CHAPTER 2

DEBT’S GEOGRAPHIES

Inequality, or Development’s Dance with Dead Capital

It had become his business to get up the subject, and then discuss with his principal, Lord Cantrip, the expediency of advising the Government to lend a company five million of money, in order that this railway might be made. It was a big subject, and the contemplation of it gratified him. It required that he should look forward to great events, and exercise the wisdom of a statesman. What was the chance of these colonies being swallowed up by those other regions,—once colonies,—of which the map that hung in the corner told so eloquent a tale? And if so, would the five million ever be repaid? And if not swallowed up, were the colonies worth so great an adventure of national money? Could they repay it? Would they do so? Should they be made to do so?

—Anthony Trollope, Phineas Finn (160)

This chapter traces a “Third World” narrative of debt. The previous chapter investigated literature’s involvement in creating a belief in something not there that had value for the incipient world of finance; the financialization of the “Third World” also requires a set of abstractions, borrowing from literature, where the narrative object of debt appears as “something else” (Clover, “Autumn” 45) and as somewhere else. In fact, it might be said that the “Third
World” comes into appearance as such a negative category of representation—a “Third World”—through a sort of debt where the object that is not there gets transposed onto a space of negative difference. This chapter argues, therefore, that literature creates a “Third World” identity as fictional in modes that parallel debt as fictional value.

The choice of the term Third World is very deliberate here—I don’t intend it to refer to a nonaligned Cold War entity subordinated to a conflict between superpowers or a pretechnological region playing catchup in a world of technological progress, though I realize that those types of meanings have been granted to the term historically and criticized appropriately as monological, racist, primitivist, and supremacist. Rather, what I mean by “Third World” is a particular structural position within the geopolitical globe that, in a world systems sense and because of its continued disempowerment through histories of colonial and other geopolitical subordinating relationships, is vulnerable to exploitation in current schemes of economic accumulation. As such, “Third World” does not exist in any other form but by its fictional usage, and yet it allows for global power relations to be seen as having similar effects in multiple sites—effects worth thinking about in their similarities even as they interact with different local cultures. Because of its history, the “Third World” carries activist claims, sympathies, and coalitions, as well as a critique of the normative economic order. As Ella Shohat remarks, “The term ‘Third World’ contains a common project of linked resistances to neo-colonialisms. Within the North American context, more specifically, it has become a term of empowerment for inter-communal coalitions of various peoples of color” (111).

This chapter moves from Nobel Prize–winning Nigerian playwright Wole Soyinka’s 1965 play The Road to celebrated Kenyan novelist Ngugi wa Thiong’o’s 2006 novel Wizard of the Crow, detailing how neoliberalism inserts its logics inside the ideologies that debt produces. The Road tells of drivers who profit by selling
dead people’s possessions after road accidents—the living need to borrow from death in order to live, as, for Marx, living labor is enthralled to dead capital, and they then “owe” time back to the gods as work. *Wizard of the Crow* is a comedy of errors telling of a fictional “Third World” nation with the name Aburiria whose entire state apparatus is wrapped up in debt as the Ruler’s sovereignty is financed out to foreign investors. As, in its metaphysical logic, *The Road* locates the ideology of debt in the relationship between commodities and gods of the dead, *Wizard of the Crow* is about antiproduction: the displacement of the worker and the commodity, the breakdown of the machine, the destruction of its made world, the death of the social.

*Wizard of the Crow* foregrounds a very basic problematic in the relationship between neoliberalism and economies of debt. Liberalism envisions debt as part of a contract. In classical liberalism, the contract is assumed to be political between citizens and states, where the citizen gives up its freedom in exchange for security. This configuration of the contract translates into an economic arrangement: equal parties enter into an agreement where something is handed over from one to the other with the understanding of an eventual return. If a rich nation or bank grants a loan to a “Third World” country, the idea behind it should be that the money will be used to build up productive infrastructure that would enable the debtor to pay back the debt even while expanding economic potential. However, debt is instead an agreement between unequal partners or, as *Wizard* foregrounds, a situation where the partners are so unequal that the contract is forced by one party onto another for the benefit of only one side. Neoliberal debt restructuring has required debtor countries to divest from developmental initiatives and infrastructure, thereby reducing or even destroying the productive capacities of the “Third World” country to deliver on the debt. Debt under neoliberalism is therefore in the service of power, destroying cultures by destroying work and workers’ lives. *Wizard* demonstrates this nexus between
increasing debt and the shrinking credibility of the promise of the material world.

*Wizard* emphasizes literature’s place in exhibiting this destruction of the material world enacted through debt because it brings up the question of who controls the relationship between languages and realities. Remember that the story of Babel is also a story about the potential to challenge God the creator by giving humans language—building, diversifying, and extending language and its power to signify, to create worlds of meaning in competition with supreme power. But the project fails. As soon as the Ruler and his cronies start negotiations for the grand construction project of the Tower (or even before), the coherence of the territory, the state, the economy, and the literary trajectory all come apart simultaneously. The streets in the business zone are filled with “flies, worms, and the stench of rot” (Ngugi, *Wizard* 36) caused by “mountains of uncollected garbage, the factories in the industrial area, or simply from human sweat” (48), and Kamiti, soon to be the Wizard, detaches in spirit form from this territory and from his working body due to hunger and unemployment, “the wounds of fruitless quests” (47). National industry here is reduced to excreting death, and labor is immersed in the waste of past production, with no employment openings available even for cleaning toilets: “Are there any toilets left . . .?” (51). Here the instruments of production make waste, death, and rot and as such are disconnected from living processes, and the machine does not need the worker even for accumulating more shit.

This death of production affects even the creative powers of language: “no vacancy” publicizes the situation of worker obsolescence while at the same time explaining that language can no longer *do its work* in an antiproductive, dead region. For example, Tajirika (soon to be in charge of the Tower project and then to be the future Ruler) questions Kamiti’s use of modern English, particularly his ability to read, understand, and interpret the sign “No Vacancy” (59). Tajirika reminds Kamiti that, as the East India
Company’s control has been handed over to the modern construction and real estate company for which he works, the standards of acceptable English since the seventeenth century, which he learned during colonization, are no longer relevant. Whereas meaning-making had been grounded in old forms of slavery, conquest, and domination, it was now grounded in new forms of exploitation, most prevalently debt (negative value, or waste). The destruction of standard literary English and the destruction of national production are thereby linked.

_The Road_ is a story about the relationship between dead capital and living labor on the road to progress in a floundering developing state. The state comes across as comical in the form of the Professor with out-of-place habits who preaches spiritualism in the Word while turned away from those in his immediate service, an absurd idealist with his eyes to the sky. Dressed in Victorian tails and bearing old newspapers and garbage, the Professor comes on stage bearing a sign that says “BEND” that he stole from off the road. “BEND” is a spiritual descriptor of the road—the material apparatus underlying productive motion and progress. Once the sign is removed from the road, commuters no longer are certain of their way—they roll straight forward, toward death. The sign “BEND” divides living labor from dead capital—those workers inside the productive machine, licensed to work by the Professor (who issues counterfeit work licenses for a fee), from those bodies piled up by the side of the road. The mythological spirit of death, Ogun, dances around the players in a mask. The Professor oversees the collection of commodities from the strewn bodies on the road and resells them, so their dead bodies are the machines of profit. The word “BEND” thus pivots, opening up a spiritual communication with the gods as a sign of technological advancement, development, and rising worker well-being—or reproduction—which its removal closes down in sacrifice and death. _The Road_ raises the question of the corrupt misappropriation of the sign of progress,
a misappropriation that stymies development with its hopes and promises.

Reading *The Road* and *Wizard of the Crow* together—two works that take up debt in its relationship to colonialism—reveals that neoliberalism intensifies the postcolonial capture of dead capital through debt by sacrificing productive living economies of the commodity. Each work takes up the narrative of a development project—the road in *The Road* and the Tower in *Wizard*—as the physical form of power, but the relation of the project to the space of development is different in each case. In *Wizard*, the Tower is a false promise, never to materialize and so alienating the possibilities offered by controlling the material construction of meaning. Though *Wizard* is steeped in mythological and religious codes, as the centrality of the Tower of Babel would suggest, the idea of transcendence or material transformation that the biblical Tower might offer in the word of God has no possibility of connecting with the situation described for “Third World” citizens on the ground—it is, in fact, comic. In contrast, with the road open to death-inducing corruption and appropriation, *The Road* is concerned with a metaphysics of debt, where the inequalities that seem steeped in religious ritual second as identities politicized in relation to the postcolony. Whereas in *The Road*, debt reignites tradition, local culture, rituals, and relations with the gods to merge with modern work-related inequalities and techniques of dispossession, in *Wizard*, debt has the power to transform culture in its totality by replacing work. The two texts also recognize that debt’s territorial alienations, where the ends of finance are to turn profits somewhere else, are caught in a similar relationship to that which the literary word has with the object of its representation. *The Road* shows the postcolonial elite and the workers struggling over the power to signify, while *Wizard* displays signification as disassociated from the needs and concerns of the national body as it, like finance, turns toward geopolitical
power centers and away from communities, commodities, and productive employment.

**SYMBOLIC EXCHANGE**

Literary scholarship has taken account of financialization’s encounters with “Third World” narratives, but not debt per se. Alison Shonkwiler uses the word financial rather than “neoliberal” or postcolonial because financial exposes the “process of creating value” (xxviii), securing abstract value in real things by securing imaginary power relations as real. This insight certainly applies to *Wizard of the Crow*, where the Tower never exists except as an unlikely plan and a vulture fund, as it only serves to gouge the economic base: financial power seeks to surrender all social relations before its own version of imaginary social relations. Most famously, Ian Baucom, citing Arrighi, notes the importance of the realist novel’s character typologies for the forms of risk and insurance adjustments fueling the Atlantic slave trade in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. The protagonist in the realist novel is a quantity, an accumulation of experience and adventure that turns into a “type,” or an object identifiable within a range of social positions. Like the English novel, the practice of insurance invents an “average” type and situation based in similar generalized abstractions. According to Baucom, insurance and its calculations of risk, like the novel, require that “the particular object which it considers and which it has placed within its determinate moment, is, to some extent, typical of that moment” and that “the situation itself will then be taken (at least in part) to define the objects it circumscribes” (44). Ericka Beckman likewise notices how “novels highlight finance capital as an illusory and indeed fictive form of wealth” (97) in late nineteenth- through twentieth-century literary narratives. Latin American financial narratives, she says, register economic imbalances showing the psychological damage done by the failure of the economy to sustain equivalences between these
characters and their commodity contexts. The system of equivalences will “fail to accurately represent value, leading to all kinds of disruptions and short-circuits in exchange” (85) that reflect in the characters’ psychologies. For Beckman, these failures are often personal and subjective, marked by nervous and psychological crises. Beckman acknowledges that money’s abstractions are constituted intentionally as unstable, even failing, by imposing inequalities of the creditor-debtor relationship into the structure of character.

Much of this new scholarship on literature and finance has followed Derrida in addressing literature’s role in producing equivalencies in value that tend toward balance, even if precariously, or at least suggest that catharsis would lead toward equilibrium rather than projecting disequilibrium as, ultimately, the norm. In line with deconstruction’s reliance on structural linguistics, which understands signifiers of meaning to be referring to other signifiers of meaning, such criticism generally envisions symbolic exchange, similarly to ideologies of market exchange, as operating within a system of made equivalencies in language: “What must be interrogated, it seems,” explains Derrida in his analysis of the gift, “is precisely this being-together, the at-the-same-time, the synthesis, the symmetry, the syntax, or the system, the syn that joins together two processes as incompatible as that of the gift and that of exchange” (37–38). This partial story does not take into account Bakhtin’s analysis of the centrifugal forces that tie literature to its social milieu, its expression of disequilibrium and distance,7 the impasse in the exchange between the call to alliance and the body-to-be-allied.6 Whereas Derrida’s analysis is based on de-emphasizing and dismantling the essential differences between a gift and an exchange, as both need to be answered with an equal but impossible return, debt triggers types of narrative that extend indefinitely the time in which returns are not returned because the indebted are denied access to the means of return, making them unequal to the exchange.7
This chapter argues that adding the “Third World” into the mix undoes the ideology of exchange through equivalence. If, as Derrida proposes, the system of equivalencies is based on the erasure of the object of signification (e.g., the signified), then the “Third World” is that object—the irreconcilable nonequivalent (or indebtedness) in the exchange that calls out the lie in the system. Though for Derrida, every empirical object is erased in the signifying economy of exchange so that symbolic equivalence empties the materiality of human suffering of its distinct importance and ethical claims, Theodor Adorno, in contrast, poses human suffering as an actuality that disrupts subjective comfort and accommodations of the subject within the objective world. As Adorno declares, “Suffering remains foreign to knowledge; though knowledge can subordinate it conceptually and provide means for its amelioration, knowledge can scarcely express it through its own means of experience without itself becoming irrational” (18).8

The “Third World” has a privileged relation to Derridian aporias, the remainder that symbolization cannot equalize, because of its history as the victim of organized expropriation. The history of the “Third World” attests that the system of exchange was never an outcome of equivalencies but instead constructed on top of radical inequalities hidden under the appearances of equality. A “Third World” literature of debt, then, would show how literature’s role in producing representations of objects referring to other representations of objects to create equal value breaks down in the context of global exchange. Foregrounding the destruction of real and potential productive capacities, a “Third World” narrative of debt shows the “Third World” as an object that has been displaced, destabilized, or disappeared: its tendency not to conform to symbolic exchange in equal representation dovetails with the reality that it has been coerced into its circuits of exchange on unequal footing.

One important element of such “Third World” literatures of debt is a critical temporality.9 As Joshua Clover remarks, this
aspect of financialization colonizes future time “as if it were space” (“Autumn” 45), ensuring “that all profit is realized finally through the disequilibrium between geographical regions” (42). As Clover adds, “The apparent M-M’ situation of financialization . . . is thus characterized by the subtraction of time” (ibid.), meaning that the worth of M’ is simultaneous to M because the change of profit occurs across geographical space. Just as Marx described capital as the struggle over the time of the working day, neoliberalism can be described as a struggle for the domination of geographical space as a method of gaining time. In fact, neoliberalism can be said to expand the distance between regions that spend time in production (where time is subtracted) from regions that take time in profits.

Financialization demands different narrative structures than commodity culture because it no longer relies on progressive accumulation in object production but rather on an avoidance of objects that decelerate the speed of accumulation with stoppages, transportation, breakdowns, conflicts, and the limits of worker productivities. Clover here follows Giovanni Arrighi, who understands Marx’s profit formula M-M’ (money gets more money, as in finance) as always in the process of overcoming M-C-M’, or profit through commodity production, progress through the object. The tendency of history, says Arrighi, is to move away from the commodity because it slows down the flow of profit. For example, financial profiteering depends on the destruction of the state’s redistributive capacities—that is, on austerity policies such as cuts to public services like education and health care as well as on the promotion of market-based remedies for all social problems. These techniques speed up the transfer of wealth upward, killing productive capacities by denying workers the means to work and reproduce themselves for the next day of work and the next generation. For Arrighi, capital’s preferred push is toward monetary flexibilization, or “phases of financial rebirth and expansion” (6). Just as Derrida’s referential object is erased to shore up equivalencies between
symbolic representations of meaning, Arrighi’s view is that money also tends to crush out the commodity object in order to create abstract equivalencies in finance.

INEQUALITIES AND THE ACCUMULATION OF DEAD CAPITAL

Literary realism, as critics have observed, is historically imbri-cated in the development of political economy, money, and the credit economy. Realism does not just teach the tenets of political economy to its reading public; it also performs an epistemological function of creating abstract, imaginative categories of identity or character, general composites of experience or “types” in which a broad range of readers may see themselves reflected. As well, realism builds a critique of representations of value alienated from objects and territories, as discussed in the prior chapter. Such realism, notes Thomas Piketty in *Capital in the Twenty-First Century*, links nineteenth-century literary writing with the twenty-first-century economy, both periods marked by increasing inequalities produced by capital’s pressure—outlined by Arrighi—to be always extracting itself from the commodity and its temporalities.

Piketty’s main concern is with growing inequality or, rather, with how the twentieth century’s wars and Great Depression constituted a time when the ratio between capital (private/industrial/corporate profits) and national income (workers’ wages) lessened (because of commodity production, industrialization, and the welfare state) in contrast to most times of history, when that ratio remained more or less constant (workers got a lesser share). Piketty believes that inequality results from a growing disparity in the ratio between dead capital (i.e., past surplus labor, usually stored up in productive machines and infrastructure) and living labor. Throughout most of history, this ratio has been level and constant, but the two world wars and the Depression depleted capital’s holdings, reducing its share for the purpose of progress and
redevelopment, only to be re-elevated at the end of the twentieth century and into the twenty-first, making the twenty-first more like the nineteenth.

This view of the economy and of the causes of inequality is, in Piketty’s own assessment, attributable at least in part to literary form and to realism in particular. Taking on a tone of Socratic irony, perhaps, Piketty tells us not to ask economists to explain the nineteenth century’s economic inequality (which we are again experiencing now) but rather to turn to other fields, literature most prominently. “Indeed,” he begins, “the distribution of wealth is too important an issue to be left to economists,” whereas “film and literature, nineteenth-century novels especially, are full of detailed information about the relative wealth and living standards of different social groups, and especially about the deep structure of inequality” (2). Though Trollope is not directly referenced (Austen and Balzac are the reference points here), Piketty’s explanations do describe Trollope’s plots, where characters’ identities (e.g., their positions in career and marriage ambitions or the likelihood of their receiving invitations to important dinner parties, hunting parties, or country houses) are reflected in the price of their inheritance, income, and assets, while there is very little discussion of where the sums come from and how they are promised. The social world seems stable when characters can be known through their assets, holdings, and annuities. Though in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, “money had meaning, and novelists did not fail to exploit it, explore it, and turn it into a literary subject” (Piketty 106), in the twentieth century, such focus ceased, says Piketty: “It is surely no accident that money—at least in the form of specific amounts—virtually disappeared from literature after the shocks of 1914–1945” (109). The evidence Piketty gives for this is Orhan Pamuk’s Snow, which, even though written at a time of skyrocketing inflation in his native Turkey, does not mention “any specific sums” (109). Piketty attributes the lack of direct reference to monetary sums in Snow (as representative
of all twentieth- and twenty-first-century literatures) to the evening out of the ratio resulting from the destruction of capital in the two world wars and the Depression as well as investments in the worker via the welfare state, unions, and wages: the ratio of past surplus and machinery to the working wage had decreased, but only for a short historical time.

Surely, as we may learn here, literature is also too important an issue to be left to economists. For example, Piketty notes, a nineteenth-century culture of accumulation links individual character and personality to certain sums that are transparent to moral standing. Characters are often identified, recognized, positioned, and characterized through the sum of their annual incomes. “When Honoré de Balzac and Jane Austen wrote their novels at the beginning of the nineteenth century, the nature of wealth was relatively clear to all readers” (113), Piketty explains. “For nineteenth-century novelists and their readers, the relation between capital and annual rent was self-evident” (53–45). Whether or not we believe Piketty’s allegations of simplicity in nineteenth-century economies and representations (on the contrary, nineteenth-century texts profess anything but easy and universal comprehension or even coherence), twenty-first-century culture might, rather, detect accumulation appearing in other social forms besides directly in inheritance, family name, or estates—in, for example, urban geographies, nation, class, systems of circulation, and financialized social relations, to follow the example of Snow. As the novelist John Lanchester jokes in his nonfiction narrative about the 2008 financial crisis, I.O.U., “The whole idea that a banker looks a borrower in the eye and makes a decision on whether he can trust him came to seem laughably nineteenth century” (74). Nevertheless, we should take seriously Piketty’s own allegation that inequality results from European nations’ disinvesting from sites of production and that its narrative structures must, in parallel, mobilize symbolic structures that disassociate from industrialization’s realisms. Financial capital profits through abstracting value from worlds it destroys by draining
productive capacities and taking away not just the surplus but also investments in the reproduction of capital. Piketty’s faith in literature’s relation to the transparent and direct representation of value cannot account for a regime of financial capital that accumulates value by doing away with its relation to (living) things in the world.

The disconnect between capital and living things (or the social relations of the commodity) in colonial and postcolonial places can indeed find a correspondence in literature, though not in the way that Piketty assumes. Theorists have begun to think about how language—particularly in its literary forms—creates symbolic value by disassociating from commodities and material things. Arjun Appadurai, for example, argues that finance depends on the promissory language of the contract, which is performative in the sense that it creates the conditions that the contract needs in order to come into existence. Appadurai terms this “retro-performativity” (from J. L. Austen and Judith Butler) and compares it to the work of rituals “bringing about the possibilities that will have led to it” (87). Derivatives are promissory contracts piled up on each other, each one further away from a direct connection to the asset. Crises like the one in 2008 occur, thinks Appadurai, because the promise has been so far removed from the asset that it runs a risk over “whether or not an agreement will emerge at all” (94), whether the offerer will find someone with whom to make a deal or, rather, whether the offer of an agreement will make a market. In addition, Appadurai argues, the logic of the derivative follows the logic of metonymy, where personhood is divided up into traits and potentials that can be combined and bundled up with other contiguous traits and potentials: “It is a logic of dividuation [he borrows this term from Gilles Deleuze], in which personhood rests not in the stable crystallization of body, soul, intention, and affect in a single bodily envelope with a name [or, in Trollope’s sense, an inheritance], but in the highly volatile relationship between those substances (flesh, blood, vitality, energy, essence, and effluvia) that are always in the
process of interacting and recombining to produce temporary assemblages of sociality, identity, and affect” (112). In Appadurai’s view, because finance depends on contracts and is therefore linguistically oriented, it necessarily erodes and transforms the material conditions on which it rests.

Yet the contract works inside of liberalism’s assumption of abstract equality, where the negotiating partners are free to decide. Appadurai does not see how language’s abilities to divide things up and erode its original references through a series of partial replacements can be appropriated by power as a tool for producing inequalities by destroying and devaluing the value-producing means of others. In contrast to Piketty and to Appadurai, Franco “Bifo” Berardi has described capitalism as a series of steps of disconnection between the body and language/representation leading ultimately to “liquidating both the living body of the planet and the social body” (112): the European financial class no longer has an attachment to territory or its particular lived histories.14 This “dereferentialization” of capital is prefigured in experiments of Symbolist poetry to forget the referent, as a “semio-economy” of capital allows for symbols of value to generate value in other symbols rather than in things: “As symbolism experimented with the separation of the linguistic signifier from its denotational and referential function, so financial capitalism, after internalizing linguistic potencies, has separated the monetary signifier from its function of denotation and reference to physical goods” (Berardi 19).15 In twentieth-century poetry, “Bifo” maintains, “signs produce signs without any longer passing through flesh” (17), just as, in Arrighi’s scheme, money seeks to make money without passing through physical substance, where its process of accumulation slows down.

At the core, Berardi sees “dereferentialization” as a form of “antiproduction” (destruction) where personal responsibility for capital’s effects are seemingly erased—in fact, where the symbols of value can destroy the territories from which they are abstracted
and removed. Through debt, Berardi is saying, capital destroys the correspondence between language and reality by destroying reality, setting signification free in its own fictions of value: “The accumulation of abstract value is made possible through the subjection of human beings to debt, and through predation on existing resources. The destruction of the real world starts from this emancipation of valorization from the production of useful things. The emancipation of value from the referent leads to the destruction of the existing world” (104–5). Debt has replaced production as the site of abstraction not because, as with production, exchange value no longer relates to concrete needs but rather because debt destroys the world of real needs. In neoliberal Europe under austerity (and by extension, in the neoliberalized “Third World,” though that is not his focus), finance in Berardi’s view has been divorced from attachments to the territory of the living. Debt finally realizes what Theodor Adorno predicted of the artwork in a commodity culture, that its symbols are “opposed to the empirical world” (1), a “realized materialism [that] would at the same time be the abolition of materialism” (29), a “manifest annihilation of reality” (31).

**WIZARD OF THE CROW**

For Marx, “capital is dead labour, that, vampire-like, only lives by sucking living labour, and lives more, the more labour it sucks” (*Capital* 224). The production machine consists of the stored working time of past workers that feeds off the life breath of the living. Marx’s gothic descriptions of nineteenth-century industrialization pose a fundamental relation between the living and the dead. The worker transforms organic nature by using up the time of his or her working life in production, handing it over to the machine: “Living labour must seize upon these things and rouse them from their death-sleep, change them from mere possible use-values into real and effective ones” (178).
Wizard of the Crow narrates a dismantling of this symbiosis between work and the machine. “Why does needy Africa,” asks one of its many narrators, “continue to let its wealth meet the needs of those outside its borders and then follow behind with hands outstretched for a loan of the very wealth it let go?” (681). Wizard displays the effects on language and culture of the financialization of the economy or the splitting off of productive investment (reproduction) from the aim of profit, where money has a life of its own away from the lives of things. By money, I mean a system of representing value that, because it circulates through the production of things, has traditionally also been expressive of social antagonisms. When this form of money turns away from the production of things, Wizard shows, the social is expressed as negative value, or debt. Debt culture inhabits Wizard not only as content but also as a reflection of this crisis of representation in literary technique. In line with “Bifo”’s insights, debt writing in Wizard severs representational values that circulate through living cultures, bodies, time, working institutions, and politics and replaces them with reified objects or empty, deathlike forms: institutional powerlessness, sovereign vacancy, temporal blockages, valueless money, deteriorating body parts replaced by dead and imported machines, waste, and other types of inorganicity, meaninglessness, and obsolescence. Within the novel’s debt culture, former producers are unemployed—called “daemons,” after the dead—gathering in lines extending in all directions from the “No Vacancy” sign outside the construction company, for miles and miles, without the authorities able to stop new arrivals or disperse the crowd. Wizard depicts the growing disparity and distancing between the profit machine and work, where debt’s profits do not accumulate in the lifetime or identity of the worker (contra Piketty). As “antiproduction,” finance means that capital is accumulating in one place while workers in another place are deprived of identity, of the wage (their share of productive income), and thereby of their participation in the construction of their surrounding reality, meaningfulness, and conditions of life.
This detachment of value production from the living underlies the temporal structure of *Wizard of the Crow*. If, as Mathias Nilges claims, the literary narrative is better at examining the temporality of finance than the instruments that finance has produced to understand its own operations, *Wizard of the Crow* is an exemplary novel for thinking about how temporality is managed in the financialized world. The commodity represented by $C$ (commodity), Nilges observes, “which once mediated the process of monetary production and accumulation, has been removed from the equation” (32). With its tendencies to reduce the time of profit extraction (friction) to zero by bypassing the commodity, finance witnesses a “narratological crisis connected to a crisis of temporal epistemology: the future is increasingly drawn into the present” (33). Nilges is particularly concerned with finance’s ability to wipe out the utopian edge of the future by erasing the future’s radicalism under a nostalgia for the endless repetitions of the past’s futures, whereas *Wizard* also plays on foreclosures to the liberal, progressive future’s promises of equality. In liberal societies like ours, equality is mostly production’s progressive promise, or the promise that jobs or salaries will bring everyone who works hard enough to the same level at some point in the future. Reflecting the temporalities of a debt economy, the present in *Wizard* traps future life in the present’s repetitions, just as the Ruler locks his wife in a house where the clocks do not move and where the calendars flip to the same date over and over, where everything—even the clothing—extends eternally the moment of her defiance. The promise is over.

Similarly, the plot itself does not follow a course of development based in a model of accumulation such as in the *bildungsroman*, where the end follows from the beginning as accumulated experience feeds the character’s moral and intellectual maturation. Rather, in *Wizard*, the end of the story brackets the beginning, displacing it to another point in the narrative that is uncertain and unmarked, making the productive line of story development all but
obsolete, circular, backward, and self-annihilating. (I have followed a similar course in this chapter, putting the later literary work first to limit possible readings of the former, so that the past is already constrained by its future.) The dominance of the end (placed at the beginning) destroys what comes before the end, covering it with a fantastic but ungrounded speculation of what must have happened to ensure this end. The novel opens as the Ruler contracts a sickness of which nobody knows the cause but many speculate. Projected backward in retrospect, five different stories are told of the illness’s origins, and each of these simultaneous narrative lines ends up depositing concrete details in the subsequent unfolding of the plot, all five mixing haphazardly as though all were equally true, happening in five different potential time zones that nevertheless impossibly overlap.

With symptoms of body enlargement and lightness, the illness, we learn, may have resulted from the Ruler’s anger; the anger is caused because the Global Network News fails to interview him during his trip to New York, an event recounted some 460 pages later. Page 471 announces the cause of the Ruler’s neurosis that happens on page 1, whereas that neurosis, as well as serious physical ailments, is the effect of the future unknown, of uncertainty (the effect precedes the cause). In New York, the Ruler’s unrelentingly inflating body—“further bodily expansion, lightness of the body, and bellyache” (652)—is examined by medical professionals. “The Ruler’s body, now more passive [and massive!] than ever, seemed impossibly light; only the ceiling prevented it from floating away” (650). With national sovereignty literally up in the air, the unemployed population at home consults the supernatural to deal with the overwhelming uncertainties of future time when the institutions are already all but defunct. The Ruler is ineffectual because of his hyperinflation: useless, ungrounded, unproductive accumulated matter. “But what to do about the Ruler’s unrelenting inflation?” the narrator asks of the fruitless yet unremitting activity of his doctors. “How to stop it, how to slow it down?”
The Ruler’s illness turns out to be a pregnancy, where he gives birth to little Baby D: democracy. Yet this little democracy is not the rule of the people, as its nomenclature might suggest; rather, it is a financial plutocracy: “It is unnatural for money to give birth to money,” reflects the Wizard with irritation. “Banks alone know the secret of money producing money. They hide the secret in ledger books and computer screens” (660). Whereas pregnancy usually marks time, this pregnancy is about avoiding time by floating, unbound by things. The placement of the Ruler’s pregnancy in the United States implies that the profits from African things are floating away from their imputed origins, disassociated. As Berardi elaborates, “Financial signs have led to a parthenogenesis of value, creating money through money without the generative intervention of physical matter and muscular work” (19). Meanwhile, the productive and reproductive capacities of Aburiria contained in the Ruler’s body are growing empty, with the emptiness named “Democracy”—Baby D. The Ruler no longer represents a territory but rather floats, pregnant with an uncertain democracy born outside of the nation, outside of political control, without citizens.

Wizard of the Crow is a novel about authoritarianism in a “Third World” nation even while the Ruler’s authority is treated as a joke. The authoritarianism is the cover through which the financial project is managed. Yet underneath the Ruler’s ruse of authority to keep order as the Tower project is negotiated and planned, the social totality increasingly unravels in disorder. Instead of going to work, the citizens of Aburiria line up in front of offices in queues that go for miles in many directions; police are sent out to stop the rumors that jobs and cash are available that compel people to line up (jobs and cash are unavailable, so the lines are interminable), but the police do not return. An unemployed man’s soul flies over the city and lands in a garbage heap, and he is taken for dead; he ends up (as wizard) able to read minds, able to see the future in the present by holding the present up to a mirror. In the fourth book, the Global Bank ends the project of the Tower:
“After reviewing the entire project, the Global Bank did not see any economic benefits to Marching to Heaven. To argue that the project would create jobs, as the Aburirian government had claimed, was a case of outdated Keynesian economics” (485). Since the bank’s cancellation of the loan happens during the Ruler’s illness, and the illness is how the novel starts, the canceling of the loan can be said to precede the original promise of the advance. The end precedes the beginning; the future is consumed in the present; book 4 occurs before book 1, the beginning is treated as a listing of the past possibilities that the future demands, and the present has been sold off to a false promise. The shifting of the story line’s sequencing makes it difficult even to determine if Aburiria exists or has existed at all or if it came to be at the convenience of the loaning body, projecting back what must have happened (as the beginning is projecting back what must have happened to make the Ruler ill) as an afterimage or after its death. As a landed territory, Aburiria functions like the diamonds in *The Eustace Diamonds*—very much there, concrete and touchable inasmuch as it is in the process of disappearing as a physical object, made unreal by its financial representation.

What finance means for *Wizard* is a relinquishing of freedom, where instead of temporality opening up to the unpredictable, the accidental, and the undetermined, the future already captures and determines what might happen next or what happened last or even what happens now—the future happens first, closing down possibility. “He, the Ruler,” he wants his wife to believe, “had power, real power over everything including . . . yes . . . Time” (7). Instead of granting trust and confidence in the credibility of the world described in the nation of Aburiria, *Wizard* insists that objects can only be secured as real by future acts, as backward reflections of future time. Like the loan, the Ruler’s life is a temporal reversal where his birth origin is established only later by a parliamentary act that flows backward, as though he did not exist before the celebration in book 4:
Now everybody in the country knew something or other about the Ruler’s birthday because, before it was firmly set in the national calendar, the date of his birth and the manner of its celebration had been the subject of a heated debate in Parliament that went on for seven months, seven days, seven hours, and seven minutes, and even then the honorable members could not arrive at a consensus mainly because nobody knew for sure the actual date of the Ruler’s birth, and when they failed to break the impasse, the honorable members sent a formal delegation to the very seat of power to seek wise guidance, after which they passed a motion of gratitude to the Ruler for helping the chamber find a solution to a problem that had completely defeated their combined knowledge and experience. (12)

As in the last chapter, the abstract categories of the law here are alienated from the objects to which they are to be applied. The supposedly sovereign, legislative body is without the means to represent to the public the national entity over which it legislates and also without the procedures to set up rules on which to base that communication. Trying to determine its concrete origin through an act of power many years later, legislative sovereign power is lost and useless in its comic attempts to bring temporality to heel in legislative code. The sentence is both too long and too short. It turns to comic precision for temporal specificity while insisting on the vagueness of distinguishing historical markers and dates. Even after Parliament adopts the conventions of decision-making and law-confirming deliberations, the beginning of the sentence contradicts the end of the sentence: the subject “everybody” defined by knowing cannot logically lead into a predicate where knowledge is defeated: knowledge is defeated first. The passage is about the emptiness of symbolization even though historical and political currents are rallying for securing its certainty. Challenging sovereignty and certainty, debt breaks apart the narrative conventions and time that the political regime shares with its citizens.
even while the Ruler’s body is increasingly distorted and unmoored through its contaminations, travels, and distresses.

Critics have remarked on the experimental temporalities of *Wizard*. Simon Gikandi, for example, talks about the novel as “a place where time itself is forced to stop” (98), while Ian Macdonald foregrounds its “destabilizing [of] the linear aggregation of Western time” (59). Generally, the temporal disjunctures are read as significant for incorporating the “local folklore and the rhythms of traditional orature” (57), as Macdonald offers, or, as Robert Colson interprets it, the temporal play points to a “future of the nation, a future beyond authoritarian rule” (134), where spoken stories and rumors from multiple narrators weaken the authoritarian grip. Such analysis has followed Ngugi’s own framing of global culture as caught in a conflict between orality and writing, with orality as the site where “different forms of being change into each other” (*Globalectics* 76), composed of a mixture between nature and nurture, environmental, human, mythological, and linguistic interchange. The future of the nation in this case, however, rather than leading beyond authoritarian rule, is trapped by always having to pay back its past. The Ruler is replaced by another ruler just like him and then dies, and the story, we assume, repeats—the Global Bank again offers a loan.

Less critical attention has been paid to the story of debt and its relation to time and representation. Yet the novel undoubltely lends itself to debt’s temporality. “Debt is actually future time” (84), says Berardi—the securing of the future’s unknowable enigma with a measurement and a calculation where “you take my (future) time” (84) and therefore “the future is no longer conceived as promise, but as threat” (108). *Wizard* takes the classic form of the realist novel, with the story advancing in stages across a vast social tableau that connects numerous characters across geographical space. Noting nineteenth-century realism’s “shift from the diachronic to the synchronic” (*Antinomies* 222), Jameson has attributed to
realism a new sense of time that substitutes its linear progressivity with a simultaneity (Middlemarch is the main reference point here), where the future is made coterminous with the present (even, as Jameson remarks, if the occurrences of the same moment in different locations do not always adequately correspond), and certainly Ngugi inherits this tradition. The event of the People’s Assembly, for example, is cut between the Aburirian capital and a foreign hotel in the United States, where the Ruler is watching the celebration on TV with his foreign doctors, ministers, and ambassadors while recovering from his illness, losing control of his body, his country, and his narrative at the same time even while at a distance. The Ruler’s illness is happening before the beginning of the novel and across the sea, where the national opposition to the crisis of the Tower is being shown as news on TV. The Ruler knows himself and his country only as a virtual image captured and mediated by and for the West.

Whereas Jameson attributes realism’s synchronicity to the “cash nexus” indicating “the synchronic role of money in the role of these individual destinies” (Antinomies 223), Wizard links it to a crisis in commodity culture as it comes to inhabit the body of the unproductive and the unemployed. In Marx, the profit of the commodity is measured in the productive time units of the working body over the time units needed to reproduce the worker—the commodity absorbs and alienates the time of the worker’s life. In Wizard, the lifetime of the organic body appears simultaneously as machine death: body parts are replaced with European surrogate technologies and machines, with the Minister of Foreign Affairs, Machokali, flying to Europe to have his eyes surgically enlarged; the Minister of State, Sikiokuu, having his ears enlarged; and the Minister of Information, Mambo, having his lips and tongue enlarged. “I tell you,” says a surgeon charged with treating a linguistic ailment, “it is not just one or two on whom I have operated and removed bits of iron buried deep in their bellies or their joints—their knees, for instance” (624). The body is here made of broken, dysfunctional,
fragmented machine parts bought from the West, or deadened future time.

Though Marx theorized alienation in the context of commodity production, *Wizard* treats alienation as devoid of production and so also devoid of working or productive language. Just as in *The Eustace Diamonds*, the available classifications of property in legal language are out of sync with the type of property represented in the diamonds, Kamiti the Wizard cannot recognize the storyteller A. G.’s version of his own life story as he himself wrote it. A. G. is a former police officer who left policing because he was told to read an omen in a car accident and became a wandering storyteller who repeats the story of the Wizard before audiences in bars.23 Aloud, Kamiti challenges the storyteller, but the storyteller does not recognize him, and the bar-goers are immersed in the storyteller’s performance of Kamiti’s story, thinking Kamiti is but a drunk: “He [Kamiti] felt like a writer whose work had been lifted by another only to skew its form and content” (594). As with the Ruler watching his own country on the TV news of a distant country, this detachment is no longer the “cash nexus” as much as the worker’s life being taken from him by the machine of dead capital.

Antiproduction thus introduces a crisis in representation. As with work in Marx’s descriptions, language loses its ability to bring worlds into existence or transform nature. This may explain *Wizard’s* frequent recurrence of language-objects that cannot be exchanged or made to signify. The chairman of the Marching to Heaven project and CEO of Eldares Modern Construction and Real Estate, Tajirika, for example—a businessman who in the end becomes defense minister and then the new ruler by having the other one killed—suffers from a rare but contagious linguistic disease where he can only say the words “If” and “If only”24 over and over. This disease is eventually diagnosed to be caused by the stinking money bills he collects from the unemployed as bribery. Similarly, money can only exist in its concrete materiality, as an object rather than an abstract representation, signifier, or universal
value against which all other objects can be compared. It is horded rather than traded; it has solid weight, is subject to gravity, and gets in the way as an encumbrance and an obstruction, like an old, out-of-place piece of machinery. Money bags shift hands, causing mishaps; money is buried in the earth; money stinks unquenchably; cash grows on trees and is harvested; an unlimited abundance of bills is meant to be dropped from a helicopter to confuse and distract the protesting crowds as well as fake fiscal largesse, but the helicopter burns and the bills were counterfeit anyway, burning and blowing away as ash.\textsuperscript{25} If, as Marx says, money is a universal equivalent that measures and abstracts units of time spent by workers in production, here money is a technical mishap or out-of-place annoyance, inaccessible to desire or exchange, blowing away as ashes in the wind.

Piketty tells us that the growing ratio between accumulated dead capital in productive machines, on the one hand, and living labor’s share (wages, reproduction) on the other is what reproduces inequality on a global level. In \textit{Wizard}, this disproportion appears as a detachment, shown to be destructive to the worlds of living labor, a dissipation of their material worlds—finance’s disinvestments in the reproductive capacities of productive workers. \textit{Wizard} foregrounds the gothic comedy of dead labor in debt culture not as surplus or fixed capital but rather as productive obsolescence. Yet it also shows not only capital in flight but also new imaginations taking hold in its absence: the Wizard and the Voice of the People suggest a future of unleashed creativity in a dance that, like Lizzie Eustace, temporarily falls outside of power’s controls. The women, defiant dancers and disruptive of the national rituals meant to commemorate foreign investments and local rule, are unidentifiable and unapprehended by the Ruler’s many spies and officers of repression; the Wizard—able to change shape, form, and gender—displays, in his mirror, glimpses of images and narratives read on the fringes of reality, dreams of cracks in power’s seemingly stable realities. Berardi, on the other hand, understands
financial abstraction as the “No future’ culture” (51) and dead language of capitalist nihilism, “liquidating the living body of the planet and the social body of the workers’ community” (52) by turning away from physical attachments (“No Vacancy” announces that the working body is no longer welcome here). Whereas power and property are reinstated in The Eustace Diamonds almost as though they were never challenged, Wizard’s warning is that the promise in the mirror will float up, away, and elsewhere or rot and that the dancers will surrender under repression, leaving behind empty boxes, valueless currencies, dead landscapes, and vacancies: productive potential with nowhere to go.

THE ROAD

The world of dead capital in Wizard marks a transition from postcolonial critique. Instead of developing a rational critique of the postcolonial state, Wizard declares the comical emptiness of its sovereign claims in the face of even more comical financialization and debt. The state in Wizard is not only inefficient, perverse, corrupt, cruel, vain, and nonsensical but also a floating figure, devoid of substance and unable to belong to, represent, or act effectually inside of a particular territory, culture, nation, or population. Dead capital has become so momentous that it overpowers the representational value of democratic sovereignty, dismantling its function of redistributing some of the surplus toward producers and the reproduction of life. In fact, dead capital is so disproportional that it makes the life and needs of producers insignificant, out of sight, vaporized, and inexpressible.

Ngugi’s depiction of debt’s challenge to democratic governance both borrows from and surpasses a critique of the postcolonial state. Postcolonial critique is still concerned with understanding the agency available to individuals in the face of imperialist cultures to make demands on their representative states, whereas Wizard witnesses an incommunicability, where the state is unanswerable to local cultures because its role in motivating and reproducing
laborers has been eclipsed by its role in managing the machinery of indebtedness at the expense of laborers. Marking this transition, Wole Soyinka’s *The Road*, I argue, is a play still concerned with workers and their reproduction. The play is critical of the postcolonial state for its failure to deliver on the road to prosperity, and at the same time, it presents the coming-apart of old paradigms of progress through work and gives a sense of their replacement by a metaphysics of indebtedness, or sacrifice to the gods. Just as *Wizard* recognizes the distance between the Ruler and the territory he is meant to rule, *The Road* recognizes, as Phillips observes, “the gods’ incompleteness and loneliness without humans” (150), a loneliness to be met with a project “to build a road between gods and humans” (150). The invitation to communicate becomes a sacrificial debt, a terrifying obligation. Soyinka’s plot of debt to development contrasts with Ngugi’s version of neoliberal debt as nonprogressive time invested in building a Tower of Babel even though no such communication can be established or even imagined. I argue that the framing of Soyinka’s critique of the postcolonial state points toward the beginning of a global unraveling of the conditions that make possible the reproduction of work in modernity, an unraveling that sits at the center of Ngugi’s debt narrative. In today’s regimes of austerity, where the role of the state in development has been challenged by policies of deregulation and public-sector dismantling demanded by global loaning institutions, worker reproduction has little interest for capital, and the commute, threatening as a horror film or absurd like a comedy, appears as the site of its collapse.

Wole Soyinka’s *The Road* can be considered within a shift in the tendencies of Soyinka’s oeuvre: this change becomes particularly pronounced during the Nigerian Civil War (also known as the Biafran War, 1967–70) and Soyinka’s consequent incarceration, but already in *The Road*, Soyinka surrenders the guarded optimism about decolonization evident in his earlier plays to a skepticism about the postcolonial moment. Unlike some of his later and better-known plays, *The Road* is not a cross section of village
life as it intersects directly with colonial or modern culture, for-
eign impositions, or systems of domination; it also does not pose
an African spiritual unity against the compartmentalism demanded
by Western technology and rationality, as Geoffrey Hunt alleges is
characteristic of Soyinka’s “nostalgia for the security of traditional
values” (71) as a “response to the loss of a well-ordered universe”
(70) before neocolonialism. The mythological, ritualistic universe
of the African gods is, in The Road, anything but a sweet ordering
that suggests a longing for a disappearing past; rather, at the crux
between local and global culture, as well as between traditionalism
and modernity’s accelerations, it is replete with constant mechan-
ical accidents that cause disorder and rupture at every turn. The
Road is an urban play that takes place at a traffic intersection where
modern technology and local mythological figures quite literally
dance around each other.

I argue here that The Road is a play about debt. It is, more or less,
a rewriting of Christopher Marlowe’s The Tragical History of the Life
and Death of Doctor Faustus (c. 1592–93) through Samuel Beckett’s
Waiting for Godot (c. 1953) in the context of Africa. It thereby unites
the metaphysics of Marlowe’s devilish contract with Vladimir and
Estragon’s anticipation of death’s arrival in a bleak and miserable
deindustrializing landscape. It takes place in two acts, each one
anticipating work to begin again while expecting an arrival that
will change everything through redemption. Entering in Victorian
tails and top hat, the Professor, like Lucky in Godot with a chair
and bundles on his back, announces, like Pozzo, the dawn and the
passage of time. The long-awaited visitor, the speechless mask of
death (or false head in Faustus), finally does arrive, only to create
even more celebration, drumbeats, and mayhem by introducing
the “power . . . [of] the knowledge of death” (228). Just as Mephis-
topheles collects Lucifer’s debt, the Professor collects the debt
to the road. While Faustus presents Faustus’s death as a repay-
ment to the gods for his enjoyment of a life on credit—“I writ
them a bill with mine own blood,” admits Faustus. “The date is
expired; this time is the time, and he will fetch me” (Marlowe 55)—
The Road ends with an insistence that one owes one’s life to the road: “Breathe like the road, be even like the road itself” (229), says the Professor before the mask of death, Ogun, spirals and spasms wildly, possessed, over the Professor’s bleeding corpse.31

The plotline of owing a debt to the devil has a varied history, and of course Soyinka is not the first writer to weave it through an economic narrative and a political critique. In his conclusion to The Consumer Society, Jean Baudrillard treats the devil’s debt as central to understanding the social alienation induced in modern commodity culture. For Baudrillard, the Faustus story imagines the subject or soul who has lost his image “hound to his death by it in real life” (189). In the modern experience of alienation, the image “takes its revenge” (189): it “haunts us” (189) just as “social labour power, which, once sold, returns, through the whole social cycle of the commodity, to dispossess us of the meaning of labour itself” (190). The modern devil reflects us back to ourselves antagonistically as the social need that constantly troubles. Haunted and pursued by the image that we have sold of ourselves, we are absorbed in the signs of an impossible Affluence, the promise of progress. Written a bit earlier, Soyinka’s road is strewn with the ruins of Affluence’s promised construction.

I read The Road as constructing the preliminary contours of a “Third World” literature of global debt, of an understanding of the world in debt’s terms where the reproductive end of the productive cycle has fallen outside of capital’s purview and concern. Yet the criticism on Soyinka has not been particularly concerned with how his work sits at the crux of a new phase of global capitalism or how he recognizes the fallout of productive disinvestment and the failing redistributive, reproductive, and infrastructure policies of the postcolonial state.

Much of the criticism on Soyinka instead debates whether he is “authentically” African on the one hand or, on the other, echoing imperialist sensibilities. This debate dovetails with a debate
about whether Soyinka’s treatment of the gods is a glorification of a precolonial or premodern past to answer present problems or whether it is a projection of a more equitable future, a future of renewal. Geoffrey Hunt is most vituperative in his dismissal: “Soyinka’s readership is largely a dispirited foreign bourgeoisie either seeking the exotic or displaying guilt feelings for colonialism and racism. The irony that Soyinka’s readership is precisely his target of attack is merely the reflection of the greater irony that his class is dependent economically on the foreign bourgeoisie which nationalism demands that it rebels against” (74). Some of this controversy arises out of Soyinka’s response to the Négritude movement initiated by Léopold Sédar Senghor in Senegal in the 1930s. Rejecting any diagnosis of African inferiority, the project of Négritude was to create a unity of African culture based in emotion and sensibility that would contrast with European reason though not be subordinated to it. Though Soyinka was at first partial to Négritude, he soon changed his mind, famously quipping, “A tiger does not proclaim his tigritude, he pounces” (as cited in Feuser 557). Yet even with his rejection of Négritude, Soyinka has himself declared that “the artist labors from an inbuilt, intuitive responsibility not only to himself, but to his roots” (“Writer” 353) and that the “artist has always functioned in African society as the recorder of mores and experience of his society and as the voice of vision in his own time” (356). Indeed, Soyinka was at the forefront of bringing African literatures into the curricula of African universities along with revitalizing African religions in the face of Christian and Muslim dominance. Soyinka also very clearly insists that the construction of Africanness can be wielded against power: “When ideological relations begin to deny, both theoretically and in action, the reality of a cultural entity which we define as the African world while asserting theirs even to the extent of inviting the African world to sublimate its existence in theirs, we must begin to look seriously into their political motivation” (Myth xi). The problem for the criticism, especially that which takes Négritude as its guidepost, might
be in trying to define “Africa” singularly and essentially and so not to recognize that Soyinka is interpreting the sign “Africa” as something, temporally charged, to be struggled over.

Other critics have understood Soyinka’s focus on African identity as progressive rather than regressive, oriented toward teasing out mythological elements in African cultures that may offer political alternatives. Critics such as Odun Balogun read Soyinka as turning away from the regressiveness of a nationalism based in race, as he saw in Négritude, and embracing in its stead a vision of socialism specific to the context (207). Willfried F. Feuser contests that “there is early evidence . . . of his grappling with a value system in which the main criterion is Africanness” (563), and he shows the closeness of Soyinka’s cultural references to the cultural, artistic, linguistic, religious, and sociopolitical trajectories of the Yoruba. Whereas Hunt understands Soyinka’s romanticism as a response to his “class alliance, class-ambivalence and severe cultural dislocation” (65) due to the uncertain allegiances of his compromised middle-class position, Biodun Jeyifro reads the metaphysical violence of Soyinka’s plays as eruptions of “an undeclared, ‘hidden’ class warfare, the more bitter because it is unconscious and implosive” (13). The class conflict, he proposes, is due to a rapid urbanization devoid of an accompanying acceleration in industrialization, leading to the rise of a population left behind by development—an “uprooted ‘reserve army of labour’” (14)—that *The Road* showcases.

Indeed, *The Road* can be said to take place in the wreckage of industrialization. Whereas *Wizard* saturates its settings in rot, pollution, and waste, the set of *The Road* is awash in the broken refuse of past production, in the “rubble of worn tyres, hubs, twisted bumpers etc.” (152). In fact, not only the debris but also the drivers themselves are remainders of production’s past. Though some of the critics mentioned above attribute inauthenticity to Soyinka’s work in that he stages village life, pantheism, and superstition as proving the regressive character of African culture, industrialism
is here what really parades as the outmoded and irrecoverable recent past. Not only the props but also the stage characters themselves are relics remaining in the dustbin of history, the refuse of progress at the crossroads of globalization. In Nigeria, “touts,” explains Enoch Okpara, “can be defined as free-lance workers at railway stations, airports, ferry points, and especially motor-parks, who undertake the self-imposed responsibility of recruiting and organizing passengers who wish to travel by road, and for this work they receive a fee, or more appropriately, a ‘commission’, that is generally paid by the drivers of the vehicles just before their departure. All the owners are private entrepreneurs, who both compete and collaborate with one another to provide road transport for the public” (327). Okpara goes on to talk about the rise in this form of labor as resulting from a lack of investment in public transportation and a privatization, deunionization, and deregulation of such services (329). The popularity of such employment is the result of the “non-existent opportunities of employment in manufacturing” (331). The Road is a satire taking place on the wreckage of “Third World” industrial capitalism. Living at the usually unremarkable side of the collapsing road of development, its characters are the precursors of what will become neoliberalism’s dispossessed.

Indeed, the gods serve not as a sign of cultural regression but rather as the spirit of the dying machine. The Road is a reenactment of an African death ritual over the corpse of Western technology. The play starts in a roadside shack, under the sign “AKSIDENT STORE—ALL PART AVAILEBUL” (151) and next to a church with a graveyard. It is six o’clock in the morning, and the touts are waking up, talking about work. There is an everydayness here, suggesting that the process of waking up for work is cyclical, daily, ceremonial, even sacred. Though the direct reference to restarting the day is clearly to the endless return to the work that awaits the drivers—“Every self-respecting tout is already in the motor park badgering passengers,” says Samson, one of the touts (153)—the temporal cyclicity is also ritualized through biblical citations, elegiac
proverbs, Yoruba incantations, imitations of church oratory, mystical allusions, and call-and-response rhythms. Such ritualistic language and the modern language of transport, work, and profit intertwine: “If I go chop the life so tey God so jealous me, And if he take jealousy kill me I will go start bus service between heaven and hell,” says Samson, and his companion Salubi rejoins, “Sometimes na aeroplane or helicopter den go take travel for Paradise” (155). As spirit-characters of technological progress at an impasse, the gods get power in their proximity to the wreckage.

The inequality between the dead machines and the drivers is overwhelming, made visible on stage by the machine destruction mounting up in piles in the shop. In line with Piketty, the demise of industrialization is the physical sign of social polarization and inequality in The Road. The industrial ruins physically take over the stage. The roadside shack is the collection point for the junk left behind by those who die on the road, never getting to work. The play’s action weaves between the broken and abandoned parts that had once crushed travelers: “As his grumbling gets in stride,” read the stage directions for his defecation, “Kotonu returns with an armful of motor parts, an old shoe, a cap etc. Goes into the mammy-waggon stall through hidden entrance upstage. He can be heard occasionally but he tries to move silently. Occasionally he lifts up the top-half tarpaulin covering and pushes out an object” (165). Kotonu shits out broken technologies, as though his body is made of parts. The question for the drivers is not if they will be killed but what kind of machine will run them down and sell their parts: “If you gonna be killed by a car, you don’t wanna be killed by a Volkswagen. You wanna Limousine, a Ponriac or something like that” (172). The gods’ celebratory dance of death, their profiting from offerings and sacrifice, depends on modernity’s technological mishaps. Productive machines—like the gods—demand the life of the worker in exchange for the promise of an affluent future in the gods’ benevolence.

The Road thus recognizes, within the symbolic context of African religion, a population that is coming to be at the ultimate end
of a beleaguered modernity. It spiritualizes the afterlife of a set of working conditions connected to the manufacturing class; it spiritualizes debt. While the death dirge mounts over the ruins of a prior industrial age, the touts are the dead space of industrial labor.

“How can anyone buy a uniform when he hasn’t got a job?” asks Samson, and Salubi responds, “Go mind your own business you jobless tout” (152). Work licenses are negotiated as debt, even when forged. “Do you think not enough people die here that you must come and threaten me with death?” Professor asks Salubi, who beseeches him for a license. “You spurious spew. You instrument of mortgage. You unlicensed appendage of the steering wheel” (184). The touts go into debt to the Professor to pay for the right to work: “So the dead are now your bank managers?” (182) asks Professor when he learns that Samson has promised to pay the fees for his counterfeit license from the money buried in the churchyard.

Not only does the Professor control the issuance of work permits, albeit forged ones. Also, the Professor enters the stage bearing the road sign “BEND,” with which he can alter the physical territory, the terrain of production and reproduction. By plucking the word out of the earth, the Professor can change what travelers see when they come around the curve, causing them to lose their way or change course, just as the erection of the Tower of Babel changes the terrain of Paradise in Wizard. “I have a new wonder to show you,” boasts the Professor, “a madness where a motor-car throws itself against a tree—Gram! And showers of crystal flying on broken souls . . . They died, all three of them, crucified on rigid branches” (158). Here, the sign has the power to induce the sacrifice to the gods by causing the mechanical failures and also by simultaneously changing the touts’ certain knowledge of the objective world where workers lives are reproduced. The sacrificial bodies of former commuters are turned into corrupted, nonproductive machines and dead communication, or dead labor for exchange. Progress morbidly sucks out their lives.
The Road expresses an awareness that national production is unable to fuel the forward movement of progress: indebted to the future through progress, the postcolonial state came upon a curve on the road to progress and crashed, surrendering its remains to thieves and thugs. Instead of taking up solely a political critique or allegory, The Road submits that the power of antiproduction is mythological—that is, unidentifiable within human scale, unreachable, overwhelming, sublime. The sacredness of the word demands a permanent dispossession. By removing the sign, the Professor also usurps the drivers’ ability to confer meaning on the future through participating in the building up of the social and semiotic world in production.

The Road previews what will become a culture devoted to debt, where the road to production has come to an end, buried in its own wreckage. It provides a critique of the postcolonial state that is prescient—in fact, a critique of the postcolonial state that offers an intimation that it is nudging toward the throes of neoliberal antiproduction. The sign “BEND” abolishes reality by opposing the material world. The material world, in fact, has become irrelevant to the sign’s circulation, unequal to it, something else. As Berardi elaborates, “Capitalism is no longer able to semiotize and to organize the social potency of cognitive productivity, because value can no longer be defined in terms of the average necessary time of labor, and therefore the old forms of private property and salary are no longer able to semiotize and organize the deterritorialized existence of capital and social labor” (74). The Road interprets the new life of the sign as metaphysical, conferred by the call of the dead, telling a story of play, pleasure, and jest in the nonconforming merriment of the African gods. Wizard of the Crow, meanwhile, critiques the distancing of semiotic and productive power and accumulation as political. The gods have been replaced by the distant bankers, financiers, and power elite who strip the unemployed of their infrastructure the way the Professor commands that the drivers strip the dead for his profit.
CONCLUSION

Zygmunt Bauman locates a new type of human waste in refugee and immigrant camps in Europe and racialized inner-city ghettos in the United States, the “dumping ground [for those for whom] the surrounding society has no economic or political use” (81) and are abandoned to “the nowhere-land of non-humanity” (80). The unemployed here are, as Bauman says, warnings about the unraveling of the institutional power through which citizens in a democracy have historically demanded redress and recognition. They are the present manifestations of a future exposed to economic globalization but devoid of political globalization, an eventuality where multinational financial power can force us, without protections, to sell future savings and accumulation to pay for others’ present enrichment and empowerment. Like the indebted, Bauman’s immigrants, because they are stateless, are outside of the scope of effective institutional action, as state institutions are beyond the reach of their demands and outside of the touch of their suffering.

In fact, neoliberal debt ensures that the state is unreactive to citizens’ demands because it requires the state to sell off its means of command, its means of redistributing national income as well as its means of building productivities—its infrastructure—to distant and disinterested investors and stakeholders. The indebted compel an awareness of the sinister outcome of infrastructural collapse. As Ivan Ascher inquires, “What should we make of the fact that even our promises are now being made only to be ‘sold’ or otherwise exchanged, as if the mere buying and selling of financial assets were sufficient to turn an uncertain future into a source of security in the present?” (14). For Ascher as for Ngugi, debt is in the process of replacing the commodity. Because it is replacing the commodity, debt is also replacing and even destroying the commodity’s apparatus: the mechanisms of social reproduction at the state, technical, ideological, and institutional levels. Therefore, the kinds of infrastructural divestment that Bauman identifies as leading to
mass population upheavals, immigrant crises, and zones of precarious, volatile, and unregulated employment (when employment exists) have become sources of profit: places where destructive liens on the infrastructure can be cut up and recombined to be sold as securities and bonds, as in Puerto Rico.

In the wake of the 2017 hurricanes Irma and Maria, which hit Puerto Rico directly, the status of Puerto Rico and its debt is up in the air. Both the federal and local governments have had ineffectual responses because the island has run out of money to pay for repairs and reconstruction after the massive devastation, particularly to its energy infrastructure. Six weeks after the hurricane hit, a large majority of the island still lacked electricity; roads were impassible; and the island’s schools reopened with only 9 percent of the students returning. As a result, Puerto Rico was turned into a police state. Four months later, more than half of Puerto Ricans were still without electricity, celebrating Christmas in the dark, and estimations were that energy would not be completely restored for another five months (another power outage occurred in April 2018 due to a downed transmission line, causing a total blackout and putting recovery efforts behind once again). Eleven months after the storm, in August 2018, energy company PREPA finally announced that all its power grids were restored, even as critics have noted they are still vulnerable to future storms, which are likely. After Irma and Maria, 167 schools were closed, while nine months later, plans were put in place to close 265 more. The Jones Act was temporarily suspended for ten days and then reinstated, while trucks were not able to distribute goods because of inoperable roads. A quarter of a million people lost their homes. Even though the government reported officially only sixty-four deaths (allowing President Trump to boast about how his own administration’s recovery efforts excelled over the Obama administration’s), Arelis R. Hernández and Laurie McGinley reported in the Washington Post that 4,645 died as a result of Hurricane Maria (within a small margin of error). According to a study done by
Harvard University and the Beth Israel Deaconess Medical Center (Kishore et al.) to which they refer, 14.3 deaths occurred for every 1,000 residents through December 31, 2017 (70 percent above the official number; after that time, the data became unavailable to the researchers), with $90 billion in damages (the second costliest storm in US history). The deaths were attributed to lack of access to medical services, slow recovery, telecommunications failures, lack of water and essential services, unsafe and unhealthy conditions, and an incapacitated power grid. Many left the island.

The federal response and recovery efforts did not considerably improve Puerto Rico’s ability to maintain the distribution of basic needs: water, energy, food, transportation, housing, health care, education, and medications. At first, PREPA signed a $300 million contract with a small Montana firm, Whitefish Energy, that had only two employees. Whitefish was the only company bidding for the contract that did not demand payment upfront, as other companies presumably would not trust Puerto Rico’s ability to meet the increase in debt obligation. The contract had to be canceled by the governor of Puerto Rico, Ricardo Rosselló, because of corruption in the contract bidding (but the canceled contract still had to be paid for, as FEMA [the Federal Emergency Management Agency] refused to cover the costs).33 The CEO of PREPA, Ricardo Ramos, canceled numerous congressional appearances. FEMA denied responsibility even though the contract explicitly says that FEMA is responsible.34 An emergency manager appointed by PROMESA’s board to oversee any further contracts then resigned on November 10. Even after the Army Corps of Engineers and other contractors reached the island, supplies and equipment for the repairs were slow in arriving, with fifty thousand power poles still needing to be replaced four months in. One year after the storm, a warehouse was found stacked with bottled water, which never made it to the storm’s victims.

In January 2018, armed federal agents from FEMA and the US Army Corps of Engineers stormed a PREPA warehouse to retrieve
equipment essential for Puerto Rican recovery and the restoration of power. Kate Aronoff of *The Intercept* reported that the workers brought in from the mainland were finding it virtually impossible to do the necessary work because of the lack of equipment. Aronoff attributed PREPA’s mismanagement to deregulation, which, under the guise of cost savings, was actually causing the reduction of tax revenues by encouraging Puerto Ricans to leave the island, fed up with the outage. Though the Puerto Rico Energy Commission had started to pass some reforms between 2013 and 2016—including some that moved the island toward renewable energy, allowed for the development of microgrids at the local level, controlled rates with an eye to affordability, and established the Independent Office for Consumer Protection—the new governor appointments under the Fiscal Oversight Board believe that structural adjustment is necessary for Puerto Rico to solve “the crisis” and propose consolidation of five of the regulatory agencies (including energy) to keep down public expenses, even though the Energy Commission had been totally funded by ratepayers (Aronoff, “Armed Federal Agents”). This move will result in the rollback of the Energy Commission’s regulatory framework.

The press coverage is divided on the status of the debt in the wake of the hurricane and recovery. The owners of the debt are growing worried, as the government will soon be out of money. Noting that none of Puerto Rico’s creditors offered anything but thoughts and prayers to assist in recovery, Aronoff raises the possibility that the PROMESA board could block collection on the debt obligations, either by repackaging the remaining debt and holding onto it until the economy gets back on track or through a federal bailout. On the flip side, the creditors could manage to overturn PROMESA’s board and the bankruptcy process, giving creditors the go-ahead to extract repayments before Puerto Rico’s infrastructure and production have been restored (Aronoff, “Puerto Rico”).

Yet as Elizabeth Yeampierre and Naomi Klein also point out in *The Intercept*, hurricane aid, given to Florida and Texas in the
form of grants, was given to Puerto Rico as a House-approved relief package in the form of $5 billion in loans. Though $81 billion was pledged by Congress for hurricane recovery relief, that amount was shared with affected zones in Texas and Florida as well as with areas in California hit by wildfires. The governor of Puerto Rico said that $90 billion were needed for Puerto Rico alone. Meanwhile, President Trump's signature tax bill will deepen Puerto Rico's burden by increasing taxes on goods manufactured on the island and going to the US mainland, even as businesses are leaving due to the difficulties of operating without electricity, reducing treasury collections further. The federal government is initiating policies that will thrust Puerto Rico deeper into debt while still angering the creditors. Puerto Ricans are left in the care of a weakened managerial control board with fewer resources to fend off the debt collectors. It is highly likely that Puerto Rico's infrastructure will be mortgaged further.

The case of Puerto Rico demonstrates that the metaphor of progress that Soyinka invokes through the road is no longer operable. The idea of even semiemployed, temporary contractors who can turn the refused surplus or waste of old production into amassed capital for producing augmented future profit is defunct. Soyinka foresaw the morbid degradation of industrial infrastructure in Nigeria and the dance of death that ensued, but he saw this as a continuous process reproducing inequality as a constant, caused by postcolonial corruption: the workday was still an endless repetition, returning like a ritual. Soyinka treated debt as a metaphysics, a compromise that linked the local gods with technological progress, rather than as the death of production altogether, the emancipation of value from the things that sustained it, and the worldly destruction that follows. Soyinka did not foresee what Ngugi observed: that the pathway to progress was mortgaged out as a false promise before it ever came to be. Ngugi understands debt as a governing force that imposes inequality, unemployment,
and unproductivity as a mechanism of financial extraction at the origin point of “Third World” identities.

The shift in thinking about debt in the “Third World” from Soyinka to Ngugi supplements a divide in their thinking about literary representation. In the previous chapter, I showed how Trollope used Lizzie’s diamonds as an object lesson in finance: the diamond necklace was an object that, despite its anticipated solidity as rock, did not consistently remain solid or substantial and could not be identified in relation to an extension of a particular space, law, or placement. As such, the existing categories of value, property, and ownership could not apply to the necklace, despite attempts by lawyers, nobility, jewelers, robbers, and various stakeholders to clarify their essential character. The meaning of the diamonds within the financial system that they were supposed to bring into view and comprehension was dependent on the diamonds also appearing within literary realism as a failure of the real, a symbol that at once has a concrete presence but, in its circulation, could not hold that presence intact.

Soyinka and Ngugi differ in their response to the challenge of the literary symbol as it substantiates social relations inside of systems of finance in the twenty-first-century “Third World.” Soyinka, like Trollope, sees the sign taken away from the ground that it created, confusing those with expectations of its once-credible certainty. When it is taken away, those without the sign experience its absence as a confusion and a travesty. The absence causes mass fatalities because it reintroduces uncertainty, and the uncertainty encourages negotiations and sacrifices to the gods in a search for certainty. The play suggests that the balance that the sign upheld has been troubled; without it, the road is made unpassable and even unreal. For Ngugi, on the other hand, language is the first casualty of debt. In fact, debt exposes that language never secured what it referenced but also that language never belonged in the first place—that its referentiality was a trick, a false promise of
security in things in living time, a destructive impulse sold under a sunny but cynical slogan of plenty. With debt divorcing capital from the territory of the living, just as when value is emancipated from referring to things, words also no longer touch on living flesh, and value is created without investments in working bodies. Unlike in Soyinka, where the sign circulates, is stolen, and is struggled over (like the diamonds) on a road in perpetual decline, in *Wizard of the Crow*, the financial system devastates the exchange of signs before its Tower is even built. As debt forces disinvestments from areas of production, *Wizard* reminds us, it destroys the correspondence between language and reality through an “annihilation of reality,” with both production and reproduction brought to a standstill.

Ironically, perhaps, the destruction of the material world that *Wizard* envisions corresponds with a return of the supernatural, now in the hands of political opposition to power and domination. The Wizard can heal the catastrophe of postcolonial modernity by holding up a mirror and thus restoring living time, giving back life to the world of real people flashing up behind the fake image of Paradise basking in the financial largess of the Global Bank. “Here, in the new venture,” *Wizard* concludes, “the extraordinary, the magical, the wonderful, and even the strange came out of the ordinary and the familiar . . . Knowledge is the discovery of the magic of the ordinary. Like words put into song” (758–59). Lodged here in a romantic fantasy with the flare of magical realism, the everyday world of material practices, both productive and reproductive, as Ngugi recognizes them, is vanishing behind a veneer of power and can only be accessed as a magical desire appearing in fragments of reflective glass. The mirror suggests glimpses, moments that have escaped from debt’s capture of time where the future has been sold elsewhere, but these moments exist in evanescent and ephemeral reflections only. As Simon Morgan Wortham specifies, “Debt itself aggresses against temporal continuity in general. If
this is true, then debt’s supposed commitment to the unstinting continuity and continuation of the present for all future time to come (as an unbreakable expression of power) itself becomes questionable and resistible, not just as an idea but in terms of the practical possibilities suggested by the limit or deficit between what debt wants and what it is.” Here, supposedly, resistance can be worked into the break between debt’s golden promises for the future and debt’s present exploitative practices.

The strategy of suggesting possibilities and pointing out limits or of revealing that everyday practices of production and reproduction still exist as fantastical projections in magical mirrors seems unsatisfactory, or maybe just a beginning. Within the current organization of economic, political, and military power, resisting debt by pointing out its contradictions—even in the form of refusing payment or defaulting—will be punitive. The reality is that debt itself is the fantasy; it is a struggle over the means of representing what counts as value. Since the financial system required a reorientation in economic thinking, where belief in representational values substituted for assuming the intrinsic value in things—finance’s “dereferentialization”—much of what counts as financial value is manipulations of the imaginary, representations of credibility, and the symbolic production of trust. In practice, debt attributes obligations to producers who have to borrow back the profits they have made for others. Debt’s systems blame inequality on unequal people rather than understanding inequality as intrinsic to capital’s representations of itself and its histories of exploitation, as antagonistic and irreconcilable. Extending political globalization in parallel to economic globalization would mean not assuming that some are unequal by nature of their identities or their geographies and then faulting them financially, setting them up as originally disadvantaged in order to prove that they cannot meet the standards of democratic citizenship and productive vitality and, as such, extracting surplus by charging them
still more. Extending political globalization would perhaps allow broader participation in deciding how the goods of the earth might be more equitably and justly shared. Debt needs not only an emancipation of its temporalities but also, more fundamentally, a reorientation of the semiotics of value toward territory, responsibility, and global citizenship—a reorientation that should lead, ultimately, to debt’s cancellation.