

## **A comparative reading of Elleke Boehmer's Nile Baby and Richard Hoskins' The Boy in the River: different attitudes towards the possibility of cultural 'mixedness'**

Eva Hunter

### **Abstract**

This article examines two contemporary texts that present different attitudes towards cultural diversity in Britain: Elleke Boehmer's novel Nile Baby and Richard Hoskins' memoir The Boy in the River. Boehmer, who is an internationally recognised theorist in colonial and postcolonial writing, applies her concept of 'mixedness' to characterisation and incident, using the metaphorical and narrative devices available to the writer of fiction, to achieve in her novel a more promising approach to cultural hybridity than does Hoskins. Writing as an 'expert' on 'African' religions, Hoskins must, in a fact-based genre, establish himself as a reliable informant for his implied British audience. Confronting the ambiguities of ethically and judicially complex situations relating to belief in sorcery and witchcraft, he consigns them to the nonrational, alien, and predominantly dangerous. Hoskins therefore, despite his commitment to notions of shared humanity, reinscribes oppositional boundaries between the belief systems of 'the West' and 'Africa'.

[I]t is instructive to consider ... how ... the postcolonial novel at once participates in and critically reflects on the global world, the uneven spread of its networks of authority, as well as the modes of survival and making do that are possible within it. ... Think for example of the weird (always advancing, always repeated) currents of goods flowing through the markets in Ben Okri's The Famished Road, managed by sinister compound chiefs who answer to no visible master ... [Such] texts trace incomplete, unresolved, and often painful trans-cultural pathways. Criticism has perhaps to catch up with the dimensions of pain, compromise and recalcitrance mapped in these writings. (Boehmer 2004: 24)

This article is an attempt critically to 'catch up with the dimensions of pain, compromise and recalcitrance mapped' in two contemporary texts that, while '[participating] in' the 'global world', also 'critically [reflect]' on it, the main focus being the different attitudes each text presents towards cultural hybridity. In Elleke Boehmer's novel Nile Baby, 12-year-old friends Arnie and Alice discover a foetus in a jar in the laboratory of their London school. The foetus, assumed by the children to be 'African', is the Nile Baby of the title, also dubbed 'Fish' by them. Richard Hoskins' memoir The Boy in the River recounts his work with London's Metropolitan Police as they investigate, first, the murder of a child whose torso was found in the River Thames in 2001, and then, following on from this case, track down child trafficking rings that begin in West Africa

and end in the United Kingdom. Both texts have at their centre a dead child assumed to be 'African' and a river, and both reverberate with Joseph Conrad's *Heart of Darkness* and Chinua Achebe's *Things Fall Apart* – Boehmer having signalled her intention in *Nile Baby* to echo aspects of these two seminal works of literature in her interview with Karina Szczurek (2009). In Achebe's *Things Fall Apart* the character Ezinma was considered an ogbanje, and belief in ogbanje, literally 'children who come and go', is significant in both *Nile Baby* and *The Boy in the River*. It was held that, within a certain amount of time after birth, the ogbanje would deliberately die and then come back and repeat the cycle, so causing the family grief.

The reverberations among past and current writing result in continuities in time and space: between the River Thames in the former imperial metropolitan and the sites of some of the British Empire's depredations in North and West Africa; between, in the 21<sup>st</sup> century, 'first-world' and 'third-world' or 'developing' countries – formal possession having been replaced by neo-colonial dominance. The foetus in *Nile Baby* is a ghostly reminder of former cruelties; the boy in the Thames – his head, arms, and legs removed – is ghostly evidence of present-day harm. Another feature the texts share is in both depicting face-to-face encounters of the self with the other, from which the other emerges as ambiguous and enigmatic. In doing so they raise the potential for an enlightened stance towards cultural differences, for, as Tabish Khair says – in *The Gothic, Postcolonialism and Otherness: Ghosts from Elsewhere*, such encounters should affirm the 'ineradicability of difference' as well as 'space for its acceptance, interplay and recognition' (2009: 157–68). But whereas Boehmer's text suggests accommodation of ambiguities arising from differences, Hoskins notes his retreat from them.

Boehmer's concept of mixedness, which she first introduced in her third novel, *Bloodlines* (1997),<sup>1</sup> as inscribed in *Nile Baby*, incorporates – even celebrates – variety: as she says in the Szczurek interview, 'Fish is a mixed creature like Alice', who sees in it 'her own high African cheekbones' (2009: 1), 'Yet he is also like Arnie, Alice's friend, who is a misfit, an eccentric child, too' (Szczurek 2009). Her tale also weaves together what is extra-ordinary with the acceptably ordinary: the predominantly realistic narrative is peppered with bizarre, uncanny elements that exert pressure on the realistic plane. These uncanny elements may be understood to represent the effects of the foetus' presence on the children's imaginations. Penelope Fitzgerald has suggested a reason why writers choose to introduce children into a novel: it is, she said, 'helpful because they introduce a different scale of moral judgment. It's probably one that they've learned from adults, but adults themselves don't stick to it'.<sup>2</sup> Some of the novel's most affecting sections are those designed to draw the reader into Arnie's naïve but tender projection of human feelings onto Fish, and these passages gain persuasiveness from being grounded in the carefully detailed ordinariness of the boy's surroundings as well as the simplicity of the language in which his thoughts and actions are rendered:

In our small, neat garden, I soon discovered, there weren't too many corners to hide a large Kerr storage jar, big enough for, say, 2 or 3 kilos of flour. Mum grew her annuals in pots arranged down the right-hand side of the lawn in a regular zigzag pattern. (Boehmer 2008a: 53)

Arnie has placed the foetus in the 'large Kerr storage jar' to protect it. Yet even Arnie, Fish's prime champion, is disgusted and repulsed by the foetus, which he says is a 'cold, wet body lump' that has a 'crumpled grey forehead and squashed in nose' with 'strange, coarse grown-up hair sprouting at the back of its head' (2). Then, when Arnie sets out for Leeds to find a refuge for Fish with his father, even the mundane and diurnal become weird. As he is driven in a taxi past a signboard, 'the massive calf of a white woman reared up over us, smooth, hairless and shiny as a seal' (110). Eerie events attached to Fish's presence continue to assault Arnie when he reaches his father's Leeds address. He finds himself wrestling with a stranger for possession of the foetus. The stranger, named Katrina, pleads with Arnie, in Nigerian Pidgin, to leave Fish with her for a short while so she can pour water on the ground, in a local graveyard, as 'a libation to thank all our ancestors' (149). Her life is, she tells Arnie, full of 'ghost babies', for her children have all died (149). Katrina is perhaps emblematic of the postcolonial subject, marginalised and forced to 'make do' when far from home. She also is a reminder of Okwonko's favourite wife Ekwefi, who, in *Things Fall Apart*, lost nine children. In a later incident with another Nigerian woman at Heathrow Airport, when Arnie requests her to take Fish 'home' to Lagos, the woman refuses saying 'Africa needs no more dead babies' (227-9).

The children share much in common, but differ, and through such characterisation, as well as her mix of the ordinary and the bizarre, Boehmer establishes a capacious concept of mixedness, which is linked to the ideas of sameness and difference that are prevalent in colonial and postcolonial writing and thinking. Arnie flees London for Leeds because Alice, a budding scientist, wishes to probe Fish with her knives (her proto-scalpels), while he is more sensitive to the enigma of the foetus' being and to its possible humanity. Arnie introduces a 'scale of moral judgment' (Fitzgerald) different from that of Katrina and his friend Alice, 'who saw [the foetus] as other than human: a spirit, or a charmed foundling, or a chunk of rubbish'. He wishes to show it 'some kindness' (53). Alice's sister, Laura, meanwhile, sees in it a reminder of their family's part-African genes. By the close of the novel, after some friction between Alice and Arnie, the friends have developed 'space', precisely, 'for [the] acceptance, interplay and recognition' of Fish's difference from them (as well as their differences from each other). There does remain, though, incomprehension about the nature of Fish, as is signalled by its mysterious disappearance.

Boehmer's exploration of difference accords with Khair's requirements: it is neither 'unbridgeable' nor an 'essential sameness':

What the Other signifies is the ineradicability of difference. But this is not the same as absolute difference, across space or time, as sheer incomprehension. For this difference to come into being, there already has to be a relationship between the Self and the Other. The very perception of difference insists on an exchange that can be experienced as different and a look, given and returned, which can distinguish sameness from difference along certain avenues of perception. What the term 'Other' insists on is that this relationship, which is vital for both the Self and the Other, cannot be reduced to sameness. For the Other to be Other, there has to be difference – and space for its acceptance, interplay and recognition. (2008a: 157-8)

Characterisation in Nile Baby is fluid, emphasising not only the dissolution of boundaries within an individual regarding ideas about the other, it also suggests a range of possible responses – ‘avenues of perception’ – to the other.

In Hoskins’ memoir, which also associates ‘Africa’ with dead children, he approaches the concepts of difference and sameness while attempting to persuade his readers to extend understanding to those who differ in their beliefs and culture. Contrary to Boehmer’s insertion of uncanny elements in her fiction, however, he draws on material evidence and his own experience (rather than speculation), both his method and his aim conforming to the demands of the memoir genre. His reliance on material evidence is also necessary for him to maintain his reputation: on his website, he notes that he is ‘an expert on African religions’ and is ‘the only registered multi-cultural expert on the UK national police SOCA [Serious Organised Crime Agency] database’.<sup>3</sup>

In this role as consultant to the police force, and after investigations in London, Hoskins travels to West Africa. There he works with groups concerned with child victims, as some of the readers of his book will have seen in the two documentaries he made with the BBC and Channel 4, respectively (Hoskins 2012: 216–7, 255–82).<sup>4</sup> Hoskins read theology at Oxford and his reliability for his readers – in a society that continues to view itself as nominally Christian despite the prevalence of secularism and the existence within its geographical borders of other religions – is embedded in a Christianity that is rational enough to allow for tolerance, to some extent, of different belief systems. While Boehmer may filter, through devices accessible to the writer of fiction – such as the use of third-person, unreliable narration focalised through Arnie and the use of emblematic or symbolic figures – her imaginative acceptance of certain beliefs, without committing herself, as writer, to either scepticism or credence, Hoskins must, in order to connect with his readers, retain his credibility as a plausible ‘expert’. In doing so, he consigns to the non-rational and, ultimately, to the alien and unacceptable, beliefs in the efficacy of sorcery and the co-existence of ancestors and the living.

His narrative, which is told, as the genre demands, in the first-person, begins in London in 2001, when a boy’s torso is found floating in the Thames and he is asked to assist the police. The boy is suspected to be ‘African’. Hoskins continues to work with the police as they extend their investigations into the murder and trafficking of other children, a trail that leads them to Nigeria and the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC). He soon intersperses his account of working with the police with flashbacks to the period 1986–97, when he and his former wife were employed by a Christian organisation in a remote village in the DRC. These flashbacks will reinforce the reader’s acceptance of his reliability as narrator: he has lived with and experienced local religious beliefs, even nearly succumbed to their persuasive power.

His crisis of faith is precipitated by the death of the couple’s twin girls. After the first twin is born dead, a friendly elder among the local people, Tata Mpia, warns him that he should sacrifice a goat to prevent the death of the second twin. Abigail is in danger of being ‘called’ by the first twin, who is now among the ‘living dead’ (Hoskins 2012: 59, 80–1). Hoskins says he is held back from sacrificing a goat by the ‘solid middle-class British persona’ he has ‘inhabited all [his] life’

(82). Yet, when the second twin dies of an infection at the age of 15 months, he is haunted by the feeling that he failed to do his utmost to prevent her death (88). (Tata Mpia's words to Hoskins, as they are burying his second daughter – 'now you are truly an African' (88) – form a tragic link with Boehmer's tale and its emphasis on the anguish caused by the high rate of infant mortality on the continent.)

Describing Abigail's burial, Hoskins confesses his susceptibility to the beliefs of those whose lives he was sharing at the time: he says Abigail was laid next to '[t]he sister who had summoned her to the shadowlands beyond the grave and who now had her for evermore' (88, italics added). Grief-stricken and remorseful, Hoskins 'cross[ed] that bridge' into the belief system of 'a strange culture', despite his having realised, when first contemplating making a sacrifice of a goat, that '[if] I made that sacrifice, I would cease to be entirely Western. I would open a door in my mind – and possibly my soul – to alien demons' (83). To his implied British audience, Hoskins represents his experience as having arisen at a time of intense psychological and spiritual vulnerability. To be 'entirely Western', though, protects the mind and soul against 'alien demons'. Is his emphasis on 'alien', so perhaps admitting that 'the West' has its own demons? It is not clear, although what is clear is that, from the perspective of the time of narration, he is sure he made the correct decision not to sacrifice the goat. His confrontation was less with the other than with himself, and he recoiled from what he discovered.

Hoskins wishes to deflect accusations of racism. For instance, in the chapter with which he closes his memoir, he tells of his visit to Scotland Yard's Crime Museum. Here he sees exhibits linked to notorious British murders and he includes in his list of the relics an especially repulsive example, 'the cooker upon which sits the pot in which Dennis Nilsen boiled the heads of his fifteen male victims in Muswell Hill between 1978 and 1983' (333). (Is this example meant to recall, and to be compared with, images previously found mostly in cartoons, of white explorers and missionaries stewing in black cannibals' cooking pots?)

Hoskins also troubles any temptation to adopt an attitude of smugness: his own beliefs are, he acknowledges, supported by access to superior material conditions, such as the modern medical care that affords an enhanced sense of existential security. He recalls an incident in the DRC when he was consulted, as a representative of 'the Church', by a woman who had lost five of her nine children (68). She wanted his permission to consult a nganga, one of the diviners and healers who are 'the equivalent... of the South African sangomas' (68). 'Could I forbid her to go to a nganga? What did I have to offer instead? 'What ngangas protect their clients against is kindoki, a term widely associated with witchcraft. 'I had encountered suffering on a scale that had not even featured in my worst nightmares' (66). He began to feel his 'faith tremble' (69). Again, however, his record of an encounter with the other, as when he buried his second child, has embedded in it the reassurance to his readers that his narrating voice is trustworthy because it reaches them from behind the shield of his restored faith.

Religious belief and its forms of expression are a constant in *The Boy in the River* and the epigraph Hoskins chooses for his book, an extract from Yeats' 'The Second Coming', alludes to the breakdown of faith and its consequences:

The ceremony of innocence is drowned; The best lack all conviction, while the worst Are full of passionate intensity ...And what rough beast, its hour come round at last, Slouches towards Bethlehem to be born?<sup>5</sup>

Hoskins' bleak vision seems warranted by his narrative: besides the torso of a murdered child and accounts of children who are being trafficked from West and Central Africa to Britain, some of them to be tortured and murdered, there is the suffering caused by child mortality on a vast scale. However, the monstrous 'rough beast' he targets is the death of children not through sickness but through the exploitation of suffering by those without conscience. Hoskins claims that the sacrifice of children arises not from 'African' religions in themselves but due to certain leaders of the popular Pentecostal churches that combine Christianity with 'African' elements.

At the time the London Metropolitan Police approached him about the boy's torso, headless and limbless, that was found in the Thames, they asked him whether they were dealing with a muti killing. This is a practice that, despite its being condemned by most traditional healers and by the law in each country, is found in South Africa, Botswana, and Zimbabwe. Human organs are removed for use as powerful 'medicine'. Hoskins advises that the Thames torso is not a muti killing: the boy's genitals are intact and the incisions have been precisely done. Instead, as he and the police pursue cases of child trafficking from the DRC and Nigeria to Europe, they discover that the abuse of children is rooted in beliefs in the exorcism through ritual sacrifice of the evil spirits that are believed to cause suffering and ill luck.

Hoskins is puzzled by the fact that accusations of sorcery are being directed against children. Traditionally, he says, animals (such as goats), not humans, were chosen as sacrificial victims.<sup>6</sup> He suggests that the answer lies in economic desperation. In London, the exploitation of migrants' desperation and dislocation will be traced to some pastors in some of the city's revivalist churches. The pastors have enormous power over their anxiety-ridden followers. In Kinshasa, too, children are being 'exorcised' by those who claim to be able, for a fee, to free the family from misfortune.

It is with this knowledge that he addresses complex questions related to moral and legal dilemmas raised by modern understanding of human rights in the context of the 'transnational' flow of human beings. These dilemmas include: to what extent should the culture and tradition of immigrants be taken into account when they conflict with British or European Union laws that protect human rights? He emphasises the richness of the spiritual life of 'Africans' and he encourages in his readers their acceptance of effusive public expression of religious belief in London. His concern is that, when belief systems find expression through harmful, cruel practices, what or who is to blame beyond the immediate perpetrators: kleptocratic African governments that ignore the deprivation of their peoples? The international corporates and rich governments that foster and sustain the globalisation of poverty, desperation, and insecurity? Unscrupulous charismatic church leaders?



In southern Africa, too, witchcraft is used as a resource to alleviate economic pressures as well as the effects of natural disasters and interpersonal conflict. In Zimbabwe and South Africa, witch hunts seem to be related to the black market demand for human body parts as muti, and the rise in this demand may be due, in the case of Zimbabwe, to the country's economic decline, says Gordon Chavanduka, head of the Zimbabwe National Traditional Healers Association but also to the desire for material success than is already owned (in Simmons 2000). Unity Dow, too, in her novel *The Screaming of the Innocent* (2003), writes that a powerful force driving muti killings is that of the desire to accumulate. Dow was Botswana's first female high court judge and is an activist on behalf of women's and children's rights. In her novel, those who are already powerful use such killings in order to gain more power, wealth, and sexual potency. The prime 'client' is a wealthy businessman, who selects a prepubescent girl whose genitals are removed to gain muti (Dow 2003: 5, 21, 105). A headman and a schoolmaster join him in paying the fee, while senior police officers ensure the demands of the victim's family for justice come to nothing and that the dread surrounding such events is sustained through a blanket of silence.

Moving closer to the site of Hoskins' investigations in West Africa, Yaba Badoe, a Ghanaian-British filmmaker, produced *The Witches of Gambaga*, a documentary on the demonization of women, especially older women, and children in an area of northern Ghana. She also reports widespread condemnation within Africa, West and East, of the persecution of the vulnerable:

The Commission for Human Rights in Ghana is thinking of using [my] documentary as an educational tool in schools and Netright [the Network for Women's Rights in Ghana], is planning to use the film as a campaigning tool to change attitudes towards women believed to be witches. These attitudes, which scapegoat and demonize vulnerable women and children and ostracize them as 'witches', need to be questioned and debated. For example, Amnesty International in Kenya is already using the film with teachers and students in its human rights clubs in south-western Kenya. (Badoe 2011)

After establishing, in the Bolobo sections of his memoir, his understanding of the conditions that underpin prevailing practices around kindoki, Hoskins goes further in bolstering his claim to be aiming at an unbiased approach by stating his awareness of his potential for bias. Attending a service in London held by Combat Spirituel, a church with connections with a 'major people-trafficking operation that had come to light during the [boy in the river] investigation' (Hoskins 2012: 234), he is 'reminded of why the church was so important' to the congregation, many of whom 'had grindingly hard lives ... on the margins of London society' (237). The pastor of such a church is 'leader of the only community to which they could fully belong' (238). As he witnesses the intensely dramatic performance of the London head of Combat Spirituel, he, scrupulously, 'had to keep reminding [him]self that [his] discomfort was at least partly cultural'; and that while he, having been raised in a secular state, regards religion 'as a private matter', the British are 'perhaps blind to the fact that some 87 per cent of the world's population remains fervently religious' (238).<sup>7</sup> He continues: 'looking beyond our comfortable and sometimes hypocritical secularism [that] is one of the challenges we all face in a rapidly changing world, if we are to understand the forces working on our society' (240).

Hoskins' identification with a British (white, middle class) secular readership in 'we all', 'we', and 'our' (repeated) is a necessary rhetorical strategy as he calls for more open-mindedness. His call it is not unconditional. Indeed, he argues against moral and cultural relativism when he testifies in a London court about the 'exorcism' of a boy who has been tortured and killed by his siblings. He and the prosecution team must not 'allow [the accused and their defence] to call on either Christianity or African beliefs to justify their actions' (242). Instead, these acts must be recognised as being prompted by 'new pseudo-religious movements' that, he claims, have 'no foundation in African tradition,' and that they are 'down to the perverted behaviour of cruelly misguided people' (241):

My argument was that the crimes had been committed despite their African heritage ... the defence must not be able to use their African origins as an excuse. That would not help British society tackle such crimes, and would be a betrayal of all that I knew and loved about Africa and its people. (242, emphasis in original)

Hoskins' condemnation of the scapegoating of children as a perversion of regular practice has been supported by the main body of Pentecostal churches. In reaction to the BBC documentary 'Witch Child' that Hoskins made in the DRC, Pastor Jean Bosco Kanyemesha, founder of London Fire Church in Walthamstow, spoke, at a symposium in 2006, about the 'infiltration of impostors and traditional healers' into the church that had aroused 'major concern' among the pastoral community in the UK and Congo.<sup>8</sup>

At times Hoskins uses a clipped, terse style conventional to the crime thriller – for instance, when he is first summoned to help the London detectives: 'I was at my desk when they called' (1); 'There was a pause' (49); 'And much more of the same' (49); 'I gritted my teeth ...' (49). He does not, however, attempt to render events as more lurid than they are. He also offers thoughtful interiority, when, for instance, he confides that his work has had an emotional cost for his marriage, while his overall tone is measured. This prepares the readers for his closing words, following on his visit to Scotland Yard's museum of British crimes, which incorporate his readers as culpable, because human, in the 'unimaginable sacrifice, here in the heart of our capital city' (334):

I'm ... reminded that the world in which I work is not defined by race, culture, age or gender. ... We cannot comfort ourselves with the thought that the heart of darkness lies beyond our horizon. It lies squarely within the world we inhabit, and within us. (333–4)

The promotional words on the front and back covers of his book are, though, designed to stoke outrage at the intrusion into ('our') civilised London/England/Britain of such horrors: 'A shocking true story of murder and sacrifice in the heart of London' (outside front cover) and 'innocent children are being ritually sacrificed in our capital city' (outside back cover). The phrase 'a personal quest into the dark heart of humanity', also on the back cover, echoes Conrad's title – ironically, given the exposé in *Heart of Darkness* of the source of the horrors enacted in the



Congo Basin. These potentially xenophobic phrases may be attributed to the publisher's goal of stimulating sales.

In *Nile Baby*, modern England, too, has its dead babies, but Boehmer, having shown sensitivity to the high death rate of children on the African continent through two Nigerian women, uses the death of a baby in London to forge connections, not reaffirm boundaries. Alice has an elder sister, Laura, whose infant dies in hospital. Meeting up with Alice in the hospital's memorial garden for 'parents whose babies don't make it' (Boehmer 2008a: 130), Laura tells her sister that this is 'not a place of extinction. Absorption, not extinction' (131, emphasis in original). She goes on to connect this belief of hers to the excavation of a Nubian skeleton dating from Roman times, an excavation in which she took part, as well as to her decision to '[face] the past, [think] about the dead' (131). The excavation has made visible to Laura links that were previously obscured. The sisters have been attempting to trace their 'African' father in order to understand the nature of their connection to the African continent. For Laura, a positive way of perceiving the past and her own place in contemporary England is as being part of a mixed English culture, rather than that her part-Africanness has been overlaid or obliterated (130–1, 133).

The sisters' discussion, in daylight and in a garden, stands in contrast to Arnie's encounter in the Leeds graveyard, in darkness, with Katrina, deracinated and alone, who is trapped in a world haunted painfully by spirits.<sup>9</sup> It also contrasts with the children's attempted funeral for Fish, near the novel's close. The children's makeshift ceremony is based on scraps of information: they will build a raft, bind the foetus onto it, and float it on the Thames so the foetus may journey 'home' to Africa (256–7). The foetus is by now disintegrating and emitting a noxious stench. Yet Alice is asked to prise its mouth open to set its soul free: 'The body's lips might have been pursed slightly open but even so she'd had to prod and to yank' (258). 'Prod' and 'yank' suggest aggressive actions: Alice, with her love of dissection, is heir to curious western explorers and scientists who have carved up peoples and places exotic to them (1, 6, 12). Furthermore, what may be read as Fish's 'refusal' to submit to further indignity – his uncanny disappearance – perhaps suggests the inescapable failure of those who pronounce upon another culture of which they have limited understanding. Or, perhaps Fish is doing what ogbanjes, who come and go, usually do, and is completing its (delayed) cycle.

Boehmer published a second book in 2008, *Nelson Mandela: A Very Short Introduction* (Boehmer 2008b), and in an interview drew connections between this text and *Nile Baby*. She said that 'Mandela is in certain respects a *Nile Baby*' in that he represents both the uncanny as well as its opposite, which she defines as the natural, the human; yet previously he was viewed as alien, not fully human – for 'the outlawed and excluded of history have also always been seen as uncanny, out on the edge, inhabiting a zone outside what is thought natural, the real world' (Szcurek 2009). The foetus in *Nile Baby*, represents, she says, 'that which exceeds the accepted pattern of things'; it is also intended to suggest the 'long embedded presences of Africa within Europe, how Europe or at least England is inseamed with Africa', while the attempts of her novel's characters to make the foetus 'fit' signal 'recognizing the "impurity" of Europe' (Szcurek 2009). The foetus'

extra-ordinary nature and Laura's understanding of her blend of African and English heritage, sustain Boehmer's concept of 'mixedness'.

Mandela has, as Boehmer says, reversed the degrading public image of him; he has come to represent to the world the iconic 'measure of the human':

To me, among Mandela's lasting achievements will be to have demonstrated through his example. ... that Africa is not somewhere-out-there, on the margins, that against which we define what the human is, as has long been the case in Europe. No, Africa is central to our understanding of what the human is. (Szczurek 2009)

Boehmer is using the term 'Africa' generically, with intent to destabilise the stale perspectives on the continent and its peoples, to foster instead 'an imagined community whose "citizens" must reinvent the narrative and visual economy of Africa'.<sup>10</sup> Her claim for the continent's moral centrality when defining 'what the human is', could, when linked to the anthropological finds at the Sterkfontein Caves and environs in South Africa that have been named 'The Cradle of Humankind', be read as Afrocentrism. Afrocentrism mirrors, rather than opposes, Eurocentrism.<sup>11</sup> It claims that Africa is central to the origins of knowledge, that such knowledge is superior to that of 'the West', and that it should be recovered. Boehmer's concept of mixedness as expressed in *Nile Baby* does not support Afrocentric claims. However, if Africa has become a kind of touchstone for contemporary understanding of 'what the human is', or what those who inhabit the continent may, as 'imagined communit[ies]', become, it would appear to be necessary to accommodate as a valid worldview what Boehmer defines – admittedly homogenising the continent and its many cultures – as the 'African vision', of 'the dead and the living existing in each other's spaces' (Szczurek 2009).

As Hoskins' tale explains, the belief in sorcery that forms part of this 'African vision' does not always result in injury: ngangas aim to protect their clients against the kindoki that is believed to lie behind misfortune. Nor is the African continent exceptional in manifesting contemporary belief in witchcraft: in parts of India, women 'witches' are tortured and killed.<sup>12</sup> Turning to Hoskins' home country, Carole G Silver, in *Strange and Secret Peoples: Fairies and Victorian Consciousness* (1999), says 'the devil and the demonic were very much alive [as recently as] the Victorian world', with 'both witches and fairies ... perceived primarily as groups of wild or uncontrolled women who were possessed of powers that had not been civilized or domesticated' (1999: 176).<sup>13</sup>

The topic of witchcraft as a contemporaneous phenomenon, is, in fact, one that is attracting extensive research. Historian Peter Geschiere is, since publication of his book *The Modernity of Witchcraft* in 1997, regarded as a leading authority on the subject. He sheds light on questions raised by *The Boy in the River*, such as why the ideas and practices of witchcraft are re-emerging in a modern country in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. In a lecture delivered at Aarhus University in 2013, 'The "Witchcraft in the House" goes global', he argued that, contrary to expectations that modern influences would result in the decline in witchcraft, such influences have instead ensured that,

especially in politics and entrepreneurship, witchcraft remains prevalent and is affecting the interface between the global and the local. Witchcraft transfers readily from its application to local anxieties to those caused by the intrusions of globalisation, as Hoskins' text suggests.

Another Africanist, Patrick Chabal, makes a provocative proposition: that those who resort to sorcery should be seen as making a rational choice. In his book *Africa: The Politics of Suffering and Smiling* he is, he says, intent on 'engag[ing] with politics as it is played out in everyday life' and on 'what politics means for people who are not political actors' (2009: xi). Chabal challenges the rational choice theories that underlie political science. Studying 'the everyday lives of African men and women' from 'below' (2009: x, ix), often in opposition to prevailing theories of social scientists, he moots 'a reconceptualisation of the notion [of rationality] that fits with the contemporary politics of belonging' (2009: 72). Chabal holds that, when discussing 'the challenge faced by Africanist political theories that wish to account for what happens on the continent', what should be adopted is 'an alternative view of rationality that is in greater consonance with the present circumstances on the continent' (2009: 72).

In this view, rationality is the application of 'logical reasoning ... that rests on the virtue of the collective social good and the morality of the reciprocity that binds rulers and ruled in a highly hybrid form ... (2009: 72)

Such a hybrid form has evolved, he says, to represent contemporary practice and is not regressive:

[T]o confine witchcraft entirely to the realm of the 'irrational' is to neglect a whole area of cultural and socio-political action that rests on well-understood relations of dependence and reciprocity within actually existing, as opposed to long disappeared, societies. (2009: 75, italics added)

To dismiss belief in witchcraft as marking a kind of regression to outdated and 'primitive' behaviour would be to underestimate its continuing vigour, a mistake that Chabal joins Geschiere in warning against: 'the practices of witchcraft have adapted to the capitalist economy, electoral politics and even the spread of new technologies in communication' (Chabal 2009: 75).<sup>14</sup>

[T]he world has [as Boehmer says] willy-nilly been subsumed into an entirely new decentred and deterritorialised form of global sovereignty, 'Empire', which is to be distinguished from the nation-based imperialism of the past. ... Empire of this sort is all-consuming, all-inclusive, everywhere ... (Boehmer 2004: 13)

In these 'present circumstances', says Chabal, to turn to witchcraft is rational: 'Witchcraft is definitely not irrational' (2009: 76).

## **Conclusion**

Both these texts, like the generic postcolonial novel that Boehmer refers to in the epigraphic quotation to this article, participate in the 21<sup>st</sup> century's global world order as well as

criticising it, and both are serious attempts to ‘trace incomplete, unresolved, and often painful trans-cultural pathways’ (Boehmer 2004: 12). At the centre of both books is a dead child who functions as a reminder that, while children usually signify fertility as well as hope for the future, they also signify the African continent’s past and present suffering as well as the perpetuation of exploitation – by countries part of ‘the West’ and, in the case of *The Boy in the River*, the continent’s own inhabitants – of its resources, including its bodies.

Both *Nile Baby* and *The Boy in the River* also, however, show the inhabitants of globalised economies achieving ‘modes of survival and making do’. In the novel such modes are embodied in two West African women that the children meet in England; in the memoir, these modes are manifest, in London and West Africa, in strong belief systems and enthusiastically-conducted rituals of worship, but to the extent that they involve the continued belief in the efficacy of sorcery or witchcraft, Hoskins presents them as perversions of both ‘African’ and Christian forms of religion.

Both novel and memoir suggest the ultimate unknowability of the other, yet here, too, there are dissimilarities. In the novel, Laura’s view of mixedness, or ‘absorption’, is a version of multiculturalism that dilutes its widely-held definition as being predominantly concerned with difference. Hoskins, too, dismisses reliance on such an approach, but less because it is inherently flawed than because the moral and cultural relativism embedded in theories of multiculturalism is not always adequate to the task of approaching the ethically complex situations that arise in the contemporary world.

Although, like Hoskins’ memoir, Boehmer’s tale is located within western epistemology, it is able, since fiction may exploit the metaphorical, to suggest that ‘the rational and non-rational constitute a single sphere of reality’ (Ndebele 1991: 50). Boehmer also creates a plasticity of values and viewpoints through using child protagonists. Further, while rooting her plot in the diurnal, she entices the reader to accept the emotional and psychological authenticity of the tale by carefully placing elements of the uncanny. At the close of her story, through Arnie’s viewpoint, she suggests that even the everyday may allow for a vision of hope and wonder:

I watched the plane for sometime [sic] till, suddenly, the light of the rising sun caught its windows and it flared for a moment like an orange comet and then disappeared behind the high, blue-grey cloud. ‘Like a supernova,’ said Alice, her eyes on the plane just the same as me. ‘Like this,’ I said. I don’t know why, and squeezed her hand hard. (Boehmer 2008a: 264)

Hopkins, working in a genre based on fact and aware of the requirements of his implied British audience, does not attempt to suggest that the rational and non-rational may inhabit a single sphere of reality. Instead, he sets out to explain what he terms an ‘African’ belief system as an alien system. He therefore maintains ‘western’ and ‘African’ worldviews as oppositional binaries, and this is despite his pleas for understanding of the religious practices of Britain’s black populace as well as his assertion of the humanity shared by all. Implicit in this assertion, however – and keeping in mind both Boehmer’s pointer to ‘the markets in Ben Okri’s *The Famished Road*, [that are] managed by sinister compound chiefs who answer to no visible master’ as well as

Hoskins' finding in West Africa and in London of black participants in the enslavement and torture of fellow Africans, is the realisation that Britain's black populace are helpless victims neither of their past nor of their present, and nor are they more virtuous than are other human beings.

When considering the contemporary politics of belonging and the nature of epistemology within the processes of change in the African continent, there is a lineage that includes Chabal who, as mentioned above, in 2009 wrote of hybridity, and Brenda Cooper and Robert Morrell, who, in the 2014 collection of essays they edited, *Africa-Centred Knowledges: Crossing Fields and Worlds*, promote the concept of 'entanglements'. Derived from physics, the term describes a 'physical phenomenon that occurs when pairs or groups of particles are generated or interact in ways such that the quantum state of each particle cannot be described independently – instead, a quantum state may be given for the system as a whole'.<sup>15</sup> As applied to the humanities and social sciences, entanglements, as Cooper and Morrell say, has been used by Achille Mbembe in his book *On the Postcolony* (2001) as a 'concept designed to capture the complexities, variations within and unruliness of knowledges in what he calls the postcolony' (Cooper & Morrell 2014: 2–3).

The same term was used by Sarah Nuttall in her innovative study, *Entanglement: Literary and Cultural Reflections on Post-apartheid South Africa* (2009). Boehmer, a theorist as well as a novelist, takes her place in this lineage with her term mixedness.

## Notes

1. Set in a South Africa on the eve of liberation from apartheid, *Bloodlines* has one of its characters discover the involvement of Irish nationalists on the Boer side at the siege of Ladysmith (1899–1900).
2. Quoted in  
<[http://www.houghtonmifflinbooks.com/readers\\_guides/fitzgerald\\_blueflower.shtml](http://www.houghtonmifflinbooks.com/readers_guides/fitzgerald_blueflower.shtml)> (accessed 10 February 2013).
3. See <<http://www.richardhoskins.co.uk/#!/bio/c1ktj>> (accessed 6 February 2015).
4. 'Witch Child', BBC2 4 April 2006; 'Torso in the Thames: Adam's Story', Channel 4 2003.
5. Yeats' poem, originally written in 1919, is generally understood as conservatively attacking the revolutionary movements that flourished in Europe after the First World War, but it has also been used, as in Achebe's title, to indicate protest at the effects of British colonialism and Christian missionaries.
6. He does not mention that such accusations of witchcraft in the West African region were usually directed against older women, frequently due to tensions generated by polygyny, as revealed in Badoe's 2010 documentary film, *The Witches of Gambaga*.
7. On Pentecostal Christianity, Richard L Wood says that, having grown 'out of multiracial religious revivals in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century United States, [it] represents one of the most dynamic religious forces in the contemporary world. It is growing particularly fast in many settings in which human rights are least honoured: in China, sub-Saharan Africa, Russia, South and Southeast Asia, and parts of Latin America. In sub-Saharan Africa, where Pentecostalism has exploded in recent



decades, the movement sometimes appears irretrievably complicit in corruption that exploits poverty and creates new elites. Yet Pentecostalism can also serve as a primary mobilizing structure to free individual Africans from suppressive tribal, communal, or family structures' <<https://www.opendemocracy.net/openglobalrights/richard-l-wood/pentecostal-christianity-retrogressive-force-or-dynamic-ally-0>> (accessed 10 September 2014).

8. International symposium at Westminster Central Hall (Monday 22 May 2006) hosted by Jesus House for All Nations, flagship church of the African-derived Pentecostal Redeemed Christian Church of God denomination <[www.fulcrum-anglican.org.uk/news/2006/20060717taylor.cfm?doc=124](http://www.fulcrum-anglican.org.uk/news/2006/20060717taylor.cfm?doc=124)> (accessed 3 February 2013). And in an article that registers protest by UK black-led church leaders, 'Church leaders hit back over "stereotyped" BBC documentary', Bishop Dr Joe Aldred, secretary of MECA (Minority Ethnic Christian Affairs, a part of the ecumenical organisation Churches Together in England) and chair of the Council of Black-led Churches in Birmingham said: 'We are aware that some cases of child abuse have come to light in the UK, which the police are investigating with our full cooperation. But to imply, as this broadcast seemed to do, that abuse of children is widespread amongst black Christians in the UK is misleading and very unhelpful' <[http://www.cpo.org.uk/magazines/news?newspage=199&newsaction=view&newsid=79.\\*](http://www.cpo.org.uk/magazines/news?newspage=199&newsaction=view&newsid=79.*)> (accessed 10 February 2013).

9. A powerful and bizarre metaphor that represents the durability of the consequences of colonialism appears in *Rebirth*, a graphic novel set in South Africa. In it, Jan van Riebeeck, the leader of the first Dutch settlement at the Cape, is a vampire. He is not only an alien invader who is parasitic on local resources but also a source of ongoing infection. Interestingly, given the power of attraction/repulsion that Boehmer attaches to her dead foetus, one of the creators of *Rebirth* says 'the colonial trauma creates a kind of force field, a blight maybe you could call it, that affects both colonized and colonizer for centuries afterwards' <<http://www.litnet.co.za/Article/rebirth-graphic-novel-jan-van-riebeeck-was-a-vampire>> (accessed 14 March 2013).

10. See the group blog 'Africa is a Country', the ironic title of which is a reaction to old and tired images of 'Africa' <<http://africasacountry.com/about-2>> (accessed 9 June 2014).

11. Sterkfontein, which has produced some of the oldest hominid fossils ever found, was designated a World Heritage site in 1999 by UNESCO.

12. 'Man murdered for sorcery, 2 detained', *The Times of India* 10 September 2014 <<http://articles.timesofindia.indiatimes.com/keyword/sorcery>> (accessed 2 October 2014).

13. The victimising of accused 'witches' is more accurately seen as a collaborative enterprise between men and women at the local level, according to Robin Briggs, who says, 'The historical record suggests that both men and women found it easiest to fix these fantasies [of witchcraft], and turn them into horrible reality, when they were attached to women' (Briggs, *Witches & Neighbours* 1996: 264–5, 270, 273, 282, quoted in <[http://womenshistory.about.com/gi/o.htm?zi=1/XJ&zTi=1&sdn=womenshistory&cdn=education&tm=101&f=00&tt=14&bt=0&bts=0&zu=http%3A//www.gendercide.org/case\\_witchhunts.html](http://womenshistory.about.com/gi/o.htm?zi=1/XJ&zTi=1&sdn=womenshistory&cdn=education&tm=101&f=00&tt=14&bt=0&bts=0&zu=http%3A//www.gendercide.org/case_witchhunts.html)> (accessed 10 February 2013)).

14. For a survey of the global reach of human trafficking, see the report by Megumi Masikana for The World Bank (December 2009) <'Human Trafficking: A Brief Overview'>.

15. See <<https://www.google.co.za/#q=quantum+entanglement>> (accessed 15 September 2014).



## References

- Badoe, Y. 2011. Blog <<http://geosireads.wordpress.com/2011/03/17/an-interview-with-ghanaian-%E2%80%93-british-writer-yaba-badoe/>> (accessed 14 January 2013).
- Boehmer, E. 1997. *Bloodlines*. Cape Town: David Philip.
- Boehmer, E. 2004. 'Global and textual webs in an age of transnational capitalism; or, what isn't new about Empire'. *Postcolonial Studies* 7(1): 11–26
- Boehmer, E. 2008a. *Nile Baby*. Oxford: Ayebia.
- Boehmer, E. 2008b. *Nelson Mandela: A Very Short Introduction*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Chabal, P. 2009. *Africa: The Politics of Suffering and Smiling*. London: Zed.
- Cooper, B. & Morrell, R. 2014. 'Inside Africa's search for meaning'. Article on Cooper & Morrell (eds), *Africa-Centred Knowledges: Crossing Fields and Worlds*. London: James Currey in *Mail & Guardian* 5 to 11 September: 1–3.
- Dow, U. 2003. *The Screaming of the Innocent*. Cape Town: Double Storey Books.
- Geschiere, P. 1997. *The Modernity of Witchcraft: Politics and the Occult in Postcolonial Africa*. Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press.
- Geschiere, P. 2013. 'The Witchcraft of the House Goes Global'. Lecture at Aarhus Universit <<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=9FifQ4wWrI>> (accessed 20 September 2014).
- Hoskins, R. 2012. *The Boy in the River*. London: Pan.
- Khair, T. 2009. *The Gothic, Postcolonialism and Otherness: Ghosts from Elsewhere*. Basingstoke, UK: Palgrave Macmillan.
- Masikana, M. 2009. 'Human trafficking: A brief overview'. Washington, DC: World Bank <<https://openknowledge.worldbank.org/handle/10986/11103> License: CC BY 3.0> unreported (accessed 13 December 2014).
- Mbembe, A. 2001. *On the Postcolony*. Oakland: University of California Press. [Originally published in French in 2000.]
- Ndebele, N. 1991. *Rediscovery of the Ordinary: Essays on South African Literature and Culture*. Johannesburg: COSAW.
- Nuttall, S. 2009. *Entanglement: Literary and Cultural Reflections on Post-apartheid South Africa*. Johannesburg: Wits University Press.
- Silver, C.G. 1999. *Strange and Secret Peoples: Fairies and Victorian Consciousness*. London & New York: Oxford University Press.
- Simmons, D. 2000. 'African witchcraft at the Millennium [sic]: Musings on a modern phenomenon in Zimbabwe'. *The Journal of the International Institute* 7(2) <<http://hdl.handle.net/2027/spo.4750978.0007.202>> (accessed 2 January 2015).
- Szczurek, K.M. 2009. 'Exploring the in-between: Elleke Boehmer, writer, critic and long-distance friend'. *Itch* e.03 March <<http://www.itch.co.za/?article=167>> (accessed 20 January 2013).