

# Reading African Complexities Today: Generic Folding in Gaile Parkin's *Baking Cakes in Kigali*

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## ABSTRACT

This article examines a recent, internationally acclaimed popular novel from Africa, Gaile Parkin's *Baking Cakes in Kigali* (2009), to explore the ways the customary cultural demarcation between "highbrow" and "lowbrow" literature, between entertainment and critique, can be blurred so as to enable more efficacious interventions, whether conceptually or pedagogically, into the complexities of contemporary African societies. The article begins by interrogating the immensely suggestive paradigm of "entanglement" (Mbembe and Nuttall) with a view to proposing more adequate images of sociopolitical complexity via the notion of "folding" (Deleuze and others). It then offers examples of such modified paradigms by looking at the generic ambiguity of Parkin's novel, matched by the complex strategies it brings to bear on such fraught and intractable issues as FGM. The article suggests that this fusion of lightweight and serious, popular and conceptually challenging, is both an index of contemporary sociopolitical complexity in Africa and the site of the text's purchase on that very complexity.

In Gaile Parkin's popular novel *Baking Cakes in Kigali* (2009), one of the characters is prevented from taking part in the Kigali-based book circle he has initiated because his brother has just died of AIDS: "it's me who is unable to come! . . . Everybody has managed to read *Things Fall Apart*, even though we have only one copy, and we're all ready to discuss it. But I've just received news that my brother in Byumba is late [i.e., deceased]" (207). In this micro-reading-public or mini-public-sphere (compare During 41) that has formed around the classic African novel, things appear to be falling apart: the initiator of the group absents himself and the other members "say they don't want to have the meeting without me because

the club was my idea, and it's my book" (Parkin 207–08). Trivial as this anecdote may seem, it is nonetheless a significant parable about the way a micro-society coheres or disintegrates around a literary text. This occurs in a novel, Parkin's *Baking Cakes*, that is concerned with the way a collectively traumatized post-genocide society may coalesce anew around micro-groupings and concomitant everyday acts. When Eileen Julien writes, "most Euro-language African writers have used the novel as a site to reconstruct the past and project, sometimes by implication, potential or imagined futures, even in the most scandalous dystopias" (681), one could recursively and metatextually fold her statement back into Parkin's novel here simply by supplementing "writers" with "readers." No African literary text can cite Achebe's foundational and still-unique classic ("we have only one copy") without interrogating its own place within the varied cultural networks and negotiations of postcolonial societies on the continent (Newell 95–97). Thus, Parkin's own internal vignette clearly gestures toward her novel's possible role in the post-catastrophe reconstruction of traumatized societies after things have fallen apart . . . and where things perhaps keep on falling apart, as evinced by the reference to AIDS.

The vignette portrays a group that, precisely because it shares only one book, appears to be as fragile as it is unified. Gathered around one text, its coherence and its momentary collapse appear to be two sides of the same coin. In this article I meditate on the notion of the "one copy," understood not simply as a scarce resource or marginalized medium, but also as the singular site of agonistic forces. For such literary texts appear to combine within themselves, like the societies they inhabit, a multiplicity of sometimes contradictory, indeed hostile, tendencies. The "one copy" is indeed such an example of undecidability between multiplicity and fusion: how can a copy, that assumes at least two texts, be singular? Such multiple-singular literary texts are positioned, I posit, both inside and outside the societies of which they provide vignettes, societies that also contain varying, even counterpoised, regimes that segue into each other and thus resist analysis in the etymological sense of the term. But only confrontations with such blurred structures and their "fuzzy" logics are likely to offer any purchase on the complexity of contemporary African realities.

In this article I begin by interrogating the immensely suggestive paradigm of "entanglement" with a view to proposing more adequate images of sociopolitical complexity; I then instantiate such modified paradigms by analyzing the generic complexity of Parkin's *Baking Cakes in Kigali*, before concluding with a detailed reading of a specific episode of the novel where such (con)textual complexity can be seen at work. I suggest that the fusion of lightweight and serious, popular and conceptually challenging, which differentiate Parkin's ostentatiously "lowbrow" novel from more obviously "highbrow" works such as Diop's *Murambi* (2000), Gourevitch's *We Wish to Inform You That Tomorrow We Will Be Killed with Our Families* (1999), or Tadjó's *The Shadow of Imana* ([2000] 2002) (see Eaglestone; Hitchcott; Masterson) is both an index of sociopolitical complexity and the site of the text's purchase on that self-same complexity.

## AFRICAN ENTANGLEMENTS

It is within the broader context of things falling apart, and the theoretical and fictional topoi that may aid in understanding social collapse and offering possible antidotes, that I wish to read Parkin's text. One powerful account of social entropy on the continent is given by Achille Mbembe in his important study *On the Postcolony* (2001) and in a subsequent series of significant articles. Mbembe's account is by no means the only persuasive narrative in the African social sciences, but I employ it here for the central figure of "entanglement" that it deploys. In his ongoing enquiry, Mbembe has presented a complex analysis of the contemporary state of many African polities, which can be summarized as follows. The structural adjustment programs of the 1980s to the 1990s destabilized the politics of distribution of wealth that the post-independence states employed to deal with the legacy of colonization. As the twinned pressures of state-dismantlement and rising debt eroded state institutions and resources—a trend exacerbated by the end of Cold War patronage from 1990 on (see for instance also Piot 30–44)—African subjects found themselves increasingly cast into situations of long-term precarity. Sources of financial security became ever scarcer, employment had to be sought at ever greater distances, resources such as oil/petroleum, minerals, or tourism developed into privatized enclaves out of the public domain, while alongside them, informal economies and criminality flourished. In the place of the rule of law, something more akin to the rule of war came to represent the norm in many parts of Africa, with an increasing militarization of politics and of social interactions directly connected to the extraction of resources. Military rule without political checks and balances, that is, war as the definitive form of politics, increasingly became the norm. Politics in the guise of war revealed itself as the capacity to bring death to large populations.

Mbembe's analysis, sustained and supplemented over more than a decade (most recently in *Critique de la raison nègre*, esp. 12–17), presents a complex but convincing narrative of many facets of African polities today. Despite the abstraction of his language, Mbembe's account makes for grim reading when combined with on-the-ground knowledge of the reality of everyday life in many African societies. His diagnoses—and his prognoses (Mbembe, "On Politics as a Form of Expenditure" 311)—may appear unrelentingly pessimistic in tenor, but they are driven by the imperative to present the complexities of social process in Africa in contrast to stereotypical negation (*On the Postcolony* 1–9). Moreover, his analyses do not preclude a militant defense of human dignity and a strident call for ongoing transformation, for instance, in the context out of which his most recent work arises, South Africa (Mbembe, "Rule of Property versus Rule of the Poor?").

Mbembe identifies three distinct regimes of politics in Africa today: the rule of law, the logic of immunity, and the necropolitical giving of death (Mbembe, "On Politics as a Form of Expenditure" 312–26). He specifies that these three regimes may be "at times distinct, at times mutually entangled, at time superimposed" (Mbembe, "Necropolitics" 13). South Africa epitomizes this entanglement. The new Republic of South Africa exemplifies the more-or-less peaceful and more-or-less successful transition to a democratic rule of law, with periodic elections, the separation of powers, and a system of constitutional appeal. Yet both governmental rhetoric and popular groundswell have identified citizenship with exclusionary

models (see for instance Chipkin) that found expression in entrenched sexism and sexual violence (Jolly) and the racist violence that erupted after the World Cup in 2009. And the power to give death has been expressed sporadically in police violence such as the killings of fifty striking miners at Marikana in 2012 (Alexander, Lekgowa, Mmope, Sinwell, and Xezwi; Saul and Bond).

An even more striking instance of this entanglement, whether temporal, ethnic/racial, or otherwise, is presented by Rwanda, where genocide was committed against the minority Tutsis in 1994, against a historical background of earlier violence, and with repercussions that drew neighboring countries into its orbit. In modern Rwanda, all three modes of political organization (the logic of immunity and the giving of death during the three-month period of genocide and the subsequent quasi-democratic order after 1994) appear to be entangled both temporally and systemically, albeit in different forms, with each other (e.g., Burnett; Vandenginste). I turn my attention here to Rwanda because it appears to embody in the most acute form possible many of Africa's pressing problems. In what follows, I will focus on the issues epitomized by the Rwandan crisis and the subsequent work of reconstructing a functioning multi-ethnic polity via the optic of Parkin's *Baking Cakes in Kigali*. In that text, I suggest, a number of categories (genre, themes, narrative strategies) index, at a formal level, the complexities of contemporary African polities.

However, in this article, I propose a critique and a modification of Mbembe's notion of entanglement and an exemplification of the ways that modification might be instantiated in Parkin's text. Mbembe's topos of entanglement, despite its heuristic potential, appears inadequate to describe the imbrications of the three regimes of politics enumerated above. The notion of entanglement is introduced by Mbembe in *On the Postcolony* to describe the interactions of various apparently contradictory temporal regimes in the life of postcolonial polities (14, 16). Sarah Nuttall provides an extensive genealogy of the term, tracing its ramifications across a network of implications and connections not only temporal, but also geopolitical, ethical, and racial in nature (1–12). The notion of entanglement possesses remarkable scope and explanatory power, as indexed by the proliferation of cognates. Thus, Leon de Kock's suggestive and influential notion of the "seam" presupposes separate fabrics stitched together (275–77). Lacan/Miller/Green's cognate notion of the "suture" also tends toward disparity—in significant contrast, Spivak's usage of "suture" assumes a single fabric that has been torn asunder and needs to be rewoven (Macdonald 47, 51–52). In the same way, Burgin's Freudian notion of "brecciated time" (and by association space) (Burgin 179–275) also assumes a layered mineral reef, according to Freud, "composed of various fragments of rock held together by a binding medium" (qtd. in Burgin 248). Even Ki-Zerbo's suggestive indigenous African concept of "la natte" (woven matt) is conjugated by the qualifying "des autres," meaning non-indigenous models of development that should be kept at bay as opposed to more appropriate indigenous knowledges (vii, viii); woven entanglement is deployed merely to preface disentanglement. These examples show how widespread and influential the notion of entanglement and its cognates have been in contemporary cultural studies, both in Africa and elsewhere. There may be considerable heuristic merit in such figures—they assume that an entangling of putative differences can and has taken place and thus affords a basis for analyses of social realities that assume rather than resist complexity.

The notion of entanglement is not unproblematic, however, to the extent that it appears to describe complex connections between putatively separate entities. These entities may, however, be in fact fluidly joined to one another, rather than merely intertwined, in which case the image of entanglement loses its purchase. Entanglement, then, does not go far enough because it does not begin radically enough. Entanglement, I submit, is a topos that, though powerful, remains trapped within a logic, albeit attenuated, of binaries and oppositions. As such it lacks the full range of explanatory power it appears to promise and thus may provide an inadequate platform for formulating perspectives for transformation.

## FIGURES OF FOLDED FUSION

In place of the notion of “entanglement” we need to seek concepts, as yet hardly invented, that neither refuse the human tendency to separate, categorize, and polarize, nor elide the fundamental indistinctions and blurrings (from metabolic processes to signifying regimes and other symbiotic dynamics) without which those putative entities would not exist in the first place.

Early on in *Baking Cakes in Kigali*, in an episode that exemplifies such complexities, Parkin’s characters pay a visit to a memorial to the Rwandan genocide at Gikongoro. Their reactions vary widely as they attempt to write a comment in the visitors’ book upon departure. Pius, the protagonist’s husband, echoing a common trope within trauma studies (e.g., Caruth; LaCapra), finds himself more than inarticulate: “My thoughts were still lying dead with the people in those classrooms. I could not rouse them to form a sentence.” Another colleague comments, “I saw that I was going to have to write my name and my country of origin. It was a struggle for me to remember that I am Dr Yoosuf Binaisa from Uganda” (75). The Rwandan Gasana says, “Do you think I even know what I wrote . . . ? All the feelings inside me flooded out onto the page. They went straight from my heart to the pen without passing through my head” (75–76). The pages of the visitors’ book form an interface in which a porosity between a place of horror and the horror of place is made manifest. The selves are emptied, their affects poured into the site via the page; in return, the “unusually quiet” atmosphere of the site inhabits them in turn with “a deep and impenetrable silence” that only leaves the visitors behind when they travel on through Nyungwe Forest (70, 74). But the ramifications extend beyond the place-trauma-subjectivity nexus. Binaisa is capable of writing nothing but “Never again”; references to the same injunction seen by Pius at the death camps in Germany when he was undertaking postgraduate study (76) link the Rwandan genocide to a global complex of histories of such atrocities. Given the colonial genealogies of the Rwandan genocide (see for instance Mamdani, *Citizen and Subject, When Victims Become Killers*; Strauss), these complexes are historically and geopolitically interfused.

How to articulate this intermingling of history, place, affect, subjectivity, and text (whether the one in the story or the one we are reading)? The book itself suggests an appropriate figure. In the final chapter, the Hutu-Tutsi couple Leocadie and Modeste are married in the novel’s emblematic topos of reconciliation. The celebration takes place in the courtyard of a bar where Tutsi victims took refuge and the Hutu proprietor saw her family murdered. Protected by a makeshift tarpaulin, borrowed plastic chairs and tables and a long table for the bride and

groom are set up under the washing lines strung across the courtyard: “the lines themselves would be draped with loose folds of white muslin” (341). The “folds” index the interfusion of outdoor and indoor, of poverty and decoration, of tradition and improvisation; and more generally, of past and present, genocide and reconciliation, tragedy and celebration, and, of course, via the white linen sheets, of literary text and social context.

Though we customarily think of books, like oral narratives, as linear entities, they are actually folded structures whose pages are subsequently (with rare exceptions) cut (terms such as *quarto*, *octavo*, or *duodecimo* traditionally refer to the number of segments created by successive foldings of a single sheet). The obverse and reverse faces of the pages consequently defy easy binarization into inside and outside. Thus, the notion of the fold is a promising means of conceptualizing such complexities (and could in turn be “folded” into de Kock’s “seam”—or Lacan’s “suture”—imagery). Combined with a notion of “fractal” folds-within-folds (Deleuze 5, 8), “pliancy” might offer a suggestive way of eluding the persistent contagions of binarism inherent in the notion of entanglement. Folds offer a more complex enhancement of entanglements that are echoed elsewhere in the social sciences today, for instance in Urry’s distinction between “global networks” and “global fluidity” (Urry, *Global Complexity*). Indeed, the shift to fluidity and constant change, once expressed by Marx and Engels’s famous dictum that “all that is solid melts into air” (83) and taken by Berman to epitomize the experience of modernity itself (87–104), appears to characterize contemporary society (Lury, Parisi, and Terranova 4–5) and all the more so Africa as the vanguard of late-modern capitalist change (Commaroff and Commaroff 12).

“Really, this was becoming too complicated,” Parkin’s protagonist Angel thinks to herself in one instantiation of a reiterated topos of complexity (113). Com-pli-cation, like com-pli-city (Sanders 9, 11) etymologically connotes a folded-togetherness in which differences and/or similarities are produced by ripples, waves, loops, or torquing of structures that are acknowledged as being fundamentally continuous. Such figures, arising out of the scientific-philosophical disciplines of chaos, catastrophe, or complexity theory (Cilliers; Gleick; Thom; Urry, “The Complexity Turn”; Woodcock and Davis), would permit theorizations of the manner in which natural and perhaps social structures and configurations evolve from novelty to novelty in a process of “emergence” (Coole and Frost 12–15). Though it would seem at first glance that scientific theories cannot be directly translated into social processes, recent materialist or vitalist concepts (Barad; Bennett; Bonta and Protevi; Capra and Luisi) assume a continuum of the natural and social worlds in which all processes are part of a complex whole.

To return to the example of Rwanda, it would seem that images of fused and indistinguishable identity-distinction, given concrete form in such concepts of folding, might offer a better way of conceptualizing the horrific events of the one hundred days of 1994, their colonial and post-independence origins, and their aftermath. The logic of immunity and the giving of death were not two entwined phenomena but indistinguishable aspects of the same operation. Similarly, it is more than likely that these two phenomena subsist as fundamental constitutive, if muted, realities within the putatively democratic and non-ethnic regime of post-genocide Rwanda, where ethnic labeling has persisted in less obvious ways and a residual rhetoric of (internal) expulsion subsists within the judicial apparatus

(Burnett; see also Buckley-Zistel). Consequently, it is possible that in the face of such interfused complexities, “folding” itself as an aesthetic strategy may be an appropriate means of confronting trauma and its ongoing confusion with social life (Lundborg). Even the image of folding, however, may be folded on itself to reveal not merely the working-through of traumatic pasts in the present, but the perpetuation of segregatory biopolitics (Handelman).

Parkin’s *Baking Cakes in Kigali* instantiates just such a fusion of contradictory regimes of politics not merely in the portrait it offers of everyday life in post-genocide Rwanda, but more significantly in its generic and formal characteristics, which constantly blur customary distinctions. The text proposes ways to continue living on after the cataclysm of 1994. It does so in a context of a political regime of democracy that contains, fused within itself, an ongoing logics of immunity and a muted necropolitics. It is therefore appropriate, within that context, that the proposals the text makes are embodied in its hybrid form and its simultaneous modes of address to multiple audiences.

## PARKIN’S COMPLEXITY

Parkin’s text addresses issues that are complicated to such an extent that they eschew “disambiguation.” The text itself, however, displays similarly fused characteristics. *Baking Cakes in Kigali* is a “folded” mix of popular and more complex (not to say high) cultural genres, of pragmatic and idealist ethical assumptions, written by an author who is both African-born and somehow non-indigenous, designed for local, global, and “glocal” reading publics.

The most intriguing aspect of Parkin’s novel is precisely one that initially appears to make it uninteresting for literary analysis: its popular “lowbrow” genre. (It is doubtless for this reason that the novel has received, to the best of my knowledge, no serious academic attention to date.) The story revolves around a Tanzanian couple, Angel and Pius, who are in Rwanda to help with the reconstruction of the country after the 1994 genocide. Pius teaches development technology at the Kigali Institute of Science and Technology; Angel has a small business making cakes for customers from their expat compound, colleagues from KIST, and acquaintances from the neighborhood. The action centers on Angel’s discussions with her cake customers and the glimpses we gain from their conversations into the everyday dramas of expatriate workers from the USA, the UK, Egypt, Ghana, Uganda, Kenya, Tanzania, and South Africa, as well as locals from Kigali and elsewhere in Rwanda. The names of the protagonists (and their grandchildren Grace, Faith, and Benedict) reveal a crypto-Christian subtext of redemption. The names are also an index of the somewhat sentimental and trite character of the self-help narrative and its do-gooder, if gently humorous, tone. Even non-academic press reviews of the novel note that “[a]t times (notably tea times) it has a coy and formulaic feel to its description of domestic life” (Williams). Local readers appear however to value the fact that the “book is humorous and easy to read” (Odoobo). Published by Atlantic/Grove in the UK, by Random House imprints Bantam and Delacorte in the US, and distributed in Africa by Penguin, the book has had solid global success in various paperback prints and has been translated widely.

Parkin’s *Baking Cakes in Kigali* is clearly to be categorized as mass-consumption fiction, yet it defies easy pigeon-holing with respect to both parts of this

composite classification. First, the category of “fiction” reaches its limits in this text. At times the novel reads like a compendium of topical issues of relevance to contemporary African societies. One has the impression of reading a primer in the “dialectic of opportunities and constraints” in African polities today (Sindjoun). The list of topics addressed is long. First and foremost among them, AIDS, genocide, and war (including the issue of child soldiers), followed by reconciliation, retributive justice, development, NGOs, the IMF and the World Bank, small volunteer and grass-roots initiatives, women’s development and entrepreneurial self-help, home-grown small-scale “bricolage” technology and “indigenous knowledge,” new forms of family solidarity (especially in the wake of the AIDS mortalities), multilingualism, traditionalism/modernity (including feminism and homosexuality), rural exodus and urban poverty, and so on. Parkin’s novel teeters on the verge of becoming an *NGO-roman à clef*.

Second, it resists easy corraling into the “popular mass-consumption” category. As is often the case in African cultural production, the distinction between popular and high cultural genres becomes blurred. From Onitsha Market literature to hardboiled Nairobi crime fiction, popular literature has often evinced a preoccupation with broader social issues (Griffiths 95–105; Ogude and Nyairo). Similarly, such fiction has often displayed a willingness to experiment with form, whether it be in modes owing something to modernism (as in Mwangi, Maillu, or Mangua) or postmodernism (from Okri to Nichol to Marechera) or in its ongoing affiliation with traditional modes of oral literary communication (Taban lo Liong, Otok p’Bitek).

Thus, though *Baking Cakes* makes for relatively easy reading, as a result of its one-character-per-chapter structure and its often stereotypical use of a pseudo-ethnic register of language (“late” is consistently used rather than “deceased,” for instance, and the South African characters say “Ja” and “Eish”), there are several respects in which the text presents a more complex approach to the above-mentioned issues.

First, the smooth surface of the simple narrative line and realist style is unobtrusively underpinned by recurring motifs (for instance, Angel’s habit of cleaning her spectacles whenever confronted with ethical conundrums), which often in turn link up with more hidden patterns of metaphor (for example, “seeing” and “not seeing” as epistemological and semiotic complexes, to which I will return below). The putative banality of its central theme, baking cakes for various sorts of family festivities, transpires to be anything but trivial (compare Morris 14, 40–41). Baking for the family conceals significant cultural operations, from the transition of raw to cooked (Lévi-Strauss) through to the creation of objects that have no immediate use-value but a high value in terms of symbolic and social exchange-value: one character, Thérèse, whom Angel teaches to bake, contrasts cakes with tomatoes, “a cake is a very special thing” (201). Typically, one of Angel’s cakes serves as a catalyst for a grassroots English-teaching initiative (204): the cake generates language, communication, and dialogue, fusing various forms of orality from the physical to the symbolic and semiotic (see Ellmann). More significantly, Angel’s sitting-room cake-order discussions with her customers serve as the main context for their narrations; in this way, the cakes serve a structuring purpose within the diegetic process of the narrative.

Second, while the broad framework of the novel suggests a range of patent recipes for African socioeconomic problems (much as the plot hinges on baking



cakes of various shapes, sizes, and colors), the text frequently voices an underlying skepticism about its own cheerful optimism. The central cake-related plot-strand concerns the marriage of the Kigali locals Leocadie and Modeste, a cross-ethnic union that emblemizes the reconciliation between former enemies: "Perhaps it was even possible that members of Leocadie's family had personally killed members of Modeste's family" (151). But this marriage only comes about after Modeste's other girlfriend fails to bear him a son. It is the lack of prestige conveyed by the other union that allows the marriage to go ahead, so that post-genocide reconciliation appears to be premised on masculinist sexual license and feminine entrapment within its disempowering structures. As will become evident below, the text suggests that genocide and masculinist sexual violence may be intimately linked, so that the resolution of one aspect of the complex appears to be undermined by the maintenance of another facet of the self-same complex. Similarly, the central project of reconciliation is questioned, for instance, by one character from Ghana, who is supervising trials of Rwandan plotters at Arusha in Tanzania (224): "My job makes it very difficult for me to believe in reconciliation, even though I fully want to believe in it" (226). Elsewhere in the text, Pius wonders, meditating on the South African and Rwandan paradigms of "truth and reconciliation" and "unity and reconciliation," "Could not truth make reconciliation impossible. . . . Was unity possible in the absence of truth?" (295). In this way the novel's possibly all-too-flippant take on "AIDS and genocide lite" (Aaronson) appears to gain a more considered, even skeptical, level of meaning.

I enumerate these blurrings of the high-culture/popular-culture divide because they are located in a contemporary literary text that appears to have (by the standards of what is an increasingly post-book age) a relatively high degree of readership. In Africa, even more than elsewhere, books are rapidly becoming ever more marginal and literary reading practices are on the verge of vanishing from the repertoire of cultural practices. Diop refers to "the crisis of the book in Africa" (Diop, *L'Afrique* 205–06, my translation); Cole comments, "The Nigerian literacy rate is low. . . . But worse, actual literary habits are inculcated in very few of the so-called literate. I meet only a small number of readers" (42). In these virtually bookless societies, the issue of the purchase (in both senses of the word) of "engaged" literary production is a pressing one. Because a text such as Parkin's may reach large numbers of readers, it has a significant role to play, on the one hand, in the mediation of attitudes toward contemporary challenges for African politics and, on the other, in the imagination of possible strategies for confronting them. Two issues, however, complicate this relevance.

First, for whom is the text intended? Is it yet another example of the exploitation of African raw (cultural) material for primarily Euro-American consumption (Ahmad 45), whether it be angled toward entertainment or "information?" Is this text, like so many others, an exemplar of "extroverted" African writing (Julien 681–82)? Or is it addressed to Africans both inside and outside of Africa? (compare Newell 96–97, 110–12, 166–67). This, however, merely begs the question of how exactly an African addressee is to be defined. How could the nature of such readerships be determined, apart from geographical sales figures, which might not be very informative anyway (I bought my copy of the book in an international airport bookshop)? Such issues may not necessarily dent the legitimacy of the text's undertaking, but they may alter the form of its axiological significance.

A second, related complex is the question of authorship and its concomitant “authority of authenticity” (Hall 261). Is Parkin a genuinely African writer? Born and raised in Zambia, educated in South Africa and the UK, and travelling on a British passport (Anstey; Greene; Hannau), Parkin “lives in Africa” (Parkin, author blurb on half-title) and says of herself, “I’m not British, my passport is; I am African” (Anstey). Holding at bay the multiple specters of ethnic essentialism (Chipkin), identity-politics embodiment (Gupta), concomitant debates about white African-ness (Matthews), or more generally about originary authorship (Foucault 127–29), all of which threaten to invade the discussion at this point (see also Newell 186–89), I wish to pose the question of the authority to speak from within a historical tradition and to address a specific sociopolitical and -economic problematic. “Who . . . in the face of endless arrivals and departures is placed to tell . . . African stories?” enquires Michael Titlestad pointedly (184). The text itself edges around the issue by focalizing Rwandan questions through the critical consciousness of a Tanzanian from just across the border (337)—thereby however foregrounding an alternative “Afropolitan” paradigm of “a fundamental connection to an elsewhere” (Nuttall and Mbembe 32; Mbembe and Nuttall 351). In summary, how do the complex configurations of place of birth, cultural affiliation or self-identification, professional trajectories, and place(s) of residence/intervention/publication/reception impact the text’s capacity to plausibly propose models for the transformations of African polities? (Such questions could equally legitimately be posed regarding the critical stance that I, in my turn, as a researcher straddling the African and European academies, assume in voicing such interrogations.)

The issues dealt with by the text, its place within global literary circulation, and the potential role of literature are too significant, given the vulnerability of literary culture today, to abandon artistic reflection to the beleaguered island of high-cultural *belles lettres* with its miniscule and shrinking elite audience, or to capitulate to potential caveats about inauthenticity or political incorrectness. It is for this reason that it may be salutary to turn a critical gaze upon an (apparently) much-read but little-studied text such as Parkin’s *Baking Cakes*. Her work embodies an “interfolded” zone of popular literary style and genre combined with unobtrusive conceptual complexity and literary devices, voiced from a simultaneously local and extraterritorial perspective. It thus exemplifies a promising fusion between the “singularity of literature” (Attridge 1–13) unharnessed from ideological causes and an unfashionable but socially responsive “didacticism” (Jameson 50), which may have a vital role to play in contemporary cultural and educational work in or around Africa.

## CUTTING THE CAKE

Within Parkin’s text and its focus on domestic cuisine, the humble christening, confirmation, birthday, or wedding cake becomes the privileged site of surprisingly complex epistemological operations. In the concluding section of this article I focus on one particularly suggestive episode of cake-related celebration where a host of thematic problematics and formal devices of irrevocably fused complexities are performatively investigated.

In the penultimate chapter, strategically placed just before the concluding wedding between Leocadie and Modeste, Angel is asked to bake a cake to celebrate

the “circumcision” (more accurately, female genital mutilation, FGM) of the pre-adolescent daughter of her Somali neighbors. The apposition of these two episodes works to suggest that issues of genocide and various types of sexual violence or violent sexuality are linked together in a single complex. First, the “cutting of a girl” (307) is implicitly related to the atrocities of genocide. Odile, the nurse who is to assist in the ritual FGM, has herself survived the genocide only severely mutilated: “In the genocide they cut her with a machete in her parts, her woman’s parts” (279). Furthermore, AIDS, as a virus transmitted both via sexual activity and genetic transmission, which is responsible for taking a toll on African populations of genocidal proportions, is associated also with cutting. Angel and Pius are raising their three grandchildren because they have lost their daughter and son to AIDS: “So when Joseph brought his children to us in Dar . . . and he told us that AIDS had come to his house . . . it sliced through my heart like a machete” (94). FGM is thus contextualized, via the text’s plot structure and metaphorical networks, within a larger fused complex of necropolitical practices.

In this context, how one mixes the ingredients for a circumcision cake and how one cuts it are of considerable importance for the ethical work the book seeks to do. Angel uses color-coded icing to articulate her confused reactions to her complicity in this custom. Using red and green icing, she initially decides to use the intertwined ying-yang pattern suggested by her neighbor Ken, who claims for this figure a “universal” validity as a symbol of “balance” (146). “In truth, she had been so confused about her feelings about what the cake was for that she had felt the need to apply Ken Akimoto’s ying-yang symbol to the idea” (330). Curiously, however, Angel decides to place this symbol inside the cake, rather than on its decorative surface, an oddity that indexes the subterfuge that will be subsequently revealed, but also the principle of inseparable fusion of contradictories that the text espouses. But the entangled structure seems inadequate to symbolize the ethical conundrum Parkin’s protagonist finds herself in: “her feelings about the issue were too complicated to separate into yin and yang” (330). Sensitive to this sense of com-*pli*-cation, that is, folded-togetherness, Angel falls back instead on a pattern of concentric red and green circles:

So, starting with a red dot in the middle of the lower layer, she had piped concentric circles of green alternating with red. As she piped each green circle she had tried to think of positive things, such as the loyalty she felt towards her friend Amina [the Somali mother], and the importance of preserving cultural traditions. And with each red circle she had allowed herself to fret about things such as the oppression of women and the pain that Safiya [the daughter] was going to suffer. She had found the concentric design more interesting than the yin-yang symbol—and also more confusing, because each new red circle was bigger than any of the circles it enclosed and could therefore outweigh all the green circles inside it. She had been relieved—though not totally comforted—that the last circle to fit on the cake had been a green one. (330–31)

And indeed, the celebration of the ritual FGM does contain an inner-outer, surface-depth, appearance-reality structure that ultimately fuses so as to permit a reconciliation of the preservation of tradition and the alleviation of women’s oppression without imposing the necessity of a violent in/*cision* or a binary de/*cision* between the two.

Amina's husband has had all the female participants of the ritual swear on the Qur'an to silence about their action (319–20) thus allowing, indeed obliging, them to deceive him about what, it transpires, is a case of simulated FGM. Safiya's finger is pricked, bloody swabs are produced, and the husband is allowed to believe that the operation has been conducted *in camera*: "Vincenzo has asked us not to tell him the truth. . . . Vincenzo himself made us swear that we will tell *nobody* what happened here. If we tell him, then we'll be breaking the oath that we swore on the Holy Qu'ran" (327). True to form, the husband, who does not see the (non)operation, but only the indexical signs of a putative FGM (compare West-Pavlov, *Spatial Representations* 39–41), sees what he wants to believe he is seeing. This self-deception is in accord with a repeating topos throughout the novel about seeing and not-seeing or "unseeing" (45, 74, 85). In this moment, the text performs an *Aufhebung* of tradition: both a preservation and a cancellation at the same time. The attending doctor explains this gesturally:

"Now you can tell people that your daughter has been *circumcised*," Dr Rejoice made quotation marks in the air with her fingers. . . . "When you do that with your fingers, they think that you mean that *circumcised* is not the right word for what happened to your daughter because female genital mutilation is nothing like the circumcision of a boy. But really your fingers will mean that it did not happen." (327)

Any statement about the putative FGM performed by the women will henceforth be a paradoxical *honest-lie*, a "truth." The italics and the quotations marks in the air are similar to the diacritics (punctuation, spacing, etc.) discussed by Derrida: they make meaning happen, but they are not of the order of the semantic structure of linguistic words (Derrida 133). They are crucial for inflecting the meaning of the discourse, yet they can only be seen in written form (or in the gesture), not heard in the verbal discourse. To that extent they are both crucial to the order of meaning but are outside it. Their very functioning thus mimics the fusion of performance and non-performance of ritual, of preservation and cancellation of tradition, and of truth and lying.

Parkin's novel approaches in this equivocal manner the controversial issue of FGM, which embodies the undecidable zone between libertarian (often but not always Western) discourses of female oppression and culture-respecting discourses of local customary law and its preservation (see for example Gruenbaum; Hosken; Rahman and Toubia; Shweder; Silverman; UNICEF). More broadly such aporetic controversies resonate with the topoi of "white men saving brown women" (Spivak 267ff, and more recently Abu-Lughod) and that of US-military regime change in the service of nominal democracy (see, for instance, Chomsky). Rather than attempting to untangle these fused issues (the spurious promise of disentanglement would be one of the problematic epistemological ramifications of the topos of entanglement) Parkin's text complicates these issues even further. Such over-determined complications are created for instance, as indicated above, by shifting FGM into the realm of genocide and AIDS. In this way, the text repeatedly focuses readerly attention on borders and their spurious demarcations: AIDS respects no borders and Angel is treated as a foreigner even though she hails from a nearby Tanzanian town that was part of the same socio-geographical region

prior to the imposition of colonial borders (11, 337). Here ethical and epistemological issues are deliberately blurred in a way that is intimately connected to an implicit repudiation of the (constructed) ethnic demarcations underlying the genocide (272–73).<sup>1</sup>

The novel, deceptively accessible and almost facile in its central domestic topoi of baking, episodic cake-based structure, and character-based narrativization, thus contains an approach to ethical complexes that defy any attempt at disentanglement. It epitomizes the approach to social complexity espoused by the late Paul Cilliers in a post-apartheid South African context: the imperative to respect and work within extant ethical norms, with the proviso that the ethical mandate they contain may entail their suspension or infringement, without any final recourse to definitive ethical certainty (Cilliers 119–23, 136–40).

Parkin's text may not be an enduring classic. Nonetheless, it is certainly an exemplar of local cultural production (albeit marketed within global publishing circuits) and of "appropriate [narrative] technology" (335) that performs a version of epistemological "bricolage" apposite to its African context—not unlike the half-full Fanta bottle that serves as a spirit-level to help Thérèse set up business with a hand-me-down oven (200). Such "bricolage," as the coiner of the term made clear (Lévi-Strauss 16–22), involves an immanent, site-specific interplay between material structure and social agency that eminently describes the interfolded complexities of African polities today. In order to exemplify such complexes, I opened this article with a vignette from Parkin's novel in which a nascent reading-group in Kigali stands or falls around "one copy" of Achebe's *Things Fall Apart* and the AIDS-related demise of the initiator's brother (207–08). The self-reflexive recursivity of Parkin's vignette reminds one of the metatextual *mise-en-abyme* at the close of Achebe's hitherto predominantly realist novel; her vignette also gestures at the undecidability between coherence and collapse. But more significantly, it indexes the ways in which the building blocks of a civic society may, among other everyday practices, be focalized in the residual techniques of critical reading and text-centered discussion. At the same time, the self-reflexivity of Parkin's knowing gesture toward Achebe's prior metatextuality also constitutes an instance of "recursive structuration" in Giddens's sense of the term (69): the interface between structure and agency out of which social futures are made. It is in the dialogical work of reading and discussion that a society can reflect on its practices and transform itself within the depths of complexity.

Simon During tellingly refuses to situate the main task of cultural studies (which could be regarded as a disciplinary analogue for the literary-studies or more generally African-studies context in which *Baking Cakes* might be taught) as even an indirect intervention within cultural practices or political struggles themselves, despite common claims to that effect. Rather, he suggests, cultural studies (here, read: African literary studies) should be understood as an institutionally embedded educational practice in which "activists, academics and students can meet, and where a pedagogy based on self-reflective dialogue among students and teachers provides an example of a well-functioning public sphere" (During 41). Parkin's novel is an example of a text that might serve ideally in such a pedagogical process. With its seamless, folded-fused combination of accessibility and complexity, facility and challenge, it provides an appropriate text for teaching and reflecting in classroom "public spheres" both in African educational institutions

and elsewhere (the double context from which I myself speak). Beyond the simple classroom discussion of content, it asks questions about the social contexts of which the classroom itself is both form and content (see Allan; Emenyonu; West-Pavlov, ““(Mis)Taking the Chair,”” *Transcultural Graffiti*, “Pedagogical Memory and the Space of the Classroom”). The text’s formal properties evince a complex and interfolded mix of non-complexity and complexity and just that blurred structure renders it particularly relevant for learning to negotiate contemporary African complexities, from within or without.

## NOTES

1. Folded into this complex is one that counterbalances it with a grotesque/carnivalesque sexuality/eating nexus, exemplified in a comical linguistic confusion between “condoms” and “cardamoms” (269–71) and in other passages about the abject linkages between eating and rubbish disposal (299, 302–03), between eating and excretion (72), and between sewage and recycling (71–73).

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