

Culture Wars in Cyberspace: A Note on Kojo Laing's *Major Gentl* and the Achimota Wars

Derek Wright, Northern Territory University, Australia

In the fiction of the Ghanaian novelist Kojo Laing, the plot is seldom the main attraction and may even distract from and impede the writer's most serious themes. In his first two books, *Search Sweet Country* (1986) and *Woman of the Aeroplanes* (1988), both written in the vein of surrealist fantasy, the humorous narrative action is a lightweight vehicle or figurative device through which can be read any number of polemical statements about neocolonialism, Third World development, and Euro-African political and cultural relations. Laing's third novel, which continues to mine the comic-fantastical vein of his first two works and is perhaps his most bizarre book to date, follows much the same pattern, and I propose in this short article to take brief account of its seriocomic combination of elements and the ensuing implications.

Major Gentl and the Achimota Wars (1992) is set in the year 2020 A.D., and on first impression seems to be the staple fare of sci-fi futuristic fantasy. Europe has retreated into a cyberworld of computerized emblems and virtual reality, in which physical existence and experiential learning have become unnecessary and have been abandoned, along with "language and humanity,"¹ to the poorer countries. The cybernetic superpowers, who communicate with each other through exclusive secret codes, have decided that the Third World does not qualify for what is now conceived as reality, and have declared Africa to be irrelevant to the modern world and humanly expendable, being useful only as storage space, nuclear sanctuary, toxic dumping ground, and experimental laboratory for germ warfare and genetic engineering (thus even the wildly futuristic has an uncomfortably contemporary ring). Direct wars, like all direct experience, are now obsolete and have been replaced by computer-coded conflicts with invisible foes and satellite-videodisc holocausts with instant replays. About a third of the way through the novel, however, we hear also, in the same hyperrealist context, of more traditional propagandist image-wars, much closer to home, in which Africa is reduced to a newsreel of famine and primitive degradation by powers who no longer bother to seek knowledge of the continent other than that which they themselves have created. At this point the polemical note begins to sound more urgently. Laing's satiric point is, of course, that for Europe, Africa has always existed in a state of virtual reality, as idea and screen

¹ Kojo Laing, *Major Gentl and the Achimota Wars* (London: Heinemann, 1992) 2. Subsequent references to the novel are given in parentheses in the text of the article.

image, or, as one character puts it, “the thingness of Africa is the headness of somewhere else” (65).

In one of these wars, called the “First War of Existence,” the city, country, and continent surrounding the Accra suburb of Achimota have gone mysteriously missing, apparently dematerialized by Western Internet Warriors who, as part of their push to get out of the galaxy, have siphoned off the Achimotans’ cerebral energy into cyberspace, and thence into outer space, through brainwave transmissions. This has caused the latter to forget their own place-names, cultural traditions, and history, and has simultaneously erased from their consciousnesses all knowledge of the Western world to avert any danger of their aspiring to its wealth, power, and privilege. This pirating of African brainwaves is partly a fantastical rendition of the Third World brain drain, and the system of co-optation of African intellectuals to Western power centers by educational aid programs, dealt with in earlier Ghanaian novels such as Ayi Kwei Armah’s *Why Are We So Blest?* (1972), in which Europe and America replenish their mental and spiritual voids by draining the superior intelligence and vitality of their victims. But Laing is also making a more topical 1990s statement about the selective nature of communication in the Information Age. The technocratic powers who build the information highways also make the decisions about where they run. For countries not let onto the network, little or no data are available and consequently they cease, informationally, to exist. One of the Achimotan government ministers looks back to the 1990s when Africa, struggling to survive, was required to prove that it still existed and was at least given the opportunity to do so. In 2020 the blank computer screen imperially asserts, by default, its nonexistence.

The negative virtualization of Achimota’s city, nation, and continent is really a metaphor for Africa’s absence from the global village and its effective nonbeing in the informational universe. Appropriately, its characters are imaged as insubstantial beings and human negatives. The mild Major, trained in self-effacement, has his shadow promoted to high command in his stead and entrusts his army to a Commander Zero, who is a collection of the city’s converging shadows and whose face is a photographic negative, with the black and white elements reversed. In the ideal hyperworld, the Achimotans are informed, “there would be no need to move, no need to stay still, and finally there would be no need for existence at all when essences themselves purified each other into nothing” (5). To remedy this ontological crisis, the second part of the book is devoted to a “Second War of Existence” in which the city fights to recover its lost country and continent and their missing populations (who were unaware that they had been virtualized); the moribund Achimotan intellectual elite is revitalized by “brain-restoring machines” devised locally by a zany female nuclear physicist called Grandmother Bomb; and the part of the planet which prides itself on never having “ceased to be human” (105) reasserts its right to

existence—human, political, artistic—independently of Europe’s degrading images and denial of information.

Inevitably, the virtualization of reality rubs off on the Achimotans themselves and opens up rich veins of comic fantasy and wordplay which are the narrative dynamo of the book, and often seem to be at odds with its cultural polemic. In hyperreality, as one of the Achimotan politicians puts it, “no one is supposed to die very much” (68). The war for Achimota fought by the eponymous hero and his evil arch-rival, the Italian-South African neocolonial agent Torro, is a joke, a fairy-tale affair in which soldiers move simultaneously forwards and sideways, fight on without their heads, and are disciplined for allowing themselves to be killed too easily. Laing’s comic phantasmagoria also includes an animal football and a children’s toffee war, horsedrawn helicopters that baffle the enemy by traveling always on the same spot, weapons that shoot only up and down, and the shadow commander, Zero, who does nothing except replace his soldiers by thousands of carrot-cultivating rabbits. Laing’s whimsical rejoinder to the West’s Space Invaders and Star Wars (Torro wants to be “Commander of the Universe”) is an army of vegetable cybernauts led by belligerent bananas and pugnacious pineapples (Achimota city is built with fruit and is governed rotatively by its entire citizenry from a cathedral of anthills). Should the fruit batallion fail, the enemy is zapped by a golden cockroach, a silver mosquito, and a praetorian guard of snakes who attend permanently upon the hero (Torro uses rats). Even the climactic “serious conventional war,” with its “hand-to-hand fighting,” turns out to be a farcical “Wet War” in which the terrible Torro, who is so virtualized that he needs a computer to map the route of his food from fork to mouth, employs subaqueous cybernetics to bombard Gentl with fruit.

The futuristic fantasy plot, with its ludicrous hyperrealist antics, is, however, like all Laing’s plots, a distracting vehicle and metaphor for most of the book, and when the fantasy threatens to become too frivolous, it is shored up by the serious underlying polemics. Laing is really fighting cultural wars in cyberspace, and the last quarter of his novel is given over to Gentl’s protracted polemical musings about spiritually truncated Europeans trapped in “the one-way streets of the universe” (166) and needing aid from the holistic consciousnesses which they are bent on destroying. In *Major Gentl* the Western cybercrats have externalized mind into sheer brain power, bereft of any broad human, moral intelligence capable of perceiving its products. It is now the task of the Achimotans, as Africa’s standard setters, to make intelligence human and consciousness whole again by reestablishing contact with an organic reality in which, in Gentl’s words, “humanity and invention allowed even the smallest human being to open out into the trees and into the universe, to see the whole, to touch the inner” (180). Underlying the poetic whimsies of ecologically holistic armies (comprising humans, animals, insects, vegetables, and fruit) are ideas about the limits of human consciousness, its need for a “type of living that had

sympathy, power and creation as well as harmony" (165), and its place in the whole phenomenon and unity of being: Gentl knows that, in the holistic universe, "fighting the enemy . . . was fighting yourself," that "humanity was one" (159). An important part of Laing's cultural polemic is his concern with language. In his Author's Note he claims that his hybridic interspersal of words from African, European, and invented languages imitates the intermixture of different ethnic tongues in Ghanaian speech and is motivated by a desire "to internationalise the English" and "create one gigantic language" by opening up parochial parts of the English-speaking world to more expansive possibilities. This results in the novel in some virtuoso wordplay and much polyglot punning, pursued with great comic and creative zest, but these heavily mannered exercises are underlaid by imperatives of wholeness and inclusiveness consistent with the book's moral concerns.

Laing is a daring, adventurous writer whose opting for surrealist comedy as a vehicle for cultural polemics is an odd and possibly dangerous strategy, always likely to detract from the seriousness of his ideas. There are times when the switch from fantastical to negotiatory mode is perhaps too abrupt, and the moralizing, more strident here than in the first two novels, becomes tendentious and fails to gel with the poetic fantasy. These flaws notwithstanding, *Major Gentl* is a witty, provocative work which, in its pioneering importation of cybernetics and hyperreality into African fiction, more than justifies Africa's claim to a place in the modern world which the villains of the tale try desperately to deny.