

Of Masquerades and Mimicry:
Performance, Identity, and Tradition in
Chris Abani's *The Virgin of Flames*

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Abstract: This article considers the ways in which tradition has been reconfigured in Chris Abani's novel, *The Virgin of Flames* (2007), through the intersection of mimicry and masquerade. Focusing on the protagonist Black's use of cross-dressing and white-face, this article considers the ways in which the notion of drag-as-mimicry, engaging the liberatory discourses of performativity in identity construction, is impeded and re-routed through the intrusion of drag-as-masquerade, read as a deferred desire towards a lost tradition. Through the rooting of performance in tradition and the routing of tradition through performance, *The Virgin of Flames*, this article argues, creates a new vision of tradition in African literatures that challenges polemic notions of "authenticity" and "authority." This essay also rebuts critical dismissals of the novel that suggest it has little to say about Africa and African experience.

The tension between opposing ideals of tradition and modernity within the realm of African letters has existed for at least as long African writers have published in Europhone languages. The anxiety towards what may constitute "authenticity" in African literature is well-rehearsed and evidenced in a range of debates which frequently reach levels of vitriol indicative of the passion they inspire, including Soyinka's criticisms of the Négritude movement (*Myth* 128–9), Achebe and Ngũgĩ's famous language debates (Achebe 29–30; Ngũgĩ 4–26), the troika of Chinweizu, Jemie, and Madubuike's polemic stance on the decolonization of African literature (Chinweizu, Jemie, and Madubuike 33), and current debate about the relative valuation of diasporic over continen-

tal writers of African literature. These anxieties are reflected in Tanure Ojaide's observation that

[w]ith cosmopolitanism and globalisation, at a time when many people feel it no longer matters where you live, some may find the argument of an African literary canon as unnecessary or passé in the postmodern world in which we find ourselves. However, if literature remains a cultural production, one expects it to reflect the experience, values, and aesthetic considerations of the people who are supposed to own it. (16)

Ojaide's comments point to a not uncommonly-held belief that African literatures must reflect a conceptually pure African reality; who possesses it and what it contains, however, remain unclear. At the heart of these competing pressures are a range of related issues about what it means to write from, by, and about Africa today and whose interests are served in the assignation of value to the body of writing deemed African. Yet, the very existence of these questions itself points to another base assumption about what constitutes "Africanness," one which is both prescriptive and confining for African identities and interests; this vision of what makes a work truly African has, in turn, created a demand for "authentic" works through what Soyinka has scathingly critiqued as the artist's choice to "prospect in archaic fields for forgotten gems which would dazzle and distract the present" ("Writer" 12).

In this essay, I will address the notion of tradition and representation in twenty-first century African literature, asking, particularly, what it could mean for the contemporary African writer to "use" tradition and how that tradition travels. To do so, I will turn to what may, at first, seem to be an unlikely source, the British-Nigerian writer Chris Abani who has not resided in Africa for twenty years (though it should be noted that, contrary to popular claims, this individual has not spent time entirely estranged from the continent or "in exile"), examining his most recent novel, *The Virgin of Flames* (2007). As a polyvalent work which takes its inspiration from a variety of sources, histories, and traditions, spanning the Americas, Asia, and the African continent, Abani's novel demonstrates that an African novel need not adopt a single-minded and static

notion of African identity, or even an African identity that is singular, constructed in isolation. Instead, the “African” in African literature may exist in fragments, function through cultural particulars, and operate alongside simultaneous and equally potent systems of cultural reference. Through a reading of the text’s transfiguration of identity through one of its many discourses, an African tradition which is (re)routed through a strongly-articulated performativity, I will demonstrate that the twenty-first century African novel is one which looks forward, towards unsettled authenticities and identities.

Performativity and the Flux of Identity

The Virgin of Flames is Chris Abani’s third novel. Like its author, a “Nigerian-born Igbo-English novelist and poet who now lives in Los Angeles” (Aycock, “Becoming” 11), the novel defies easy categorization and generic convention; instead, as a work that celebrates the carnivalesque, the grotesque, and the fantastic, *The Virgin of Flames* challenges the very idea of static origins and easily-applicable labels in a landscape far removed from stereotypical visions of African literatures and identities. The novel takes place in a post-9/11 Los Angeles and has been described as a love letter of sorts to the city of its setting (Cheuse 6). The narrative follows Black, a thirty-six-year-old mural painter, and features a diverse cast of characters including Iggy, Black’s benefactor, landlord, and employer at the Ugly Store, a bohemian coffee shop; Bomboy, a refugee from the Rwandan genocide who makes his fortune running illegal abattoirs; Ray Ray, a dwarf addicted to formaldehyde who waits tables for Iggy; and Sweet Girl, a Mexican undocumented migrant and transgendered stripper for whom Black develops an obsession. The novel has not been met with the same critical success as Abani’s 2004 sophomore effort, *GraceLand*—winner of both the Hemingway Foundation/PEN Award and the Hurston-Wright Legacy Award—or his two novellas, *Becoming Abigail* and *Song for Night*. Described as a novel which “does not say much about life in Africa” (Aycock, “Becoming” 11), *The Virgin of Flames* has proved a difficult sell from a writer generally associated with the third generation of Nigerian writing, whose previous works have explicitly engaged with continen-

tal African subjectivities. Yet, as I will demonstrate in this essay, *The Virgin of Flames* is less of a departure from Abani's oeuvre than has been claimed. As Aycock has written, the novel is "about identity. It is about being biracial. It is about being of uncertain gender and sexuality. It is about being multicultural. It is about being human and not fitting into the usual categories" ("Becoming" 18). Though set in the United States and populated by an array of characters who defy demographic categorization, *The Virgin of Flames*, read as part of Abani's larger body of writing, draws upon recurring themes of becoming and belonging, tradition and ritual, and transformation and performance which directly respond to the construction and (re)circulation of what it means to be African and speak of an African identity in the context of global capitalism, migration, and traveling theory and traveling tradition.¹ Situated as such, it may be observed that the novel uses the undulating space of Abani's Igbo heritage as its ground for both a celebration of difference and an acknowledgement of the dynamism of the past within the contemporary. Situated alongside cultural discourses from Asia, the Americas, and other parts of Africa, the re-configuration of Igbo tradition points to the variability and malleability of "Africa" as a signifier, marking new visions of what it means to write African literature away from the anxieties of "the stereotyped immobilism of an essential 'authenticity'" (Chambers 38).

The Virgin of Flames opens with a scene which emphasizes its ongoing themes of performativity and flux in identity as Black turns himself into the Virgin of Guadalupe, a celestial woman he plans to capture in a fifty-foot mural on the side of one of Bomboy's abbatoirs:

White.

Black sat before the mirror applying paste to his face. Face paint really, but it was thick like wallpaper paste. Too thick maybe, but when he was mixing it, he thought it would take that much to cover his complexion. It would also help the mask to harden with a sheen he could paint over: rouge cheeks, blue eye shadow, and really black eyelashes. But for now, he had to get the right shade of white. (Abani, *Virgin* 4)

Black is thus introduced in the midst of an act of shape-shifting, becoming, through the accoutrements of femininity, another entity entirely under a literal white mask of makeup and, later, Iggy's wedding gown taken without her knowledge. Looking into the mirror as he applies the makeup which will transform him, Black runs through a mental catalogue of the parts and pieces which he will construct to allow his transformation. The paste, perhaps too thick, which will become his new skin, creates the base onto which the signifiers of femininity which Black envisions will be attached; the paste, in other words, seemingly highlights the contingency of identity. Indeed, in this scene Black's drag underscores the notion that the feminine is an act of play for which no referent exists, existing instead through its very artifice, what Diana Fuss has called the awakening to the knowledge that "there is no model behind imitation, no genuine femininity beneath the performance, no original before the copy" (27). Drawing on the work of Judith Butler, Fuss here alludes to the former's claim that "[i]f gender attributes and acts . . . are performative, then there is no preexisting identity by which an act or attribute might be measured; there would be no true or false, real or distorted acts of gender, and the postulation of a true gender identity would be revealed as a regulatory fiction" (Butler 180). Such a fiction is highlighted in drag play where the act of "performing" a gender identity marked as false "*implicitly reveals the imitative structure of gender itself—as well as its contingency*" (Butler 175; emphasis in original). Freed from an originary model from which to base his making up and dress, Black, in his drag, inhabits the space of liminality in which his very difference from what he will become marks a subversion of social norms and roles which simultaneously exposes the myth of authenticity surrounding those roles.

Simultaneously, however, the disjointed collection of metonymic body parts which Black enlists in his quest for femininity recalls the crippling fragmentation of racialized subjectivity outlined in Frantz Fanon's *Black Skin, White Masks* (92–95), echoing the imaginary spectacle of identification as Black regards his image in the mirror: "He looked beautiful, he thought, thinking at the same time how odd it was that he would think that" (Abani, *Virgin* 6). Highlighting the strangeness of his own

image, Black's narration foregrounds his experience of himself as other, marking a split between his embodied self and the spectral image which appears before him. From this moment, Black's realization juxtaposes two distinct effects. On the surface, Black displays a performative ease with the prior anxieties of a split within his being, indicated in his ability to regard himself as other and, in that moment, beautiful, while foregrounding his continual act of becoming. At the same time, his desire to embody an other identity through his repeated attempts at perfecting his gender-bending drag play activates a sense of insecurity in this very process. His performative ease with the prior anxieties of a split within his being keeps the self forever incomplete, a work in progress not entirely analogous to his gender-bending drag play. As Butler notes, with reference to the categories through which identity is constructed, "no single account of construction will do . . . these categories always work as background for one another, and they often find their most powerful articulation through one another" (xvi). As this scene demonstrates, for Black, the effect of an articulated identity, in which received notions of gender and race act upon each other, results in a doubling of his performance, as both willful and beyond the scope of his control. This dual articulation thus reveals the contingency of naturalized notions of identity and identification. In other words, Black's whitefaced drag simultaneously calls upon the phenomenological alienation of enforced and externally-fixed notions of epidermal anxiety, even as it foregrounds and celebrates the contingency of gendered norms. Caught in between these two facets of being, Black undergoes a halted becoming, caught between an over-determined racialized tradition and the exaggerated mimesis of his parodic gender play. This tension between notions of racial and gendered becoming is further emphasized in the following passage: "While trying out the dress, which was several sizes too small and which he had to adjust at his sewing machine, he thought that the contrast of his dark hands and feet against the white of the dress and his face made for an interesting play" (Abani, *Virgin* 5). For Black, the inhabitation of the feminine role develops through its play of difference. The very contingency of gendered identity, in other words, appears to seek a moment of settlement where the gendered self may reconcile the

fragmentation of the racialized self through a series of exclusions. The difference and desire which motivate Black's play emerge from within him, perpetually acting upon each other to create a path of infinite regression whose tensions he will be unable to settle. At the same time, the articulation of racial and gendered performance highlights Butler's assertion of the more general condition of performative identity (60), in which appearance, acting as being, operates in a contradictory play with the presupposition of ontological specification in the lived experience of being black/Black.

As the novel progresses, Black's fascination with drag play and, more specifically, with wearing Iggy's wedding gown is developed through what has been called "a back-story that renders it psychologically plausible" (Stobie 174). In a scene midway through the novel, Black muses to himself that "[h]e had been collecting various women's clothing for a while, everything but dresses. He chose the wedding dress because the only dresses he could wear were wedding dresses. Ever since he had first used his mother's" (Abani, *Virgin* 76). In the passages that follow, the narrative reveals that because his father, an Igbo man named Frank, was declared MIA during the Vietnam War, Black, as a boy, was left behind with his mother Maria whose Salvadoran Catholic beliefs escalated into a cruel fanaticism leading her to abuse and torture the son she saw as her curse from god. Not insignificantly, the narrative reveals that Black's very name, an attempt to fix the multiplicity of his lived experience into a single, racial essentialism, is a legacy of this maternal torment, bestowed upon him by his mother following his father's disappearance. With the father he adored and feared forever gone, Black becomes the reluctant caregiver to his mentally-ill mother, nursing her through an advanced cancer. Hating his mother but also loving her and watching her die, Black puts on her wedding gown: "And then he thought of his mother's wedding dress and went into her room, still naked, ignoring her hate and her bile, and pulled the dress on, tearing a deep gash in the side. He went back to the couch and lay there, pretending to be her, to be dead, to be lying in state, and all the while, the gash let in a cooling breeze" (Abani, *Virgin* 166–167). Based upon this foundational moment, Black's obsession with wearing Iggy's wedding gown

transforms into a deferral of this first moment of desire. This moment of relief in transformation is echoed in his adult life as Black, pausing before Iggy's gown, says a prayer to the Virgin before turning to himself: "He dropped the dress over his head, sweating with effort to pull it down without tearing the lace. Even with the adjustment it was still tight. . . . He wasn't beautiful, but he was still stunned. He simply didn't recognize himself; at least not as Black. He began to cry" (Abani, *Virgin* 77). It is through this moment of transformation, this becoming of the Virgin, of Maria, that Black appears as other, beautiful in his strangeness, seemingly entering the moment in which he may sever himself from any grounding in his being, escaping his very identity as Black and reveling in the infinite flows of pure appearance, where the surface upon which his performance materializes gives the impression of total malleability. A symbol of purity and chastity on the cusp of entering into adult union, the wedding gown, for Black, turns into his marker of purification in this annihilation of assumed ontological essentialisms, surfaced via the apparent ease with which he may assume an other identity and thereby destroy any fixed notion of being.

In her discussion of *The Virgin of Flames*, Aycock wonders, "Why does Black become the Virgin? He becomes her because he too is a prisoner of sexual taboo; he too is defined by his body—the Virgin' and 'Black'" ("Becoming" 22). To put on his makeup and gown, it follows, becomes a way of erasing that body, and by extension, that taboo, using the sheer artifice of the performance of drag as a means of refusal and of subverting the boundaries of the self. Conversely, however, as Stobie points out in her reading of Abani's novel, "for a man, cross-dressing as a bride and as the Virgin Mary indicates the aspiration to enact femininity in its most potent aspects, both in terms of social acceptability and in terms of religious significance" (175). Crossing-dressing, especially as the virgin bride, thus becomes a site of amplification, using the archetypal form of femininity as a means through which to highlight its contingency. Through this play, Black engages with a cognizance of his performance tied—through its relation with his mother and that first dress, her wedding gown—to the power and destruction of rigid conceptualizations of dogma and suffering which he simultaneously destroys in the act of

capture. Following this play of dress-up, however, Black finds himself on the roof of his home, a self-made structure he refers to as his spaceship, teetering at the top of the building where he lives. Caught for a brief instant in the flash of a police helicopter, Black becomes the Blessed Virgin, seen by the crowds on the street below and thought by them to be a miracle (Abani, *Virgin* 78). In this moment, Black, in his play, is symbolically fixed, embodying that potent, sacred femininity in a moment where his own image exceeds him, flying out of his grasp. Interpolated by the crowds as the Blessed Virgin, Black is captured by the faithful below, fixed in a single image and into a singular notion of being, in an act which echoes his prior fixing through racial alienation as black/Black.

Tradition, Memory, and Masquerade

If the moment at which Black is fixed as the Virgin by the faithful who see him in the helicopter's flash of light is the first moment which threatens the free play of Black's assumed femininity, as the narrative continues, another still more potent symbol appears, hinted at in the tinges of racial anxiety that colour his early efforts of transformation. For Black, there is another, earlier dress, which both highlights and destroys the notion that "in order to 'find' his origin, he has to 'reinvent' it; in other words, he has to make it up, he has to put together the idea of an origin from the fragments of his past" (Aycock, "Becoming" 20). It is this first dress that serves as his marker of desire for an impossible ontological stability in an assumed tradition, a condition which the narrative makes apparent in Black's attachment to it in a photograph which he wears around his neck. Throughout the novel, Black describes himself as a native of Los Angeles, a city which, as the narrative reminds us, has no myth of its own, no anchors (Abani, *Virgin* 207), where the individual is forever in a process of becoming. As Black explains, he is a shape-shifter, "going through several identities, taking on different ethnic and national affiliations as though they were seasonal changes in wardrobe, and discarding them just as easily" (Abani, *Virgin* 37). Signifiers of gender, race, and national affiliation merge and transpose, creating a narrative effect where Black is defined not so much by what he is but by evoking the

space of difference which, despite his many metamorphoses, he cannot inhabit. Like the city he lives in, Black too is heavy with the weight of this nothingness, a feeling described in the narrative as “like being a bird . . . swaying on a wire somewhere, breaking for the sky when night and rain came, except for him it never felt like flight, more like falling, falling and drowning in cold, cold water” (Abani, *Virgin* 37). Black’s only physical connection to his past is maintained through a single photograph of himself as a child, worn in a plastic pouch which he keeps as a talisman: “The photo it held was of a young child, maybe three or four years old in a white dress. Faded as it was, it was hard to tell if the child was a boy or girl. The photo was pressed against an envelope with a name written on it in slanted penmanship. Obinna; *his* name, the one he’d had in another life” (Abani, *Virgin* 44–45). The image of the child in the picture, Obinna who would become Black, is a remnant from his childhood, the result of a superstition handed down through his Igbo father’s family in which, to prevent an early death, male children remain dressed and are treated as female until their seventh birthday. On its reverse, the photo is inscribed with the single word, “Echefulam. A language he hadn’t heard since his childhood, but one he knew was Igbo, as sure as if he had been born to it. And he had been. His father had been Igbo. At least that’s what he had always told Black” (Abani, *Virgin* 45). This word, “Echefulam,” meaning “never forget me,” was inscribed by his Igbo father prior to his disappearance in Vietnam and returned along with a letter as Black’s sole inheritance from the man, simultaneously confirming both his father’s absence and the often abusive man’s love. Described in Black’s early memories as a man of science, fascinated with space, Black’s father is revealed to have been a man of faith, faithful to a love for his son which he was unable to show, at the very moment where his absence in Black’s life is confirmed. Along with the photo, Black’s father’s letter confirms that oppositional and contradictory discourses may coexist within a single individual, albeit not without suffering, and that a multiplicity of identities, however secret or unspoken, persist within the self, destabilizing the myth of ontological stability. This photo simultaneously places Black and the femininity which he mimics within the realm of the Igbo sociality, situating his fluctuating self within a

specifically acculturated heritage. The photo and the letter thus unite the two lost discourses of his childhood, the feminine and the Igbo, into a singular site of absence and loss.

For Black, the childhood photo becomes the totem of his past, an instance of what Butler calls “part of the incorporative strategy of melancholy” (62). As the lost object, Black’s photo becomes that which “conceals this loss, but preserves (and negates) this loss through its concealment” (Butler 63). Enlivened by this knowledge, Black’s drag takes on a new valence, becoming his means of transgressing the territory of a denied history:

He knew why he did this; dressed up in Iggy’s old wedding dress, in any dress Black did it to feel safe. That was all, simple really when he thought about it Maybe if he’d continued to wear a dress his father would have come back and his mother wouldn’t have died in that living room in Pasadena when they came to tell her that his father was MIA, presumed dead. Died to be replaced by the woman who’d hurt him until she died, seven years later. (Abani, *Virgin* 77)

Black’s memories of his father are themselves limited in scope, relegated largely to vague memories of Igbo conversation, drinking, and fighting (Abani, *Virgin* 45), with few clear episodes. In one of these, Black recalls his father taking him out to look at the stars with his beloved telescope, naming them both in Igbo and English, and teaching his son, at this young age, the duality of tradition and fluidity of identification before abruptly withdrawing to his usual brusque silence. Yet, as Black himself ruminates, without these few exceptions, all he has of his father is “this nameless and shapeless desire and the memory of strong hands, like his father’s, strong hands and back and a face rough with beard and soft with tears, and lips full with the knowledge, whispering: Echefulam” (Abani, *Virgin* 51). Butler writes that “[t]he melancholic refuses the loss of the object, and internalization becomes a strategy of magically resuscitating the lost object, not only because the loss is painful, but because the ambivalence felt toward the object requires that the object be retained until differences are settled” (78–9). Admitting that his memories

of his father, like his memories of his Igbo heritage, are vague enough to be hallucinations, Black instead holds on to the performance of drag and his act as the Virgin; he attempts, through his mimicry of his childhood costume, to return to that foreclosed space where he too felt himself part of a seamless totality, through this paternal legacy, as his means of deferring the moment in which his ambivalent process of becoming must seek. Yet, Black is unable to ground himself in a single notion of being, the idealized past forever eluding him as he “tries to resuscitate a link between himself and Igbo history, but rather than contribute to a fuller understanding of his self, it muddles his conceptions of identity even more, in part due to his father’s refusal to impart knowledge to his son” (Aycock, “Becoming” 19–20). Black is not able to find the answers he longs for in the shape of a static and knowable Igbo tradition, not because that tradition remains beyond him but because such a fixed and unmoving essence does not exist. Instead, he remains trapped within the perpetual movements of hybridity through his transcultural drag performance, oscillating between the myth of unencumbered, free play through his gender parody and the suffocating reification of a fixed and impossible notion of tradition. The quest for selfhood through the feminine guise is thus intimately bound with a fruitless striving towards an unknowable past. For Black, this becomes apparent as the border between the past and present is transgressed in flashbacks and long reminiscences which hearken to what Benjamin once characterized as the attempt to “articulate the past historically” by “seiz[ing] hold of a memory as it flashes up at a moment of danger” (257). Black’s obsessive dwelling on the past, instead, culminates in his confrontation with the haunting recollection of his violent rape at gunpoint, at the age of twenty. Black relives this moment of violence as a sort of communion that situates his violation as a rebirth in a lifetime of such rebirths and remains locked in his reminiscence as a moment that “felt like home” (Abani, *Virgin* 137–138).

Set in this context, at the interstices of a network of circulating and competing discourses, Black’s play of dressing up, making up, and drag operates on the hinge between mimicry and masquerade, the site of tension between the contingent and that assumed as ontological. As a

feminine guise, Black's dressing up is a mimicry of the feminine, becoming, as Fuss suggests, "the deliberate and playful performance of a role" (24). Mimicry, as "deliberate," operates as strategically subverting the bounded categories it transgresses. Yet as masquerade, that which is "the unconscious assumption of a role" (Fuss 24) or "the performative production of a sexual ontology" (Butler 60), this same act of costumed performativity becomes that which seeks to assimilate the inassimilable, unconsciously becoming the "pervasive nostalgia" (Butler 12), striving toward a conception of tradition and identity as pre-given and fixed. Like his father, declared MIA but never dead, this tradition remains unattainable in its liminality, located where Black can neither access nor deny it because "it," as an ontological marker of an essentialized past, does not exist at all. Black's gender-bending whitefaced play thus turns into a doubly-articulated signifier of both the conscious act of mimicry and the unconscious space of the masquerade. Yet, as Fuss reminds us, if mimicry may be ironic and subversive, indicating the constructedness and the contingent performativity of identity, Black's masquerade, as the interiorized site of an oppressive and impossible desire, indicates something else entirely. Smith-Rosenberg has suggested that "masquerades carry additional meanings their players do not necessarily intend. Disguises, they are designed to present a false outward show, to counterfeit the real" (1329). Likewise, Butler suggests that, with its guarantee of failure, the masquerade "effectively undermines any strategy of cultural politics to configure an alternative imaginary for the play of desires" (72). Masquerade, in other words, blocks the subversive potential of mimicry in its unconscious assimilation of the normative categories it seeks to undermine. In such a manner, Black's masquerade fixes him within a melancholic desire to fix the past and his identity, ultimately truncating his free play of being and dooming him to stasis.

The contradictory bind in Black's masquerade becomes amplified through its multiple significations, nowhere more apparent than through its allusion to the Igbo tradition of *egwugwu*.² In its manifestations as part of Igbo ritual, *egwugwu* refers to a masquerade in which a male ancestor is figuratively brought back to earth. Dancers in white masked-costumes serve as the givers of funeral rites and enforce the law

in what was a markedly masculine tradition. Crucially, the “*egwugwu* acts out the role of the dead man, stating his final wishes” (Isichei 520), through a ritual which women, children, and outsiders are forbidden to watch. The *egwugwu* masquerade is thus intimately linked with a masculine tradition and the transmission and simultaneous fixing of normative masculine identity within the world of the living. Far from operating at the level of the unconscious, the *egwugwu* serves as a deliberate claim to an ontological purity in gendered and ritualized identity. In Black’s whitefaced drag, there lies an element of this memorialization through his connection to his own departed father, marked as the aforementioned trace of a received and stultifying notion of race. Combined with its connection with his childhood photo, Black’s drag performs as such a doubly-inflected masquerade, one which works against its appearance as mimicry. As masquerade in this context, Black engages in an act which strives to fix and to enshrine, operating like the *egwugwu* as a mediator of a code of law and order which only men born into a strictly-enforced tradition may enact, reasserting the domination of essential myths of identity. In the larger picture of racialized mimicry, we are reminded that both the acts of whiteface and blackface, though presented as parody, themselves served as a means of staging and fixing the boundaries between racialized identities, creating a static type (see Lott 23, Byrne 134). While it may be claimed that “Black’s story is about defying those norms and reinventing notions of acceptable identity” (Aycok, “Becoming” 21), the double contradiction at the core of the masquerade forces it to collapse upon itself, pulled by its two utterly incompatible desires, that for a free performativity and that for a fixed essence, aimed towards rectifying the bewildering cacophony of identity in living.

This clash of discourses and traditions comes to the fore in the materialization of Black’s mural, a woman based on the Virgin of Guadeloupe who becomes, instead, Fatima, the name which Black bestows upon her. In the narrative, Black’s mural is described only briefly: “Rising fifty feet, on the side of the abattoir wall, in a head to toe yashmak, was the figure of a Muslim woman. Only her eyes and hands were visible. In one she was strangling a dove. The other was wrapped around something that,

though still largely unformed, was meant to be an AK-47. The image was stunning and more than a little disturbing” (Abani, *Virgin* 188). Yet, Fatima is not simply what appears on the surface. Black, the narrative describes, has painted her from the inside out, beginning with her skeleton, muscles, and flesh. The yashmak, a particular term for the niqab taken from the Turkish rather than Arabic tradition, is not the extent of Fatima’s identity but rather a simple veil under which her body resides. Like the AK-47 and the dove, symbols of seemingly contradictory discourses of violence and peace which, in the mural, function together, Fatima, as the Virgin of Guadeloupe, “the perfect woman” (Abani, *Virgin* 188), in Black’s words, represents a site of melding and conceptual blending, where the pull of oppositions becomes the magic that creates her. Marked for removal by the city police as soon as she appears, Fatima, in her brief existence, becomes the haunting spectre of that which is not but could be, the site of contestation and circulation which threatens the viewer. Watching her destruction, ordered by the city council who deem her wanton eroticism inappropriate, Black acknowledges that, though ephemeral in her physical manifestation, Fatima will live on in the traces she leaves upon those who view her who will remain forever “infected by the desire for Fatima” (Abani, *Virgin* 238–9). Fatima thus becomes desire itself, perpetually circulating, often contradictory, forever eluding grasp and impossible in its enormity. Yet, like the ontologically-given identity which Black craves, Fatima too is impossible, condemned to the liminal site of melancholic refusal, leaving Black in that impossible space of desire.

Significantly, Fatima is described as having Black’s face, as being his very image but with breasts and a vagina (Abani, *Virgin* 239). Fatima is Black, and Black is Fatima. Gazing at her disappearing form on the abattoir wall, Black is transfixed, standing like “[a]n iroko the wind could not uproot” (Abani, *Virgin* 241). The iroko is, of course, a tree native to Nigeria and significant within Igbo folklore. Black, figured literally through his adoption of the Virgin’s guise in the effort to create Fatima, both becomes and surpasses her in this acculturation, using her legacy as the only tenuous foundation through which to grow rooted in this image. Together with Black’s own cross-dressing as the Virgin of the Flames and

his original muse, the Virgin of Guadeloupe, these figures become what Stobie calls “Abani’s three images of the Virgin” (181). Yet, there exists a fourth figure of the divine feminine, this time decidedly not a virgin, yet equally potent in the culturally-inflected figuration of the feminine that she represents from Black’s Igbo past. Unbeknownst to him, Black inhabits a further figure of mythology—Mami Wata, a hybridized name for a pantheon of sea and river goddesses in Igbo cosmology. In Igbo mythopoeitics, Mami Wata, in her various local inflections, is the giver of life, guarding the river which stands on the boundary between the spirit and human worlds. Like Mami Wata, Black, in his spaceship, also presides over a river, here the Los Angeles River, a concrete serpent filled with the detritus of the living. To enter into life, one must pass Mami Wata, and, in life, her followers are rewarded with riches untold in exchange for unwavering and total devotion. Mami Wata is named in the narrative as the subject of an earlier mural painted by Black, which Iggy happens upon while walking through a graveyard:

[Iggy] paused for a few moments before a grave marker. It was blank except for a figure spray painted on it. It was well done, depicting a woman who could have been Mediterranean, although her features seemed more Northern European. Wrapped around her waist, its head and neck dangling down between her legs like a grotesque appendage, was a python. Arched over her head was a banner that said: *Mami-Wata*, and in the corner were Black’s signature and a date. It was two years old. (Abani, *Virgin* 202)

Asked by Iggy, he explains that “[s]he’s a new goddess, early nineteenth century. I think some guy was walking on the beach one morning and saw a masthead of a mermaid washed up, probably from a slaver sunk by the Royal Navy and took it as a sign from the sea to start a cult” (Abani, *Virgin* 205), adding that he read about her in a book. The story which Black tells is not, in fact, the one upon which scholars today agree (see Jell-Bahsen, *Water Goddess*); instead, Black makes reference to a contemporary version of the Mami Wata myth, underscoring, without understanding, the manner in which tradition is itself “an imitation without

an origin” (Butler 175). Black may deny his access to Mami Wata, viewing the goddess as part of an over-determined cultural heritage which he cannot come to understand as performative and ever-shifting; at the same time, the narrative suggests that Mami Wata is herself emblematic of Black through his birthright into a liminality where transculturation and appropriation rule.

Despite his explanation of the goddess-figure, who, in Igbo cosmology, is thought to be both a seductress bringing destruction to the unfaithful and a bringer of prosperity and wealth, Black is unable to articulate his connection to her, saying that he “didn’t see how the painting of Mami Wata had anything to do with what he was going through just then” (Abani, *Virgin* 206). Denying any connection to the goddess, Black is unable to recognize the traveling tradition that roots and routes within him, transformed past stereotype. If it is “[b]y disentangling the knots of that monothetic discourse [of tradition] and loosening ourselves from its rigid ordinances, a further, more open, discontinuous and historical, framework emerges” (Chambers 73), it is precisely this perpetual work of disentanglement which Black is unequipped to appreciate. Refigured past a unitary signifier, Mami Wata, like Black’s traveling Igbo heritage, eludes his comprehension through her transformativity. Yet, like Mami Wata, a known shape-shifter who transcends gender, as able to appear in male guise or as female (Jell-Bahlsen, “Concept” 30), Black, too, becomes a figure beyond the dichotomies of self and other. As “more than of a divinity” (Jell-Bahlsen, “Concept” 30), Mami Wata, in her shape-shifting and malleable form, encompasses Black’s Virgin of Guadeloupe, Fatima and Black himself, overtaking and becoming them. Figured as a seductress, Mami Wata fills her followers with lust and longing, leaving them unable to love any other; likewise, Black, in his wedding gowns, inhabits this union, his drag play marking him as one of those followers who, referred to as “married in the water” (Bastian 118), devote themselves to her and bring destruction to any who attempt to sever this tie. As the goddess figure in need of perpetual marriage through her devoted, mostly male followers, Mami Wata, the bride, the seductress, and the mother, inhabits the transformative possibilities of roles and identities to which Black’s

own desire for a grounded self does not allow him conscious access. It is equally important that, in Abani's narrative, Mami Wata is never called by her indigenous forms, Ogbuide or Idemilli. The name Mami Wata has been described "[a]s a pidgin term to describe various locally named water deities to outsiders not conversant with the language or practices of the area" (Gore and Nevadomsky 60). The name, then, becomes a marker of a traveling tradition, an acculturation which is ever-shifting and whose refusal situates Black, like the hybridized goddess, as a site of instability. In place of Mami Wata's relation to water, Black becomes her inverse: as the eponymous Virgin of Flames he transforms his domain into a River that, made of concrete and set on fire, becomes "more ash than water" (Abani, *Virgin* 272). Black, too, becomes "as elusive and slippery as the liquid element itself" (Jell-Bahsen, "Concept" 32), both exterior to and the embodiment of the goddess.

Recreation, Reclamation, and the Regeneration of the Self

Black enacts one last moment of dress-up in the narrative, his circulating acts of mimicry and masquerade culminating in this final transformation. Throughout the novel, Black has been obsessed with Sweet Girl, a beautiful transgendered stripper of whom he saves photographs and tokens for a homemade shrine in her honour. Finding his interest in her reciprocated, Black begins to lose his sexual fixation with her, until, at the narrative's conclusion, she shows him how she transforms her body into its female form, allowing him to see her usually-hidden penis and wrapping his genitals for him: "He stood there. It was strange, but he could feel his penis in the empty space where it once was at the same time as feeling an incredible void. An emptiness. He wanted to cry. To laugh. He didn't know what he wanted" (Abani, *Virgin* 283). Physically transformed, Black, feeling the emptiness where his penis once was, is faced with the unspoken desire of his doubly-articulated masquerade that appears on the surface to be an act of mimicry. A feeling he describes as at once claustrophobic, frightening, and joyful rises within him, marking the contradictions which plague his need for truth in origin and simultaneous search for the static and the fixed which he now realizes he will never find. In full makeup, penis bound and fully

aware of the terror of mimicry writ without the unconscious workings of masquerade, Black strikes at Sweet Girl, savagely beating her until she retaliates by dousing him with turpentine. Semi-blinded and fully in drag, Black runs to the roof of his spaceship, lighting a cigarette:

A woman on fire.

And the wind tore at the train of the wedding dress until it became a billowing sheet of flame trailing away behind Black, until it ripped the burning cloth free. The floating train hovered in the ash-heavy air for a moment, like a phoenix, all flight and fire, even as Black flailed dangerously close to the edge of the spaceship. Another updraft caught the train of lace and it sailed away, still burning. Set free it floated over the crowd, heading for the River. It sank from view. (Abani, *Virgin* 290)

Rey Chow, citing Irigaray, explains that masquerade functions as “a type of social sacrifice, whereupon women must imitate or reproduce—at their own peril—the feminine norms that have been prescribed in advance by patriarchal mores” (139). Black, the woman on fire, Mami Wata performing the *egwugwu*, inhabit this clash of mores, norms, and conventions in this moment of his final sacrifice. In an interview, Abani explains that “Black cannot occupy either gender: he cannot let himself be a woman, but he’s no longer able to be a man. But he has to become something. He becomes this chimera, this bird of fire” (Aycock, “Interview” 8). Taken further, Black, it seems, cannot be anything at all because all being is at last revealed as appearance; letting go of his falsely-determined ontological moorings, Black is released. Black’s story ends with his position on the threshold between life and death, deification, and destruction. In *The Virgin of Flames*, however, the ultimate narrative function of its protagonist is to inhabit a space beyond borders, where traditions cross and reconfigure and the past projects onto the present as its foreclosed shadow. With this ending to Black’s story, Abani creates a narrative in which the instability of the signifiers of a heterogeneous and variable tradition-which-is-not-one come to the fore, enacting the transgressions of multiply-articulated subject positions within the novel’s discursive spaces.

Laura Chrisman has written that a conception of the black Atlantic, that space triangulated between Africa, Europe, and the New World, in contrast to a binary view of centre and periphery, Africa and diaspora, necessitates that “we . . . think of the dynamic between diasporic and nationalistic cultures as uneven, variable, and at times symbiotic” (7). Through a view of the intersections and interactions of Africa and its resonance in its diasporas throughout the black Atlantic, criticism and cultural commentary may escape unitary and unidirectional notions of what it means to write in and about Africa, instead allowing that “colonised and postcolonial cultures could now be understood as dialogues with other (formerly) colonised and diasporic cultures” (Chrisman 7). At the same time, however, this unfettered conceptualization of the traces of African cultures, traditions, and narratives throughout a transnational landscape gives way to a cultural vanguardism which “positions diasporic African populations as a sovereign class, or icon, of modernity that African populations then uncritically model themselves upon” (Chrisman 8), a danger which may be perceived in Abani’s reconfiguration of tradition within Black’s narrative trajectory. Yet, in *The Virgin of Flames*, threats of diasporic vanguardism are refused as the narrative redeploys tradition not as the static, mummified remnants of a nativism gleefully transformed into a practice of modernity within the diaspora; instead, for Black, and for the novel as a whole, tradition operates as a shadow which is itself the object of masquerade, yet perpetually out of reach through its own internal dynamism. Black does not consciously model an African reality, nor does he consciously identify himself as operating within the boundaries of an African identity within the sphere of modernity and postcoloniality. Indeed, Black does not inhabit a singular identity of any sort. Still, he remains fixed and in thrall to the transformed traces of an Africanness which, by exceeding a singular marker of authenticity, continually elude his understanding.

The Virgin of Flames has been described as a novel that has little to do with Africa, that is more about the United States or Los Angeles. This may be reflected in the limited critical commentary on the novel, in which the formation and re-constitution of Igbo mythopoetic tropes

and legacies have typically been overlooked in favour of the more potent and straightforward symbolism of the narrative's virgin figures. Yet, the existence of the one does not preclude the latter. Indeed, throughout the novel, a plurality of cultural sources, ranging from canonical British writing to Latin American Catholicism and beyond, function on an equal level with this reconstituted Igbo tradition, disallowing a simple privileging of any one discourse. Yet, it is this very malleability which creates this traveling Igbo tradition, underscoring the mutual contingency of imbricated identity markers and histories. *The Virgin of Flames*, read as such, is precisely a novel about Africa, about what it means to seek a sense of authenticity and freedom beyond the strictures of, as Binyavanga Wainaina has satirized, how to write about Africa. Following James Clifford (469, 477–8), tradition is both rooted and routed through its transformed and transnational spaces, acting under this articulation as a shifting space of creation and longing. Put differently, Abani's *Black*, it may be said, engages in an act of rooting through his performance in drag, which is only thwarted by his inability to come to terms with the coexistence of multiple discourses and methods of meaning-making within the act. Bill Ashcroft has written that "in the displaced post-colonial world of diasporic subjectivity utopia is a constant horizon of the present, the horizon *that is at the same time* the horizon of the past" (82; emphasis in original). By suppressing his connection with memory-as-tradition under a nostalgia towards an origin, falsely seen as monolithic and irrevocably altered, *Black* limits his own efforts of self-creation from the outset, severing himself from the potentiality of that utopian horizon.

Equally, this reception of the novel may be attributed to its critical isolation from Abani's larger corpus of long-form fiction. Read against his earlier works, *The Virgin of Flames* ceases to function as an aberration and reveals itself as a continuation. *Black*'s tormented state of becoming serves as a repetition of the protagonist's struggle to inhabit what has already been lost in *Becoming Abigail*. Like the protagonist of the earlier work, *Black* is also faced with the spectre of the lost parental object and succumbs to a melancholy in which the jettisoned object is internalized as the very deferral of mourning which sparks his per-

petually elusive quest for himself. In his whitefaced cross-dressing and struggle with an over-determined normative masculinity, Black parallels Abani's Elvis Oke, the protagonist of his celebrated *GraceLand*. No less pertinently, the act of drag and the search for identity, in both cases, intertwines with each protagonist's re-inscription of a traveling and transfiguring tradition, reflecting, in these negotiations, the nocturnal wanderings of My Luck, the voiceless protagonist of *Song for Night*. In all of the above cases, the articulations of self and the tormented struggle to be, to become, and to appear as a self unfettered by the normative values imposed upon one develop as an essential component of the struggle to articulate an African identity beyond received constructions.

Read as such, *The Virgin of Flames* becomes a novel about African identities and traditions that takes its form by way of the United States, through the insertion of the modern and the contemporary as a means through which to re-present Africa not as a monolithic purveyor of the "tradition" or the "authentic" but rather as a dynamic and variable entity amongst entities. Tradition is no longer that which pins the self down, demanding its sacrifice through a capitulation to its dictates; instead tradition transforms into something else entirely, turning Mami Wata into the Virgin of Flames and the inscription of Echefulam into the lamentation of the phoenix with which the novel concludes. The performativity that comes with what Aijaz Ahmad has scathingly referred to as "an excess of belonging" (130) is re-routed through its origins where, as fleeting as desire, it transforms. Tradition, like Black's performance of drag, is spoken in several tongues and along multiple registers and never in the singular.

Notes

- 1 While traveling theory is a term coined by Said and used to express what happens to theory when it is dislocated and re-situated from its point of origin, here, I use the term to refer to the transformation of a notion of "authentic" and "legitimate" Africanness where the very idea of Africa has been uprooted and transfigured through the practices of globalization, transnationalism, and multilocality.

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