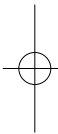
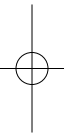
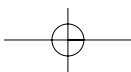


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Essays and Studies



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“Nigeria is Bus is Stage”: The Bus as Metaphor in Contemporary Nigerian Literature¹

This essay takes as its central argument that the bus can be viewed as a metaphor for the nation in Ben Okri’s “Stars of the New Curfew” and Karen King-Aribisala’s *Kicking Tongues*. It unveils the numerous lexical and narrative correspondences between the realms of politics and public transport contained in the texts, and highlights how these associations interact with references to the stage to produce different, yet equally powerful, comments on contemporary Nigerian society.

Every day my people dey inside bus
Shuffering and shmiling
 Forty-nine sitting, ninety-nine standing
Shuffering and shmiling
 Dem go pack dem self in like sardine
Shuffering and shmiling
 Fela Anikulapo Kuti, “Shuffering and Shmiling”

Avid readers of contemporary Nigerian literature have undoubtedly come across fictional “go-slows” more than once.² Caught up in these traffic jams among a multitude of cars are overcrowded buses, indiscriminately filled with haranguing medicine traders, pleading beggars, itinerant preachers, boisterous hawkers, crying babies, commuting workers and cackling chickens. The lively novelistic descriptions of such scenes are, more often than not, set in the congested arteries of Lagos, the former capital of Nigeria.

Paradoxically, Lagos’s flurry of activity is precisely what brings its rush-hour traffic to a standstill. Liveliness transforms into urban chaos, and harsh statistical realities enter the scene:

In 1990 the Population Crisis Committee, a research center based in Washington D.C., studied the world’s one hundred largest metropolitan areas to see which

¹ I am grateful to Karen King-Aribisala and Tolulope Gbenga Ogunlesi for having authorized me to quote extensive passages from their work. I would also like to express my gratitude to Prof. Bénédicte Ledent for her valuable advice and encouragement during the writing of this article.

² The noun “go-slow” is used in British English “in the context of industrial relations,” but “primarily denotes ‘stoppage of traffic’” in Nigerian English (Jowitt 185).

were the most livable. “Livability” was measured in terms of ten characteristics: murder rates, food costs, people per dwelling room, percent of homes having water and electricity, telephones per 100 persons, percent of children in elementary school, infant mortality rates, levels of street noise and speed in rush-hour traffic. . . . Lagos came dead last. (Griswold 153-154)

The *Lonely Planet* tourist guidebook provided a more laconic, yet similar analysis. Without relying on sophisticated scientific evidence, but achieving an equally powerful impact, it plainly stated that “[a]ccording to popular wisdom, the best thing about Lagos is leaving it.”

The position adopted by Nigerian poets and novelists on this matter is less straightforward. Even though Lagos summons associations with violence, corruption, loss of innocence and prostitution in countless novels, of which Chinua Achebe’s *No Longer at Ease* and Cyprian Ekwensi’s *Jagua Nana* are only two famous examples, some writers offer a more balanced picture of the urban environment and hail Lagos as an invaluable source of creativity. For instance, the 2001 Caine Prize winner, Helon Habila, once declared that “[t]here is something almost magical about Lagos. It’s perfect for a writer” (“Sense of the City”). It thus seems that the city rouses feelings of horror and fascination – sometimes simultaneously. This ambivalent perception is admirably captured by Tolu Ogunlesi in his poem “Lagos”:

the rich the poor and the dead
are children
of the same Lagos, broken china
flung amidst splashes
of garbage and gold
gold and garbage scents and smells
smells and scents (74)

An echo of J. P. Clark-Bekederemo’s celebrated poem “Ibadan,” this stanza evokes Lagos’s multifarious facets: its inhabitants of contrasting status and states, since even the “dead” belong to the city beyond the grave; its “garbage and gold,” which, just as its “scents and smells” (nearly synonymous in denotation, yet different in connotation), appear to be so closely related that they are intertwined and almost interchangeable, as the chiasmic constructions seem to imply. Syntax and semantics combine to suggest that the city’s dumps and ghettos conceal undiscovered riches.

“Garbage and gold” are terms that could also be used to describe buses, which are the most popular form of public transport in the former capital of Nigeria. Painted yellow like the precious metal, the large “molues” and smaller “danfos” that criss-cross the Lagosian metropolis offer ample opportunity for enriching social interaction. According to the Lagos-based writer Obiora Udegbumam, it is not infrequent, while on a bus journey, to encounter beggars or salesmen who would treat their interlocutors to a fantastic life story. However,

the vehicles are in such poor condition that, in the words of Chika Unigwe, a Nigerian author now living in Belgium, “they seem to be disintegrating as they move.” When the buses are not stuck in traffic, they often race through the streets at lightning speed (Oguine), which results in an accident rate so high that, according to the BBC report “On the buses in Lagos,” molues have become known among commuters as “moving morgues,” and danfos as “flying coffins.”

These striking features could not but trigger the imagination of creative writers. In his 2004 novel *Graceland*, partly set in Lagos, Chris Abani minutely described the molues which the main character, Elvis, regularly boards. Although incidental to the action, this depiction offers revealing insight into the vehicle’s attributes:

Molues were buses unique to Lagos, and only that place could have devised such a hybrid vehicle, its “magic” the only thing keeping it from falling apart. The cab of the bus was imported from Britain, one of the Bedford series. The chassis of the body came from surplus Japanese army trucks trashed after the Second World War. The body of the coach was built from scraps of broken cars and discarded roofing sheets – anything that could be beaten into shape or otherwise fashioned. The finished product, with two black stripes running down a canary body, looked like a roughly hammered yellow sardine tin. (8-9)

The molue seems to incarnate the hardships of impoverished urban existence, as suggested by the comparison of the bus with an overloaded, battered sardine tin reminiscent of the Fela Kuti lyrics quoted in the epigraph. Abani’s novel further reveals that the vehicle has acquired a symbolic value:

The buses had a full capacity of forty-nine sitting and nine standing³, but often held sixty and twenty. People hung off the sides and out of the doors. Some even stood on the back bumpers and held on to the roof rack. The buses wove through the dense traffic so fast they threw the passengers about, and caused those hanging on to sway dangerously. An old man on the bus had told [Elvis] that the spirits of the road danced around the buses trying to pluck plump offerings, retribution for the sacrilege of the road, which apparently, when it was built, had severed them from their roots, leaving them trapped in an urban chaos that was frightening and confusing. (9)

In this passage, the vehicle takes part in the impalpable, supernatural dimensions that characterise much African folklore. The bus is humorously invested with magical powers that constitute the only plausible explanation for its holding together, while the evocation of the spirits of the road, figures already found in Ben Okri’s Booker prize-winning novel *The Famished Road* (1991), transforms the heavy death toll caused by technical faults and dangerous driving into sacrificial offerings. This juxtaposition of traffic accidents and African lore was already present in Wole Soyinka’s *The Road* (1965), in which the Yoruba deity Ogun was depicted as a “hungry god” (59) to whom victims of road accidents constituted

³ See Kuti’s irony in the epigraph above.

“sacrifice[s]” (22).⁴ In Soyinka’s play, public transport – not in the form of a molue but of a “bolekaja,” a type of lorry otherwise known as a “mammy wagon” (Fioupou 65) – is a central metaphor for danger and death.⁵ Soyinka’s, Okri’s and Abani’s works bear witness to the fact that the molue, as an unavoidable component of the Nigerian urban landscape, has become entrenched in local mythologies.

The molue’s composite nature is also a conspicuous element in Abani’s description. While the vehicle’s designation as “hybrid” may primarily indicate that it results from the assemblage of mechanical parts of various origins,⁶ its status as a quintessential Lagosian artefact also prompts associations with the city’s ethnic, religious and linguistic diversity. The Lagos bus passengers’ manifold backgrounds may even be said to embody the cultural and social variety characteristic of the Nigerian nation as a whole – also a grouping of disparate parts, each with their own history, forced into shape by the coloniser and which, against all odds, still forms a single entity.

The molue has been designated as a microcosm of Nigeria before. In his analysis of Ben Okri’s short story “Stars of the New Curfew,” Robert Fraser wrote that the Lagos bus in Okri’s piece can be seen as “a metonym for the nation, a crowded space in which people scramble for the wherewithal to live” (61). Nevertheless, as Fraser did not elaborate on this statement nor provide textual evidence to buttress his claim, it seems necessary to re-examine the aforementioned fictional text. It will rapidly emerge that Okri’s molue is not only endowed with metonymic, but also metaphorical, qualities. Furthermore, I would like to argue that the metaphorical traits associated with the bus in Okri’s story can be extended to another contemporary Nigerian work of literature, namely Karen King-Aribisala’s *Kicking Tongues*, a book that mixes prose and poetry.

The first-person narrator of “Stars of the New Curfew,” Arthur, is a salesman. He earns a living by vending, as he puts it himself, “rather dubious locally made medicines at various markets and on the molue buses that career all over Lagos” (83). While fully aware of the moral questionability of his commercial activities, the narrator nevertheless decides to exploit the “credulity of people” (84) in his own self-interest. In his effort to attract potential customers, he proudly displays a wide range of theatrical devices that evidence

⁴ In an essay, Soyinka describes Ogun as the “God of creativity, guardian of the road, god of metallic lore and artistry. Explorer, hunter, God of war, Custodian of the sacred oath” (*Myth* 140).

⁵ See Christiane Fioupou’s *La Route* for an extended analysis of the theme of the road, transport and Yoruba mythology in Soyinka’s work. Quayson (121-122) also provides a brief analysis of the concept of the “famished road” in the writings of Okri and Soyinka.

⁶ In this sense, the notion of hybridity can be understood outside any theoretical framework as meaning “derived from heterogeneous or incongruous sources; having a mixed character” (*OED* 7: 523).

the proximity between selling and acting techniques, hence Arthur's remark: "Sometimes I think I missed my real vocation, but I am not wholly sure what it could have been. Maybe in another society, in a different time, I might have been well regarded as an actor" (84). As the narrator attributes imaginary qualities to his drugs, pretence joins performance among the basic ingredients in the recipe of profitability. Another indispensable constituent of the formula resides in an element incongruously appended to the salesman's inventory of merchandise: "ointment, malaria tablets, phials for yellow fever and dysentery, and books" (87). The item that completes the enumeration of dangerous medicines, "books," emphasises the importance of discourse in the itinerant merchant's dishonest business activities: by retailing medicine, he above all sells idea(l)s – just as politicians are commonly believed to do.⁷

After repeatedly witnessing the devastation caused by his medicines, which aggravate the ailments they are supposed to cure, Arthur resolves to find another job, but he soon realises that "the only sales jobs to be obtained were the ones that sold products that had to do with cures. Everybody seemed to need a cure for something" (89). Despite the health hazard represented by the medicines, the crowd of sufferers continue to be fooled by the salesman's empty promises. Okri seems to indicate that they are, to put it abruptly, a party to their own misfortunes, for their lack of discernment leads to the aggravation of their ordeal. This meek attitude and self-inflicted suffering is perhaps alluded to in their willing intake of a medicine named "koboko" (91), a word of Hausa origin that designates a whip commonly used to beat cattle (Igboanusi 161-162).

The naivety of the crowd is a recurrent thematic concern in Okri's work. For instance, Felicia Oka Moh (137) has written that the credulity of the masses in "Stars of the New Curfew" anticipates an incident in *The Famished Road*, during which a political party distributes free milk that is eagerly accepted by the inhabitants of a ghetto, but later turns out to be poisonous.⁸ The diseases provoked by these toxic products – the medicines in "Stars of the New Curfew" on the one hand and the milk in *The Famished Road* on the other – seem to be concrete representations of the disasters brought about by the pernicious ideas fed to the gullible population by experts in the art of persuasion. In this respect,

⁷ The term "discourse" used in this sentence may require clarification since, as Sara Mills rightly observes, the word "cannot be pinned down to one meaning" (6). Following Roger Fowler's claim that "texts can be regarded as the *medium* of discourse" (Fowler 111, emphasis in original), my use of the concept points to the importance of language in the shaping of social and political structures. As critical discourse analyst Norman Fairclough argues: "Discourses do not just reflect or represent social entities and relations, they construct and constitute them" (cited in Mills 149). This perception of discourse is indebted to Foucault's work, notably in terms of its concern with power relations (Mills 148-157).

⁸ Although Moh does not mention this, a similar incident involving poisonous milk is briefly reported in "Stars of the New Curfew" (94).

the salesman and the politician (and even the actor, who is paralleled with the salesman in the text and whose lies can be compared to the politician's) seem to merge into a single type of character, one who falsely claims to cure the ills of the nation by means of a magic potion.

The links between the figures of the salesman and the politician, especially, are hinted at on several occasions in Okri's short story. For example, Arthur's boss claims that his only interest is to "bring health to the battered people of the nation" (90) with an all-purpose drug. Such a statement resembles a demagogic political speech, especially since this apparent altruism proves to be mere self-interest. Indeed, a few pages later, the very same man is exhilarated when he tells Arthur about "the perfect money-making medicine" (97) that his team has elaborated.

But nowhere perhaps is the fallacy of the salesman-cum-politician's arguments better exposed than in a passage describing a bus ride. Facing the rush-hour crowd, Arthur and two of his colleagues board a molue with the intention of selling a new medicine called POWER-DRUG – an ambiguous name that adequately reflects the real and conceived properties of the potion, which is supposed to bring power and energy to those who drink it, but in fact enriches and reinforces the power of those who manufacture and sell it. Once on the molue, Arthur waits for an opportunity to interrupt the speeches of a Rastafarian and a Jehova's Witness, and then launches into his sales talk. He begins his act in Pidgin (103), a language traditionally associated with the lower social classes, thereby temporarily breaking down ethnic barriers and creating a form of popular solidarity with the passengers.⁹ He then continues his harangue in English, also providing versions of his talk "in seven different national languages" (104), as if he were indeed addressing the entire nation.

Not only is the salesman not only a linguistic chameleon, but he also knows how to camouflage reality and manipulate his audience. For instance, he initially says that the drug he is selling was "produced with the co-operation of the most important pharmaceutical companies in the world" (103), only to argue shortly afterwards that it is "more effective than anything the white man ha[s] invented" (103-104) and that it is really "the product of African powers, the collaboration of Africa and India" (104). In other words, he starts by giving his product universal prestige before changing his tactics, and valorising it as an African – or even a post-colonial – creation, no doubt hoping that the mention of an alliance between formerly colonised territories will bring to mind subversion and cultural pride, and thus turn the purchase of the medicine into an act of political resistance. The merchant's appeal to post-colonial solidarity is of course deeply ironic, since the unscrupulous exploitation of his Nigerian compatriots serves a

⁹ The association between Nigerian Pidgin and low social status is regularly reported in sociolinguistic studies, but the language is in fact spoken by people from all social backgrounds in Nigeria (see e.g. Deuber 45-58).

capitalistic agenda, typically associated with the neo-colonial practices of Western multinationals operating on African soil.

Inconsistent as the salesman's argumentation may be, it works wonders. The Rastafarian, followed by virtually every passenger on the bus, purchases the so-called miracle drug. In the narrator's words, "it was as if, in an instant, and totally by surprise, [the passengers of the bus] had come across the answers to all their problems" (104). But the situation degenerates when the driver imbibes a large quantity of POWER-DRUG. Stimulated by the medicine's hallucinogenic effects, he engages in a race with another molue and loses control of his vehicle, which splashes into the Lagos lagoon. A tool of the author's masterful use of structural irony, the narrator, who manages to escape the wreck, reports that "As always in these kinds of accidents, the driver and the conductor survived. I learnt later on that *only* seven people drowned" (108, my emphasis). Significantly, the vehicle sinking into the lagoon may be viewed as an extension of the bus-nation metaphor: in the bus, as in Nigerian society, those at the helm shirk their duties and drag down their compatriots in their fall. The individuals responsible for the catastrophe – whether drivers, salesmen or politicians – survive, while the victims, weakened by desperation, keep making the fatal mistake of swallowing blatant lies.

Towards the end of the story, the representation of the medicine trader as an inefficient politician surfaces once more, this time in a much more straightforward manner:

My boss began to contemplate making medicines to cure the problems that POWER-DRUG created. Where will it end? Like most of our leaders, he creates a problem, then creates another problem to deal with the first one – on and on, endlessly fertile, always creatively spiralling to greater chaos. (143)

Okri no doubt condemns the repeated frauds that plunge the nation into disarray, yet his puzzling use of positively connoted words such as "fertile" and "creatively," terms that evoke life and inventiveness, may provide a hint of hope in this otherwise bleak situation. The text seems to indicate that the people of Nigeria do not lack resourcefulness or imagination, but need to put their ideas to a more constructive use.¹⁰ Once again, the Lagos bus is the perfect incarnation of this creative potential: just like Nigeria, the molue is an unlikely assembly of bits and pieces that does not break up until, as in Okri's story, it is taken over by the madness of its leaders.

Imagination and creativity are also at the heart of Karen King-Aribisala's *Kicking Tongues*, a work that transposes Geoffrey Chaucer's medieval *Canterbury Tales* to contemporary Nigeria. In King-Aribisala's book, the fourteenth-century journey from Southwark to the shrine of Saint Thomas Becket takes the form of a bus trip from Lagos, Nigeria's former "Capital / Offence and Sin" (6) to

¹⁰ Mariaconcetta Costantini views this particular passage in more negative terms (44), but also assigns "a potential energy of renewal" (52) to the narrator's account.

Abuja, the new federal capital, “Hoped for redeeming-hope” (6). This future-oriented itinerary, away from “Evil” (6) and towards redemption, clearly expresses the fact that the expedition organised by the book’s narrator, “The Black Lady The,” is not simply a physical one, but also a “spiritual, psychological” one (King-Aribisala, “Interview with Ronnie Uzoigwe”). In addition to the religious undertones contained in the description of the travelling process, the tales related by the passengers on their way to Abuja are said to constitute a series of “journeys into otherness / in hopes of discovery” (King-Aribisala, *Kicking* 7), suggesting that story-telling is an instrument that can help to progressively renew the Nigerian nation.

Beside the vehicle in which the “pilgrims” are travelling and whose role will be examined later on, a second bus is featured, in Russian-doll like fashion, in one of the stories recounted by The Black Lady The. At the beginning of this tale, entitled “Bus Play,” it is explicitly stated that the molue in which the action is set serves as an epitome of the Nigerian nation:

Bus is stage of country. Nigeria is Bus is stage.
 Bus driver is nation leader. Is leader
 Is
 Leader-leading-leader of
 The-not-so-easily
 Led
 Bus conductor is minister of government is Bus-conductor
 Conducting-conduit-conducting-conductor
 Bus-country is large and pop-popping-populous
 Bursting at its siding seams
 The many many benches crammed-stuffed
 With people-fulling (159-160)

In this opening poem, attention is drawn to the phonological proximity and the ambiguous polysemy of certain words, whose multiple meanings are particularly relevant to the bus-nation parallel. A striking example can be found in the line “Conducting-conduit-conducting-conductor.” While the verbal form “conducting” evidently refers to the bus conductor’s capacity, “to conduct” also signifies “to organise” and “to lead.” Moreover, the lexemes “conduct” and “conductor” share their etymology with the noun “conduit,” which figuratively means “a channel or medium by which anything (knowledge, influence, wealth) is conveyed” (*OED* 3: 694). This linguistic convergence is not emphasised by chance, for what the conductor-minister does in the bus-country is assist the driver in collecting money – acting, on a metaphorical level, as an intermediary between the Head of State and the population.

The narrator not only likens the bus to the nation but, as shown in the line “Nigeria is Bus is stage,” she establishes, even more directly than in Okri’s story, a triangular relationship between the country, the bus and the theatre, the last of which is also echoed in the title of the section, “Bus Play.” Incidentally, the

pertinence of the theatre to the exploration of reality is reminiscent of Jacques's soliloquy in Shakespeare's *As You Like It*:

All the world's a stage,
And all the men and women merely players.
They have their exits and their entrances . . . (2.7: 150-151)

Shakespeare's play describes the world as a giant stage which actors enter and leave; King-Aribisala presents the bus, which passengers board and alight from, as one such stage. And *her* stage is Nigeria. The similarity between the events that unfold in the movie and those that occur in Nigerian society is remarkable from the onset of the story. It is evidently bribing and impunity, often described as the scourges of the nation, that are denounced when the "Bus Driver Nation Leader" peremptorily announces that the passengers will have to pay a double fare, simply because "Times are hard" (160).

When the bus-nation comes to a halt, an intriguing character enters the stage: a beggar, who addresses his audience in an English so perfect that it "mesmerises the passengers" (160). More than the man's mastery of the English language, it is his extremely formal register that creates great comic effect by contrasting with the more colloquial Pidgin spoken by most of the commuters. When the eccentric beggar is asked if he is mad, he does not deny his condition and replies that he is "indeed an escaped patient from the psychiatric hospital" (161). He is equally truthful when he admits that he is going to use any money he is given to buy alcohol and cigarettes, adding that "the situation in our country has driven me to this terrible affliction of my body . . . and my mind" (161-162). The figure of the madman is once again evocative of Shakespeare. *King Lear* notably features two of them, both of whom bear a striking resemblance to King-Aribisala's character: Edgar, who is perfectly sane but disguises himself as a "madman, and beggar" (4.1: 97), and Lear, whose insanity proves to be an eye-opener, as suggested by Edgar's observation, "Reason in madness" (4.6: 113). The beggar-madman in "Bus Play" appears to be a conflation of these two Shakespearian figures, as his outspoken statements and incisive remarks may be interpreted as signs of madness or, conversely, as indications of extreme lucidity. The parallel established between *King Lear* and the bus-country may encourage one to consider the Nigerian autocratic regimes to be as corrupt and illegitimate as Goneril and Regan's access to power in Shakespeare's play, gained after the hypocritical emotional bribing of their father.

In addition to this possible intertextual influence, the beggar's candid reflections in King-Aribisala's piece, combined with his excessively formal language, may prompt one to view him as a metaphorical representation of an intellectual, perhaps a writer, driven crazy by the corruption of Nigerian society. His madness also appears to be mixed with anger, and indeed, when a female passenger enquires about his insanity a second time, the beggar replies: "Yes, madam. I can get really mad" (162). In this sentence, the meaning "angry" is

superimposed on “crazy,” as if the beggar’s ire at the country’s condition had mutated into lunacy, preventing him from channelling his frustration into a constructive course of action.

Yet the entire Nigerian nation cannot be simplistically reduced to corruption and disorder. Unlike Okri, King-Aribisala asserts that the fraudulent schemes of the powerful are offset by the voices of those whom her narrator calls the “not-so-easily / Led” in the introduction to her tale (159). Towards the end of “Bus Play,” a group of anonymous passengers collectively identified as “the back bench chorus” (166) – a noun phrase evocative of the backbenchers in Parliament and the chorus of classical drama that brings the theatrical and political metaphors full circle – breaks up a fight between the bus conductor and a woman who refuses to pay the imposed double fare. In six consecutive lines attributed to no individuals in particular, this chorus of voices urges the conductor and the woman to cease fighting, for example by exhorting them to “Stop this nonsense oh!”, and drawing their attention to their commonalities: “We are all Nigerians!” (167). Thereupon the story ends, on a hopeful note and in a spirit of reconciliation and, ever so slowly, signs of change start to surface: the passengers pay the normal fare in a friendly atmosphere; the bus driver and his conductor decide to replace the cracked windscreen of their bus-country. As the commuters disembark, the narrator reports that “Many, if not all, will go on, continue; on. Further-farther; continuing” (167). They will board another bus, for their physical journey has not yet ended. Neither, in fact, has their imaginative one.

The moral of King-Aribisala’s piece appears to be twofold. Firstly, any impulse prompting the democratisation of Nigerian society is contingent on collective commitment; secondly, the move away from totalitarianism is a continuous process – metaphorically speaking, an ongoing expedition that most passengers will nonetheless strive to complete. In *Kicking Tongues*, the complexities inherent to the transformation of the Nigerian political landscape are further metaphorised as the eventful bus trip that frames the successive tales – although this time, the vehicle involved is not a molue but a coach travelling from Lagos to Abuja. At the beginning of King-Aribisala’s book, forty people of different genders, ages, social classes and ethnic backgrounds gather at the Eko Holiday Inn in Lagos to board a coach bound for Ikeja airport, where they are planning to take a flight to Abuja. Upon their arrival at the airport, they are informed that the seats they have booked are no longer available, as they have been given to a government party. To the great displeasure of the narrator, an official advises the group that arrangements have been made with their coach driver for them to complete the journey to Abuja by bus. Assuming that the “pilgrims” metonymically stand for Nigeria’s population, this entire incident can effortlessly be construed as a metaphor: when plans to fast-forward the nation into democracy fail due to corruption, the country is forced to set out on an arduous journey towards the democratic ideal.¹¹ The “bus” and “country” spaces

are similarly blended with each other throughout the narrative. For example, the organiser of the expedition, The Black Lady The, is said to be “conducting this particular affair [i.e. the trip]” (68).¹² The ambiguity of this figure who acts as self-proclaimed leader of the bus-country is perhaps best captured in her own description of herself:

Objective
I am
Not

I speak
Plain subjective truth (10)

The narrator straightforwardly acknowledges her lack of objectivity in the first stanza, but the second stanza is much more equivocal. While the expression “subjective truth” may have lost its oxymoronic qualities in post-modern times,¹³ the collocation “plain truth,” which is here split by the adjective “subjective,” generally evokes objectivity, thereby implicitly contradicting the confession made in the first stanza. The intertwining of the opposite notions of “subjectivity” and “objectivity” in the single noun phrase “plain subjective truth” aptly reflects the narrator-conductor’s inconsistent attitude towards the passengers of the bus. Just as she admits to her subjectivity, yet obliquely claims that her viewpoint reflects the “plain truth,” she confesses to the existence of her “old feelings of authoritarianism” in a narrative passage (68), yet repeatedly takes the moral high ground when telling the travellers that she is a democratic person (69, 161). The narrator’s insistence on the democratic nature of her initiative cannot but encourage the reader to view the events that take place in the bus as a metaphoric representation of the Nigerian political scene. For all her laudable intentions, The Black Lady The constantly tries to have absolute control over the discussions and is, as a result, perceived as a commanding leader by some of the passengers, especially Oba Oyelekan. The Oba, whom one may assume stands for traditional authority,¹⁴ repeatedly challenges the narrator, accusing her of

¹² Recall the foregoing analysis of the verb “conduct.”

¹³ The refusal to subscribe to “grand narratives” and the unique “truth” they try to impose is a widely reported characteristic of the post-modern condition, a feature which finds its theoretical origins in Jean-François Lyotard’s *La Condition postmoderne*. Along similar lines, Hans Bertens states that “the awareness of the absence of centers, of privileged languages, higher discourses” (46) is a striking feature of practically all recent concepts of post-modernism.

¹⁴ The lexicon appended to *Kicking Tongues* defines the word “oba” as the “highest-ranking chief” (244). For a brief account of the status of these traditional rulers in Yoruba society, see Sadiku (141-142). Significantly, in *Kicking Tongues* Oba Oyelekan is the character who reminds the narrator that she has breached traditional protocol by forgetting to let the elders speak first, or introduce them to the group during the early stages of the journey.

“monopolising the story-telling” (68) and “being authoritarian” (187). When another traveller, identified as The Postgraduate English Major, enters into a discussion with The Black Lady The over her use of metaphor in a tale, she characteristically retorts:

“Don’t think. Just listen. Your turn is coming. You’ll have your say, I promise.” I can see that many of the travellers might not get a chance to tell their story on the journey but the ones left can do so when we arrive in Abuja. Maybe. It just depends on how they treat me”. (81)

The Black Lady The’s response, whether voiced in her reply to The Postgraduate English Major or expressed in direct thought, inconsistently oscillates between the arbitrary reasoning of a dictator and the democratic promises of a liberal politician. It is only at the end of the journey that she learns to compromise with her authoritarian inclinations – she reports, for example, that she has developed a friendship with her antagonist Oba Oyelekan (240). The narrator’s idealistic motivation for the organisation of the trip and her less commendable attitude during the journey itself may be considered an illustration of the complexities entailed in any process of democratisation. As The Banker, a minor character in the book, relevantly comments: “Nigeria [may] be undemocratic even, sometimes, in its pursuit of democracy” (134).

The parallels drawn between Karen King-Aribisala’s fictional bus trip and the possible evolution of the Nigerian nation exemplify the argument that I have attempted to develop in this article. On the basis of textual evidence, I have indeed argued that the bus has undergone a transformation from location to trope in literary works such as Ben Okri’s “Stars of the New Curfew” and Karen-King Aribisala’s *Kicking Tongues*. In Okri’s story, the molue can be seen as a metaphor for Nigerian society: not only do they share similar features (both are associated with hybridity and, paradoxically, with dynamism and immobility), but the activities of the salesman retailing his merchandise on the bus is also presented as a politician’s address to the nation. King-Aribisala’s “Bus Play” establishes explicit connections between the bus, Nigeria and the theatre, thereby providing a representation of the Nigerian situation in the form of a comedy; yet more tragic undertones may be inferred from the presence of a chorus and the possible intertextual connection with Shakespeare’s *King Lear*. The bus is also more than a mere setting to the passages in prose and poetry that frame the travellers’ tales in King-Aribisala’s book. The narrator’s position as organiser-conductor-leader during the trip from Lagos to Abuja suggests connections between the bus’s movement in space and the nation’s development in time. Considering that the passengers seem to represent the social and ethnic diversity of Nigeria – and thus embody character types rather than individuals – and that the vehicle’s journey may be related to the democratisation of the country, *Kicking Tongues* resembles a moral allegory in more than one respect. This label brings to mind both religion, which plays an important role towards the end of

the book, and medieval literature, which inspired the narrative structure of King-Aribisala's work.

The bus-nation equivalence is viewed from different angles by the authors examined in this essay. While the bleakness of Okri's story is only counterbalanced by inconspicuous allusions to the possibility of change, King-Aribisala's approach, however critical, is more decidedly oriented towards a potential for improvement. These diverse strategies testify to the remarkable versatility of the bus metaphor in the Nigerian context, a flexibility that admirably reflects the vehicle's contrasting attributes: host to a lively communal environment that can become a hellishly crowded space, the bus is an unpredictable conveyance, now immobilised in traffic, now madly racing on the Nigerian roads.

The bus's metaphorical potential has not been exhausted in this study, which has barely scratched the critical surface. However, it is to be hoped that the bus-nation parallel will provide the basis for a theoretical investigation into the vehicle's symbolic associations with movement, transformation and ambivalence. Many avenues are indeed left to explore.

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