evil Forest] is easily recognized as a thick, seemingly primeval, forested area that nevertheless exists within the lived spaces of the town, and for this reason appears somewhat incongruous . . . What distinguishes the ajo ofia from the sacred forest and other naturally occurring forests that may be put to use, is of course the fact that the former is actually located within the boundaries of an already "mapped" settlement. Ajo ofia, paradoxically perhaps, seems to belong to the "civilized," inhabited, world, quite in contrast to the wild forest more generally.[41]

Just as the Evil Forest collapses the distinction between virgin forest and exhausted farms it breaks down the distinction between "primeval" and "civilized." As a place

35 Achebe, *The African Trilogy*.
36 John Locke, *Two Treatises on Government* (New York: Mentor, 1960), 328–29.
37 Locke, *Two Treatises on Government*, 46.
38 Locke, *Two Treatises on Government*, 48.
39 Giorgio Agamben, *Signature of All Things* (New York: Zone, 2009), 20.
40 Ikem Stanley Okoye, "History, Aesthetics, and the Political in Igbo Spatial Heterotopias," *Paideuma: Mitteilungen zur Kulturkunde* 43 (1997): 82.
41 Okoye, "History, Aesthetics, and the Political in Igbo Spatial Heterotopias," 82.

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populated by dead bodies and discarded things, the Evil Forest is unlived, yet it is located within the borders of the clan "in the lived spaces of the town." We can therefore conclude that the Evil Forest is a kind of opposition or disruptive principle that takes the form of collapsing the categories that shape life in the clan. But by setting itself outside the clan as what cannot be categorized it renders the order within the clan visible. The Evil Forest, thus, brings some level of spatial order to Achebe's fictional world in the sense that it serves as the basis on which we can see what is common to other spaces that may have appeared distinct. Agbala's cave, the household, the virgin forest, the farmland, the bush,[42] and so on—with the exception of the Evil Forest—can be constituted as a part of the diversity of spaces where collective life exists. The Evil Forest is the only space to which such a part to whole relationship with the clan does not apply. This fact is made all the more problematic given that, as Okoye notes, the Evil Forest is located inside the boundaries of the clan. How is it that even though the Evil Forest is located within the clan it cannot be reduced to one of its parts? Why is the Evil Forest, a place "alive with sinister forces and powers of darkness,"[43] located inside the clan? Why does the clan harbor something that is so hostile to its existence? The answer lies in the role of the forest in the clan's origin, to which the narrator alludes in the novel's fascinating opening.

The Spirit of the Wild

In the opening scene, eighteen-year-old Okonkwo is locked in a deathly grip with Amalinze the Cat. It is Okonkwo's first time in the wrestling ring, but Amalinze has been an undefeated champion for seven years. Amalinze's prowess is attributed to a somewhat mythical athletic quality that the narrator seems only to be able to explain in the terms of the animal. "He was called the Cat because his back would never touch the earth," the narrator remarks.[44] Amalinze's wily feline ways are contrasted with Okonkwo's elusiveness—"slippery as a fish."[45] "In the end," concludes the narrator, "Okonkwo [the Fish] threw the Cat."[46] By establishing an affinity between his characters and beasts, Achebe takes us into the world of the fable. In the bodies of men imagined as animals, Achebe adds on a layer of the fabulous to an ostensibly realist canvas. But this intrusion of the fabulous also invites us to look beyond the immediate setting of the story. It shifts the scene of narrative from the market square where the fight is taking place to the forest enclave of the beast. In so doing, the scene of combat between a cat and a fish suspends Achebe's realist and novelistic discourse, even though momentarily, and clears the space for another story to be told—an etiological narrative about the clan's origin. Okonkwo and Amalinze's fight, it turns out, is a repetition of a primordial scene of combat. "It was this man," the narrator remarks, "that Okonkwo threw in a fight which the old men agreed was one of the fiercest since the founder of their town engaged a spirit of the wild for seven days and seven

42 With a few exceptions, the word *bush* generally refers in the text to domesticated forms of forestlike terrain. It is usually a space where everyday activities like wood fetching, rodent hunting, and walking take place.
43 Achebe, *The African Trilogy*, 113.
44 Achebe, *The African Trilogy*, 5.
45 Achebe, *The African Trilogy*.
46 Achebe, *The African Trilogy*.

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nights."[47] Presumably, it is after the triumph over this spirit of the forest that the "founder of the town" becomes the "first father" and produces the nine sons who settle in the nine villages that make up the clan called Umuofia.[48] When these nine sons reappear within the clan in the form of masked ancestral spirits, the oldest and most powerful is called Evil Forest and later in the novel Ajofia. "Ajofia," the narrator remarks, "was the leading egwugwu of Umuofia. He was the head and spokesman of the nine ancestors who administered justice in the clan."[49] How is it that the Evil Forest—a "dumping ground" rife with "sinister forces and powers of darkness"—is personified in a founding ancestral figure who represents "justice in the clan"? What is the nature of this relation that links "sinister forces and powers of darkness" with "justice"?

In reenacting the clan's origin story, Okonkwo and Amalinze evoke the foundational act of violence—defeating the spirit of the wild—by virtue of which the clan is constituted as a zone of collective life. In defeating "the spirit of the wild," the founding father does not put an end to "the wild" and the violence it signifies. Instead, he brings it under his control. He transforms the formless violence of "the wild" into the instrumentalized violence of the law constituting the household. But the violence of "the wild" outlives the origin of the clan. Some version of it remains after the constitution of the community and becomes emblematized in the Evil Forest. Just as the violence of the wild serves as context for the founding father's constitution of the first household, the transference of that violence into the Evil Forest continues to ground the order visible in clan life. In other words, the Evil Forest is the form in which the "spirit of the wild," "the wild," and the violence they signify continue to provide the situation from which clan order derives validity. Therefore, it makes perfect sense for the leading Egwugwu who administered justices in the land to be called the Evil Forest. In embodying the Evil Forest, he embodies the total suspension of the law, which means that he embodies the context in relation to which the law of the land draws its validity. He presides over the clan's juridical order precisely because he embodies its total suspension.

The paradox to which Okoye alludes when he speaks of "ajofia as the heterotopic space of uncivility without which the civility of habitation cannot be imagined"[50] becomes particularly illuminating. Okoye is suggesting that the Evil Forest is a kind of disorderly context that paradoxically constitutes the order of clan world. In *Homo Sacer*, Agamben, who has written extensively on sovereign power and its paradoxical structure, comments on Hobbes in a way that throws an interesting light on how the forest stands in relation to the clan. Agamben explains that if sovereign power inheres in the distinction between law and violence, the natural condition of man is the virtual collapse of this distinction, thereby producing the situation that justifies sovereign power.[51] This derives, in part, from the fact that the state of nature is the form in which the political community—be it the city or the state—is posited

47 Achebe, *The African Trilogy*.
48 Achebe, *The African Trilogy*, 68.
49 Achebe, *The African Trilogy*, 144.
50 Ikem Stanley Okoye, "Fieldwork and the Text Preceding the (Question) Mark: Prolegomena for a Response to Mudimbe's 'African Art as a Question Mark,' " *RES: Anthropology and Aesthetics* 39 (Spring 2001): 51–52.
51 Agamben, *Homo Sacer*, 27.

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"as if it were dissolved."[52] Sovereign power, therefore, paradoxically derives its validity from positing its total suspension. Although clan power and sovereign power are not the same things, this line of thinking confirms Okoye's definition of the Evil Forest as an "anti-society."[53] As a spatial embodiment of the violence of "the wild" roaming with spirits, the Evil Forest, thus, is a literal manifestation of the clan's ruin and, as such, what justifies the legal but also social and cultural institutions put in place to give the clan order. Clan order draws validity from this space, which, in signifying its total dissolution, justifies the order imposed by the clan and grounds political decisions. This explains why the Mbanta elders see the Evil Forest as the "real battlefield" and why what is at stake in their face-off with the Christian mission is a "victory over death."[54] The clan guarantees its existence by asserting victory over this space that signifies its utter ruin and death. By building a church in the Evil Forest where rescued twin newborn are housed and cared for, the mission transforms the Evil Forest, as Gikandi points out, into a "home."[55] This act runs counter to the forest's structural logic, which requires that it retain its irreducible singularity as the place where life cannot exist. The re-signification of the Evil Forest as the site of a new community neutralizes its power and signals the clan's eventual fall.

In the Hobbesian formulation, however, it is easy to conclude in error that the natural condition of man disappears with the constitution of the commonwealth. That is why in an attempt to update Hobbes's political mythologeme, Agamben points out that the state of nature is not a chronological datum. It is not a moment in the life of the city that can be consigned to the past. It is contemporary with the city and internal to the structure of order. "The state of nature," Agamben explains, "did not necessarily have to be conceived as a real epoch, but rather could be understood as a principle internal to the state."[56] What Agamben is at pains to point out here—that the state of nature has been erroneously understood as a prepolitical function, which ceases to operate with the institution of sovereignty—is made explicit in the physical presence of the Evil Forest within the clan. Achebe's Evil forest, thus, predates and clarifies Agamben's revision of Hobbes. Agamben's insistence that the natural condition of man survives the establishment of the commonwealth and continues to inhere within it is plainly demonstrated in the Evil Forest as a physical space contemporaneous with the clan. In the world of the clan, the condition of violence that grounds the founding father's separation of the violence of the forest and the law of the household continues to be in force, not in a subjective figure of power as we find in Hobbes's Leviathan, but in the spatial proximity of the Evil Forest.

There is no doubt that the Evil Forest is what lies at the heart of the order Achebe is eager to ascribe to clan life. But it is also what lies at the heart of the novel's narrative structure. The Evil Forest can be used as a principle of characterization in the sense that it can serve as the context on which incidents in the lives of characters can be made intelligible. One way to observe the forest at work in this regard is to consider

52 Agamben, *Homo Sacer*.
53 Okoye, "History, Aesthetics, and the Political in Igbo Spatial Heterotopias," 82.
54 Achebe, *The African Trilogy*, 113.
55 Gikandi, *Reading Chinua Achebe*, 49.
56 Agamben, *Homo Sacer*, 27.

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the forms of life that are brought under its realm and the violence by means of which their exclusion is carried out. In what follows, a series of iconic acts of violence in the novel—Unoka's horrifying death, the murder of Udo's wife, the sacrificial killing of Ikemefuna, and Okonkwo's suicide—is analyzed in order to show how each act of violence and the lives of those involved becomes meaningful only when they are linked with the Evil Forest.

Forest Life: Unoka

Of all the principal characters, Unoka is the one most directly tied to the forest. He is carried out of his house, presumably by strangers, and left to die, sick and alone, in the forest. This is the narrator's brief account of the incident.

> Unoka was an ill-fated man. He had a bad chi or personal god, and evil fortune followed him to the grave, or rather to his death, for he had no grave. He died of the swelling, which was an abomination to the earth goddess. When a man was afflicted with swelling in the stomach and the limbs he was not allowed to die in the house. He was carried to the Evil Forest and left there to die . . . The sickness was an abomination to the earth, and so the victim could not be buried in her bowels. He died and rotted away above the earth, and was not given the first or the second burial. Such was Unoka's fate. When they carried him away, he took with him his flute.[57]

In spite of the straightforwardness of the account, one key element is missing. Why does Unoka's misfortune take the form of banishment to the Evil Forest? The narrator is clearly eager to set up fate as the context for the misfortune that befalls Unoka, which is why he repeats it twice, first at the opening of the paragraph and then again at the end. Fate, however, does not justify Unoka's horrifying banishment and death and does not explain the role of the forest. All it reveals is that Unoka's banishment to the forest is decided by some kind of impersonal force. Fate suggests that what links Unoka to the forest is systemic. Our task is to decipher the nature of this systemic logic that predetermines Unoka's exclusion to the Evil Forest.

What we know about Unoka boils down to five things: He is "tall," "very thin," "slouching," "haggard," and "mournful."[58] He is lazy. He "can't stand the sight of blood."[59] He loves to play the flute far too much to the extent of failing to wield his "machete and [his] hoe" to produce yams.[60] Lastly, "he owed every neighbor some money," which he wasted on alcohol and merrymaking.[61] These habits and attributes could be read as a set of character flaws. But these flaws take on a different significance when they are observed in light of the two temporal orders at work in Achebe's fictional world. One order is the time of productive labor, the highest form of which is the production of yam. As the narrator puts it, yam is "the king of crops."[62] The other temporal order is the time of leisure and rest. Its primary figure is the musician

57 Achebe Chinua. "Things Fall Apart," *The African Trilogy* (New York: Penguin, 2017), 16.
58 Achebe, *Things Fall Apart*, 6.
59 Achebe, *Things Fall Apart*, 7.
60 Achebe, *Things Fall Apart*, 16.
61 Achebe, *Things Fall Apart*, 6.
62 Achebe, *Things Fall Apart*, 27.

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working up the crowd to a dancing fest under the moonlit sky. The agrarian life cycle of the clan revolves around the dialectical relationship between the two ord ers. In his essay on Amos Tutuola's *The Palm-Wine Drinkard*, Achebe comments on this dialectical relationship between work and play and its structuring effect. He describes:

> [a] moral universe in which work and play in their numerous variations complement each other. The good life . . . is that in which business and pleasure, striving and repose, giving and receiving, suffering and enjoyment, punishment and reprieve, poverty and wealth, have their place, their time and their measure. We give work and struggle; and in the end we take rest and fulfillment.[63]

Unoka, ever since his days as a wandering and kite-chasing boy, has always inhabited that threshold where the distinction between the two orders of life collapses. He interrupts the dialectic between labor and leisure that grounds the economy of value in the clan. Labor for Unoka revolves around singing, dancing, and playing his flute. Although these activities can be considered as labor in some sense, from the point of view of the clan these activities exist in the domain of pleasure and, thus, depend for their value on their being tethered to an economy of agricultural labor. Without the context of productivity—read as yam production—these activities are utterly meaningless.

There is, thus, one sovereign order of labor,[64] and this is the labor of producing of yam, which the narrator aptly describes as a "very exacting king."[65] Okonkwo is the quintessential figure of this form of labor. He "worked daily on his farms from cock-crow until the chickens went to roost" and "was a very strong man and rarely felt fatigue."[66] The dominance of yam production derives from the fact that it doesn't just sustain the biological life of the community, but also functions as currency for the distribution of wealth, class, and gender divisions.[67] Flute playing, dancing, drumming, and merrymaking are not necessarily in opposition to this sovereign labor of yam production because they mark the time of leisure and rest from the exacting labor of producing yams. So long as they are tethered to the production of yam, these other

63 Chinua Achebe, "Work and Play in the Palm-Wine Drinkard," *Hope and Impediments* (New York: Doubleday, 1990), 103.

64 "From an agricultural point of view, the yam is a very extravagant vegetable to grow. Each tuber requires a full square yard of land, which, in itself, is a big demand. For seven or eight months, regular attention must be given to its care, absorbing much time and labour. If wages had to be paid, it is doubtful whether a yam farm would pay its way, let alone yield profit." George Thomas Basden, *Niger Ibos: A Description of the Primitive Life, Customs and Animistic Beliefs of the Ibo People of Nigeria by One Who, for Thirty-five Years, Enjoyed the Privilege of their Intimate Confidence and Friendship* (New York: Barnes & Noble, 1966), 389–90. See also: "Yam, the king of crops, was a very exacting king. For three or four moons it demanded hard work and constant attention from cockcrow till the chickens went back to roost. The young tendrils were protected from earth-heat with rings of sisal leaves. As the rains became heavier the women planted maize, melons and beans between the yam mounds. The yams were then staked, first with little sticks and later with tall and big tree branches. The women weeded the farm three times at definite periods in the life of the yams, neither early nor late." Achebe, *Things Fall Apart*, 27.

65 Achebe, *Things Fall Apart*, 27.

66 Achebe, *Things Fall Apart*, 13.

67 Chima Korieh, "Yam Is King! But Cassava Is the Mother of All Crops: Farming, Culture, and Identity in Igbo Agrarian Economy," *Dialectical Anthropology* 31.1/3 (2007): 223–24.

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activities are part of the clan's economy of value. The true opposition to the production of yams and, thus, what threatens it, is something to which Achebe alludes in his Tutuola essay when he asks: "What happens when a man immerses himself in pleasure to the exclusion of all work; when he raises pleasure to the status of work and occupation and says in effect: 'Pleasure be thou my work!?' "[68] Achebe's term for this strange order of labor is "socially useless work."[69] Socially useless work is work that has no form. It exists outside an established economy of value. It is a "gross perversion"[70] because it "knows no limit or boundary" and "allows play not just to transgress but wholly and totally to overrun the territory of work."[71] Unoka's attempt to "raise [flute playing] to the status of work and occupation" is a direct affront to a political, topographical, and financial economy built on the sovereignty of yam production. But what is also true is that by collapsing the distinction between work and pleasure, yam and music, farming and flute playing, the hoe and the flute, Unoka also creates the disruptive context that justifies these distinctions in the first place. In other words, what places Unoka outside the clan is paradoxically what renders him useful to the clan and, thus, pulls him inside.

This is precisely the sense in which Unoka's relationship to the community reproduces the logical structure that binds the Evil Forest to the clan. He is a misfit. But it is far more significant that he is a misfit whose opposition to the community takes the form of neutralizing a distinction that makes clan life possible. We have to understand the notion of yam as "the king of crop"[72] literally in the sense that yam is the sovereign flora and, thus, the vegetative emblem of order. As the New Yam festival demonstrates, it also anchors the clan's temporal order. It renders a geographical location legible as a space of collective life because it stands in relation to the wild, untamable, unusable, prohibited, and chthonic vegetation of the Evil Forest. It marks the difference between the zone of domestic/agrarian life and its suspension in an untamed and demonic wilderness. Given that the labor of yam production is unforgivingly intense, it requires a world where the distinction between work and pleasure is clear. Unoka's attempt to elevate flute playing to the level of work threatens the sustainability of an economy of value centered on yam production. Imagine a clan made up of people who, like Unoka, played on the flute all day without farming yams. It would essentially mean a return to the forest ruled by wild spirits. A yamless clan is a political void. Therein lies the threat and, thus, usefulness of a figure such as Unoka. Failing to uphold the system through which value is ascribed to things, bodies, and temporality, Unoka's body becomes trash and is thrown into the Evil Forest—a spatial void that, theoretically, suspends every binary relation and principle of codification in the clan.

In the end, when his body begins to swell, it is as though, like the Evil Forest, his body reveals that it has always lacked form. In the light of all this, the seemingly adventitious detail about Unoka's flute that comes at the very end of the paragraph, quoted earlier, in which the narrator details Unoka's banishment is all of a sudden far

68 Achebe, "Work and Play in the Palm-Wine Drinkard," 102.
69 Achebe, "Work and Play in the Palm-Wine Drinkard."
70 Achebe, "Work and Play in the Palm-Wine Drinkard."
71 Achebe, "Work and Play in the Palm-Wine Drinkard," 110.
72 Achebe, *The African Trilogy*, 27.

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less trivial than it may have appeared. The statement "When they carried him away, he took with him his flute"[73] might appear to be an inconsequential afterthought, but it brings us directly to the question of how the Evil Forest organizes this text. As an emblem of Unoka's socially useless body, the flute has to go with Unoka into the forest —the place where bodies and things resisting assimilation by interfering with clan order are abandoned. It turns out that what the narrator calls ill fate is, more precisely, the systemic disposability of lives that mirror the forest in their structure and function.

Forest Life: Okonkwo

We can now better understand Okonkwo's fear of "himself, lest he be found to resemble his father."[74] What it means to resemble his father is to have his life framed by the Evil Forest. Yet, in spite of his best efforts, he runs up against the forest at every turn in his life. His father is banished to the forest. A number of his children, infants born to his wife Ekwefi, die in succession, and their corpses are thrown in the Evil Forest. Nwoye's "incipient laziness"[75] already has him marked with the signature of the forest. His closest friend, Obierika, never quite gets over the loss of his twin newborns, who are left to die in the Evil Forest. Okonkwo, in the opening scene, is said to recall the founding father whose foundational act of violence can be linked to the emergence of the Evil Forest. Okonkwo clearly lives within the matrix of the Evil Forest. But what will become apparent as we attempt to identify the nature of this relation is that the forest frames Okonkwo's life differently. If Unoka is the figure of the forest as threatening and, thus, what needs to be kept outside, Okonkwo would be the converse: a figure that embodies the power of the Evil Forest and, thus, needs to be brought inside. What is being suggested here, that Okonkwo should be understood in terms of something that looks like sovereign power, plays out dramatically in the father–son bond between him and Ikemefuna.

Ikemefuna comes into Okonkwo's life as part of an interclan legal process involving a decision on a previous act of violence. Ikemefuna is a kinsman of Mbaino, a rival clan, or what the narrator seems eager to constitute as Umuofia's "just enemy."[76] He meets Okonkwo for the first time when he is thirteen. A woman from Umuofia is murdered. The culprits are men from Ikemefuna's clan, one of whom is Ikemefuna's father. Instead of having the murderers punished individually,[77] Umuofia demands a virgin girl to replace Udo's wife in the household of her bereaved husband. Umuofia also demands "a young man" for sacrificial killing.[78] Okonkwo is the emissary sent to deliver this decision and bring back the virgin and young man given

73 Achebe, *The African Trilogy*, 16.
74 Achebe, *The African Trilogy*, 13.
75 Achebe, *The African Trilogy*.
76 Carl Schmitt, *The Nomos of the Earth in the International Law of the Jus Publicum Europaeum*, (New York: Telos, 2003), 52.
77 In Achebe's fictional world, violence appears to be meaningful only in relation to the collectivity. Violence does not seem to be considered as a natural individual right or capacity. Later on in the novel when Okonkwo kills Ezeudu's son, Okonkwo does not take the fall alone. His entire family is exiled and his material possessions are destroyed. Similarly, in the case of Udo's wife's murder, the individual acts of violence are immediately abstracted and given significance at the level of the collective.
78 Achebe, *Things Fall Apart*, 12.

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as reparation. On his return, he is "asked on behalf of the clan to look after [the boy] in the interim."[79] This link of violence is what binds the two characters, and it is never dissolved, not even after Okonkwo becomes an ersatz father to this boy who is placed in the politically precarious situation of living in a clan where he is not kin. But this link of violence that binds the two runs deeper and is tied to the relationship of violence that binds Okonkwo's clan and Ikemefuna's clan.

The first chapter of the novel begins with an image of Okonkwo defeating a wrestler from Ikemefuna's clan. Referring to Amalinze, the narrator remarks, "It was this man that Okonkwo threw in a fight which the old men agreed was one of the fiercest since the founder of their town engaged a spirit of the wild for seven days and seven nights."[80] This analogical relationship between the wrestling scene and the primordial scene of combat, between the seven years of Amalinze's championship and the seven nights of the mythic duel between founding father and spirit of the wild, is impossible to ignore. For one thing, it places Okonkwo and Amalinze within a mythico-historical context such that Okonkwo can be said to stand in for the founding father while Amalinze, the wrestler from Mbaino, stands in for the "spirit of the wild." These parallels are not fortuitous. In a moment of anger at the murder of Udo's wife, Ezeugo refers to Mbaino as "Those sons of wild animals" who "dared to murder a daughter of Umuofia."[81] Ezeugo's use of the word *wild* should recall the "spirit of the wild" who is defeated by Umuofia's founding father. Udo's wife's murder is eventually resolved in an aggressive political move that forces Mbaino to acknowledge Umuofia's ascendancy in the region. Mbaino is given two choices—war or reparation. By choosing reparation, Mbaino admits the illegitimacy of the woman's killing and, thus, submits to Umuofia's power to guarantee the attribution of value to violence in the region. Ikemefuna's execution is simply the seal of this defeat.

The scene in which Okonkwo is standing before Ikemefuna with his machete raised and ready to hack him down is, thus, a repetition of the primordial scene of violence that haunts the clan's machinery of power—the scene of the founding father and his spirit opponent dueling it out in the wild, a scene that is later re-enacted in the wrestling match between Okonkwo and Amalinze, an Mbaino wrestler. The moment Ezeugo declares Mbaino "Those sons of wild animals" who "dared to murder a daughter of Umuofia," he sets in motion the forest machinery used to translate violence into power. By establishing kinship between Mbaino and the Evil Forest, Ezeugo establishes the context on which Mbaino can be read as a territorial threat and a "just enemy." Ikemefuna is both the sign of his clan's status as a threat and the seal of their submission to Umuofia's claims to dominance. He stands in for the "sons of wild animals" who have "dared" to commit an act of violence, which Umuofia, based on its geopolitical dominance, defines as nonsanctioned violence. If Okonkwo is forest life as it resides within the structure of power and Ikemefuna is forest life in the form of a geopolitical threat, then it goes without saying that Ikemefuna's death is at its most productive as a power-making gesture when it is carried out by Okonkwo. It is in this sense that Okonkwo and Ikemefuna are two sides of the same coin. If Okonkwo is the

79 Achebe, *Things Fall Apart*, 12.
80 Achebe, *Things Fall Apart*, 5.
81 Achebe, *Things Fall Apart*, 11.

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form in which the Evil Forest appears as a figure of power, Ikemefuna is the form in which the forest appears as excluded life.

Violence is, thus, revealed to be a constitutive part of Okonkwo and Ikemefuna's relationship. What binds the two is not a father–son relation but a systemic relationship of violence integral to the production of interclan power. Seen in these terms, the choice of Okonkwo as both the emissary and the foster father of the boy begins to appear less fortuitous and opens up the possibility that Okonkwo is, in fact, set up to kill Ikemefuna. Okonkwo killing Ikemefuna is not the outcome of bad judgment on Okonkwo's part or a legal irregularity but a necessity woven into the fabric of clan power. Notwithstanding, it is hard to ignore the haunting truth in Obierika's rebuke: "But if the Oracle said that my son should be killed I would neither dispute it nor be the one to do it."[82] Obierika certainly complicates things by introducing the element of choice into the situation. But there is a sense in which Obierika is wrong. Okonkwo's part in killing Ikemefuna cannot be reduced to the subjective registers of a moral choice. It is a systemic imperative that derives from the primordial force of violence linking Okonkwo to the founding father and that, thus, makes him an instrument of clan violence. Okonkwo is legally justified—though ethically misguided—to see killing Ikemefuna as simply "add[ing] a boy"[83] to a primordial cycle of violence and power that ties him to the originary structure of clan world—the Evil Forest.

The Last Beheading

Okonkwo's last act of violence before he kills himself is the beheading of a colonial official. If we add Ikemefuna to the body count, this would be Okonkwo's seventh beheading in the course of his life. The moment Okonkwo chops off the head of the court marshal, he senses that there is something different about this decapitation. It is the first of a new kind—one that is inoperative and useless in the production of clan power. It is also the first act of killing done in the name of the clan after the Abame massacre and the the descralizing of the Evil Forests. The Abame massacre is the first act of violence that is not authorized by the clan. It marks a decisive moment in the narrative because it is by means of that single act of mass killing that the colonial order changes the geopolitics of the region by claiming for itself a monopoly over violence. The Abame massacre is what Walter Benjamin would call "a law-making violence," violence that threatens to constitute a new order.[84] It marks the moment when the colonial order displaces Umuofia, constitutes itself as the new center, and reorients the regional community of clans in relation to itself. The problem, though, is that even though killing what may possibly have been a few thousand men, women, and maybe even children clearly establishes that the colonial order is capable of mass destruction and, thus, reconfigures the spatial orientation of power, the senselessness and scale of the violence also constitutes the colonial order as savage power. Wiping out a whole clan in retaliation for the death of one man is irrational and senseless by any standard. As a result, the district officer assigned to the

82 Achebe, *Things Fall Apart*, 52.
83 Achebe, *Things Fall Apart*, 50.
84 Walter Benjamin, *Reflections: Essays, Aphorisms, Autobiographical Writings*, ed. Peter Demetz (New York: Schoken, 1986), 287.

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region, the courts and jails erected, and the court marshals appointed all continue to be empty signatures of power with little or no civil and judicial legitimacy. Even though the war machine of the colonial order has clearly rearranged the tectonic layers of power, it still hasn't taken over the visible structures of clan power. This changes after the Mbanta face-off.

The Mbanta face-off is significant because it marks the precise moment when an emblem of clan order is delegitimized, its power neutralized, and its meaning resignified in the terms of colonial power. Soon after the Evil Forest is desacralized, other institutions of clan power are subjected to colonial violence. The sacred python is killed. A group of clan elders are jailed and physically assaulted. And finally a masked spirit is decapitated. Samatar argues that the killing of the python and the unmasking of the ancestral spirit should not be classified as colonial violence because they are committed by members of the clan.[85] But she fails to realize that irrespective of who commits these acts, the value ascribed to them derives from the colonial order. That is why the clan's attempt to punish the man who unmasks the ancestral spirit fails. Before the arrival of the British, burning down Mr. Brown's church would have been considered legal violence, but within the new context of power, it is re-signified as arson in the name of the queen.

The clan's powerlessness to define the distinction between legitimate and illegitimate violence is rooted in failing to win what the elders of Mbanta term "the victory over death." It should come as no surprise that this battle "over death" is staged in the Evil Forest, which the elders also term "the real battlefield." Simon Gikandi states the outcome of the face-off rather beautifully as the transformation of the Evil Forest into a "home." This domestication of the Evil Forest, he then argues, results in "a semantic crisis," whereby the Evil Forest

> [m]ean[s] different things to different people: to the missionaries, it will be home; to the people of Mbanta, it will be a dangerous dumping ground. However this ambivalence, this dispersal of meanings, will have deprived the site of its powerful ritual authority: only those who believe in the Evil Forest can be affected by it.[86]

Linking the Evil Forest to a semantic order is brilliant. But Gikandi does not push the proposition far enough. The Evil Forest is not simply a zone of prohibition; neither is it just a site of "powerful ritual authority." As the presupposition of the order inherent to the clan, the Evil Forest is, in the terms of Agamben explaining Schmitt's notion of the exception, "the space in which the determination of [the clan's] juridical order and [its] territory first becomes possible."[87] There can be only one conception of the Evil Forest around which the political order of the region is organized. The Evil Forest is precisely that element of the political that cannot mean different things to different people because it is what makes meaning possible in the first place. Desacralizing the Evil Forest results in the end of meaning not its semantic ambivalence. It is not up to individuals to decide whether to believe in the Evil Forest or not. In fact, the Evil

85 Samatar, "Charting the Constellation: Past and Present in Things Fall Apart," 63.
86 Gikandi, *Reading Chinua Achebe*, 49.
87 Agamben, *Homo Sacer*, 19.

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Forest is not about belief. It is neither a divine being nor a religious iconography. What is lost in the transfiguration of the Evil Forest into the site of a new community is a deeper, structural, nomological power.

This disorder is what Okonkwo sees as he looks down at the "man's head [lying] beside his uniformed body."[88] Okonkwo is right. By failing to kill the other court marshals, the clan makes its first public gesture of powerlessness. It is the clan admitting it no longer has control over the technology of power that can make use of this act of violence he has committed. The clan abandons the dead body in acknowledgment of the fact that its legal and political order has fallen apart. In the wake of colonial weapons of mass destruction, the legal apparatus that once transformed violence into power has been rendered inoperative. Okonkwo also senses that in killing the court marshal his own life has been pulled into an alien vector of power. In that moment, he is stripped of every form of identity—champion wrestler, father-executioner, title bearer, wealthy farmer, and wearer of ancestral mask—that once mediated his function as an instrument of legal violence. Bare and exposed, Okonkwo's body is ready to be inscribed with a new language of violence. An arrest, a public trial, and the spectacle of death by hanging would have provided the perfect occasion for entrenching the colonial order as a law-preserving power. Up until that moment, colonial power is known as brute power thanks to the Abame massacre and the imprisonment and assault of clan chiefs. Its claim to power lies entirely on its capacity for mass destruction. Okonkwo's trial and execution would have been the perfect means of giving juridical coherence to colonial violence, which up until then has been savage, haphazard, and senseless. Besides, the exemplary nature of his life sets him in an analogical relation to clan power. Killing him would have the symbolic value of being read as killing the clan itself.

Okonkwo's suicide should, thus, be seen as a line of flight out of the power-making intentions of the colonial order. By killing himself he renders the colonial juridical machinery, through which violence is transformed into law-preserving power, inoperative. Instead of using Okonkwo's death as an opportunity for legal decision, the district officer and his men end up, on Obierika's request, with the "undignified" menial task of cutting the body down and discarding it in the Evil Forest.[89] If Okonkwo renders his body unusable for colonial power, he also makes it unusable for whatever has remained of clan power because not even the clan is able to appropriate the body to further its own ends. His death is not that of the great criminal who is admired by the common people in life and revered in death. Like his father, Okonkwo dies a death of shame. In a phrase that is reminiscent of Kafka's K,[90] the narrator remarks that Okonkwo will be buried "like a dog."[91]

As a suicide, Okonkwo's body is an abomination and has to be separated from the clan. If the colonial order cannot secure their law-preserving power on the basis of Okonkwo's death, neither can the clan use his death as a new center around which to gather what is left of the broken order. Okonkwo's corpse, doubly abandoned, exists

88 Achebe, *The African Trilogy*, 156.
89 Achebe, *The African Trilogy*, 159.
90 Franz Kafka, *The Trial* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009), 165.
91 Achebe, *Things Fall Apart*, 158.

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beyond the two symbolic orders. But there is another dimension to Okonkwo's suicide. In killing himself, Okonkwo hands over his body to the Evil Forest, creating one last case on which its power could be evoked. He gives himself to what remains of its power. He allows it one last chance to ascribe value to an act of violence. Okonkwo's death should be read as a heroic act and not as the triumph of the colonial order.

Conclusion

The objective of this study has been to make the case for approaching the Evil Forest as something that has to do with questions of law, dominion, and the juridical aspects of territorial power. This is, in part, because only then can we fully account for the reason why Achebe's novel is a counterpoint to the colonial archive. If all the novel did were to address the notion of order at the level of culture, custom, and religion, it would have fallen into the old habit of rehearsing worn-out idioms of the colonial archive. *Things Fall Apart* is a paradigm shift because it is the first novel to give us a convincing answer to the question: By what logic of order can the African world be made intelligible? It offers an African literary solution to the question of power. After all, the question of culture and religion presupposes a "locus communis or commonplace,"[92] a political topos that is not only marked by durable boundaries but that exists within a "power complex."[93] Against an archive anchored in Hegel[94] and Conrad,[95] Achebe imagines how a precolonial African community constitutes and preserves order, how it solves the problem of violence, how it guarantees the distinction between sanctioned and nonsanctioned violence, how it distinguishes between the political friend and enemy, and how it ascribes value to bodies, objects, and spaces.

Things Fall Apart is not about the particularities of culture and custom or the fascination of rituals and myth. It is an intervention in a larger question about the discursive rules, narrative techniques, and philosophical assumptions needed to render Africa intelligible as a common world. *Things Fall Apart* is an attempt to invent a new "regime of writing"[96] by introducing specific models and paradigms necessary for assembling an African world. This study has merely focused on rethinking the Evil Forest as one of those key paradigms that Achebe employs to make his idea of an African world order visible. Perhaps the literary uses of the Evil Forest are not limited to Achebe's work and could be made to function as a generalizable model that is applicable to other texts, fictional topographies, and narrative discourses.

92 Schmitt, *The Nomos of the Earth in the International Law of the Jus Publicum Europaeum*, 50.
93 Schmitt, *The Nomos of the Earth in the International Law of the Jus Publicum Europaeum*, 51.
94 George Wilhelm Hegel, *The Philosophy of History* (New York: Dover, 1956), 112.
95 Joseph Conrad, *Heart of Darkness* (New York: Penguin, 2012).
96 Jacques Rancière, "The Politics of Literature," *SubStance* 33.1 (2004): 18.

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