

theories and
methodologies

Ato Quayson's *Oxford Street, Accra*: Tracing Autobiographical Narrative in Analytical Method

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IN HIS FASCINATING STUDY OF ACCRA, ATO QUAYSON QUICKLY ALERTS HIS READER TO THE IDEA THAT ONE MUST NOT SEPARATE WAYS OF KNOWING Shakespeare from ways of knowing Accra. "Reading" the city as a literary critic, but much more, Quayson gives a discursive framework to his historical account of the material, social, and esoteric life of the city. Underlying the text is an implicit argument with other prominent accounts of African cities, which take a more utopian view and present these cities as mapping the innovative, exciting, and creative possibilities of urban space for the rest of the world. Quayson's mode of history is explicitly linked to storytelling in a number of ways beyond his disclosure that "[t]he retelling of Accra's story from a more expansive urban historical perspective is the object of *Oxford Street*" (4). From the start, it is also clear that his approach will utilize a broadly Marxian framework, which is to see (city) space in terms of the built environment as well as the social relations in and beyond it: "space becomes *both* symptom *and* producer of social relations" (5). But ultimately Quayson's apprehension of his city is Marxian because it recuperates ideas, desires, and creativity from the realm of the unique or inexplicable, of "genius," to effectively insert them into various systems of production or into spaces that lack them. In so doing Quayson enhances, not hinders, our appreciation of those forms of innovation. Also Marxian is his employment of the "negative," which refers to the way he splits apart many of the accepted relations between things in the scholarship on the development of the city, the postcolonial African city in particular, and pushes beyond the evidence of the "booming" or "creative" city. Quayson thus binds a more philosophical method of reasoning to his analysis of urban social relations while he straddles different disciplines. His work is illuminated when we locate a personal impulse, which we will track through the autobiographical narrative, to intervene not just in the ways the city is understood but also in the ways it is actually developing.

Although Quayson draws from geographers, urban scholars, and sociologists, among others, his literary sensibility marks his

most consequential statements and analytical moves. Thus, in admitting his account of the city is subjective, he writes that this “does not mean that it is private” (30).¹ He enlarges this account by shifting his own perspective, which reveals different preoccupations. That movement is playfully acknowledged when he writes:

To understand the city as a whole we are obliged to keep shifting our analysis to encompass the moving pieces of a geographic jigsaw puzzle, which, depending on which way we turn, divulges slightly different perspectives on urban space. This method of interpreting Accra is much like what Chinua Achebe recommends in *Arrow of God*: if the world is like a mask dancing, you cannot see it by standing still. (67)

The book is full of exciting and unexpected nuggets that sometimes allow us to read it like a mystery unveiling itself in the facts Quayson researches.

The layout of the city is traced in its geographic particularity with reference to a politics of land, of its ownership and claims to ownership, that contrasts with the planned development under colonialism. After the British purchased Christiansborg Castle from the Danish in 1850, the power of the Euro-African merchant princes declined as a more formalized British colonialism took hold. Focusing on the role of the mulatto school established in Christiansborg in 1722, and linking the development of the Osu district of Accra to a more stable economy that did not depend directly on harbor trade, Quayson’s account of urban development is wrested from the response-to-crises mode that typically characterizes that narrative. Here, there is space to contemplate the caboceer—a combination of trade captain, political leader, and diplomat liaising between the Europeans on the coast and the Akan traders from the hinterland (102). The caboceer, having no formal allegiance to any single European power, was

a cosmopolitan, engaging with different peoples, navigating languages and customs, and translating values across borders. A caboceer from Osukodu seems to have given the name Osu to the town that contains the part of Cantonments Road now called Oxford Street. That type of cosmopolitanism is harnessed in the service of Quayson’s discussion of the “transnational” visible in Accra today.

Quayson begins by remedying some problems he identifies in contemporary Africanist urban scholars’ work. For example, because AbdouMaliq Simone does not provide sufficient examples to ground his theorizations, “his overall process of argumentation obscures the relations of complicity and overlaps between top and bottom that have constituted the African city” (8). Highlighting the uniqueness of the Accra markets, Quayson admonishes us not to be too quick to compare Oxford Street with other “postmodern transnational commercial boulevards” (12). Examples of local specificity,² for Quayson, make Oxford Street compare more convincingly with the commercial districts in other parts of Accra, such as “Makola, Kaneshi Market, Dansoman High Street, or Spintex Road, which nevertheless have their own distinctive characteristics” (14). This move exploits the power of comparison by restricting the analyses to Accra, thereby dislodging the more predictable mimesis of the former metropolises that Quayson rightly wants to interrupt. Instead of treating Oxford Street as a mere replica of the original metropolitan Oxford Street,³ Quayson keeps the sanctity of Accra’s specificity from being distorted through comparison. However, one result of this method is to allow Quayson to lose sight of the larger reach of the legacies of colonialism his novel study could signal because of the silence around substantive South-South comparisons. What would happen to the type of anecdotes Quayson takes up if one extended the understanding of spatial practice on Oxford Street not to “Accra in general,” as Quayson does (24; see also 30),⁴ but to other

postcolonial cities? For example, while arguing that in Makola Market “the distinction between informal commercial transactions on the street and the formalized routines that occur inside the shops and stores is completely blurred, whereas on Oxford Street the formal and informal remain sharply distinct” (28), Quayson may be ignoring his own recognizability as a citizen returned from abroad, one who has the means to pay mall prices and for whom haggling is out of the question. The rules may apply differently to “true” locals. This might emerge at least as a possibility or even as uniquely impossible in Accra Mall if a comparison of the pavement shops in, say, Janpat, in New Delhi, or Marché Colobane or Sandanga, in Dakar, were touched on.⁵ That said, these comparisons would be an obvious extension of Quayson’s research agenda, which, when established, could draw attention to a need in many fields, especially urban development, for increased South-South comparison and collaboration.

Recounting the Accra story is deeply autobiographical for the author, and the sustained attention he gives it represents a diasporic intellectual’s daring analytical gesture of turning back: daring because it cannot fail to be imbued with a sense of nostalgia. In retelling “this great African cosmopolis,” Quayson is not only gathering “the many parts of [him]self that have been lodged there, here, and elsewhere”; he is also retelling his own story as one that emerged from Accra’s history. As a narrator of the city, then, who is sometimes inadvertently narrating himself, Quayson arrives at his best insights from a formal and methodological accounting of the collusion between his story and the city’s, while a slippage between them sometimes allows for glosses in the analytical process. For example, Quayson’s recounting of a conversation between two upper-middle-class fourteen-year-old girls provides the basis for his delving into Accra’s Tabon community—Brazilian returnees who, although

assimilated to the Ga, maintain a sense of their different history. The author does not reveal how he was privy to this conversation: “At one of the top private schools in Accra a conversation takes place between two fourteen-year-old girls” (37). This presentation contrasts sharply with the way the “characters” who appear in the story are presented in other chapters, where Quayson carefully documents their lives and circumstances as well as his developing relationship to them. In pondering this anomaly, I was struck by the way in which form and content are consistently in harmony in this work.

In his discussion of multiculturalism, Quayson makes the point that it is established through colonial policies that distinguish among different groups and give them their status within the polity (55). Drawing from Will Kymlicka’s distinction between multiculturalism and multiethnicity, Quayson reiterates that multiculturalism involves “targeted policies” that affect autochthonous groups, substate actors, and immigrants (56). In Africa, he argues, the new states consistently resist multicultural accommodations (e.g., of the East Indians in East Africa or of the Lebanese in Ghana). Citing other examples, Quayson suggests that, in Africa, “migrants have never been placed under the rubric of multiculturalism despite the extensive history of migrant sojourns in different parts of Africa. They are all firmly ethnicized and subject to various forms of exclusion” (58). There is some confusion regarding what *ethnicize* means here, because it suggests a form of bureaucratic categorization and not an organic social (or anthropological) process. According to Quayson, “multicultural accommodations” (acknowledging what has been aggregated as cultural difference in a particular society, which one supposes would be called “ethnicization” in Quayson’s terms) occur through “informal cultural practices” and “in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries [are devised] through targeted laws

that protect the character of specific ethno-cultural identities.” Further, he writes that “[m]ultiethnicity lies in the domain of everyday life but almost never in that of specific policy accommodations, while the history of multiculturalism everywhere suggests that it is the product of policy as well as everyday practice, with policy taking precedence in shaping everyday attitudes to the multiethnic dynamic.” Yet we soon learn that “[i]n Ghana the realities of multiethnicity were first shaped by colonial policy, for British Indirect Rule, as we have already noted, was designed to install so-called customary laws as a key aspect of colonial governmentality at various levels” (59). We could clarify whether multiethnicity preexists multiculturalism and whether multiethnicity continues to operate in any verifiable way “after” multiculturalism. Quayson concludes that “in Africa it is ethnicity and not race that is the primary vehicle for the articulation of identity. Irrespective of where it is to be found, race is always converted into a mode of ethnicity” (60). This is substantiated by the fact that the various African terms used for Europeans—such as *obroni*, in Ghana—are ethnic markers because they basically refer to their identity as outsiders, not to their skin pigmentation (African Americans are also *obronis* in Ghana [60]).

In this analysis *ethnicity* becomes an empty signifier. What do African Americans and Caucasians have in common other than that they are both categorized as outsiders? It is not clear if the Tabon are ethnic in Ga culture the same way that visiting or recently returned African Americans are ethnic in Ghana. The chapter concludes, “Perhaps the one element that was to ensure their ultimate ethnicization is that the Tabon never managed to retain a grasp of the Portuguese language.” From what I understood of Quayson’s history of the Tabon, it seems that *assimilation* rather than *ethnicization* would clarify the process Quayson is referring to. Their “difference” lives on in their Afro-Brazilian

names, just as all assimilated communities in the world that were once the *obronis* of their society are distinguished by their names. Quayson concludes, “If we learn anything from the Tabon for our understanding of Accra, it is that they represent a mode of cultural hybridity that is easy to bypass due to their degree of apparent ethnic assimilation into Ga culture” (62). However, the Tabon were not studied or presented as an ethnic group, such that their “real” and enduring ethnicity might be contrasted with their “apparent ethnic assimilation.” When we return to the conversation that frames this discussion, the cursory reference to the two girls, which omits details such as who they are and the author’s interest in their class, seems to complement the less developed notion of ethnicity within that class in the chapter more generally. While positioning himself dynamically and analytically as insider and outsider, Quayson probes both underprivileged and highly privileged parts of his beloved city and its people. Thus, his omission of detail concerning the girls becomes a blind spot for a proper accounting of ethnicity.

Privileging the coexistence of the real and the esoteric and focusing on the Ghanaian realist novel’s notion of “sentimental education,” Quayson suggests that interiority is thwarted by the city itself. It is not quite true that in the realist novel the city space is an “inert and historical backdrop to the vicissitudes of characterization” (214). In Balzac, for example, the city itself can become a character, such as a woman or a fearsome machine; in Flaubert’s *Éducation sentimentale*, Frédéric desires Madame Arnoux through his imagination of the city, which is filtered through his desire. One question that might emerge is what formal alternative to the Western bildungsroman the Ghanaian (or African) novel develops that is ultimately specific to the African city. Though Quayson attributes to African orality the blurring of myth and realism that distinguishes Ghanaian realist

novels from their Western counterparts, he is surprisingly silent on this literature's relation to magical realism, of which he is something of an expert.⁶ Such a move might have facilitated another South-South dialogue.⁷

Quayson's chapter "Euro-Africans and the Transculturation of Osu," a study of the conditions in which the mixed-race community came into being, relies heavily on one secondary source.⁸ As a result, his characteristically brilliant insights into original documents and firsthand encounters are less conspicuous in this chapter. The history of the Ga that occupies much of the description also relies on others' studies. Quayson is unusually deferential in his treatment of these secondary sources and does not subject them to the kind of scrutiny he brings to his appraisal of the colonial archives or the work of urban studies scholars.⁹ In presenting mixed-race people as consummate hybrids who incarnated and performed "the transnational" long before today's Oxford Street came into existence, Quayson tends to move quickly over the circulation of African bodies into slavery, which accompanied the constitution of the hybrid class. What he presents as transnational in the social fabric he subliminally gives a utopian flavor in Accra's history, much as other critics reading African cities do to contemporary ephemera in the urban studies projects that Quayson takes to task. As a result, in this chapter the position of mixed-race people, who initiated and sustained "transnationalism" in Osu, is not interrogated through an examination of the metaphoric and real tunnels of slaves that they managed.¹⁰ Consequently, it is also not clear whether and how the Lebanese, who appear in the conclusion, are allied, analytically, to the mixed-race group that much of this chapter describes or if they should be understood (also) in the terms of "ethnicity" that the previous chapter on the Tabon suggested. The fact that the more recently arrived (and lighter-skinned) Lebanese are often seen as "outsiders," commercially

exploiting "native" Africans, could illuminate how we might reread the legacy of the mixed-race (Euro-African) population as both exploiting and constituting Accra. Deference to social histories and a modest approach to comparison that does not draw on the breadth of Quayson's expertise leave the reader wanting more of his sharp observations regarding the historical hybridity of Accra and what might have proved useful insights on this hybridity as it manifests itself in literature.

Then again, Quayson's enthrallment with his city equally leads to a delightful theorization of what he calls the "arc of enchantment," which brings together different "texts" that are literally inscribed in the streets: on billboards, on walls, and on motor and hand-pushed vehicles. Quayson deftly calibrates his argument by connecting the less grounded notion of self-fashioning that the city offers to the more pernicious, materialistic, and pervasive brand of Christianity that has come to dominate the imaginary of the Accra residents. Quayson begins more cautiously, stating that these signifying surfaces are "the nodal points of much wider discursive propositions" (133). While the images plastered on billboards and other large surfaces transport viewers to a world beyond Oxford Street, they mingle with local slogans and mottoes in what he calls "the invitation to enchanted self making" (134). Equally perspicacious is Quayson's underlying approach to this textual look at the street as one that studies the orientations of a contemporary culture to a world taken to be "in a state of flux" (135). Quayson meticulously prepares the way to discuss the increase in religious references in *tro-tros*' and other vehicles' slogans and especially of direct religious sentiment expressed in them to drive home the following point:¹¹ that these can only be properly understood when read alongside the "ideology of enchantment" that has "conclusively permeated the social imaginary as a whole" (151–52). This is a magnificent coup in his analytical method: "Both vehicular slogans and

billboard adverts overlap in the attribution of prosperity to personal choice and, more important, to the possibility of self making as an attribute of transnationalism, whether this is manifest as a feature of Christianity or of global capitalist consumption” (151–52). This dazzling way of reading the street texts dialectically is carried over into two other topics: the innovative story of salsa dancing and gym culture. In these discussions, Quayson’s own role, as narrator and participant in the conversations and interviews, is detectable in the narrative. In stark contrast to the two characters in the Tabon story, the dance instructors are lovingly presented by the narrator-author in the fullness of their characters on the salsa scene. Quayson himself seems to lament, with some of the veteran instructors, the commercialism that is injected into the organization of salsa dancing evenings, which now have to compete for space with other, more lucrative, enterprises. Once corporate sponsorships enter the picture, they poison the carefree yet dedicated spirit of salsa dancing. Quayson displays his ability to read the anecdotal beyond its status as such and to fold it into the structure of which it is indicative.

Quayson’s research into today’s Accra threw him into five-star hotels and swanky bars and malls as much as into the slums of Sodom and Gomorrah, Makola Market, and the fast-food restaurant Frankie’s on Oxford Street.¹² When Quayson makes the discerning claim that “this street [could be] the explicit materialization of the dream of prosperity invoked in the prayers of the evangelical churches themselves,” he might also be saying that this street is the most explicit materialization and mediation of his current self as something of an outsider and his former self as a child and then a young man born and raised in Accra.

The birthing of Oxford Street in Quayson’s narrative becomes a bold form of pastiche that transforms the text unobtrusively

but conclusively, mapping the *Bildung* of the unstated hero, the author-narrator, who educates himself about what it means to be a diasporic Ghanaian returning to the city of his youth and understanding colonial and precolonial legacies and the possibilities they offer him for understanding Accra today. His presence is sometimes implicit and sometimes explicit in the text, which contains snippets of biography (and often, against the grain, autobiography), suggestions of the short story, and flirtation even with mystery. But the presentation of Accra’s architecture also contains the unstated idea of pastiche: for instance, Quayson notes that Accra contains re-creations both of European towns and of towns and cantonments from elsewhere in the former British Empire. In literary parlance, pastiche does not contain the ironizing quality of parody. Quayson’s narrative consistently works toward the literarification of Oxford Street and its interpretation as a fragment of a totality that is Accra. He instinctively and correctly steers away from invoking architectural pastiche (which, especially in postmodern architecture, invokes irony [e.g., Petit]) to avoid the burden of implicit “lateness” that this would place on urban development in Accra. However, the corollary in the form of the narrative is found in less accounting of the narrative position and in its undertheorization. The more interesting accomplishment these glosses bring to light for me is the complete synchronization of method with content, which though here identified as a flaw actually proves to be one of Quayson’s great strengths as an intellectual.¹³

Quayson sets up his analysis of Accra (and Oxford Street in particular) by distinguishing it from, though allying it with, Rem Koolhaas’s positive and even celebratory reading of Lagos and Jean and John Comaroff’s take on the African city, in which the ephemeral phenomena resulting from inventiveness in everyday life are lauded (*Millennial Capitalism and Theory*). These approaches reject the highly pessimistic view of the decrepit global city

that permeates most other urban studies accounts of them. Turning to the way in which, for these critics, inventiveness is a product of unemployment and to the forms of recycling to which inventiveness is attributed, Quayson answers with his example of the *kòbòlò* (199–203). This and other loiterers' free time "is not the same as freedom," he states (248). For Quayson, then, these ephemeral activities are not recuperated into an essentially romantic view of African inventiveness in the urban context but are, rather, products of structure in, we might say, "the final instance." What Quayson proposes is not a simple critique of a particular proposition made by these urban critics. Rather, he provides a methodological revision of the means by which we integrate the study of what is assumed to be ephemera into our interpretations of material conditions and read the two domains for insights into processes and structure.¹⁴ Quayson provides a change in the methodology of managing the opposing terms *cultural* and *material* by an understanding that oscillates between process and structure. His ultimate interest in such a recuperation of ephemera into the economic and bureaucratic, as well as less official, structures is to give them status in process—where "they are forced to do something or die trying"—rather than make them a utopian product of the new urban space. This allows him to set up his powerful conclusion: "Today the something to be done may simply involve recycling space and objects, tomorrow the ad hoc mobilization of political sentiment, but the day after that this may call for the ultimate revolution" (249).

Aligning Quayson's most salient moments with the narrative of autobiography, one might venture that the book is a mediated return to home, as well as an understanding of its impossibility, through routes that involve transnational circuits connecting to the author's present and translocal circuits that relay him to another time in his life made present. Following from this, Quayson's own

Bildung in this intellectual reacquaintance with his city through the writing of *Oxford Street, Accra* is accompanied by a methodological accounting of the indigent spaces of his native city in his study. His best and most scintillating insights throughout the book derive unfailingly from that solidarity spoken through method, while the less convincing conclusions result from the tendency to overlook his own desire in the narrative, something that often seems related to modesty. Quayson's career-long adherence to an ethical and philosophical Marxism is reiterated in this book and becomes visible in his reliance on negative dialectics, critical thought, moving the subjective and the anecdotal beyond the purely personal, pushing the cultural beyond its irreproachable status of being disconnected to economic structure, and, particularly, in his commitment to the liberation of the parts of humanity that endure the greatest burden of the enchanting process of urbanization he studies.¹⁵ These evoked my deep admiration for what I consider a courageous piece of writing, whose unity and consistency of method contain brilliant successes and (fewer) weaknesses. As a reader, I embraced both aspects equally because only together do they embody the coherence of a conviction that imbues the entire intellectual project. The pleasure of the text resided in the fact that this coherence emerged startlingly through the autobiographical narrative when it was least proclaimed.

NOTES

1. Here he is in dialogue with a tradition of thought about reading and the reception of the text (taken up by, e.g., Wolfgang Iser, Georges Poulet, and Stanley Fish) that implicates, directly or indirectly, various other related bodies of work, such as the hermeneutics of Hans-Georg Gadamer or Edmund Husserl's phenomenology of language.

2. These examples include the seemingly "esoteric" skills of the coconut seller, the woman selling *kelewele*,

and others displaying a unique skill of balancing tall loads on their heads without support, even while carrying a child strapped to themselves.

3. To prevent such underestimation and simplification, Fredric Jameson proposed the allegory of nation as a means to restore “Third World” literary texts to an autonomous sphere in the Western academy’s project of expanding the field of comparative literature. Quayson’s choice of comparisons is clearly linked to the same impulse.

4. Quayson applies this method consistently and successfully throughout *Oxford Street*.

5. The recent flooding in Chennai replays the flooding that Dakar has continually been plagued with since 1970, brought on during the monsoons by irresponsible urban development, along with rampant corruption and population growth. Since these towns were all planned in the colonial period, there are patterns that scream for comparison.

6. Quayson does not probe this relation beyond the remark that “the space within a realist text is quite different from that to be found in a surrealist or magical realist one” (214).

7. Although Quayson mentions Tayib Saleh’s *Season of Migration to the North* (1966) and Chinua Achebe’s *Arrow of God* (1964), his points of comparison are, quite legitimately for this project, Joyce and Dickens and the “long tradition of realist novels” (214).

8. This source is a doctoral thesis by Pernille Ipsen.

9. This is seen in his treatment of Ipsen, especially, but also of Ray Kea, Kwame Yeboah Daaku, Raymond E. Dumett, Selena Axelrod Winsnes, Ole Justesen, Johannes Postma, George E. Brooks, and Irene K. Odotei.

10. To his credit, Quayson gives an account of two monuments to slavery: the rooms where slaves were kept in the merchant prince Heinrich Richter’s home, which was close to Christiansborg Castle, from where they would go on to board slave ships; and the remnants of the “tamarind-tree avenue planted by freed slaves [and] still visible in some parts of Osu today” (155). However, these are presented in a long parenthetical paragraph that refrains from describing details of Richter’s home—its stone stairway, the texture of its walls—and from illuminating why freed slaves planted trees to formalize pathways taken by Europeans in Accra (106).

11. Examples of such religious slogans are “God Is Great,” “Hallelujah,” and “My Savior Lives.”

12. While transnationalism links his current life seamlessly to the various remakes by transnational capitalism and their modifications in Accra, the translocal spaces and interethnic practices that converse with and refashion these remakes allow him to activate older connections to his city through his childhood, family, knowledge of language, and memories.

13. The glosses are characterized by a lesser engagement with class in the discussion of ethnicity and by a

weak connection between the historicizing of the mixed-race Africans and current inequities related to ethnicity and skin color in discussions of today’s transnationalism. The South-South dialogue is one that is clearly enabled by, and at times suggested in, the book, though its accomplishment might take another project of the same or greater magnitude. Both the problems of the book and the theoretical openness of its analyses to solving them become evident when we examine the form of the narrative and the position of the narrator.

14. Evidently, in posing the problem of how to distinguish between what seems to have concrete implications for describing the urban and what initially appears to be merely ephemeral, Quayson is importing into his argument a now classic debate in Marxian criticism between Nancy Fraser and Judith Butler in which new social movements were considered “merely cultural.” Butler wished to tie these movements to economic and material disadvantage. Fraser, for her part, wanted to keep the distinction between misrecognition and maldistribution, and she argued against Butler’s attempt to collapse the political and the economic.

15. This commitment is particularly evident in *Calibrations: Reading for the Social* (2003), but it is also found in *Aesthetic Nervousness: Disability and the Crisis of Representation* (2007) and is already visible in *Strategic Transformations in Nigerian Writing: Orality and History in the Work of Rev. Samuel Johnson, Amos Tutuola, Wole Soyinka, and Ben Okri* (1997).

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