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NONSYNCHRONOUS CITIES: ERNST BLOCH, POSTCOLONIAL TIME, AND THE FICTION OF LAGOS

Clement Oshogwe Mamudu
Department of English and Literary Studies, Igbinedion University, Okada, Nigeria
ORCID ID: 0009-0006-2359-2194

ABSTRACT

This essay argues that the contemporary Lagos novel performs Ernst Bloch's concept of Ungleichzeitigkeit (nonsynchronicity) not merely as thematic preoccupation with urban disorder but as a constitutive formal principle that fundamentally revises the temporal assumptions underwriting Euro-American high modernism. Reading Teju Cole's Open City, Chris Abani's GraceLand, and Sefi Atta's Everything Good Will Come through the lens of Bloch's Ungleichzeitigkeit, the essay contends that these texts reveal nonsynchronicity in the postcolonial city to be not a transitional condition awaiting resolution into capitalist modernity but a permanent, generative, and aesthetically productive mode of being and narration. The essay further argues that this formal insight compels a retheorization of modernist urbanism itself, exposing the Eurocentric temporal teleology embedded in canonical accounts of literary modernism from Georg Lukács through Fredric Jameson to Franco Moretti. Against these totalizing frameworks, the essay proposes the category of postcolonial nonsynchronism as a theoretically precise and historically grounded alternative for reading the Lagos novel and, by extension, for understanding the relationship between postcolonial urbanism and global literary modernity.

INTRODUCTION

The City That Refuses One Time

In the opening pages of *Heritage of Our Times*, Ernst Bloch observes that not all people exist in the same temporal moment. "Not all people," he writes, "exist in the same Now." The philosophical resonance of this claim extends far beyond the Weimar Germany that occasioned it. Bloch's concept of *Ungleichzeitigkeit*, variously translated as nonsynchronicity, non-simultaneity, or the simultaneity of the non-simultaneous, names a condition in which different historical temporalities coexist within a single social formation, each governed by its own internal logic, its own relationship to capital, tradition, and futurity. For Bloch, this was a symptom of incomplete modernization, a residue of premodern time surviving within the body of the modern. The theoretical horizon of his analysis remained, however, firmly European, the temporal contradictions of Germany's accelerated and uneven modernization providing both the occasion and the limit of his thinking.

The contemporary Lagos novel does not merely illustrate Bloch's concept. It transforms it. In Teju Cole's *Open City*, Chris Abani's *GraceLand*, and Sefi Atta's *Everything Good Will Come*, the cohabitation of incommensurable temporalities is neither a transitional condition pointing toward eventual synchronization nor a melancholic survival of the premodern within the modern. It is, rather, the permanent and defining condition of urban experience in the postcolonial city, and it becomes, in each of these novels, the generative principle of narrative form itself. To read these texts through Bloch is, simultaneously, to read them against the grain of Bloch, pressing his conceptual vocabulary past the limits of its European genealogy into a theoretical space that neither Bloch nor his later appropriators in postcolonial studies fully anticipated.

The argument of this essay proceeds through four movements. The first reconstructs Bloch's concept of *Ungleichzeitigkeit* within its philosophical context, tracing its partial appropriation by Homi Bhabha and Dipesh Chakrabarty and identifying the crucial ways in which both postcolonial theorists, despite their revisionary intentions, ultimately domesticate Bloch's more radical temporal heterogeneity. The second, third, and fourth movements offer sustained close readings of Cole, Abani, and Atta respectively, demonstrating how each novel enacts what this essay terms postcolonial nonsynchronism as a formal, not merely thematic, achievement. The conclusion proposes that this category, derived from but irreducible to its Blochian provenance, demands a reconceptualization of the relationship between modernism, postcolonialism, and the global urban literary imagination.

The theoretical stakes are significant. Dominant frameworks for reading the relationship between African fiction and literary modernity remain captive, in ways rarely acknowledged, to a fundamentally synchronous model of historical time. Whether in the world-systems comparatism of Franco Moretti, the institutional sociology of Pascale Casanova, or the Marxist formalism of Fredric Jameson, the underlying assumption is that literary modernity constitutes a single temporal horizon that peripheral literatures approach from behind, belatedly replicating or creatively appropriating forms whose temporal logic was determined elsewhere. The Lagos novel, this essay argues, does not approach that horizon from behind. It inhabits a temporal condition that Euro-American high modernism never

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encountered and therefore never theorized, and in doing so it renders visible the Eurocentric periodization that has organized the study of literary modernism from its institutional founding to the present.

Bloch's *Ungleichzeitigkeit* and Its Postcolonial Discontents

Ernst Bloch developed the concept of *Ungleichzeitigkeit* in *Heritage of Our Times*, first published in 1935, as a diagnostic tool for understanding the political crisis of Weimar Germany. His central contention was that the rise of National Socialism could not be explained within a purely synchronous Marxist framework that assumed the working class to be the inevitable agent of revolutionary transformation. The German peasantry and petty bourgeoisie who flocked to fascism were not simply deceived or manipulated; they were responding, however perversely, to genuine contradictions in their temporal existence. They lived, as Bloch put it, in a Now that was not the Now of industrial capitalism, carrying within them memories, desires, and social forms whose temporal logic belonged to a different, earlier mode of production. Fascism, on Bloch's account, successfully mobilized this temporal residue, channelling the explosive charge of nonsynchronous experience into reactionary politics.

The philosophical genealogy of the concept is important and underexamined in the secondary literature. Bloch's nonsynchronicity is in productive tension with Hegel's dialectical philosophy of history, which posited a single, progressive temporal logic culminating in the self-realization of Spirit. Where Hegel's Geist moved through history as a unified temporal force, Bloch's *Ungleichzeitigkeit* insists on the irreducible multiplicity of historical times coexisting within any given social formation. This is simultaneously a materialist revision of Hegel and a complication of orthodox Marxism, which, in its more mechanical formulations, inherited Hegel's synchronous teleology while inverting its idealist content. Bloch's wager is that the temporal heterogeneity suppressed by both Hegelian idealism and mechanistic Marxism constitutes not merely a theoretical problem but a political resource, an unspent charge of unfulfilled desire and uncompleted historical time that could, under the right conditions, be mobilized in the service of genuine emancipation.

The connection to Walter Benjamin is equally crucial. Benjamin's concept of Jetztzeit, the now-time that erupts within homogeneous, empty time to shatter the continuum of progress, shares with Bloch's *Ungleichzeitigkeit* a fundamental resistance to linear historical temporality. Both thinkers were responding to the same crisis of European modernity, the barbarism that had revealed itself within the apparent progress of Enlightenment civilization. Yet where Benjamin's Jetztzeit is characteristically momentary and messianic, a flash of revolutionary possibility within the temporal continuum, Bloch's nonsynchronicity is structural and persistent, a condition that does not disappear with the coming of industrial modernity but continues to shape social life and cultural form long after the ostensible completion of modernization. It is this structural persistence, rather than the momentary eruption, that makes Bloch's concept particularly productive for reading the postcolonial city, where the non-completion of modernization is not an exception to be explained but the fundamental condition to be theorized.

Postcolonial theory has made partial use of Blochian temporal thinking without, in most cases, acknowledging its source or developing its full implications. Homi Bhabha's influential account of colonial time in *The Location of Culture* describes a condition of temporal splitting in which the colonized subject inhabits an ambivalent, disjunctive temporality, neither fully present to colonial modernity nor simply located in a pre-colonial past. Bhabha's "time-lag," as he theorizes it, names the gap between the pedagogical time of colonial authority and the performative time of colonial mimicry, a gap that generates the possibility of subversive agency. The resonances with Bloch are audible, but the differences are as significant as the similarities. Where Bloch's nonsynchronicity is rooted in material history and political economy, Bhabha's time-lag operates primarily within the discursive and psychic registers of colonial representation. The structural analysis of temporal cohabitation that Bloch offers gives way, in Bhabha, to a reading of temporal ambivalence as a condition of enunciation rather than a feature of urban form.

Dipesh Chakrabarty's *Provincializing Europe* engages more directly with questions of historical time, proposing the distinction between History 1, the universal, abstract time of capital, and History 2, the heterogeneous times of human practice that capital encounters but cannot fully subsume. Chakrabarty's project is explicitly decolonizing in its ambition, seeking to provincialize the European historical imagination that has erected itself as the universal measure of historical time. Yet, as critics including Vivek Chibber have noted, Chakrabarty's History 2 risks a certain romanticization of temporal heterogeneity, preserving it as an irreducible residue of non-capitalist life rather than analyzing the specific ways in which heterogeneous temporalities are produced, deformed, and instrumentalized by the operations of global capital. The result is a theory of temporal difference that is philosophically compelling but politically indeterminate, unable to specify the conditions under which nonsynchronous experience generates progressive or regressive political energies.

What neither Bhabha nor Chakrabarty fully inherits from Bloch is the insight that temporal heterogeneity is not merely a condition of colonial or postcolonial experience but a formal condition of the cultural texts that register that experience. Bloch was, among other things, a reader of literary and artistic form, attentive to the ways in which the aesthetic organization of a text could embody or resist the temporal contradictions of its historical moment. It is this dimension of his thinking, the connection between temporal heterogeneity and narrative form, that the Lagos novel illuminates most powerfully and that the present essay seeks to recover and extend.

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Nonsynchronous Subjectivity: Temporal Palimpsest in Teju Cole's Open City

Teju Cole's *Open City*, published in 2011, presents itself as the meditative wanderings of Julius, a Nigerian-German psychiatry resident in New York, whose peripatetic traversal of the city becomes the occasion for a sustained reflection on the layering of historical time within urban space. The novel's formal structure is organized by Julius's walks, which produce not a linear narrative of accumulation and arrival but a palimpsestic accumulation of temporal strata, each connected to others not by causal or chronological necessity but by the associative logic of an urban consciousness moving through a space saturated with non-contemporary historical residues. The formal achievement of *Open City* has been widely noted; what has been insufficiently analyzed is the specifically Blochian character of the temporality it enacts.

Julius moves through New York as through a city of multiple, coexisting times. The Dutch colonial history of Manhattan, the passage of African slaves through the city, the more recent histories of immigration and displacement, and Julius's own Nigerian past are not organized into a progressive historical narrative but allowed to exist simultaneously, each in its own temporal register, each making a claim on the present that cannot be resolved into a single, unified account of historical development. When Julius encounters the remains of a seventeenth-century African burial ground beneath the streets of lower Manhattan, Cole's text performs precisely the kind of temporal cohabitation that Bloch theorizes, revealing the dead time of colonial slavery as neither past nor superseded but genuinely present and simultaneous, co-inhabiting the same spatial coordinates as the twenty-first-century financial district that has been built over it.

The novel's use of free indirect discourse intensifies this temporal complexity at the level of sentence structure. Julius's narration moves without typographical warning between historical registers, embedding observations about the present within meditations on the distant past and then returning to the present without any signal of transition. This formal feature is not stylistic ornament; it is the linguistic embodiment of nonsynchronicity itself, the formal enactment of a consciousness for whom different historical times are genuinely simultaneous, genuinely cohabiting the experiential present rather than arranged in a temporal sequence that assigns each its proper place in the march of history.

What distinguishes Cole's nonsynchronicity from the temporal melancholy that critics such as James Wood have attributed to the novel's narrator is its fundamentally spatial and material grounding. Julius's temporal consciousness is not a psychological disposition toward the past but a response to the actual layering of historical time within urban space itself. The city, in *Open City*, is not a background against which psychological drama unfolds; it is itself the bearer of multiple, non-contemporary temporalities that resist the progressive organization of official history. This is what Peter Osborne, in his philosophical account of the politics of time, calls the "spatiotemporal" dimension of historical consciousness, the recognition that different spaces are the bearers of different times, that to move through a city is to move through a field of heterogeneous temporal forces that cannot be unified by any single narrative logic. Cole's formal achievement is to have found a narrative mode adequate to this spatiotemporal heterogeneity without resolving it into either nostalgic lamentation or progressive historicism.

The novel's Brussels interlude, in which Julius travels to Belgium ostensibly to search for his German grandmother and finds instead a city populated by African migrants whose presence haunts the capital of the former colonial metropolis, extends the temporal argument across geopolitical space. Brussels is simultaneously the site of King Leopold's Congo and the contemporary capital of the European Union, a city in which the temporality of colonial extraction coexists with the temporality of postcolonial migration, the long aftermath of imperial history materializing in the bodies of the African and Arab migrants who move through its streets. Cole's Julius does not resolve this temporal cohabitation into a moral narrative of colonial guilt and postcolonial reckoning; he observes it, registers its complexity, and refuses the consolations of a progressive temporal framework that would assign each historical moment its proper place in a sequence leading toward justice or reconciliation.

Cole's debt to W. G. Sebald has been widely remarked, and the formal parallels are genuine. Yet the temporal logic of *Open City* differs from Sebald's in a crucial respect. Where Sebald's temporal layering produces an affect of irreversible melancholy, a mourning for historical losses that cannot be undone, Cole's nonsynchronicity generates a more ambivalent and more politically complex relationship to historical time. The simultaneous temporalities that Julius inhabits are not simply the ruins of a lost past; they are active forces in the present, making demands on the contemporary consciousness that cannot be discharged by mourning alone. This distinction between Sebaldian melancholy and Blochian nonsynchronicity is not merely affective; it reflects a fundamentally different theory of what historical time is and how it operates within the lived experience of the urban subject.

Narrative Architecture and Temporal Contradiction: Bloch in Chris Abani's *GraceLand*

Where Cole's *Open City* enacts nonsynchronicity through the consciousness of a single, mobile narrator, Chris Abani's *GraceLand*, published in 2004, embeds temporal heterogeneity in the very architecture of the narrative. The novel alternates between two temporal strands, placing in productive tension the present of its protagonist Elvis Oke's adolescence in the slums of Lagos in the mid-1980s, a period defined by the catastrophic aftermath of structural adjustment and the collapse of the oil boom, and a past rendered through the

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diary entries of Elvis's deceased mother Beatrice, whose words carry the temporality of an earlier Nigeria, one shaped by the relative prosperity and nationalist optimism of the 1970s. This structural alternation is not merely a technique for providing backstory; it is the formal enactment of the novel's central argument that the present of structural adjustment Lagos can only be understood as the simultaneous cohabitation of incompatible historical times.

Bloch's analysis of *Ungleichzeitigkeit* in relation to political economy is directly illuminating here. The Nigeria of *GraceLand*'s present is defined by the logic of structural adjustment, the IMF and World Bank's mandated dismantling of the nationalist developmental state in favor of export-oriented, market-driven economic organization. Yet the subjectivities, desires, and social forms that populate Abani's Lagos were shaped by the earlier temporality of petroleum nationalism, the oil-boom state's promise of modernization, welfare, and national belonging. The people of the Maroko slum do not simply inhabit the temporality of structural adjustment but continue to carry within them the expectations, the memories, and the wounded aspirations of a different historical moment, one that the logic of structural adjustment has rendered obsolete without erasing from lived experience. What emerges is Blochian nonsynchronicity in its most precise materialist sense, understood not as the coexistence of the modern and the pre-modern, as in Bloch's original formulation, but as the coexistence of successive and incompatible modernities, each bearing its own temporal logic, its own relationship to capital and state power.

The novel's formal alternation between Elvis's present and Beatrice's diary enacts this cohabitation at the structural level. Beatrice's diary does not simply provide context for understanding Elvis's situation but constitutes a genuinely different temporal world that coexists with Elvis's present without being fully continuous with it. The tonal shift between the two strands is equally significant, with the present-tense narrative of Elvis's Lagos carrying the affective register of precarity, violence, and improvisation, while Beatrice's diary carries the more expansive, hopeful rhythms of an earlier moment in Nigerian history. Each strand makes the other legible in ways that neither could achieve alone, and the effect is precisely the kind of temporal montage that Bloch associated with the aesthetic potential of nonsynchronous experience.

The figure of Elvis Presley, whose name, image, and music haunt the novel from its title to its final pages, is particularly rich in its Blochian implications. Elvis Oke's impersonation of the American rock star is not simply a gesture of cultural mimicry or postcolonial belatedness of the kind that Homi Bhabha theorizes; it is the appropriation of a cultural form from a different temporal context, the 1950s and 1960s American popular culture of the original Elvis, into a radically different historical moment and social formation. The American Elvis belongs to the temporal world of Cold War consumer capitalism, of Fordist prosperity and rock-and-roll rebellion; the Lagos Elvis belongs to the temporal world of structural adjustment, urban immiseration, and postcolonial disenchantment. The distance between these two temporal worlds is not merely geographical but historical, and Abani's deployment of the Elvis figure as an organizing trope for the novel allows him to stage the cohabitation of these temporalities as a formal and thematic principle simultaneously.

Biodun Jeyifo's analysis of what he terms the "social contradictions" of Nigerian literary modernity is instructive here. Jeyifo argues that the Nigerian novel has consistently been shaped by the tension between the universalizing aspirations of the literary form itself and the particularizing pressures of the social and historical contexts it seeks to represent. In *GraceLand*, this tension is resolved not by subordinating one pressure to the other but by finding a formal structure in which both can coexist without synthesis. The alternating narrative strands do not resolve into a unified historical understanding; they remain in productive tension, each illuminating the other's limitations as a framework for understanding the temporal complexity of postcolonial urban life. This is the formal achievement that distinguishes Abani's novel from more conventionally realist accounts of Nigerian urban experience and that aligns it most powerfully with the Blochian tradition of temporal critique.

The Maroko slum itself, as a spatial formation within the novel, functions as a privileged site of nonsynchronous cohabitation. Abani's description of the slum as a space where traditional Igbo cultural practices coexist with Pentecostal Christianity, where American popular culture circulates alongside Yoruba oral traditions, and where the architectural debris of successive colonial and postcolonial projects accumulates without ever being fully cleared away, constitutes a spatial rendering of temporal heterogeneity that is simultaneously realist and theoretical. The slum is not simply poverty; it is a spatial argument about the structure of postcolonial time, a material embodiment of the claim that in the postcolonial city, different historical temporalities do not succeed one another but accumulate, persisting in the present as active forces that shape the possibilities of social life and cultural form.

The Female Body as Temporal Archive: Nonsynchronicity and Gender in Sefi Atta's *Everything Good Will Come*

Sefi Atta's *Everything Good Will Come*, published in 2005, introduces a dimension of Blochian temporal analysis that neither Cole nor Abani fully develops, namely the inscription of competing historical temporalities on the female body. The novel follows Enitan Taiwo from her girlhood in 1970s Lagos through her adulthood in the late 1990s, tracing the intersection of Nigeria's postcolonial political history with the intimate history of female experience in a society whose gender norms encode, in compressed and often violent form, the contradictions of simultaneous temporal regimes. Atta's novel is the most explicitly political of the three texts examined here, and it is also the most searching in its analysis of the ways in which nonsynchronous temporalities are not merely experienced by social

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subjects but inscribed on their bodies, particularly on female bodies that become the site on which competing historical claims are played out.

The temporal architecture of *Everything Good Will Come* spans three decades of Nigerian history, from the optimism of early postcolonial nationalism through the military dictatorships of the 1970s and 1980s to the contested transition to civilian rule in the late 1990s. Each of these historical moments carries its own temporal logic, its own relationship to the promises of modernity, tradition, and gender equality. Yet they do not, in Atta's rendering, constitute a progressive historical sequence in which each moment supersedes and replaces the previous one. Rather, they coexist within the novel's present, each making active demands on Enitan's consciousness and social existence. The Nigeria of the late 1990s in which the novel's contemporary action is set is not simply the outcome of the earlier historical moments; it is their simultaneous inhabitant, haunted by the unfulfilled promises of nationalism, the traumatic legacies of military rule, and the unresolved contradictions of a patriarchal gender order that has proven remarkably resilient across successive political transformations.

The figure of Enitan's mother is central to this temporal argument. The mother inhabits a temporal world shaped by a particular strand of Yoruba social conservatism, a world in which female identity is defined primarily by marriage, motherhood, and deference to patriarchal authority. Yet this temporal world is not simply traditional in the sense of being pre-modern but rather a specific historical formation produced by the intersection of Yoruba patriarchal norms with colonial Christianity and its attendant gender ideologies. When Enitan resists her mother's temporal world, she is not simply choosing modernity over tradition but navigating between multiple, historically specific temporal formations, none of which can be reduced to a simple opposition between the modern and the pre-modern. This is precisely what makes Atta's gender analysis Blochian rather than simply feminist in a liberal sense, for she is attentive to the historical specificity and the internal complexity of each temporal formation, resistant to the progressive narrative that would simply assign the conservative gender order to the past and the feminist consciousness to the future.

Enitan's friend Sheri, who is raped by a group of young men and subsequently reinvents herself as a kind of strategic femme fatale, navigating male desire in order to secure material security, embodies a different temporal formation altogether. Sheri's sexuality is simultaneously the site of her violation and the instrument of her survival, and the temporal logic she inhabits is one in which the promises of female liberation that the novel's nationalist moment briefly made available have been foreclosed by the violence of patriarchal retrenchment. Sheri does not simply inhabit the past; she inhabits a present that has been shaped by the violent closing-off of futures that were once, however briefly, imaginable. This is what Bloch, in a different context, calls the "darkness of the lived moment," the temporal condition of a present that is overloaded with unrealized possibility, with the debris of futures that did not arrive.

The novel's engagement with Nigerian political history further complicates its temporal argument. The successive military dictatorships that define the political backdrop of Enitan's adult life are represented not as interruptions of a normative democratic temporality but as constitutive features of postcolonial Nigerian time, shaping the possibilities of social life in ways that persist even after the formal transition to civilian rule. When Enitan becomes involved in pro-democracy activism, she is not simply choosing the future over the past; she is intervening in a temporal field in which different historical formations make simultaneous and often contradictory demands. The democracy she struggles for is itself inhabited by multiple, non-contemporary desires, some rooted in the nationalist moment, some shaped by global human rights discourse, some drawing on specifically Yoruba traditions of political accountability that predate both colonialism and the postcolonial state.

Atta's formal choice to narrate through Enitan's first-person retrospective voice introduces a further temporal layer. The retrospective narrator who looks back on the events of the novel has been shaped by temporal formations different from those available to the younger Enitan, and the gap between the experiencing self and the narrating self constitutes, in itself, a formal enactment of nonsynchronicity. The retrospective voice does not simply organize the past into a coherent narrative of development and arrival; it inhabits the past from a present that remains itself constituted by unresolved temporal contradictions. What the retrospective narrator has gained is not temporal resolution but a more complex understanding of temporal cohabitation, a recognition that the multiple times she has inhabited do not give way to one another but accumulate, persisting in the present as the conditions of whatever future remains possible.

In this respect, Atta's novel performs what Bloch, in his account of the utopian function of cultural form, called the "anticipatory consciousness," the formal capacity of aesthetic experience to register possibilities that the present social formation has foreclosed but not fully extinguished. The novel's title embodies this anticipatory structure precisely in its refusal of the rhetoric of inevitability. That everything good will come is asserted not as the guaranteed outcome of historical progress, not as the promised transcendence of temporal heterogeneity in some finally synchronized future, but as the unfulfilled and unfulfillable promise that nonsynchronous time carries within it, the charge of unrealized possibility that makes the present more than simply what it is.

Postcolonial Nonsynchronism and the Limits of World Literature Theory

The readings developed in the preceding sections collectively demand a reconsideration of the dominant frameworks through which the relationship between African fiction and global literary modernity has been theorized. Franco Moretti's influential account of the world

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literary system, developed across a series of essays and extended in *Distant Reading*, posits a center-periphery dynamic in which formal innovation originates in the literary centers of Western Europe and is subsequently adopted and adapted by peripheral literatures. Peripheral novels, on this account, represent a "compromise" between local materials and foreign forms, the foreign form providing the narrative structure while the local material provides the content. The temporal logic underlying this model is explicitly evolutionary, treating peripheral literatures as belated participants in a literary history whose temporal direction was established by the core.

The Lagos novels examined here resist this framework at every level. They do not adopt foreign forms and fill them with local content; they develop formal strategies that respond to the specific temporal conditions of the postcolonial city in ways that have no adequate precedent in the metropolitan literary tradition. The nonsynchronous narrative forms of Cole, Abani, and Atta are not adaptations of European high modernism's temporal experiments; they are independent formal solutions to a temporal problem that European modernism never encountered in the same form. When Woolf or Joyce or Faulkner experimented with narrative temporality, they were responding to the crisis of a modernity that, however contradictory, was organized around a single, dominant temporal logic, the time of industrial capitalism and its cultural forms. When Cole, Abani, and Atta experiment with narrative temporality, they are responding to a condition in which multiple, incommensurable temporal logics coexist without any one of them achieving dominance, in which the time of global capital, the time of nationalist aspiration, the time of precolonial social formation, and the time of postcolonial decay are simultaneously active within a single urban space and a single narrative consciousness.

Pascale Casanova's account of "the world republic of letters" is equally inadequate to the temporal complexity of the Lagos novel. Casanova's model posits literary value as a form of capital accumulated within a hierarchical global literary field, with Paris at the consecrating center and peripheral literatures struggling for recognition on terms set by metropolitan taste. The temporal dimension of this model is implicit but no less decisive for that, insofar as to achieve literary recognition is to be admitted into a present defined by metropolitan standards of literary modernity, to be recognized as contemporary rather than belated. What this model cannot account for is the possibility that the temporal condition of peripherality is itself a literary resource rather than simply a deficit, that the experience of inhabiting multiple, non-contemporary temporalities simultaneously might generate formal innovations that cannot be measured on the scale of metropolitan modernity because they exceed that scale.

The category of postcolonial nonsynchronism that this essay proposes is intended to name precisely this excess. It differs from Bloch's original *Ungleichzeitigkeit* in three crucial respects. First, where Bloch understood nonsynchronicity as a transitional condition produced by the uneven penetration of capitalism into pre-capitalist social formations, postcolonial nonsynchronism is a permanent condition produced by the specific historical trajectory of colonial and postcolonial development, in which the non-completion of modernization is not a temporal lag but a structural feature of the postcolonial social formation. Second, where Bloch's analysis remained focused on the European metropolis and its hinterlands, postcolonial nonsynchronism is generated by the specific dynamics of colonial extraction and postcolonial dependency, the temporal contradictions of which are irreducible to the European model. Third, and most important for literary analysis, where Bloch's account of nonsynchronicity focused primarily on political and social experience, postcolonial nonsynchronism, as the readings of Cole, Abani, and Atta demonstrate, becomes a constitutive principle of narrative form, generating specific aesthetic strategies that cannot be derived from or reduced to any prior metropolitan tradition.

Neil Lazarus's important critique of postcolonial theory's tendency to aestheticize cultural difference at the expense of materialist analysis is relevant here. Lazarus has argued, most forcefully in *The Postcolonial Unconscious*, that the cultural turn in postcolonial studies has produced an overemphasis on discursive and aesthetic heterogeneity that obscures the underlying unity of capitalist social relations across the postcolonial world. The risk of the present argument is that it might be read as another instance of this aestheticizing tendency, celebrating the formal complexity of the Lagos novel in ways that deflect attention from the material conditions of immiseration and exploitation that generate it. This risk is real and must be acknowledged. The response is not to abandon the formal analysis but to insist, as this essay has consistently done, on the inseparability of formal innovation from historical and material conditions. The nonsynchronous forms of Cole, Abani, and Atta are not free-floating aesthetic achievements; they are formal responses to specific historical conditions, the conditions of colonial extraction, postcolonial dependency, structural adjustment, and urban crisis that have produced the Lagos of these novels.

CONCLUSION

Toward a Theory of Postcolonial Nonsynchronism

The Lagos novels of Teju Cole, Chris Abani, and Sefi Atta collectively constitute what this essay has called a literature of postcolonial nonsynchronism, a body of formal innovation that responds to the specific temporal conditions of the postcolonial city by developing narrative strategies adequate to the cohabitation of incommensurable historical times. Read through Ernst Bloch's *Ungleichzeitigkeit*, these novels reveal the temporal assumptions of Euro-American high modernism to be not universal truths about the nature of narrative time but historically and geographically specific responses to a set of conditions that are not, and cannot be, those of the postcolonial city. The formal experiments of European modernism were responses to a crisis within a single, dominant temporal logic; the formal

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experiments of the Lagos novel are responses to a condition in which no single temporal logic achieves dominance, in which heterogeneity is not a temporary disruption of synchrony but the permanent structure of social and experiential time.

The theoretical consequences of this argument extend beyond African literary studies. If postcolonial nonsynchronism names a genuine formal and historical condition rather than a regional curiosity, then it has implications for how literary modernism is periodized and understood globally. The standard account of modernism as a metropolitan phenomenon that generated formal innovations subsequently adopted by peripheral literatures must give way to a more complex model in which different literary traditions develop different formal responses to different temporal conditions, none of which can be treated as the original or the standard against which others are measured as belated or derivative. This is not simply a pluralist argument for the equal value of all literary traditions; it is a theoretical argument about the relationship between historical time, urban experience, and narrative form that has consequences for the discipline of comparative literature as a whole.

The implications for Bloch studies are equally significant. Bloch's *Ungleichzeitigkeit* has been applied most extensively within European intellectual history and, more recently, within the analysis of late capitalist cultural production. Its application to postcolonial literature reveals both its continuing relevance and its historical limitations. Bloch's insight that temporal heterogeneity is not simply a sociological condition but an aesthetic resource, a charge of unrealized possibility that cultural form can register and mobilize, survives the translation from Weimar Germany to postcolonial Lagos with its fundamental validity intact. What does not survive intact is the underlying assumption that nonsynchronicity is a transitional condition pointing toward an eventual temporal resolution. In the postcolonial city, as the Lagos novel demonstrates, nonsynchronicity is not transitional but constitutive; it does not point toward a synchronized future but defines the permanent condition of postcolonial urban modernity. This revision of Bloch is not a refutation but an extension, pressing his conceptual vocabulary into a historical context he did not foresee and finding there not the limits of his thinking but its most radical implications.

The "darkness of the lived moment" that Bloch invokes to describe the immediate, unthematized experience of temporal contradiction finds its most complex literary embodiment not in the European texts he analyzed but in the Lagos novels that could not have been written without the historical conditions he could not have imagined. That this should be so is itself a nonsynchronous fact, an instance of the temporal heterogeneity that Bloch theorized returning, from an unexpected historical direction, to illuminate the limits and the possibilities of the theory itself. It is, perhaps, the most compelling argument for the continuing vitality of Blochian temporal thought in a world that has moved, unevenly and incompletely, far beyond the historical horizon within which it was first developed.

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