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ABSTRACT

Departing from the relationship between the texts of the Ghanaian poet and novelist Kojo Laing and a recent international art exhibition, this article traces the relationship between style and the multivalent activity of flight across Laing’s work. Drawing upon an intercontinental range of philosophers – from Deleuze and Guattari to contemporary Akan thinkers – it analyses the intersections between gender, geography, and language in Laing’s texts, and demonstrates their value within the context of discussion of contemporary literature’s investment in possible futures. Laing’s transnational aesthetic foregrounds lines of flight across and between different linguistic and cultural communities, and traces relentlessly emerging or possible constellations of relation. Situating Laing in the context of his interdisciplinary reception, this article seeks to explore the aesthetic and ethical ramifications of the unusual networks of affiliation and response of one of West Africa’s most important, yet critically undervalued, contemporary writers.

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From October 2018 to January 2019, the British-based Otolith Collective and The Showroom presented the London segment of a four part international art exhibition entitled *Women on Aeroplanes*. Featuring ‘new work by artists Lungiswa Gqunta, Pamela Phatsimo Sunstrum and Emma Wolukau-Wanambwa’, the exhibition sought to draw attention to the ‘largely unrecognised role of women in struggles for liberation, their participation in transatlantic networks, and their key voices in revolutionary socio-political movements that helped to achieve post-colonial nation-states in Africa’ (‘Project: Women on Aeroplanes’, 2021). Seeking, as the organisers Annett Busch, Marie-Hélène Gutberlet, and Magda Lipska suggest (2018, 5), ‘to change the parameters of how we see and listen to the achievements and practices of women in a multitude of moments’, *Women on Aeroplanes* brought together work united by an interest in ‘chang[ing] the grammar of a dominant narrative’, recalibrating understandings of a woman’s position within history and historical change, and rethinking the centrality of women for humanity’s futures.

The exhibition’s title is borrowed from a novel by the late Ghanaian poet and novelist Kojo Laing. More than just its title, however – as the exhibition’s *Inflight Magazine* suggests – *Woman of the Aeroplanes*, published in 1988, provides the project with its

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curatorial principle. Indeed, in a speech delivered at the inaugural meeting of the *Women on Aeroplanes* project in Berlin, the British-Ghanaian artist and Otolith Collective founder Kodwo Eshun (2018, p. 24) indicated that what connects the various exhibitions (in London, Lagos, Warsaw, and Berlin) with Laing's novels – and *Woman of the Aeroplanes* in particular – is 'an orientation towards the future. A revisiting of future's histories. A rethinking of history's futures.' For Eshun, it is Laing's idiosyncratic literary style, his 'grammars of displacement', that generates these processes of 'rethinking' and 'revisiting':

> What Laing narrates is a grammar of predicates on the move. What we read is the ongoing movement of predicates that *detach themselves from their owners and move according to their own momentum*. Laing writes about predicates that are no longer properties. Predicates that are no longer the exclusive property of, nor are securely possessed by, nor automatically belong to a person. Predicates that are usually attributed to a person, fictional or historical, predicates which we might think of as the attributes of that person, which we usually think of as defining who that person is by characterising them: these predicates extricate themselves from bodies and move on. And we read them in the process of their movement. (Eshun, 2018, p. 25)

This article traces this 'movement' across Laing's work as it intersects with questions of community and foreignness, gender, and the futures of African and Afro-diasporic art. Situating Laing firmly within the context of his interdisciplinary reception, it seeks to explore the aesthetic and ethical ramifications of the author's development of unusual networks of affiliation and response, as well as his relation to African philosophy and political thought. This means, above all, connecting Laing's writing more comprehensively to contemporary artistic practices. The kind of questioning of the relation between predicates and persons Eshun describes is a common thematic investment in contemporary African and Afro-diasporic art. To take some examples, Sofia Yala's series, 'The Body as an Archive' collages self-portraiture with archival material 'private notes of [their paternal grandfather's] birthplace, dates of birth, full names, official documents, and international mail' in order to remap 'a parallel space of transgenerational realities' (Yala, 2023). Similarly, Ethel Tawe's 'Image Frequency Modulation', which also works with family archives, 'recognise[s] and reframe[s] memory as a present experience rather than a past', with 'montage and assemblage' becoming 'modes of memory-making in the first installation' (Interview, 2022). In both cases, it is the complex and inconsistent relationship between predicates (archival material or documentation which purports to define, in Eshun's words 'who that person is') and bodies (the artist's, but also the affective memory of a family member's presence) that collage and montage seek to express.

Lungiswa Gqunta's contribution to the 'Women on Aeroplanes' exhibition – titled 'What songs will we sing when everything returns to us' – forces the viewer to become self-conscious about and experience an insecurity with respect to their own predicates and properties. Drawings of series of lines, some serrated and some thickly inked, some intersecting and others forming lattices, are fixed to the gallery's walls at a conventional viewing height, but the spectator's access to these drawings is made difficult by much of the space between and above the drawings being filled with densely knotted barbed wire. In order to look at the drawings, one first has to look to one's own safety, as the experience of the art is continually interrupted by a concern for those parts, predicates, and properties (bags, hats, clothing, hair) which might get snagged or even detached.

The separation of predicates and bodies also recurs frequently in Martin Egblewogbe's short stories. 'The Gonjon Pin', for instance, revolves around Kumi's discovery of a scrotum – here a predicate of masculinity floating grotesquely free of its body – 'hanging on his wall' (2020, p. 60), while, in 'The Going Down of Pastor Mintumi', it is the literal stripping of Mintumi's predicates and property that renders him recognisable only as 'demonic' by his own congregation (49). With different but comparable emphases, 'A part' serves the role of subject in Momtaza Mehri's poem 'First Sight' ('A part has come to find itself', 'A part needs to felt needed'), which dramatises a version of the diasporic subject's return to a place of origin or source (Mehri, 2023, 71). Playing on the homophone, 'apart', the poem not only separates the predicate from a body, but embodies it as the exemplary subject position of diasporic experience.

In many ways, Laing himself also embodies this experience. The eldest son of an Anglican priest, Laing was, in the year of Ghana's independence, sent to Scotland. Arriving in Dunbartonshire aged eleven, he attended Bonhill Primary School, and, later, the Vale of Leven Academy, all the while staying with the parents of the future bishop of Edinburgh Richard Holloway, a friend of Laing's father. Later, as Kropp Dakubu et al. (1996, p. 141) notes,

> he lived with Holloway in Glasgow. Holloway's erudition and his circle of social activists and religious thinkers, which included Dame Lilias Graham, made a considerable impression on him. Laing received distinctions in English and history at secondary school and with Holloway's encouragement began to write poetry.

Returning to Ghana after attending Glasgow University, Laing's formative experiences in Scotland marked all of his subsequent writing. As a consequence of these experiences, Laing himself connects his work with the process of 'dragging two continents along' (Cooper, 1998, p. 188), with the verb here indicating that the 'considerable impression' Kropp Dakubu reports might also have been felt as a weight. His sense of a persistent if strained belonging to two continents forces a 'reallocation' of what Eshun calls the 'predicates [. . .] which we usually think of as defining who that person is', a reconfiguration of what it means to be both 'African' and 'European'.

This reconfiguration or reallocation of the predicates of identity is a theme which runs through all of Laing's fiction. Although his first novel, *Search Sweet Country* (1986), has been described by Binyavanga Wainaina as 'the finest novel written in English to come out of the African continent' (Laing, 2011, p. i), his texts rarely limit themselves geographically or imaginatively according to that continent's borders. They regularly trace relations and geographical configurations that expose transnational and transcontinental connections, interpenetrations, and dependencies. In *Search Sweet Country*, this transnationalism is most explicitly represented in the novel's Accra by both the Scottish academic Dr. Pinn and the English researcher Sally Soon. *Woman of the Aeroplanes*, too – eschewing 'centres' such as Kumasi and Accra, Edinburgh and Glasgow – features an extensive cultural and economic exchange (including friendship and intermarriage) between the inhabitants of the fictional towns Tukwan in Ghana, and Levensvale in Scotland. Laing's final novel, *Big Bishop Roko and the Altar Gangsters* (2006), focuses upon a lengthy war between the equally fictional Gold Coast City and European religious leaders, principally the Archbishop of Canterbury. By stressing geographical relationships – Canterbury-Gold

Coast City, Tukwan-Levensvale – that ignore more conventional economic and cultural centres, Laing's novels propose, on these macro-scales, a reconfiguration of spatial constellations.

As Eshun notes, however, these reconfigurations are mirrored at the level of the sentence by Laing's disruptive and playful grammars of displacement. Eshun's primary example of this occurs on the first page of *Woman of the Aeroplanes*. An inhabitant of Tukwan, Kwame Atta, is described as being 'so agitated that when he inadvertently picked up a piece of rubbish on the clean streets of Tukwan, he threw himself in the bin instead, with the rubbish motionless in his left footprint' (Laing, 1989b, p. 1). This ludic reversal of expectation is a mark of Laing's style. In *Search Sweet Country*, the farmer ½-Allotey's 'quarrel with the earth' begins when his hat falls off: landing on the soil, suddenly 'the ground wore it', and this surprising switching of roles, this bizarre reallocation of agency, defines his peculiar relationship with 'the tropical earth' (Laing, 2011, p. 98). Characteristically, in both of these examples, an indeterminacy in the bonds between agents and actions, nouns and their possessors, provokes a reconsideration, even uncertainty, with respect to the behaviours stereotypically attributed to persons and objects.

For the *Women on Aeroplanes* project, this indeterminacy represents an opportunity for progressive thinking regarding the position of women within society. Eshun (2018, p. 25), for instance, compares Laing's 'grammar of predicates on the move' to the social effect of the first female pilot from Morocco, Touria Chaoui: just as Laing's texts trouble any attempt to fix the relationship between humans and predicates, Touria Chaoui's flights represent a 'practice of displacement that entails and inspires a grammar of reallocation.' The comparison between Laing and Touria Chaoui itself performs an aspect of this 'reallocation'. As Eshun continues to explain,

> [w]e can think these two distinct moments, one fictional, one historical, in their articulation, precisely because they do not have any necessary belonging to or with each other.
>
> A figure such as Touria Chaoui would, in her singularity and her exemplarity, usually be assigned to the archives of Morocco's histories, Morocco's feminist histories, Maghrebian feminisms or moments from Morocco's Independence. *Women of the Aeroplanes* [*sic*], would be assigned to a course on African literature or West African literature or a module on magical realism.
>
> Part of the impetus for this gathering is to practice a collective thinking with moments such as these in order to displace or disarticulate the frameworks that allocate a figure such as Touria Chaoui to her place in the history of Moroccan Independence and assigns a novel such as *Women of the Aeroplanes* [*sic*] to its place in postwar African literature. (25)

Just as Laing's 'grammar of predicates on the move' forces a reassessment of the properties and behaviours one habitually attributes to a given person, the 'collective thinking' underpinning the *Women on Aeroplanes* project seeks 'to displace or disarticulate the frameworks' that structure a great deal of comparative thinking. Laing's writing appears particularly suited to this kind of displacement and disarticulation. Indeed, within the context of the project, the slippage, across Eshun's speech, between the singular woman of Laing's original title and a title featuring multiple 'women' serves to suggest the generative potential of Laing's texts, their ability to proliferate 'articulations' outside of its immediate frames of reference, and their tendency to encourage the tracing of lines of flight away from the specific details of their plots to more expansive and transnational networks of imaginative connection and affiliation.

The 'articulation' between Laing's texts and the *Women on Aeroplanes* project enables a perspective on Laing's work that is capable of 'disarticulat[ing] the frameworks' that tend to allocate and confine his texts to particular disciplines and genres. Reading Laing through his reception-one characterised by an emphasis on the Utopian possibilities of what Eshun calls 'disallocation' and 'reallocation' – can also help to situate Laing more centrally within contemporary discussion of possible futures. It can also indicate one way in which 'disallocation' and 'reallocation' can begin to reshape the kind of geographies and connections drawn by criticism itself. By beginning in this way with the relation between Laing and Eshun – between particular practices and theories of fiction and contemporary art – this article seeks to draw attention to networks of affiliation that regularly fail to coincide with conventional disciplinary or geographical distinctions and cartographies. This, consequently, requires the tracing of what Laachir et al. (2018, pp. -293–4) term 'significant geographies'. Intended to reflect 'the richness and plurality of spatial imaginings that animate texts, authors, and publics in the world', the term 'significant geographies' stresses the importance of 'the *conceptual*, *imaginative*, and *real* geographies that texts, authors, and language communities inhabit, produce, and reach'. The morphological mismatch between these geographies and more conventional ways of approaching space – 'Global North' and 'Global South', a peripheral 'Africa' and a central 'Europe' – provoke, like Laing's 'predicates on the move', a reallocation of 'significance' in accordance with aspects of lived experience that do not quite fit established categories. By tracing the interplay between Laing's 'grammar of predicates on the move' and his text's affirmation of future-oriented and counter-intuitive 'significant geographies' – an interplay frequently resulting from the acts of women within his novels – this article will explore the multivalent relationships between the micro- and macro-levels of Laing's writing, between style, for instance, and a much broader ethical and political commitment to new forms of intercontinental cartography.

One particularly clear way of articulating the relationship between the *Women on Aeroplanes* project and Laing's writing is to pursue the instances across his novels in which women are represented in flight. *Search Sweet Country* features several of these instances. Ostensibly centred upon the existential searches of a range of characters in and around Accra – searches for meaning, prosperity, and purpose, in the wake of both a general disillusionment regarding post-independence Ghana, and a military government – *Search Sweet Country*, in a way that is characteristic of Laing's writing as a whole, often invests imaginatively in the in-between spaces of aeroplanes and airports, and the connecting and interrelating function of flight paths. Throughout the novel, the lines of flight of women tend to perform cartographic functions, to trace 'significant geographies' that suggest the potential for new forms of interrelation capable of reimagining the meaning and historical trajectory of a Ghana, as Laing suggests in the poem 'One hundred lines for the coast', 'grown old without wisdom by generations of dire disconnection' (Laing, 1989a, p. 50).

Take, for instance, the description of Araba Fynn's airborne multilingualism. 'When she spoke English in the aeroplanes,' we learn, 'her Mfantse touched it, and her Ga touched her Mfantse; so that in this world of languages touching, her mouth became complex yet beautiful' (Laing, 2011, p. 130). Flight, here, in its conjunction with Araba Fynn's embodied language, is a medium for a range of connections and interrelationships across and between language communities. Flight paths between different regions of Ghana support

a network of cultural and linguistic relation which, in Laing's texts, is considered a marker of aesthetic value. In this sense, Araba Fynn serves to embody what, for Laing himself, is an essential quality of his writing. In the 'Author's Note' to his third novel, *Major Gentl and the Achimota Wars* (1992), Laing explains his own 'complex yet beautiful' style, in which English is continually expanded by a variety of words from both Ghanaian and non-Ghanaian languages (including Scottish slang, Latin, Italian, together with some of Laing's own neologisms):

> The motive behind them is to internationalise the English. I believe that more parochial areas of the world need a broadening of vocabulary – hence many of the words are repeated in my novels and poetry. Some are invented, most are direct translations from Akan and Ga and sometimes Hausa. It is usual in Ghana (with such a cosmopolitan mix of cultures) to intersperse one language with words from another. This ought to be done universally for the idea is to create one gigantic language. (Laing, 1992, p. vi)

This 'gigantic language' is, for Laing, dependent upon the 'broadening' function of linguistic 'significant geographies', of a plurality of specific transnational interrelationships and exchanges mediated by people like Araba Fynn, which are capable of articulating new ways of speaking by virtue of 'a cosmopolitan mix of cultures'.

Elsewhere, Laing's first novel links this 'broadening' function to the flight path of a particular woman. Just as Araba Fynn's mouth, and the Laingian text as a whole, represent contact zones for encounters between a variety of different languages, the flight of the witch Adwoa Adde serves to mediate interrelationships across the Accra of *Search Sweet Country*:

> As the woman floated towards her with laughter in her hot eyes, Adwoa Adde dropped her ring, and flew … from some force by her breasts through the open staring window. The window closed by itself after she had gained height, still praying, and feeling a strange brown underbelly of love as she flew over Accra. She flew round the Central Post Office clock twice, moving it to dong with a wave of her fingers. She felt herself going through the looking phase, seeing the city within her own movement of time, disorganising all sleeping clocks, seeing the night and the day at the same time; Accra was cut up into varying intensities of light and dark, of good and bad, in such a way that she could only describe and feel for what she saw … she could not distinguish what was good and what was bad, for she was forced into relationship with everything, and her pulse was the movements of thousands in sleep. (Laing, 2011, p. 39)

Laing's style here is once again characterised by Eshun's 'predicates on the move'. The perspectival reversal in which Adwoa Adde sees the city 'within her own movement' – her 'pulse' becoming 'the movements of thousands in sleep' – reflects a resignification of a body now 'forced into relationship with everything'. Syntactical ambiguity (the latent reading 'she could only describe and feel, for what she saw she could not distinguish' haunting, despite the ellipsis, the primary meaning) doubles kaleidoscopically a description already invested in simultaneity. Dream-like inversions and confusions – it is the window that is 'staring', and Adwoa sees 'the night and the day at the same time' – accentuate the loosening and freeing of predicates. Adwoa Adde, here, experiences a becoming-other that is also a becoming-Accra, a blurring between self and city that also restructures the relationship between body and place.

Many of the novel's characters pursue what might be termed adequate cognitive mapping; that is, they seek the means of making sense of their place within Ghana's

history and geography, of situating themselves meaningfully within Accra's complex plurality. Very few, however, can extricate themselves sufficiently from their embeddedness in a fast-moving, confusing social life to assess things on the scale they intend to. The novel, in part, focuses attention on the friction that occurs between a range of these partial perspectives. Adwoa Adde – by virtue of her flight – is the only character capable of seeing (and feeling) simultaneously 'all the hands moving around in the dark in this city', the 'thousands making love, the thousands crying, the thousands laughing' (Laing, 2011, p. 43). As such, her displacement and dislocation – both far above the city, and from her quotidian life – enables a privileged perspective from which to understand the specific relations and 'significant geographies' which comprise place and location.

Laing's other novels also attest to this interrelationship between women, 'significant geographies', and flight. In *Woman of the Aeroplanes*, Pokuaa – the woman of the novel's title – is corporeally congruent with the 'two small aeroplanes' she owns: the aeroplanes, recalling Araba Fynn's complex mouth, both 'stood at the level of her lips: one at her upper lip, and the other at her lower lip' (Laing, 1989b, p. 6). It is Pokuaa who is responsible for the relationship of trade and cultural exchange with Tukwan's 'sister town in the UK', as well as for leading the Ghanaian town 'through the different calabashes of history' (6–7). Pokuaa's intimacy with her aeroplanes is often expressed through metaphors – Atta, for instance, is described as being 'under the wing of Pokuaa' (9) – that blur the distinction between her and her possessions. This blurring is associated in the novel with a reconceptualisation of the individual. If individuals are capable of surprising and unconventional kinships – like Pokuaa and her aeroplanes – then a variety of 'significant geographies', which rarely coincide with conventional cartographies, become available. Hence, early in the novel, Kwame Atta's 'major idea', the 'democratization of family genetics':

> He had decided, without the authority of the ancestors, that there was a finite number of human types available in Tukwan; and that once this number was reached, any human characteristic – whether physical or mental – was a repeat of what was already available over an agreed time span of two thousand years: so that if you talked about inheriting a leg, then you could easily inherit it out of the family pool. This would increase togetherness, and rope all bones into a potential oneness. He swore that this would also reduce guilt, tribe – which barely existed in the town anyway – and then would, paradoxically, increase the space of individuality available to each person. (Laing, 1989b, pp. 35–6)

In response to Maimuna, who asks Atta '[b]ut what is genetics?', Atta replies that 'genetics is the origin of your other leg that you thought belonged to your uncle when it really comes from someone unrelated at all!' (36). As a result, 'since a snore in Levensvale could originate in Tukwan, and since an elbow in Tukwan could have its counterpart in Levensvale, everyone was free to be and do what he or she liked' (86). Indeed, the 'blast of freedom from' these 'freely-mixed bodies and worlds' (86) animates the novel. Exemplifying Atta's idea, the aeroplanes' journeys between Scotland and Ghana help to develop a spatial constellation for the inhabitants of both towns, a constellation which – in contradistinction to national geographies – opens up a future of intimacy, mutual growth, and beneficial interrelation.

As such, just as Atta's 'democratization of genetics' makes it impossible to define an individual only in terms of their filial ancestry, the novel's lines of flight routinely involve flight from any fixed distribution of predicates and behaviours: Tukwan frees itself from

a sense of duty and allegiance to Accra and Kumasi, and Levensvale distances itself from Glasgow and Edinburgh. The phrase 'lines of flight' is perhaps most famously associated with the work of the French philosopher Gilles Deleuze, as well as with his collaborative ventures with the psychotherapist Félix Guattari. Zourabichvili et al. (2012, p. 175) stresses the opposition within Deleuze and Guattari's thinking between what they term 'lines of flight' and situations (echoing Eshun's description of 'allocation') 'that *striate* in advance our perception, affectivity, and thought, imprisoning existence within ready-made forms, even forms of refusal and struggle.' Lines of flight support 'the vacillation, fluctuation, and disorganization of any [such] given situation' (176). Consequently, it represents a challenging alternative to conventional methods of treating the relationship between different people, and the allocation of different predicates. This is particularly clear in the context of the difference between this sense of lines of flight and dialectical thought. 'Contrary to the dialectic,' Zourabichvili (178) explains, 'which claims to overcome the alternative through a synthetic reconciliation, and in doing so admits and conserves the premise [. . .], the line of flight is placed under the sign of the indiscernible and of *inclusive disjunction*.' This 'inclusive disjunction' refers to situations when a 'disjunction envelops a possible conjunction', a situation governed by 'an order of asymmetrical reciprocal implication that does not resolve itself into equivalence, nor into a higher-order identity' (168).

There is a mutually enriching relationship between Deleuze and Guattari's 'inclusive disjunction' and Eshun's stress on the allocation and reallocation of predicates. Both permit perspectives from which individuals appear less as necessarily coherent, socially predictable bearers of conventional behaviours limited by a homogenous 'identity', and more as figures that are heterogeneous, disjunctive, and unpredictable, capable of forming social relationships governed by 'asymmetrical reciprocal implication'. Inclusive disjunction, for instance, characterises Kwame Atta's vision of individuals as potential nexuses of composite and asymmetrical cross-cultural interaction and relation, just as his 'democratization of genetics' involves a rethinking of the relationship between persons and predicates. Both, too, speak to the ways in which individuals can serve as sites of social relation, without losing singularity. In this sense, the 'line of flight' described by Deleuze and Guattari bears similarities with one of the constitutive tensions of Ghanaian – and in particular Akan – philosophy. For the philosopher Gyekye (1995, p. 161), 'Akan social thought' is in part distinguished by an attempt 'to establish a delicate balance between the concepts of communality and individuality.' As a consequence, there is, Gyekye argues, 'an enduring tension in the Akan philosophy of the individual'; while 'it offers a clear, unambiguous statement on the value of individuality, at the same time it makes an equally clear and unequivocal statement on the value of communality' (161). Significant in this context, Gyekye suggests, are both the 'Akan art motif of the "siamese" crocodile' – a 'crocodile with two heads but a single stomach' – and the 'proverb connected with this symbol' that 'says that, although they have a common stomach, they always struggle over food' (159). Echoing aspects of Deleuze and Guattari's 'inclusive disjunction', here the disjunction between the two heads 'envelops a possible conjunction': their shared stomach. The motif and proverb seem to represent individuality as a site of equivocation, pulled in two directions. Individuals are just as validly defined from the perspective of their different heads (singular, independent) as they are from their shared stomach (social, dependent, collective). The tension between these two different

perspectives – their disjunction – is not, as Gyekye's 'unambiguous' and 'unequivocal' suggest, an obstacle to their relation. If lines of flight, in Deleuze and Guattari's sense of the term, foreground inclusive disjunctions in place of ways of thinking that, like Eshun's predicates, imprison 'existence within ready-made forms', then the 'enduring tension' within Akan philosophy between singularity and the collective can also be seen to encourage a view of individuals as something more than homogenous, closed systems.

This tension is, across the work of several Akan philosophers, replicated on broader geographic scales. From Wiredu's (1996) interest in the tensions and relationships between cultural universals and particulars, to Appiah's (1992, pp. 72, 180) reminder that 'the political meanings of identities are historically and geographically relative', involving ineluctably 'the mutual interdependencies history has thrust upon us', Akan philosophers have regularly drawn attention to the inclusive disjunctions characteristic of cultural interrelation on transnational scales. This often means, epistemologically and linguistically, analysing the in-between spaces – Appiah's 'mutual interdependencies' – that intervene between individual and community, people and nation, nation and world. Indeed, as Osha (2005, p. 67) notes, Wiredu's method often involves 'traversing the problematic interfaces between various languages in search of satisfactory structures of meaning.' In Wiredu's (1996, p. 5) own words, this means trying 'to test philosophical formulations in a metropolitan language in our vernacular to see if they will survive independent analysis'. In Wiredu's writing, Akan words, practices, and concepts are, like Adwoa Adde, 'forced into relationship with everything': relationships in which disjunction' between Akan and English, for instance, can still envelop 'possible conjunction', and in which cultural particulars and universals can relate as the crocodile's two heads do to its body.

Throughout Laing's work, motifs of this kind (doublings that trace the spaces between the singular and the plural, inclusive disjunctions that force a recalibration of the relationship between individuals and predicates) are frequently used as a means of exploring new and future-oriented modes of relation across cultural and linguistic borders. In *Woman of the Aeroplanes*, the two planes – regularly named after Pokuaa's upper and lower lips – share a relationship characterised by rapid oscillation between inclusion and disjunction. They approach Levensvale for the first time, for instance, in a configuration that echoes the Akan art motif of the crocodile with two heads:

> Appa's plane had run out of fuel, and had landed expertly on top of Atta's, with the two trailers mating in the sky. The shitoh, kyenam and kenkey, still wonderfully fresh after a day and a half's flying, was being eaten in a one-storey fashion, one plane above, one plane below, with the teeth chewing or chattering with the cold. One plane was heaped with the eating of another. (Laing, 1989b, p. 71)

The congruence between both aeroplanes and Pokuaa's mouth is here materialised: different enough for their trailers to mate in the sky, yet still together forming one mouth capable of eating their cargo of 'shitoh, kyenam and kenkey', both aeroplanes are here suggestive of precisely the balance between singular and plural, individual and communal, described by Gyekye. The lines of flight between both towns – lines tracing new and counter-intuitive 'significant geographies' – are themselves scenes of interrelation that encourage an understanding of cross-cultural interaction grounded in inclusive disjunction.

Perhaps because of this emphasis on interrelation, an equivalence between lines of flight and sexual relations appears throughout Laing's career. In Laing's early poem, 'Miles: Poem on a Runway', aeroplanes provide the material for an extended metaphor for love (Laing, 1984, p. 41). Elsewhere in *Woman of the Aeroplanes*, the manoeuvres of two pilots – the Tukwanian Atta and the Levensvalian Mackie – frequently imitate or suggest varieties of corporeal intimacy:

> The we-go-do aeroplane played with the clouds, tossing its wings among them like a lover's toss of hips; and it put more love in its own deep air-pockets, and its jet emission was quietening with what the two pilots thought was the metal intuition of approaching home (Laing, 1989b, p. 147)

Recalling Eshun's confusion between Laing's singular 'woman' and his exhibition's plural 'women', Laing's description slips between a single 'aeroplane', multiple pilots, and a pairing between wings and sky that blurs the distinction between them. This slippage also affects the vocabulary: 'emission', for instance, in the dual contexts of aeroplanes and love, takes on at the same time two very different meanings.

As such, the broader narrative's inclusive disjunction between Tukwan and Levensvale is replicated on many different scales in the novel. More than just aeroplanes, however, this relation also determines the dynamics between specific characters. The Tukwanian twins, Kwame and Kwaku, are as frequently represented as identical as they are strongly distinguished. If, for example, Kwame Atta was 'the bad twin' (1),

> Kwaku de Babo was the good twin, coming with the nearsame face as the other one, Kwame. The twins were a bigitive force in the town, even if it was suspected that they only had half a buttock each in common . . . Atta having an advanced chin, which was developed by some stylishly deep holding when he was inventing; and Babo powerful knees that refused to knock even when he was entering Pokuaa's house, knees that were strong enough to hold the large Minutes Book of the town. [. . .] When they were children, Kwame would often borrow Kwaku's hairstyle whenever he found it tidy; and when they quarrelled, they would sit and touch the four soles of their feet and push hard to see who would give way. Kwaku. Or they would see who could cover a whole plantain leaf with urine first. Kwame. (3)

Whenever twins appear in Laing's writing, they tend to encourage a sensitivity to relations that are 'nearsame', to differences that intertwine with similarities, oppositions that paradoxically contain accordance. Indeed, the art motif and proverb of the crocodile is again reflected in the typescripts of *Godhorse*, held at the University of Reading, which include a poem that was left out of the final printed text. Entitled 'One is Kwesi one is Kwame' – names anticipating the twins of *Woman of the Aeroplanes* – the poem recounts some of the antics of the 'terrible twins', Kwame and Kwesi, who match each other's actions to the extent that they 'laugh with one mouth' and 'pound fufu double'. Both are 'booklong', a word Laing elsewhere glosses as 'intellectual', yet it is their cohabitation of a 'mutual intellectual chamber' that would lead to their clashing. Having been awarded the title of 'full professor', Kwesi displays the arrogance of 'blessing his own groin with extra powder' – and this assumption of social superiority provokes Kwame to end their 'good match' forever. The poem ends with the absurd and comic suggestion that, because of their rift, 'neither went to the other's funeral' (Laing, n.d.).

Like Adwoa Adde, whose relationship with Accra involves a stretching of the individual body to collective proportions, twins provide Laing with an opportunity to explore the

tensions of similarity and difference that ought, he appears to believe, to structure transnational interaction and exchange – 'allowing the worlds around to seep through, while throwing their own worlds in a corresponding spread when required' (Laing, 1989b, p. 87). Written in 1982, and later collected in *Godhorse* (1989), Laing's poem 'No needle in the sky' reflects – perhaps better than any other poem – the relationship between these tensions and flight. An intercultural translation of Gerard Manley Hopkins's 'The Windhover', 'No needle in the sky' associates the flight path of a weaver bird with precisely this sense of inclusive disjunction. Its clear thematic, typographical, and formal similarities with Hopkin's poem, rather than simply representing a linear trajectory of influence, pose the relation between the two texts as the poem's central problem:

> The weaver bird dappling its flight in yellow light
> has no needle in the sky but my words, no
> directions but the up and down
> of making my cloth, my kente,
> up, up in the sky
> that I too would dap with my words.
> I drop to the knees full of gravel,
> where the ants pull my concentration across the earth.
> Over
> the new hill made with my instant geology
> I see the mist
> weave the bird in and out of its own skin,
> weave the vowels out of my words
> because the hill has no photogenic dusts,
> and every rock is a consonant.
> Behold, down from the ironed sky
> with its steam of rain and birds,
> drops the giant kente flagless,
> twisting and unfurling,
> unstitching
> the great words carrying the world,
> AND:
> gently dropping the wonder
> right back into the poet's lap.
> Poor man carries his own universe, for
> Even literature has its donkeys, I lie? (Laing, 1989a, p. 12)

Predicates, here, are characteristically loose. This is most clear in the poem's oscillation between different kinds of agency. The poet's mastery over what he describes ('no needle [. . .] but my words'), alternates with a sense of passivity ('the ants pull my concentration', while it is now the 'mist' that 'weave[s] the bird in and out of its own skin'). This oscillation performs the central problematic of intercultural translation: whether the immediate environment and the bird's line of flight controls or is controlled by the poet reflects the poem's questioning of the relationship Laing's text has with Hopkins's: whether the latter is a determining influence (as in Laing's adoption of Hopkins's characteristic vocabulary: such as 'dap') or is revitalised and animated by the imaginative power of the former. In this sense, the weaver bird's line of flight – whether a flight designed by the poet or a flight from the poet's influence –

comes to embody the 'inclusive disjunction' between Laing's and Hopkins's texts: a poem, that is, with two heads and a single body.

Returning to Eshun and the exhibition's *Inflight Magazine*, we learn that 'Laing's formal approach to prose reallocates qualities by displacing characteristics from their proper site of belonging to locations to *which they do not properly belong*' (Eshun, 2018, p. 25). Similarly, 'the *girl pilot* named Touria Chaoui, airborne in a sky open to her flight, a sky through which she flies, sets predicates in motion. A girl pilot practices displacement. Touria Chaoui is displacement in practice. A practice whose independence of motion no longer knows its acceptable place' (25). In displacing Hopkins's poem to a Ghanaian context, 'No needle in the sky' is clearly underpinned by a similar process of reallocation. But, more than this, the poem's articulation and questioning of the relation between itself and 'The Windhover' supplements this reallocation. Just as the *Women on Aeroplanes* exhibition sought to unravel the implications of unusual networks of affiliation between figures as apparently unconnected as Laing and Touria Chaoui, Laing's novels regularly envelop processes of reallocation within a broader interest in future-oriented flight paths capable of tracing relational geographies unsullied by assumptions regarding 'proper site[s] of belonging'. It is this interest that places Laing's writing at the heart of both the representation and investigation of the contemporary experience of space, and the struggle to imagine and develop new modes of transnational and cross-cultural interrelation.

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To conclude this article, I'd like briefly to connect these new modes of transnational and cross-cultural interrelation more explicitly to Kodwo Eshun's critical and artistic practice, and in particular to his varied account of Afrofuturism. One reason for this is it helps to articulate the ways in which Laing's writing might be said to anticipate some of the key concerns of Afrofuturism. But it also permits Laing's work to continue to participate directly in an ongoing and future-oriented aesthetic project-one which, as The Otolith Group's website suggests (in a language equally applicable to Laing's texts), pursues the 'opening up' of 'human and non-human life to an aesthetics of intertemporality and interscalarity'.

In a 2003 article titled 'Further Considerations on Afrofuturism', Eshun suggests that, '[b]y creating temporal complications and anachronistic episodes that disturb the linear time of progress,' African and Afro-diasporic 'futurisms adjust the temporal logics that condemned black subjects to prehistory' (2003, p. 297). Afrofuturism, as such, emerges in Eshun's analysis both as a key part of what he terms 'the war of countermemory' (2003, p. 287), and principally as a solution to what has been felt to be the 'urgent need to demonstrate a substantive historical presence' (287), but one which 'aims to extend' this demonstration 'by reorienting the intercultural vectors of Black Atlantic temporality towards the proleptic as much as the retrospective' (289). A reorientation, he reminds us, which takes place in a context in which 'African social reality is overdetermined by intimidating global scenarios, doomsday economic projections, weather predictions, medical reports on AIDS, and life-expectancy forecasts, all of which predict decades of immiserization' (291–2).

In a paper entitled 'This is not a paper . . . ', delivered to a conference in 2000 on African literature and 'thresholds', Laing introduces in remarkably similar terms his fourth and final novel, *Big Bishop Roko and the Altar Gangsters* (2006):

> My fourth novel, which I have just finished, is about a tropical city where there is a religious renaissance which is soft in the center, in the sense that it is full of chanting, it is purely a question of faith and no analysis. And then, the richer cities abroad are on the verge of an artificially induced mutation, a mutation that would prevent different peoples from, for instance, mating or which would prevent a dialogue because one or certain aspects, certain parts of the species would have left, would have mutated from the gene pool. [. . .] So, from all this you can see that the creation of new worlds – some self-referential world – is more important to me that the interpretation of existing worlds. (Laing, 2000, p. 105)

Published in Accra six years later, the novel balances – as Laing's introduction suggests – a range of thematic interests: religious critique shares space on the page with a trans-continental conspiracy involving genetic mutation, eugenics, and economic disparities; a 'tropical city' is pitted against the machinations of 'richer cities abroad'; multi-scalar geographies are delineated alongside an almost metaphysical emphasis on questions of faith. Moreover, and despite his insistence otherwise, the novel interweaves its utopian exploration into potential futures, its investment in 'the creation of new worlds', with a powerful and multi-faceted 'interpretation of existing worlds'.

Above all, however, it is mutation that resides at the heart of *Big Bishop Roko*. The first of Laing's novels to feature a first-person narrative, *Big Bishop Roko* recounts the experiences of a wordman, or griot, struggling to tell the story of the Gold Coast City's Bishop Roko Yam, an 'authentic local man' (Laing, 2006, p. 54) intent on developing the 'subversive plan of an absolute transformation of worship' (22). This plan unfolds in the context of a war against a project of genetic engineering – called 'the biggest anatomical rape ever planned' (306) – which would 'create a biological apartheid' (227) by allowing the rich in the Global North to evolve at a quicker pace than the poor in the Global South. From Roko's passion for shark breeding – a pastime the Bishop thinks of as 'both genetic and theological' (12) – to the wordman's conviction in the importance of raising 'mutabilities around you' (41), the novel foregrounds the variety of ways in which its principal characters struggle to control the rate, direction, and distribution of biological, cultural, and historical mutation.

The interrelationship between these three different scales of mutation – ranging from the individual to the collective, the local to the global – represents, for Roko, both an impasse and an opportunity. The bishop's 'relentless creations of what he called future value' (31) remain in tension with a Gold Coast City trapped within 'the barrier year of 1986' (38), unable to progress towards the new millennium. His goal, the pursuit of a 'species-wide ethics' (266) unhampered by ethnocentrism and economic inequality, depends, therefore, upon the result of the 'mutation war' (334): a war that is as much a war over the present as it is a war over the future.

The connection in thought with Eshun's account of the 'war of countermemory' (2003, p. 287) is clear. The 'intimidating global scenarios,' and 'doomsday economic projections' (291–2) which Eshun outlines reflect the 'biological apartheid' of *Big Bishop Roko*. The emphasis, too, of a shift 'towards the proleptic' (289) finds its corresponding emphasis in Laing's Bishop's 'relentless creations of what he called future value' (2006, p. 31). This is

a creation that takes place as much in language as it the story described. The sense of predicates 'on the move' is as characteristic of this novel as of Laing's earlier fictions.

But what Laing and Eshun share most is their 'aesthetics of intertemporality and interscalarity'. In an interview held on 13 November 2001 in Chicago with Romi Crawford, Eshun notes that part of the motivation behind his writing of *More Brilliant Than The Sun* (1998) was the idea that, despite a widespread critical neglect of sound, 'the sonic is capable of generating a world view' (Eshun, 2015). By developing a methodology based on what is variously termed 'active' or 'close listening', 'microscopic hearing', or 'hearing in close-up', Eshun seeks to demonstrate that the 'sonological' can and ought to be understood 'as an imaginal space which creates networks of affect and creates communities' (Eshun, 2015). For Laing, this 'imaginal space' is the semi-sonological space of language, one in which the relation of 'significant geographies' creates both its own 'networks of affect' and a utopian array of transnational 'communities' – built, more often than not, from the verbal ground upwards. As I have tried to show, this creation is open to the kind of microscopic and close-up analysis Eshun develops in *More Brilliant Than The Sun*, even if the places, persons, and predicates detached and recombined in Laing's fiction are often remarkably distant.

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