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<Title>African Feature: Radical Equality in Ghanaian Market Fiction for Children

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<Abstract>

This article situates Ghana's popular market fiction for children in relation to British colonial and official Ghanaian children's literature and, following Rancière's model of the 'ignorant schoolmaster', presses for an expectation of intelligence from the rowdy genre, toward 'radical equality'. Joshua Kojo Sey's *Wonders Shall Never End* (c. 2017) serves as a central case of how a text that may seem to lack control over its own abundance of ideas offers up vital imaginary constructs.

African literature, Ghanaian literature, children's literature, popular fiction, gender, mythopoesis, capitalism

This article concerns an unruly genre of children's literature: Ghana's market fiction for children. This contemporary chapbook fiction, which boomed in the 2000s and still circulates today, breaks the 'rules' in all kinds of ways. First, because it is published in the informal sectors of Accra and Kumasi by self-made independent publishers, with no 'official' oversight (in the sense that Karin Barber uses that word in contradistinction from 'unofficial' 'Popular Arts' in Africa), individual publishers create their own parameters. Child-reader demands rather than editorial guidelines or institutional requirements set the standard. Most often, primary and junior secondary schoolchildren buy the books with their own 'chop' (lunch) money on the street from itinerant hawkers. So while mediating adults are imagined as a secondary audience, satisfying their desires is not a publisher's, nor an author's, top priority. For their part, authors are at liberty to write what they like, so long as their books sell. And at the industry's apex, between 2005 and 2008, they did: 50,000 copies a week, the publishers collectively claimed, compared with 1,000 copies a year reported, on average, by large multinational publishers such as Woeli and Sub-Saharan Publishers (de Bruijn 'Sensational Aesthetics'). This is a commercial industry, which sets it at odds with the 'rules' of the field of postcolonial literature, which would prefer more self-conscious writing, aware of and resistant to the demands of consumer capitalism. But this is popular literature, which trades like comic books do, sometimes raising eyebrows, if not hackles, about the

moral direction that its pages offer. Morality is certainly taken up in these books, sometimes with disturbing conservativeness, sexism, and other forms of bigotry, but at other times with a strikingly progressive brazenness.

The fiction does not adhere to a European-derived classification of the child as separate and protected from the world of adults. Its subject matter often veers into what would be deemed in many contexts, in Ghana as elsewhere, 'too adult' for children: child rape, bloody murder, human sacrifice, sex trafficking, modern-day slavery, political intrigue, religious manipulation, and so on. Nor is the writing, which is nearly all in English, constrained by British-standard English but liberally indulges in 'Ghanaian English' and pidgin, a dialect condemned by many of Ghana's elite. The readership's demand for 'sensational' content means that the shocking and alluring cover images – a book's first point of sale – do not always match with the book's narrative (de Bruijn 'Permissive'). This sort of discrepancy, together with frequently poor editing for technical errors, is one of the most easily identifiable signs of the industry's lack of regulation. All of these factors combine to give a sense of a literary industry out of control.

I argue that being out of control is perhaps the industry's greatest strength, even as it creates problems and poses limitations. The relative lack of 'policing', in the sense conceived by Jacques Rancière, allows for an aesthetic opening of restrictions on what can be seen, heard, felt, and thus deliberated. Elsewhere, I have discussed the fiction's precursor roots in Nigeria's Onitsha market literature (de Bruijn 'Permissive', Obiechina). Here, I will illustrate how this rowdy Ghanaian genre thrives in that inheritance, providing – however unselfconsciously and apolitically – an open marketplace of ideas that is more characteristic of oral narrative contexts, which invite discussion and debate, expect critique, and make room for resistance, even if sometimes unintentionally. This article will look at how this unofficial fiction for children is located within, and responds to, the limitations of official African and Ghanaian children's literature. Although this article will recognise market fiction's messiness, which has been justifiably critiqued, it will also, following Rancière's model of the 'ignorant schoolmaster', press for an expectation of intelligence from that messiness, which is, in his formulation, the basis for radical equality (Rancière, *Ignorant*). Joshua Kojo Sey's *Wonders Shall Never End* (c. 2017) will serve as a central example of how a text that may seem to lack control over its own abundance of ideas nonetheless offers up vital imaginary constructs.

<A>Ghana's Market Fiction in Literary-Historical Context

As several scholars of African children's literature discuss, both the critical field and the literature exhibit a tendency to protect cultural mores by way of the figure of the child. In his book *Children's Literature* (2000) and essay "'Child of the Rose"?: Children as Agents of History in African Fiction', Robert Muponde condemns the many 'insidious reconstructions' of the child (107). He stridently critiques the creative and critical will to constrain the figures of the child and of childhood as romantic, known, and unchanging – figures that are made to bear the weight of adult mourning: from lost precolonial pasts to traumatised postcolonial presents. Drawing broadly on global childhood studies, Muponde urges both critics and writers to break free from this orientation and to foreground 'resisting childhoods', which he models in his 2015 book *Some Kinds of Childhood* (4), which emphasises Zimbabwean literary representations of children as at once aspirational and dissenting (39).

In the specific field of Ghanaian children's literature, Helen Yitah and Mabel Komasi have similarly advocated for representations of children as resisters. In a 2010 essay, they, too, call for 'resistance to monolithic models and systems' (2). This begins with confronting the literature's prominent agist hierarchy, which presses young readers onto the 'narrow path of unquestioned submission' to adults ('Children's' 247). And it is also about turning from the myth of idyllic 'tradition' and toward contemporary social issues that bear on their readership. They explicitly echo Jawa Apronti who, a decade earlier, insisted that the best-hewn characters are 'confronted with problems of the type that confront children and fill up their lives' (Apronti 20). Yitah and Komasi update the complaint, saying that as of 2009 'AIDS, rape and incest, child trafficking and street children are still not featured' ('Authenticity' 10). Perhaps most notably, they emphasise that resistance is aesthetically achieved in stories that produce pleasure, that indulge in play, and that adopt the poetics of majority, non-elite society, as in the exceptional writing of J. O. de Graft Hanson, Peggy Appiah, Efua Sutherland, and Meshack Asare. Even then, the 'imagery and symbolism' that 'abound in the oral literature' is scarce, they find ('Children's' 248).

Yitah and Komasi indicate that the shortcomings of Ghana's official children's literature have resulted from the colonial reshaping of literary aesthetic values, when Christian missionaries redefined the purpose of narrative for young people ('Children's' 240–1). In the only available sustained study of Ghanaian children's literature, the

unpublished PhD dissertation *A Critical History of the Development of Children's Literature in Ghana* (1995), Fredericka Alice Dadson supports this account, pointing to how, with allegorical works like *Pilgrim's Progress* and *Aesop's Fables*, the Christian Missions aesthetically appealed to 'traditional morality' for the purposes of assimilation, creating 'a didactic culture not unlike that of the Puritan era in England', which 'pervaded' literary production up to the 1940s (90) and was maintained in 'condescending' writing into the 1990s (231). Dadson's specific concern is 'literary decolonization' (173), which she defines as 'recovering the Ghanaian past and uniting it with present realities' (198) – a process that was heartily undertaken in the mid-1950s and '60s via Kwame Nkrumah's nationalisation programme, which funded universal education, public libraries, and the Ghana Publishing Corporation. As Dadson relays, further publication of and access to new Ghanaian literature was drastically curtailed in the 1980s and '90s, not only due to political instability, famine, massive repatriation, and 'brain drain', which created a nationwide depression, but also because of the Bretton-Woods-facilitated dump of American and British books into foreign-funded libraries, which created a 'dependency on foreign books' (210). Though significant inroads into supporting local libraries and children's publishing have been made in the intervening years, such as the Osu Children's Library Fund, library provision in public schools remains negligible in most cases (de Bruijn, 'Permissive' 146), and official children's literature remains financially out of reach for the majority. As market fiction author-publisher Ike Tandoh put it in 2005: 'If you write books and put them in bookshops, there's no need to have written them at all'. The 2008 global economic crisis, from which Ghana has not recovered, has kept that statement all too true.

It is with this literary-historical context in mind, particularly the history of European–American intervention in the shaping of the literary ecology for young readers, that I am considering Ghana's market fiction and what liberties its popular nature affords it to do differently, the ways in which it may evade certain kinds of colonial and neocolonial aesthetic policing. Elsewhere, I have discussed the global-institutional conditions that both inhibited Ghana's national publishing and, through neoliberal restructuring, created a demand for private investment in literacy, which propelled the market fiction category for children as a distinct subgenre ('Permissive'). Where that print-culture essay describes the 'permissive frame for unruliness' established both by the institutional context and the material text, I will here dive into the 'unruliness' itself.

<A>The 'Wild Zone' of Children's Literature

The popular nature of children's market fiction gives the genre very long rein and particular literary value. Defenders of popular children's literature, generally speaking, orient us helpfully to the epistemic value of such texts. The question Margaret Meek poses to scholars of children's literature can also be redirected to those detractors of Ghanaian popular fiction. She asks:

How, I wonder, do you respond to my suggestion that we have neglected potential readers for too long? We have often despised what they choose because we can't bear its banality. In so doing, we have not really seen the inexperienced reader *building an imaginary object*. (290, my emphasis)

Meek asserts that it is largely the literary constructs of the seemingly banal, yet hugely popular, literature for young readers that influence how the latter learn to build narratives. In a similar vein, Kimberley Reynolds notes that there are 'aspects about writing for children that result in a kind of *wild zone* where new ways of thinking are explored, given shape, and so made part of the intellectual and aesthetic currency of that generation of child readers' (15, my emphasis). I argue that Ghana's popular cultural matrix, as a whole, keeps in circulation an invaluable 'intellectual and aesthetic currency', in figures and storylines that are often deemed too 'wild' for official children's literature but that market fiction readily 'entextualises', as per Karin Barber (*Anthropology*), providing children and youth with building blocks for constructing and reconstructing their worlds.

<A>Rancière's Radical Equality, Equal Intelligence

Coming to some understanding and appreciation of what 'imaginary objects' are built in the 'wild zone' of the market fiction industry requires an approach that expects to find intelligence in the texts. Rancière's philosophy of radical equality attends to the ethics of meeting on an equal footing texts that are judged inferior by cultural gatekeepers. His best articulation of the concept is found in *The Ignorant Schoolmaster: Five Lessons in Intellectual Emancipation* (1987), where he argues that valuing others as equals requires bowing out of the position of the 'enlightened pedagogue', whose inherited will to 'explicate' 'stultifies' – or, better, in the original French, '*abrutit*' (renders brutish) – the other (7-8). Rancière is not speaking of the colonial educator or academic – although the same applies – but to the

normative pedagogical approach that splits intelligence into superior intelligence and inferior intelligence (7). Although progressive politics asserts that all people are equal, Rancière says, it postpones ascribing equal intelligence to all people. Rather, as Yves Citton wonderfully glosses, the ‘common motto’ and the ‘trap’ of progressive politics is: ‘Accept to submit your (lower) intelligence to my (higher) understanding today, in order to be my equal tomorrow!’ (32). This, in Rancière’s view, is not emancipatory. What is required, instead, is the ‘verification’ of a slogan like “‘Yes, we already can’” (Citton 32). Rancière’s challenge to academics is to verify such equality.

Rancière has elaborated in several works on how the political agitation for equality is effected via aesthetics. For him, politics and aesthetics are inter-constitutive: limitations on society are enforced by ‘the police’ through aesthetics, and resistance to such limitations is achieved by ‘politics’, equally aesthetically. With ‘police’, Rancière means ‘a form of intervention which prescribes what can be seen and what cannot be seen, what can be said and what cannot be said ... what emerges and what is heard, what can be counted and what cannot be counted’ (‘The Cause’ 28–9). ‘Politics’, by distinction, strives to make visible, vocal, hearable, and counted what and whom is not. Ghana’s market fiction is rarely self-consciously political. However, its aesthetic interventions nonetheless make visible and hearable a mode of narrating and imaginatively constructing the world that, I submit, is political in the Rancièrian sense.

Joshua Kojo Sey’s *Wonders Shall Never End* (c. 2017) illustrates the sort of unruliness that attracts judgements of market fiction as an inferior class of literature but that, at the same time, makes seen and countable material that, as we have seen, rarely circulates in print: southern Ghanaian poetics from tradition and the street, depictions of past and current socio-economic precarity that affects the majority, challenges to adult authoritarianism, and messy negotiations of gender norms.

<A>The Abundance of Joshua Kojo Sey’s *Wonders Shall Never End*

A great deal happens in this book’s short twenty-four pages. The story runs thus: in the land of Ewele, the beautiful Gyeyame chooses Adinkra for her husband despite his poverty, and although her family initially alienates the couple, once Adinkra is offered training in the UK by his white employer (a goldmine-owner), the family welcomes their union. Adinkra enjoys great success and becomes the mine-owner himself, as well as chief. He and Gyeyame are

unhappy, however, because they are childless. Gyeyame resolves to intoxicate her husband and make their housemaid, Abawa Mary, have intercourse with him, which results in a girl, Nhyira. When, later, Gyeyame produces a boy of her own, the couple give Abawa money and send her and her daughter back to her hometown. There, Abawa discovers that all her remaining relatives were killed in a famine. She introduces Nhyira to the fishing trade and tells her of their past before dying of an illness.

Having spent everything on medical treatment for her mother, Nhyira is left with no capital for her fishing business. In search of 'menial' work (9), she encounters boys beating a tortoise and rescues it, explaining that it was the murder of certain sacred animals that had caused the village's famine. After bringing the tortoise home and nursing it back to health, baskets of fish for her begin to appear daily in the entrance to her home. She discovers that, in the night, the tortoise metamorphoses into a teenage boy. When she professes her love for him, he turns back into Prince Kafu, whose throne his uncle, King Adusei, had usurped. The moment Kafu's curse is broken, the king turns into a tortoise. Kafu agrees to marry Nhyira, and the two return to Ewele, where he recovers his throne. They then approach Chief Adinkra and Gyeyame, who are both ill. Adinkra recovers after apologising, but we learn that Gyeyame 'died in her guilt' (24). Kafu and Nhyira marry and produce royals who live 'a morally right life' (24).

This story takes the reader on a charging pace from one subplot to the next. The through-line is the rags-to-riches story, as familiar to Ghanaian readers from British- and American-imported texts as it is to Euro-American readerships: a child of noble origins is cast out, lives in penury for years until a disguised prince or princess falls in love with them and, in proclaiming their love, enables both to claim their rightful noble status. While such a predictable plot might seem derivative, in Ghana's market fiction, as in many African oral narrative traditions and contemporary popular arts, stock plotlines, characters, and narrative parts serve as supportive frames for creative variations on familiar themes. As Moradewun Adejunmobi argues, the familiarity of repeated forms renders audiences experts, with the authority to analyse and critique the variations ('Pleasures'). Even so, this variation is a complicated one. Two rags-to-riches plots are entangled, and while the perspective remains third-person throughout, the story makes rather sudden shifts in sympathy from one character to the next, demanding the same of the reader. The underdogs keep changing: from the impoverished Adinkra to the discarded mother Abawa,

to the abandoned daughter Nhyira, to the cursed and outcast Prince Kafu. While the protagonists of the core rags-to-riches story, Nhyira and Kafu, are presented as unequivocally 'good' in confronting an abusive uncle-king clearly demarcated as 'bad', they end the story in nearly the same position that Chief Adinkra and Gyeyame began theirs. Nhyira and Kafu's story was primed by Adinkra's, whose own tale is a rag-to-riches one gone wrong, then partially redeemed.

<A>Mixed Gender Messages: Representing Misogyny, Challenging Sexist Norms

The most jarring variation is that on the plotline borrowed from the Bible, where the problem of a threatened heritage is solved by women raping a would-be male progenitor. In the Genesis story, Lot's two daughters (Abraham's grandnieces) intoxicate their father and have sex with him to extend the line of Israel's patriarchs. In *Wonders*, Gyeyame orchestrates a two-way rape, which the narrator euphemistically softens, explaining that Gyeyame's plan was to 'lure one of her pretty housemaids to seduce him' (5). This language seems to shift the blame for the alcohol-facilitated rape to the housemaid, Abawa Mary, but we hear that Adinkra was 'furious when he realized what his wife had done' (5), rightly making her responsible for his sexual violation, even if Abawa's goes entirely unmentioned. Initially, Gyeyame's double assault seems to be dismissed, even rewarded, as Abawa does become pregnant, and she is folded into the family unit in the way a second wife would be under a polygamous system: Adinkra 'soon became fond of' 'the maid who had turned his mistress' (6). At this stage, the narrative seems to justify Gyeyame's abusive tactic just as the bible does Lot's daughters' solution.

However, Gyeyame is made to take the fall – presumably because she acts against her own divinely invested nature, which is signalled by her Akan name, from 'Gye Nyame', which means 'Except God'. The phrase expresses the Creator's omnipotence and unfathomableness, and, as a name, it carries the responsibility of trusting to Nyame's ways, however mysterious. Adinkra's name is also freighted, referencing the pictographic signifying system that conveys the philosophy of the Akan, each symbol condensing a piece of proverbial wisdom. In Ghana and throughout the continent, names are often invested with a distinctive destiny function, publicly pronounced in naming ceremonies (see, for instance, Agyekum). At the outset of this story, the names set us up to expect great things from, and a strong union between, the couple. But Gyeyame takes her fate into her own

hands. No wrongdoing may be levelled against Lot's daughters, but this 'step-mother' (6) is exposed, at the end of the book, as the 'mastermind' behind not just Nhyire's 'birth' but also her 'desertion' (22). Adinkra asks for, and gains, forgiveness for being 'misled', for forgetting his 'root' [sic] (23), but Gyeyame does not even appear again in the book. Beyond redemption, she has to die. By the standard of Propp's *Morphology of the Folktale*, her repositioning as stepmother makes her narratively discardable as 'villain'. It is hard to get past this misogyny.

Yet *Wonders Shall Never End* also confronts sexist norms with notable gender reversals. First, the wife is not blamed for her barrenness in the way that women have been in much of Ghana's recorded narrative history. Adinkra does not hold Gyeyame accountable nor show interest in seeking a second wife, as husbands are often encouraged to do in the stories. Then again, Gyeyame's taking such violating action to solve the problem reflects the severity of stigmatisation that childless women continue to feel in Ghana, registered in other market books, such as S. Y. Adoboe's *Efia and the Wicked Step Mother* [sic], in which a barren woman murders her co-wife to take the latter's child as her own. *Wonder's* first gender reversal goes some distance in arresting the blame game but reveals that the misogyny runs deep. Second, the long-held preference for sons over daughters in Ghanaian narrative is playfully flipped with Adinkra's and Gyeyame's obsessing over producing a daughter of their own, which drives them into near-fatal illness. Gyeyame has twelve sons in a futile effort to birth a girl, and Prince Kafu's mother, the queen of Ewele, explains 'that is why in spite of their enormous wealth they were never happy' (22) – a comical turnover.

Third, the story represents Nhyira as a young woman with impressive agency. She is only sixteen when she establishes herself as a savvy businesswoman. The tortoise-boy may provide her with capital, but she expands her business on her own, and her success is so visible that the village chief approaches her to buy his expansive 'palm and cocoa plantation' when he gets into financial trouble (16). The chief's attempt to reclaim the plantation by assassinating Nhyira is what leads 'her mystic tortoise friend' to rescue her and results in Prince Kafu's permanent metamorphosis back into a young man (17). She does not simply say 'I love you' to break the spell, though. She precedes it with 'Marry me', and after he explains how he was cursed, she repeats her proposal, formally: "Will you marry me, Prince Kafu?" (19). The unusualness of this third role reversal creates another comic effect, which is extended by Kafu's response, "Yes, I will. But then, first things first, I have to get back my

kingdom” (19). More than simply entertainment, this reversal, like Adinkra and Gyeyame’s flipped obsession with the child’s sex, is a progressive move.

The mixed treatment of gender in *Wonders* is illustrative of that of the industry as a whole. There is no skirting around the problem that many books reinforce sexist or misogynist ideas of the kind Stephanie Newell identifies in popular fiction from a generation earlier. Yet other market books confront and challenge gender representation in new and creative ways, such as Adom K. Charles’s *The Three Brave Girls and the Wolf*, which features three warrior-girls who rescue their village from a rampaging beast. It is not particularly uncommon for a book to be both progressive and regressive at once, however. For instance, Ofosu K. Samuel’s *The Macho School Girl: Rapist Gang under Fire* features a senior secondary school girl who acquires supernatural powers through her dead mother, who was raped and murdered; the girl thus overpowers a gang of rapists and brings them to justice. She is made a hero, and the metaphysical understanding of ancestor-protection is encouraged. But the awareness of rape culture that this story helps raise is sidelined by a narrative that, first, suggests that rape is a girl-child’s problem to fix and, second, shifts blame onto exogenous forces, to unknown men in the city of Kumasi who come to prey on village girls, rather than promoting local male responsibility. I do not think we should conclude that contradictions like this result in self-sabotage, however. It is not a one-step-forward-one-step-back calculus. The misogyny is familiar, and while it may be reinforced in these inconsistent stories, what is most affecting is the novelty: altered gender norms, arrested adult tyranny over children, exposed taboo subjects.

<A>Mythopoeic and Cosmological Recovery in ‘Contamination’

Children’s demand for novelty can be thanked for the profuse experimentation in market fiction, as authors dig deep into Ghana’s narrative repertoire for sufficiently striking resources. One result has been a recovery of mythopoeic forms, such as the metamorphosing tortoise in *Wonders*. Startling transformation is one of market fiction’s strongest selling points, and book covers with metamorphosing figures are abundant: *Maame Wata’s Son*, where a boy changes into a mer-boy; *Flower Baby*, featuring a baby emerging from a flower; *Save Me Oh God!*, in which a woman transforms into a pig in the night; *The Human Crocodile*, figuring a half-man, half-crocodile – these are just a few. Such changes are often central in the hefty subgenre of *sika-duro* (blood-money) stories, where a

change in fortunes is sought via a violent *juju* ritual process, often requiring human sacrifice (de Bruijn and Murphy 12). But Joshua Kojo Sey distances this story from the ritual motif which has previously attracted criticism that market fiction encourages superstition.

Sey's tale of the tortoise is a clear borrowing from *Anansesem*, the store of Akan folktales said to belong to Ananse. When Nhyira stops a group of boys from stoning the tortoise, she warns that 'the culture of [their] land' deems it a 'taboo' to kill 'certain animals' demarcated a 'blessing to mankind', that, if killed, will evoke 'the wrath of Onyankapon', another name for the Creator God (10–11). This kind of taboo and the consequences of its violation are seen in a number of Akan folktales, such as those collected by R. S. Rattray (1930). This mechanism both introduces the disguised prince and establishes Nhyira's virtuousness, which has already been primed by her name, which means 'Blessing' – making her an apt partner to the tortoise-prince. By associating the tortoise with a sacred custom relayed through folklore, *Wonders* points back to a long history of 'sensational aesthetics' (de Bruijn 'Sensationally Reading'). The book effectively reincorporates Akan cosmology into contemporary structures of knowledge.

For all of these references to Akan animist spirituality, though, there is no return to any pure autochthonous belief system. Spirituality, in this book, is thoroughly contaminated, in Kwame Anthony Appiah's celebratory sense, where 'contamination' is a 'counter-ideal' to 'cultural purity' (111). An Akan cosmology co-governs with a Christian one. This might appear contradictory, but it reflects a very familiar imbrication of indigenous knowledge systems and accommodated Christian ones (or vice versa). By no means are animist metaphysics always entertained in such a friendly manner; rather, in market fiction, animism and its central representative – the *juju* priest – are often derided if not demonised. As Birgit Meyer details in her invaluable historicisation of Pentecostal expression in Ghanaian video film, 'Pentecostalite' culture proclaims Christ's ongoing victoriousness over the 'demons' of animism. However, as Ghana's popular arts illustrate regularly, the divorce from animist beliefs is not so absolute, and keeping a foot in both worlds is not uncommon in practice.

Prince Kafu's messianic return and replacement of the corrupt King Adusei reinstates a moral order, which is what one might expect of a children's book, and even more so of a West African popular text. What Moradewun Adejunmobi says of 'Nollywood' (Nigerian video film) applies here, too: 'In situations of permanent insecurity', by which she means

postcolonial precarity, 'the predictability offered by an interpretation of events founded on the certainty of moral absolutes holds considerable attraction' ('Charting' 113). In the final section of the story, more justice is meted out: Chief Adinkra makes good on his name and demonstrates his wisdom in humbling himself, admitting his wrong, and seeking forgiveness to restore his relationship with his daughter. As we have already discussed, Gyeyame, beyond forgiveness, is killed off. The authoritarian and oppressive adults are all brought to their knees by the young pair, showing that true future vision lies with the young. The virtuous couple ascends the throne, avoiding the wealth and power trap of Chief Adinkra and King Adusei, and seemingly performs the role of perfect parents, successfully producing 'morally right' royals to succeed them. (24)

<A>Confronting Closure: An Exposé of Capitalist Precarity

The viability of this happy ending, I would argue, is made absolutely fanciful by the way the book opens. The ending is called into question by a beginning that puts front and centre the organisation of social production around an economy dominated by foreign resource extraction. The third sentence tells us: 'The land is rich in gold, cocoa and crude oil. Thus mining and farming is the main occupation of the people' (1). The story is purportedly set in a 'peaceful' precolonial period, one in which 'people love one another and rarely quarrel or fight among themselves'. The 'Ahen dynasty' is still under self-government, 'a mighty dynasty whose ancestors are believed to be the founders of the land' (1). Ethnic unity is signalled in the Akan-language characters' habitation within Ewele, a clear reference to Eweland, the Ewe territory that was colonially annexed into the southern area of what is now eastern Ghana, Togo, and western Benin. The fictional Ahen dynasty, from the Akan *ɔhene* ('chief'), is able to accommodate all sub-nations.

Yet the organisation of labour around resource extraction disrupts this peace, as the story bears out, and the inclusion of oil in the list of Ahen's riches signals that this disruption will not be the last. The text may not take stock of its own anachronistic inclusion of oil, but it registers a long history of unequal global economic relations driven by extraction (see Okoth). The story draws attention to the continuation of capitalist exploitation from the sixteenth century to the present day. It recalls the establishment of the Gold Coast by way of the Portuguese trade in central African slaves; the colonially forced production of cocoa as a cash-crop to benefit the British market; and the recent discovery of

off-shore oil deposits that, predictably, has widened the gap between rich and poor in the country.

What is most disturbing is that the lead characters, Adinkra and Gyeyame, whose names designate them as representatives of indigenous wisdom and values, are nonetheless extremely susceptible to being interpolated into the order of exploitative capitalism. Even though Gyeyame is introduced as class-blind, standing by Adinkra despite his poverty and her family's initial ostracisation of them both on those grounds, she is transformed into someone incapable of recognising the similar plight of Abawa – Gyeyame heartlessly throws Abawa 'out of home' (2) just as her own parents did her. The metamorphosis that Adinkra and Gyeyame undergo in this story is familiar from the many blood-money stories that convey sharp social concern with the speculative nature of capital, which sees a minority acquire unfathomable wealth while the majority wallow in penury (see Comaroff and Comaroff). Typically, well-meaning, hard-working people turn to *juju* in desperation, when all other avenues to attaining basic necessities are unsuccessful. In this story, the cause of the trouble is not masked by the cipher of the blood-money metaphor, but it is exposed through Adinkra replacing the white mine-owner.

We learn that Chief Adinkra is 'the only native who owned a mine', all the others 'in that land' being 'owned by foreign investors' (1). He started out as 'a servant to one of the white miners in the land' (3) and, following the model of the Protestant work ethic, is rewarded for being 'honest and hardworking' with promotion to mine supervisor. From there, he is put on the fast track to Modernity, Eurocentrically defined, by his white boss, who sends him 'abroad to acquire more knowledge in mining' – notably, 'to make him more competent in his work' (3). He becomes the obedient, assimilated 'colonial clone' (Young 139). Again, the book may not self-consciously identify the way that Adinkra's labour is oriented towards facilitating the colonial pillaging of Ghana's resources. In fact, his fiancée identifies this training as a guarantee of her and Adinkra's 'eventual victory', which sends 'tears of joy streaking down Gyeyame's beautiful cheeks', and the news of 'Adinkra's departure to the queen's land' awakens Gyeyame's family to 'how stupidly they had behaved' (3). The result: 'Adinkra's status changed' (4). He moves into the role of his aging white employer, becomes a 'multi-millionaire', and hires 'male and maid servants to run errands and help with his household chores' (4). Hiring servants, in and of itself, is not necessarily exploitative; many cultures in precolonial Africa had practices of keeping

servants (see, for instance, Perbi). But the ease with which Abawa is used and discarded marks an important distinction from earlier historical practices, illustrating the same slide from transatlantic slavery into servitude that Anowa, the titular character of Ama Ata Aidoo's 1970 drama, decries. This story, like that play, is set in the transitional period between the British abolition of slavery (1807) and the consolidation of the Gold Coast as an official British colony (1821), when slavery might have been illegal but the exploitation of local labour to meet the global demand for market commodities continued (Gilbert 98). The book's extensive exposé of precarity and of the economic organisation of society to facilitate extractive capitalism stands in tension with the overly neat conclusion. The fairy-tale-like ending may be aspirational but is ultimately not nearly as familiar to readers as the everyday felt reality of the struggle and strain that takes up most of the narrative space.

<A>Conclusion

Sey's Wonders Shall Never End, like most market fiction, bears many features that make it dismissible, if not contemptible, for many. Its seemingly excessive plotlines, character inconsistencies, narrative contradictions, and fantastical ending would be off-putting for readers whose tastes have been trained on best-selling international children's books. And even for those who have not, the moral ambiguities left dangling, especially in terms of gender expectations, are troubling. However, the 'wild zone' of popular culture is one always characterised by the risk that some regressive thinking may take hold – a risk arguably offset by the possibilities open for radical thought. Further, we have seen that official children's literature is largely out of reach of the vast majority of Ghanaian readers, and indeed that that literature cannot offer the sense of immediate relevance that market fiction does, in terms of culturally familiar content, locally prized aesthetics, and urgent matters of social concern.

Market fiction's direct confrontations with adult authoritarian abuse against children – one of its central topics – and its representations of smart, resourceful, resilient children who are able to overcome and obtain justice for such abuse make the fiction a powerful literary genre. In his essay, Muponde looks hopefully toward African children's literature in which the 'child is no longer being written for, but being re-written' ('Child' 112). I argue that market fiction serves as one means by which such a re-writing can be achieved. It

requires a Rancièrian approach: to seek to see, hear, and count what and whom has not been seen, heard, or counted before, which is the way forward to 'radical equality'.

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¹ Square brackets indicate unlisted dates of publication but ones confirmed to me by the publisher or author. The addition of 'c.' indicates an approximate date of publication based on date of purchase or other factors.