



**QUEEN'S
UNIVERSITY
BELFAST**

Unfinished forgiveness: dynamics of Igbo cosmology and Christian theology in Chigozie Obioma's *An Orchestra of Minorities*

Livingstone, J. D. (2024). Unfinished forgiveness: dynamics of Igbo cosmology and Christian theology in Chigozie Obioma's *An Orchestra of Minorities*. *Literature and Theology*, 38(1), 44-64.
<https://doi.org/10.1093/litthe/rae012>

Published in:
Literature and Theology

Document Version:
Publisher's PDF, also known as Version of record

Queen's University Belfast - Research Portal:
[Link to publication record in Queen's University Belfast Research Portal](#)

Publisher rights

Copyright 2024 The Authors.

This is an open access article published under a Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial License (<https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc/4.0/>), which permits use, distribution and reproduction for non-commercial purposes, provided the author and source are cited.

General rights

Copyright for the publications made accessible via the Queen's University Belfast Research Portal is retained by the author(s) and / or other copyright owners and it is a condition of accessing these publications that users recognise and abide by the legal requirements associated with these rights.

Take down policy

The Research Portal is Queen's institutional repository that provides access to Queen's research output. Every effort has been made to ensure that content in the Research Portal does not infringe any person's rights, or applicable UK laws. If you discover content in the Research Portal that you believe breaches copyright or violates any law, please contact openaccess@qub.ac.uk.

Open Access

This research has been made openly available by Queen's academics and its Open Research team. We would love to hear how access to this research benefits you. – Share your feedback with us: <http://go.qub.ac.uk/oa-feedback>

Unfinished forgiveness: dynamics of Igbo cosmology and Christian theology in Chigozie Obioma's *An Orchestra of Minorities*

Justin D. Livingstone 

*Corresponding author: School of Arts, English and Languages, Queen's University Belfast, 2 University Square, Belfast BT7 1NN, Northern Ireland. Email: J.Livingstone@qub.ac.uk

ABSTRACT

Chigozie Obioma's *An Orchestra of Minorities*, a novel embedded in the Igbo traditions of Odinani, is acclaimed as a literary exercise in alternative cosmology. Yet the book is also seriously engaged with Christian theology. This essay argues that the novel's account of wrongdoing, repentance, and remission, offers a careful analysis of the dynamics of Christian forgiveness, sharpened by its Igbo cosmological perspective. The tensions that it dramatizes between an honor-shame code and the demands of forgiveness, simultaneously critique the logic of retribution and problematize romantic and therapeutic models of forgiving. By dwelling on the complications of resolving offences, and opening taxing questions around political injustices, *An Orchestra of Minorities* pushes towards a refined moral grammar in which forgiveness is not impossible but routinely unfinished.

Key words: Forgiveness; Christian theology; Igbo cosmology; African fiction; Chigozie Obioma.

In a short essay, "Pistols and Repentance", Chigozie Obioma meditates on his participation in street evangelism as a teenager in Makurdi, Nigeria. He joined the church "evangelism group," he recalls, out of guilt over a new girlfriend. Facing the disapproval of a pious older brother, Obioma hoped his evangelistic efforts would prove he was still a committed believer. The opening passage raises expectations of a satirical reflection, but the register shifts as the author begins to report his personal encounters. One woman, regretting marital infidelity, listens "with tears in her eyes"; a man "haunted by the guilt of a murder" weeps "a great, wasting lamentation"; another listens with "discombobulated restraint" before responding violently.¹ These

¹ Chigozie Obioma, "Pistols and Repentance: Street Evangelism in the City of Makurdi, Nigeria", *Esquire Magazine*, 12 January 2021. <https://www.esquire.com/uk/life/a35178267/repentance-chigozie-obioma/>.

face-to-face interactions, in doorways or on the street, are not held up for mockery but are cast instead as precarious sites of intimacy between evangelists and their auditors. At the crux of Obioma's essay is the reaction of one reluctant recipient of the evangelists' message. When a woman refuses to stop and speak, a particularly "relentless proselytizer" follows her until he manages to "slip her a tract" on repentance. Thinking their job is done, the evangelist and Obioma are dumbfounded when she returns. The confession that follows is startling: showing the boys a concealed pistol, the woman reveals that she had been on her way to kill the man who stole her life's savings along with his accomplice, before killing herself. But the pamphlet's seemingly hackneyed rhetorical question—"What is the biggest decision you've ever made?"—has stopped her in her tracks. A theological meditation follows, for which the young men are totally unprepared. "But when I read the first words of the tract, it touched me. It touched me because I was afraid already. After I see maybe it is not worth it again. If I kill him now—if I kill her self—what did I gain?" When Obioma tentatively replies with "Nothing, ma," she agrees: "Nothing," she said, and the tears filled her eyes as if something in them had ruptured.² In these brief words, the woman confronts the limits of retaliation and mourns the irrevocability of loss; vengeance will neither alter the past nor heal her wounds.

In this essay, Obioma emerges not only as an observer of Christianity in Nigeria, but as a writer with theological preoccupations. For at least one of the young men, Obioma himself, the encounter is a lesson in the Christian life. The woman's unanticipated response not only rebukes his group's conversionist model—in which the evangelists "gave you the gospel and walked away"—but opens him to the possible stakes of a lived theology: "this thing I was doing to earn my brother's grace had produced a result way beyond its spiritual intention."³ Obioma is one of Nigeria's major contemporary novelists and among the leading African authors writing for a global audience today. Two novels, *The Fishermen* (2015) and *An Orchestra of Minorities* (2019), have been nominated for the Booker Prize and widely translated, while the first has also been adapted for the stage.⁴ Now based in the USA, where he teaches creative writing, Obioma's fiction is intensely engaged with his nation of origin. Indeed, his work—particularly the second novel, which I focus on here—is notable for its embeddedness in west African culture, philosophy, and spirituality. Following the lead of works like *The Palm Wine Drinkard* by the Yoruba author Amos Tutuola, or *The Arrow of God* by the Igbo novelist Chinua Achebe, *An Orchestra of Minorities* participates in what has been called "West African Spiritual-Realism," by articulating an experience of reality within the terms of indigenous traditions.⁵ As Obioma puts it, the book is grounded in the "complex system of beliefs and traditions that once guided—and in part still guides" Igbo communities.⁶ It is what he delineates a "cosmological novel", that aims to "monumentalize" the Igbo's "fast-eroding worldview and religion" and to realize an alternative to the ontology underpinning the European realist tradition.⁷

Unsurprisingly, it is the deep investment in Igbo cosmology that has compelled reviewers of *An Orchestra of Minorities*—and most likely, the same feature will attract scholars of postcolonial literatures. Yet the book is also one that engages seriously with Christian theology and that shares the preoccupations introduced in the short essay with which I opened. The novel's

² Obioma, "Pistols and Repentance".

³ Obioma, "Pistols and Repentance".

⁴ Chigozie Obioma, *The Fishermen* (New York: Little, Brown, 2015); Chigozie Obioma, *An Orchestra of Minorities* (New York: Little, Brown, 2019).

⁵ Katelyn Harlin, "One Foot on the Other Side: Suicidality in Contemporary African Diaspora Fiction", PhD diss. (University of Missouri-Columbia, 2020), 147.

⁶ Obioma, *Orchestra*, 513.

⁷ Kunle Ajibade, "I Am Interested in the Metaphysics of Being and Existence': Chigozie Obioma in Conversation with Kunle Ajibade", *Journal of the African Literature Association* 13 no. 2 (2019): 260. Darlington Chibueze Anuonye, "Writing, the Gambler's Art: A Conversation with Chigozie Obioma", *World Literature Today*, November 2023. <https://www.worldliterature-today.org/2023/november/writing-gamblers-art-conversation-chigozie-obioma-darlington-chibueze-anuonye>.

extended account of wrongdoing, repentance and remission, I argue, offers a particularly careful analysis of the difficulties and dynamics of Christian forgiveness, sharpened by the Igbo cosmological perspective from which it is narrated. The tensions that it dramatizes between the imperatives of an honor-shame code and the demands of forgiveness, simultaneously critique the logic of retribution and problematize romantic and therapeutic models of forgiving. By dwelling on the complications of resolving offences, and opening taxing questions around historical and political injustices, *An Orchestra of Minorities* pushes towards a refined moral grammar in which forgiveness is not impossible but routinely unfinished.

This essay participates in a literary turn in the study of forgiveness, which takes as its starting point the value of imaginative writings as theological forms. For Matthew Ichihashi Potts, literary texts most clearly contribute in their willingness to tolerate confusion and resist definitive conclusions; where it allows “forgiveness to be a problem” that is not quickly solved, “contemporary literature wrestles with forgiveness most admirably, in a way that mimics scripture’s similar complexities”.⁸ This tendency is not peculiar to twenty-first-century fiction, but may be a feature more broadly of the modern novel. Indeed, for Richard Gibson, prose fiction should be regarded as one of the “major venues” for debates about forgiveness since the nineteenth century. Where more didactic forms of the period, like sermons and theological works attempted “to clarify the *correct* meaning and practice of forgiveness”, the novel distinguished itself in being “able to entertain a number of disparate ways of formulating forgiveness”.⁹ In other words, the novel’s dialogic quality can make it a productive site for theological thinking. Perhaps equally vital is the novel’s temporality and particularly its capacity to register changes across time. As Gibson argues, following L. Gregory Jones, forgiveness has a “timeful character”; understanding whether or not forgiveness has occurred, and how it has occurred, requires a “long view” for it seldom occurs instantaneously.¹⁰ The “timefulness” of forgiveness, then, can only be grasped in the context of a narrative. As the narrative form par excellence, one of the novel’s key affordances for the study of forgiveness is the capacity to showcase moral work as it occurs in particular lives over an extended duration.

In following the complexities of forgiveness in *An Orchestra of Minorities*, this essay also contributes to the emergence of work in African literature and theology. The enormous growth of Christianity across the southern hemisphere over the last century has transformed the religion’s global demography. The change has been quickest in sub-Saharan Africa, where the number of Christians increased from under nine million to over 516 million between 1910 and 2010. This expansion also marks a significant shift in global distribution, with the region’s share of the world’s Christians rising from 1.4% to 23.6% in the same period.¹¹ Over recent decades a burgeoning scholarship in “World Christianity” has responded, reorienting the study of Christian history and theology towards the diversity of Christian communities around the globe.¹² In literary studies, however, critical effort to examine the imprint of these religious transformations in the literature of the global south is still in an emergent phase.¹³

Certainly, the ways that African fiction—by major authors like Chinua Achebe and Ngũgĩ wa Thiong’o—responded to the missionary encounter in the decades around decolonisation has

⁸ Matthew Ichihashi Potts, *Forgiveness: An Alternative Account* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2023), 14.

⁹ Richard Hughes Gibson, *Forgiveness in Victorian Literature: Grammar, Narrative, and Community* (London: Bloomsbury, 2015), 4.

¹⁰ Gibson, *Forgiveness in Victorian Literature*, 16, 21.

¹¹ “Global Christianity: A Report on the Size and Distribution of the World’s Christian Population”, Pew Research Centre, 19 December 2011. <https://www.pewresearch.org/religion/2011/12/19/global-christianity-exec/>.

¹² Joel Cabrita and David Maxwell, “Introduction: Relocating World Christianity”. In *Relocating World Christianity: Interdisciplinary Studies in Universal and Local Expressions of the Christian Faith*, edited by Joel Cabrita, David Maxwell, and Emma Wild-Wood (Leiden: Brill, 2017), 1.

¹³ Susan VanZanten is one of the few scholars to have used “World Christianity” as a framework for literary analysis. See Susan VanZanten, “World Christianity”. In *The Cambridge Companion to Literature and Religion*, edited by Susan M. Felch (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2016), 262–76.

attracted attention. Critics have, of course, emphasized the pronounced critique of European mission that is found in this fiction,¹⁴ but they have also discerned sophisticated literary strategies like the appropriation of biblical styles, the subversion of missionary genres, and the anti-colonial deployment of Christian “emancipatory narratives.”¹⁵ Yet there has been less sustained engagement with the forms of African Christianity themselves as they appear in fiction. As Afe Adogame notes, although the “formal study of literature and religion has gained a significant place in the academic curriculum”, analysis of the ways that African literary cultures are “informed and illuminated ... by religious traditions, imagery, ideas, and concerns” has been limited.¹⁶ For Adriaan van Klinken, the problem is not only that the field of “religion and literature” has not prioritized African and other “non-Western” literary texts, but that the field of postcolonial studies has been constrained by a “secular bias” affording “little interest in the religious aspects of literary writings.”¹⁷ There is, argues Klinken, not only scope for closer examination of literary representations and critiques of everyday religious practices and beliefs in Africa, but for more attention to the “literary religious imagination” or the ways in which authors use “religious symbols, texts and motifs” creatively to envision new social, political and religious possibilities.¹⁸ There are signs that a critical shift is taking place amongst literary scholars and theologians. Mark Mathuray, for instance, has offered an important examination of myth, ritual and “the sacred” in African writing, while Rebekah Cumpsty has lately explored the imbrication of “sacred and secular experience”, arguing that the continent’s literature is energized by “the syncretic and adaptive nature of religious and cultural practices that incorporate indigenous epistemologies, oral and print traditions, Christianity, Islam.”¹⁹ Amongst academic theologians, David Tonghou Ngong has made a notable turn towards African literary writings—specifically, the poetry of Léopold Senghor—as productive source texts for politically engaged “theological discourse.”²⁰ Nevertheless, sustained efforts to address the religious imaginary in African literature are relatively uncommon, and rarer still are efforts to analyze such works in the contexts of Christian theology.

1. ODINANI AND CHRISTIANITY: SOURCES OF THE SELF

An Orchestra of Minorities follows the devastating losses experienced by a young poultry farmer, Chinonso, over a period of seven years, leading to the point where he commits a terrible crime against Ndali, the woman he loves. The book takes the form of an elaborate petition to the

¹⁴ See, for example, J.N.K. Mugambi, *Critiques of Christianity in African Literature: With Particular Reference to the East African Context* (Nairobi: East African Educational, 1992).

¹⁵ See Nicholas Kamau-Goro, “African Culture and the Language of Nationalist Imagination: The Reconfiguration of Christianity in Ngugi wa Thiong’o’s *The River Between* and *Weep Not Child*”, *Studies in World Christianity* 16 no. 1 (2010): 6–26; Justin D. Livingstone, “Dissenting Traditions and Missionary Imaginations: Novel Perspectives on the Twentieth Century”. In *The Oxford History of Protestant Dissenting Traditions. The Twentieth Century: Themes and Variations in a Global Context*, edited by Mark P. Hutchinson (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2018), 377–415; Megan Cole Paustian, “A Real Heaven on Their Own Earth’: Religious Missions, African Writers, and the Anticolonial Imagination”, *Research in African Literatures* 45 no. 2 (2014): 1, 3.

¹⁶ Afe Adogame, “Editorial: Religion in African Literary Writings”, *Studies in World Christianity* 16 no. 1 (2010): 3.

¹⁷ Adriaan van Klinken, “The Black Messiah, or Christianity and Masculinity in Ngugi wa Thiong’o’s *The River Between*”. In *Reading the Abrahamic Faiths: Rethinking Religion and Literature*, edited by Emma Mason (London: Bloomsbury, 2015), 131.

¹⁸ Adriaan van Klinken, “Religion in African Literature: Representation, Critique and Imagination”, *Religion in African Literature* 14 no. 12 (2020): 9.

¹⁹ Mark Mathuray, *On the Sacred in African Literature: Old Gods and New Worlds* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2009); Rebekah Cumpsty, *Postsecular Poetics: Negotiating the Sacred and Secular in Contemporary African Fiction* (London: Routledge, 2022), xii, xiv.

²⁰ David Tonghou Ngong, *Senghor’s Eucharist: Negritude and African Political Theology* (Waco: Baylor University Press, 2023), 7. Ngong notes that the fiction of Nigerian novelist Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie, particularly *Purple Hibiscus*, has promoted the “call to take African literature seriously in African Christian theology”, The novel has been analyzed, for example, by an influential Botswana theologian. See Musa W. Dube, “Purple Hibiscus: A Postcolonial Feminist Reading”, *Missionalia: Southern African Journal of Missiology* 46 no. 2 (2018): 222–35.

Supreme God, Chukwu, delivered by the protagonist's chi with the aim of explaining its host's actions. In Igbo cosmology, the chi is what Chinua Achebe calls an individual's "other identity in spirit land", a "complementary spirit being", or as Sabine Jell-Bahlsen puts it, an "indestructible soul/life force" who "travels in an eternal cycle of time" occupying host after host.²¹ With its privileged perspective on its host's mentality, the chi provides an account of Chinonso's life, calling attention to early traumas and the wrongs he has experienced in adulthood. Through the chi, we follow Chinonso's first meeting with Ndali, when she is on the cusp of suicide; his persuasions deter her from throwing herself from a bridge, and when they meet again a relationship begins. But it is a relationship that crosses class and socio-economic boundaries, for Ndali is university-educated and part of Nigeria's social elite. Finding himself treated with contempt by her family, Chinonso resolves to improve his prospects through education and, at the recommendation of an old school friend, Jamike, settles on university in Cyprus.

In placing a central phase of the narrative in Cyprus, Obioma no doubt draws from his own time as a student on the island.²² But the Mediterranean island operates too as a liminal location, suspended between north Africa, west Asia, and southern Europe.²³ More specifically, the location is Northern Cyprus—the north-eastern part of the island that is occupied by Turkey and not internationally recognized as a state. Chinonso is therefore at the border of the EU, placed inside Europe whilst simultaneously excluded from it. In this intermediate space, Chinonso's predicament spirals rapidly. Shortly after his arrival, he realizes he has been defrauded; Jamike, who claimed to have arranged his place at university, has absconded with the money raised by selling the poultry business.²⁴ Chinonso finds temporary hope on meeting a nurse, Fiona, who helps him secure a job, but when they are attacked by her husband—and Chinonso retaliates in self-defense—she provides a false testimony to save her partner. Jailed on a false charge of rape, Chinonso suffers the physical, mental, and racialized violence of the prison system; in a moment experienced as "life altering" he is "penetrated from behind by another man, violated beyond redemption."²⁵ When he returns to Nigeria, following his release, Chinonso attempts to retrieve his former life. Central to the latter portion of the plot is his unexpected reunion with Jamike, now a fervent evangelical who regrets his actions and seeks to make amends. With Jamike's assistance, Chinonso attempts and fails to reunite with Ndali who has married in his absence. Unable to accept this loss Chinonso retaliates in violence, setting fire to the pharmacy in which Ndali works, unaware that she is caught in the flames. It is this reprehensible action that prompts his chi to rush to Chukwu and deliver the long address that forms the content of the novel.

Reading *An Orchestra of Minorities* for its engagement with Christianity might seem surprising, since its most distinctive feature—its narrative voice—is generated by an investment in Igbo cosmology. Indeed, the chi-narrator speaks from within the Igbo spiritual world and draws deeply from formal oratory. Performing in Chukwu's court, its petition integrates the religious invocation, the panegyric or praise poem, and the careful speech of the legal courtroom;²⁶ the chi seeks to make his defensive case, while also deferentially commencing each phase of his

²¹ Chinua Achebe, "Chi in Igbo Cosmology", *Morning Yet on Creation Day* (New York: Anchor, 1976), 131; Sabine Jell-Bahlsen, "The Lake Goddess, Uhammiri/Ogbuide: The Female Side of the Universe in Igbo Cosmology", In *African Spirituality: Forms, Meanings, and Expressions*, edited by Jacob K. Olupona (New York: Crossroad, 2000), 42.

²² See Obioma's account of his time studying in Cyprus. "Chigozie Obioma: The Ghosts of My Student Years in Northern Cyprus." *Guardian*, 16 January 2016. <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2016/jan/16/chigozie-obioma-booker-nominee-haunted-student-years-northern-cyprus>.

²³ The use of Cyprus as a symbolic location, on the frontier of geographies and cultures, can be traced at least to Shakespeare's *Othello*.

²⁴ Obioma reports that Chinonso was partly inspired by a friend similarly defrauded. Ajibade, "Metaphysics of Being", 258.

²⁵ Obioma, *Orchestra*, 423, 379.

²⁶ For examination of these forms in African oral literatures, see Ruth Finnegan, *Oral Literature in Africa* (Cambridge: Open Book Publishers, 2012), 111–43, 173–83, 432–34.

address with a different praise name for the divine. Yet Obioma's book is also preoccupied with the religious hybridity of Nigeria, and specifically the interactions of Odinani—Igbo traditional religion—and Christianity. The chi may be resolutely Igbo-centric, but its host, Chinonso, is much less securely anchored to indigenous cosmologies. In fact, the chi considers contemporary Nigerian subjects to be alienated from their traditional cultures. Rooting this estrangement in the European colonial encounter, the chi mourns the importation of “the White Man's religion, his inventions, his weapons”, which together explain “why the children have abandoned the ways of the illustrious fathers”.²⁷ Throughout the novel, Chinonso certainly shows little awareness of the spiritual domain that his chi inhabits. While in prison in Cyprus, he prays once to the Igbo earth goddess, Ala, and once to the chi itself; yet these prayers are themselves symptoms of spiritual indirection, for they appear in the context of disparate “requests to deities big and small, sometimes to ‘God’, sometimes to ‘Jesus’”.²⁸

In this sense, Chinonso is a representative of the “orchestra of minorities” invoked in the novel's title. The phrase originates as an attempt to translate the Igbo words, *umu-obere-ihe*, used by his father to describe the collective crying of a flock of chickens after one of their number is killed by a hawk.²⁹ But the expression is extended beyond its context in poultry farming to provide a recurring metaphor, operating at multiple levels, for the complaint of the disempowered. At a local level, it refers to the “weak things” of contemporary Nigeria, disadvantaged by socio-economic inequalities.³⁰ At its broadest, it includes the global totality of those experiencing the legacies of slavery and colonialism: “[a]ll who have been chained and beaten, whose lands have been plundered, whose civilisations have been destroyed ... They were the minorities of this world whose only recourse was to join this universal orchestra in which all there was to do was cry and wail.”³¹ Perhaps most striking is the spiritual charge that the metaphor is given, when the chi applies it to the predicament of Odinani and frames the pantheon of deities as the mourning flock. “Elders of Alandiichie ... these products of the White Man's sorcery are the reasons you now complain and wail about your children like fowls after a hawk attack. It is the White Man who has trampled on your traditions.”³² In Chinonso's near estrangement from Igbo cosmology, he embodies the wider spiritual disenfranchisement that the chi—together with the gods—can only lament.

Supporting the poultry metaphor is Chinonso's status as an orphan, whose mother died in childbirth and whose father died during his adolescence. Although these events are long in the past at the point of the chi's testimony, the centrality of parental absence is signaled in his perpetual search for a mother; his habit is to address all women, including Ndali, as “mommy”.³³ In making orphanhood a primary feature of Chinonso's identity, Obioma invokes a familiar figure—albeit in adult form—from west African orature. In Igbo oral literature, as Ernest N. Emenyonu shows, a common plot follows an oppressed orphan who “is dispatched on an impossible mission” but “survives through courage and sometimes through supernatural intervention” when a guardian spirit appears at a crucial juncture.³⁴ Obioma adopts and adapts the orphan narrative for the conditions of contemporary Nigeria. Previous African authors have re-staged the orphan for postcolonial critique; the Cameroonian novelists, Mongo Beti and Ferdinand Oyono, argues Susan Domowitz, turned the orphan plot of Beti, Basaa, and Bulu tales into “a vivid metaphor for colonialism” by replacing the protagonist's traditional reintegration into

²⁷ Obioma, *Orchestra*, 201.

²⁸ Obioma, *Orchestra*, 393.

²⁹ Obioma, *Orchestra*, 97–8.

³⁰ Obioma, *Orchestra*, 289.

³¹ Obioma, *Orchestra*, 290–1.

³² Obioma, *Orchestra*, 202.

³³ See, for example, Obioma, *Orchestra*, 59.

³⁴ Ernest N. Emenyonu, *The Literary History of the Igbo Novel: African Literature in African Languages* (Abingdon, Oxford: Routledge, 2020), 20–1.

society with a deepening cultural alienation.³⁵ In Obioma's case orphanhood, like the poultry metaphor, signals both the socio-economically marginalized peoples and the wider postcolonial condition of Nigeria. Chinonso is at once a political orphan without power in the nation state, and a spiritual orphan detached from the traditions of the "fathers"³⁶

Chinonso's orphanhood means, to use Charles Taylor's term, that his "framework"—that which provides "the background, explicit or implicit, for our moral judgements, intuitions or reactions"—is fractured.³⁷ This is not to say that Igbo cosmology does not shape him at all. While this should not "compel our hosts against their will", they are able to "flash" thoughts into the hosts' minds that have influential effects—and Chinonso's does precisely that on several occasions.³⁸ Periodically, moreover, Chinonso manifests a residual connection to Igbo tradition that colonialism has not effaced. The chi notes that although the "oratory of the wise great fathers" has become rare, the language of Igbo orature still shapes "the speech of [its] host when what he was about to say had come from deep introspection".³⁹ Despite Chinonso's lack of participation in Igbo tradition, it nevertheless remains a constituent of his selfhood. But also crucial to Chinonso's framework is another source of orientation: the Christianity of his childhood. Chinonso attended church until he took his injured gosling to a healing service and found himself rebuffed. Objecting to a God who would "not care for a sick animal", the "incident killed his faith in the religion of the White Man".⁴⁰ Yet lingering traces of his earlier faith appear in the "childhood drawings, mostly of the God of the white Man, [and] his angels" that still adorn his bedroom and in a wall calendar that represents Jesus in a crown of thorns.⁴¹ The imprint of this discarded Christianity manifests in his interpretive practices. On receiving assistance in Cyprus from another Nigerian student, Tobe, he is reminded of Simon of Cyrene, "an innocent man who merely happened to be passing on the same road as the condemned".⁴² Indeed, as this association suggests, Chinonso occasionally identifies himself with the suffering Christ. When spurned by Ndali's family for his lowly social status, he gazes at a painting of "a man gently ascending into the sky". Pondering this iconography of the ascension, he imagines himself as the once rejected, now risen, Jesus: "he did not know why he thought for a moment that this man who was levitating into the sky was my host himself".⁴³ Making sense of Chinonso's framework is crucial in understanding his predicament; his moral attitudes and actions are structured by the partial influence of diverging sources—Odinani and Christianity—which can each push him towards different ends.

2. REPENTANCE AND REFRAMING

The interplay of Igbo cosmology and Christianity in Chinonso set the stage for the novel's examination of forgiveness. The latter part of the book, following his return to Nigeria, tracks his attempts—faltering and only partially realized—to forgive those who have wronged him, under the pressure of his dual moral orientations. In offering an extended account of attempted forgiveness over time, *An Orchestra of Minorities* can be read against what Nicholas Wolterstorff calls the "therapeutic tradition", in which forgiveness simply involves overcoming "negative

³⁵ Susan Domowitz, "The Orphan in Cameroon Folklore and Fiction", *Research in African Literatures* 23 no. 4 (1981): 350, 355.

³⁶ Obioma, *Orchestra*, 322.

³⁷ Charles Taylor, *Sources of the Self: The Making of the Modern Identity* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989), 26.

³⁸ Obioma, *Orchestra*, 178, 407.

³⁹ Obioma, *Orchestra*, 469.

⁴⁰ Obioma, *Orchestra*, 326.

⁴¹ Obioma, *Orchestra*, 126.

⁴² Obioma, *Orchestra*, 249.

⁴³ Obioma, *Orchestra*, 116.

feelings toward the deed and its doer". In making "feeling better" into the primary objective, the therapeutic model reduces forgiveness to "an a-social and a-moral process that is entirely internal to the victim".⁴⁴ It therefore fails to address the social relationship between the victim and wrongdoer, or adequately engage the moral issues around the act of wrongdoing. In *An Orchestra of Minorities*, by contrast, forgiveness appears as a "moral social engagement" concerned with the actions and interactions of the wronged party and the offender.⁴⁵ Before examining Chinonso's faltering work towards forgiveness, I begin with the novel's primary offender, Jamike, on whose repentance that effort hinges.

Amongst theologians and philosophers who agree that forgiveness is a moral and social process, opinions are divided on whether it is contingent on the wrongdoer's repentance. For Potts, there is no such requirement. Defining forgiveness minimally as the refusal to retaliate, the wrongdoer's position towards her deed becomes irrelevant; if "all forgiveness demands is the forswearing of vengeance, then it need not carry any specific conditions".⁴⁶ In Miroslav Volf's account, forgiveness involves refusing "to press charges" or resolving to "forgo the demand for retribution".⁴⁷ The victim can enact this resolution in the absence of the offender's repentance, but it does not follow that the wrongdoer will necessarily experience forgiveness. Volf explains this through the analogy of a gift, which can be given without being received. Until accepted, a gift given "is stuck somewhere in the middle between us". On this understanding, argues Volf, repentance is not necessary for giving forgiveness, but it is a necessary condition for receiving it: "Forgivers" forgiving is not conditioned by repentance. The offenders' *being forgiven*, however, is conditioned by repentance—just as being given a box of chocolate is conditioned by receiving that box of chocolate.⁴⁸ Wolterstorff, by contrast, doubts that the victim can truly forgive without the wrongdoer's repentance. If a victim chooses to overlook an act of wrongdoing while the offender continues to stand over the deed, she is "not treating the deed or its doer with the moral seriousness required for forgiveness". The victim can certainly "be willing to forgive" and have "a forgiving disposition" towards the offender, but simply excusing in the absence of repentance is to trivialize the wrongdoing.⁴⁹ In Wolterstorff's understanding, the gift of forgiveness that Volf describes is really only an *offer* of forgiveness until the wrongdoer expresses contrition. There is no need to attempt to settle this debate for the literary study that follows, but *An Orchestra of Minorities* does insist on examining forgiveness in the context of repentance and therefore as a moral and social engagement between parties.

The novel's analysis of forgiveness commences with a dramatic scene of repentance that is at once productive and problematic. Chinonso has returned to Nigeria, following his release from the Cyprus prison, harboring hope for revenge on the man who defrauded him. When he recognizes Jamike's voice on the streets of Umuahia, amplified by gramophone, he believes the occasion for retaliation is at hand. But Jamike, now a street preacher, unexpectedly opens the possibility of a different form of encounter through behavior that is rooted in a theology of repentance. After spotting Chinonso in the crowd, Jamike "broke down in tears" and "embraced him" before praising God for a long-awaited reunion. He goes on to make a public confession in Christian vocabulary that acknowledges his guilt without hesitation. "This man here is the reason I'm saved. I stole from him and others. But the Lord used him to touch me."⁵⁰ Jamike, it is clear, has morally reevaluated his deed; in Wolterstorff's terms, "he has altered his relation

⁴⁴ Nicholas Wolterstorff, *Justice in Love* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2011), 174.

⁴⁵ Wolterstorff, *Justice in Love*, 174.

⁴⁶ Potts, *Forgiveness*, 8.

⁴⁷ Miroslav Volf, *Free of Charge: Giving and Forgiving in a Culture Stripped of Grace* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2005), 169.

⁴⁸ Volf, *Free*, 182–3.

⁴⁹ Wolterstorff, *Justice*, 173. On this point, Wolterstorff refers the reader to Richard Swinburne's *Responsibility and Atonement* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1989), 85–6.

⁵⁰ Obioma, *Orchestra*, 395–6.

to what he did in a morally significant way.” In a “testimony of how he stole everything from ‘Brother Chinonso-Solomon,’” Jamike names his wrongdoing and shows that he has “morally distanced” himself from it, such that he no longer stands over his actions but joins with the victim in condemning them.⁵¹

Yet this confession is also the site of critique, for despite Jamike’s public recognition of guilt the interaction is one of renewed wounding for Chinonso. When Jamike begs “Please forgive me in Jesus’s name,” a crowd throws spiritual weight behind these entreaties; they pray “Lord help him. Let him forgive,” while “His enemy wept even more vocally.”⁵² Jamike’s sincerity is not in doubt, but the public and insistent nature of his penitence puts Chinonso under social and psychological duress. The combined force of Jamike and the onlookers induces Chinonso to say “I will forgive,” but this is clearly a gift he is far from ready to give. As the pressure builds, he recalls the sexual violations of the Cyprus prison—“He saw himself falling against the bars of the cell”—and when he does make his utterance, it is experienced as fresh injury. “My host,” bemoans the chi, “had just been defeated ... He’d simply announced that he would forgive.”⁵³ The scene of repentance is thus also one of violence, that reinscribes Chinonso’s pain and loss. As Potts astutely observes, there are situations in which demands for forgiveness are ethically suspect: “isn’t it a moral outrage,” he asks, “to pressure victims into offering this forgiveness, to mandate that those already subject to loss and victimization assume responsibility for redeeming their offenders?”⁵⁴ In pushing Chinonso to release the offender from the burden of guilt, Jamike and the crowd add new burdens to the victim. Indeed, the scene of repentance risks serving the offender more than the offended, for in conscripting his acts of wrongdoing into his testimony, Jamike comes close to reducing the victim’s loss to a feature of his own story. This is compounded when he celebrates Chinonso’s reluctant words, shading into a triumphalism that is met with the “cheers of onlookers.”⁵⁵ A problem with the “triumphalistic tone” that characterizes some Christian language around forgiveness is that it tends to minimize the grief and loss that victims of wrongdoing endure.⁵⁶ Jamike’s public repentance thus threatens to obscure Chinonso’s loss even as it reveals the perpetrator’s acts.

Nevertheless, this problematic scene of penitence still opens a pathway to forgiveness. It is an encounter that presents the possibility of what Charles Griswold calls moral “reframing,” whereby the victim alters their view of the wrongdoer.⁵⁷ Crucial here is not only that Jamike condemns his actions and indicates his revised moral orientation in a spoken statement, but that he laments. While the crowd celebrates, Jamike turns to Chinonso with “eyes that were filled with tears and a face that bore the visible stigmata of his own suffering.” It is this response—one of grief—that saves the interaction from triumphalism and affords Chinonso the beginnings of a new perspective on the offender. “My host had not expected this,” narrates the chi: “before him was Jamike, in tears, with a weather-beaten face, cracked lips—a face that bore the insignnia of shame. It was not the face of one who has conquered another but of one who has been subdued.”⁵⁸ Jamike’s weeping could be interpreted as a performance of self-pity that privileges his own pain, but the source of this pain is the loss for which he is responsible. Jamike’s tears are better read as a sign that he is entering into mourning with the one he has wronged. For Potts, the work of forgiveness is “akin to mourning,” since it means seeking to “live in the wake of loss” which often “cannot be restored”. It is, he suggests, “more tragedy than triumph, less

⁵¹ Obioma, *Orchestra*, 398. Wolterstoff, *Justice*, 172.

⁵² Obioma, *Orchestra*, 396–8.

⁵³ Obioma, *Orchestra*, 398.

⁵⁴ Potts, *Forgiveness*, 2.

⁵⁵ Obioma, *Orchestra*, 398.

⁵⁶ Potts, *Forgiveness*, 9, 2.

⁵⁷ Charles L. Griswold, *Forgiveness: A Philosophical Exploration* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007), 54.

⁵⁸ Obioma, *Orchestra*, 399.

miracle than mourning.”⁵⁹ In joining in lament with the victim, Jamike embodies his repentance to Chinonso in a way that goes beyond a declaration of regret. It is precisely that which initiates the work of moral reframing. As the chi puts it, “The face disarmed him”: “The face is, beyond all else, naked—a thing of great poverty. It does not conceal itself from anyone.” Faced with a face that speaks of grief, Chinonso is opened reluctantly to a new stance towards Jamike: “It must have been why ... he gave this man who had caused him irreparable damage his phone number and nodded in response to his adversary’s request to meet the following day.”⁶⁰ It is Jamike’s altered orientation—embodied in lament—that elicits the possibility that Chinonso might begin to reframe his enemy.

Jamike’s repentance contrasts conspicuously with another key scene of contrition. While Jamike precipitated Chinonso’s crisis, the wrongs experienced in Cyprus are owed to other agents, including Fiona and her husband whose accusations landed him in jail. After four years’ imprisonment, Fiona confesses to having “falsified her initial testimony” leading to the review of his case and subsequent release.⁶¹ Accompanying her revised story is a statement of regret. But it is, as Katie Scrogin puts it, a “limp apology,”⁶² one lacking in the essential qualities of Jamike’s posture towards his victim. Crucially, Fiona’s contrition comes one step removed; her expression of remorse is channeled through her lawyer who tells Chinonso that: “She is very sorry for what happened.” Not only is the apology indirect and unembodied, but its admission of culpability is limited. Her regret is vaguely for “what happened” rather than specifically for her actions. “For many years Fiona is sad because this,” the lawyer carries on: “Please, Mr. Ginoso, you must accept her sorry.”⁶³ The misnaming of the victim is perhaps an effect of the Turkish lawyer’s linguistic limitations, but it equally reflects an inattention to the wronged party. The demand that her apology “must” be accepted, moreover, places a new moral burden on the victim; it betrays an assumption that forgiveness is an obligation, something owed to the offender after contrition. Fiona’s lawyer may suggest otherwise, but there is little reason to regard repentance as “an obligation-generating act”; even in the context of repentance, granting forgiveness is a “supererogatory grace”, a gift rather than a duty.⁶⁴ The lawyer also attempts to pay Chinonso damages, reporting that Fiona “asked us to give you this money.”⁶⁵ Even if well intentioned, however, this move reduces restitution to economic exchange, placing a price on Chinonso’s loss that does more to belittle his woundedness than make amends.

The lawyer-led scene of confession—distant, offender oriented, and transactional—is met by Chinonso with silence and “conjurations of violence.”⁶⁶ Unlike Jamike’s repentance, it presents no avenue towards reframing the wrongdoer. Yet even the encounter with Jamike has evoked only the possibility of forgiveness; if forgiveness involves “the enacted resolution of the victim no longer to hold against the wrongdoer what he did to one”, Chinonso is at this stage far from any such determined resolution.⁶⁷

3. BETWEEN RETALIATION AND REMISSION

Chinonso’s particular difficulty in reframing the offender is bound up with sensibilities inherited from Igbo history and tradition. Prior to the reunion with Jamike, the novel establishes an

⁵⁹ Potts, *Forgiveness*, 10.

⁶⁰ Obioma, *Orchestra*, 399–400.

⁶¹ Obioma, *Orchestra*, 368.

⁶² Katy Scrogin, “An Orchestra of Minorities, by Chigozie Obioma”, *The Christian Century*, 13 March 2019, 43.

⁶³ Obioma, *Orchestra*, 369.

⁶⁴ Wolterstorff, *Justice*, 188.

⁶⁵ Obioma, *Orchestra*, 369.

⁶⁶ Obioma, *Orchestra*, 370.

⁶⁷ Wolterstorff, *Justice*, 169.

acute sense of honor and shame as central to his conduct. The hard distinction between “guilt” and “shame” cultures, as Stephen Bishop notes, “has been discredited for some time” for the two feelings tend to appear in some degree in the majority of societies.⁶⁸ Yet even while acknowledging the reductive nature of this binary, it remains analytically valuable to attend to the influence of either orientation in particular contexts. As John Iliffe has argued, understanding the history of many African societies requires taking “account of changing notions of honor”. “Until the coming of world religions, honor was the chief ideological motivation” in most African cultures, and “remained a powerful motivation even for those who accepted world religions.”⁶⁹ Certainly, African fiction today continues to explore the effects of honor-shame codes. As Bishop notes, “declarations of shame appear in a wide array of African texts from the colonial period through contemporary literature.” This is not to suggest that shame is “an emotion essentially or concretely connected with African societies”, but rather that it is a preoccupation “significantly and flexibly imbricated in the *evolving* discourse of African literature’s representation of African societies.”⁷⁰

An Orchestra of Minorities participates in this trend, for Chinonso’s sensitivity to shaming emerges from the Igbo value system that informs his moral framework. Indeed, it is the sense of shame that follows Chinonso’s interactions with Ndali’s family that is most critical in motivating him to pursue higher education in Cyprus. When Ndali’s brother, Chuka, consigns him to directing cars during the family party, he feels particularly degraded because she “had witnessed his humiliation”; “The disgraced can forget his shame,” muses the chi, “until he comes across those privy to it.”⁷¹ With options for saving face curtailed, education seems like a route through which to recover status. When Chinonso justifies his decision to Ndali, the affront to honor is clearly in evidence: “see what they are doing to me. See how they disgraced me.”⁷² Likewise, when the chi accounts for Chinonso’s resolution to Chukwu—claiming that “when a man is disgraced, his actions might be shaped by shame”—it identifies its host’s honor code as decisive.⁷³

Chinonso’s sensitivity to shame is underscored by the martial framework through which the chi interprets him. Chinonso appears as an Igbo wrestler, a figure with resonance in Nigerian fiction since Achebe’s *Things Fall Apart*, whose hero Okonkwo is introduced as a famed grappler who had “brought great honour to his village.”⁷⁴ As T.J. Desch-Obi shows, Igbo wrestling, or *mgba*, is part of a “tradition of grappling arts” in west Africa stretching back millennia.⁷⁵ In Igbo culture, wrestling not only played a significant role in religious life but was highly social and political: it was a means “to determine status and seniority in village affairs”, to resolve conflict without bloodshed, and to compete with other villages for prestige.⁷⁶ Champion wrestlers could secure wealth, rank, and “deferential treatment”. Among its functions, then, was the cultivation of individual and collective achievement within “a system of divinely enforced honor.”⁷⁷

The chi casts Chinonso as a wrestler by recounting his experiences in terms of victory and defeat. In an early scene, for instance, when a hawk seizes a chicken, Chinonso is pained that “one had been taken away from him, again, *without a fight*.” The affront to his honor, felt severely because Ndali is present, is assuaged only by recalling a previous triumph: “I knew,” says the chi, “that one of the things that can heal the heart of a defeated man is the story of his past victory.”⁷⁸

⁶⁸ Stephen L. Bishop, *Scripting Shame in African Literature* (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 2021), 3.

⁶⁹ John Iliffe, *Honour in African History* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005), 1.

⁷⁰ Bishop, *Scripting*, 3–4.

⁷¹ Obioma, *Orchestra*, 148.

⁷² Obioma, *Orchestra*, 146, 176.

⁷³ Obioma, *Orchestra*, 160.

⁷⁴ Chinua Achebe, *Things Fall Apart* (London: Penguin, 2001), 3.

⁷⁵ T.J. Desch-Obi, *Fighting for Honor: The History of African Martial Art Traditions in the Atlantic World* (Columbia: University of South Carolina Press, 2008), 52.

⁷⁶ Desch-Obi, *Fighting for Honor*, 65–7.

⁷⁷ Desch-Obi, *Fighting for Honor*, 66, 54.

⁷⁸ Obioma, *Orchestra*, 92–3.

When Chinonso's first encounter with Ndali's family makes him painfully aware of his social inferiority, this language recurs. The wealth on display "defeated him" and "by the time the food had been served ... he was already vanquished".⁷⁹ The same metaphor governs Chinonso's interpretation of Jamike's actions; when he gives Fiona an account of the fraud that left him destitute, he frames it as "the story of his great defeat". It follows, therefore, that the wrestler motif is most explicit during the first reunion with his old enemy. After the coerced words of forgiveness, wrested from Chinonso by the crowd, Jamike "lifted my host's hand like a referee who raises the arm of the victorious wrestler."⁸⁰ The wrongs against Chinonso are not only sources of pain and loss but of shame, and the pressure to express forgiveness prematurely once again violates an honor code that pushes him towards redressal rather than remission.

This is not to say that the novel erects a hard binary between Igbo restitution and Christian forgiveness. That Christianity can also fuel vengeance becomes clear when Tobe assures Chinonso that: "Jamike, he will suffer." Since these words come from a pious man, Chinonso hears them as divine entreaty: "This priest-that-did-not-come-to-be had in fact prayed for him who could not pray for himself. And so, in the secret of his mind, he said a loud *Amen*."⁸¹ Equally, Igbo culture has resources for forgiveness. "[T]he magnanimous fathers," notes the chi, "often say that if one keeps a record of all the wrongs done to him by his kinsmen, he will have none left."⁸² In fact, some work on Igbo traditional justice argues that it privileges restorative principles over the retributive; O. Oko Elechi describes it as a "democratic" and "participatory" system that prioritizes "the restoration of relationships."⁸³ When *An Orchestra of Minorities* roots an impulse towards restitution in west African honor codes, then, it is not to essentialize Igbo culture or to construe remission as an alien value, but rather to focalize the demands of forgiveness and dismantle any neat account of its happening. Crucially, under the pressure of honor and shame, forgiveness is no singular event or linear process for the victim. The scene of repentance may have opened an avenue towards forgiveness, but the subsequent dynamic for Chinonso is one of oscillation that moves towards vengeance and away again, that alternately rejects forgiveness and embraces it.

This complex dynamic is most vivid in the next encounter between Chinonso and Jamike—the day after their reunion on the streets of Umuahia—in which a series of turns ensue in quick succession. Having felt "fettered" by the public context of their first meeting, Chinonso now anticipates recover honoring through retaliation; with renewed rage, he fantasizes about leaving his enemy "on the floor in a pool of his own blood."⁸⁴ Yet when they meet again, the face-to-face encounter with an "emaciated, suffering man" dissipates Chinonso's "maddening anger". The reprieve is short lived, however, for Jamike unintentionally undermines the regret that his appearance so clearly embodies. "I have not been—how do I say it?—alive," he tells Chinonso, before "he began to cry."⁸⁵ Jamike's words, which point to his own suffering, combined with ambiguous tears whose object may be as much his own pain as the victim's, have an immediate effect: as the chi perceives, Chinonso's "hatred had returned". Giving in to the impulse to retaliate, Chinonso beats his old friend severely on their return to his apartment. This time it is Jamike's willingness to accept violence "without any resistance" that temporarily dissipates the rage; when Jamike submits, saying "Please, brother, go ahead," and insists on his love for his attacker, it is a reminder that he has an altered relation to his former actions.⁸⁶ Chinonso

⁷⁹ Obioma, *Orchestra*, 111–12.

⁸⁰ Obioma, *Orchestra*, 303, 398.

⁸¹ Obioma, *Orchestra*, 249–50.

⁸² Obioma, *Orchestra*, 425.

⁸³ O. Oko Elechi, "The Igbo Indigenous Justice System." In *Colonial Systems of Control: Criminal Justice in Nigeria*, edited by Viviane Saleh-Hanna (Ottawa: University of Ottawa Press, 2008), 398–9.

⁸⁴ Obioma, *Orchestra*, 403, 405.

⁸⁵ Obioma, *Orchestra*, 408–9.

⁸⁶ Obioma, *Orchestra*, 410–11.

aims to restore dignity by defeating an enemy, but finds the contest transformed: “now, when he engaged a wicked man in a fight he’d rehearsed for years, what he finds instead is a saint who prays for him.”⁸⁷ The dissociation between Jamike’s past and present arrests the pursuit of revenge, since the object of Chinonso’s anger is no longer present in an uncomplicated sense.

Indeed, Chinonso’s fluctuating reactions reflect the extent to which he perceives continuity or change in the offender during their interactions. This is clarified in the same scene when Chinonso demands, as a condition of forgiveness, that Jamike read aloud a letter that details the experiences of Cyprus. As Chinonso puts it, “You have to know what happened to me, what you caused me, for you to ask for forgiveness and for me to consider it.”⁸⁸ The requirement, in other words, is for the offender to hear and acknowledge the full extent of the charge against him. Jamike begins to oblige, but falters as he reads of his actions’ effects; the letter brings a new depth of condemnation from which he recoils, since it forces him to gaze at “his unpleasant self in the dark mirror of his own past malevolence”. When Jamike requests reprieve, the “murderous rage” again overwhelms Chinonso, who strikes with “so much force that his knuckles hurt”.⁸⁹ Jamike’s reluctance to hear the full condemnation—which might signal retreat from the full implications of his wrongdoing—compromises the new understanding of the offender that Chinonso has been forming.

Chinonso’s fluctuations between rage and restraint do not hinge only on Jamike’s behavior. Rather, the recollection of the past that the letter conjures is also critical. It is when Jamike reads “from the parts my host often refrained from going to,” which trigger “unwanted memories” of his rape, that Chinonso is prompted to the most extreme violence. “In terror, he seized the man and began to hit him” until Jamike is “beaten into a human pulp.”⁹⁰ Critical here, moreover, are not just the memories invoked, but a confrontation with the limits of language, for Chinonso registers his own autobiographical narrative as a failure of articulation. Struck by “the inadequacy of his own words” he feels an “urge to correct the insufficiency in the narration” that he cannot satisfy.⁹¹ The impossibility of adequate articulation is re-wounding, for the result is that the offender can never fully grasp the victim’s loss. By framing Chinonso’s violence as in part a traumatized response to resurgent memories and the failure of language, the novel suggests there are real forces that constrain his power to forgive.

Yet for all its limitations, this narration of the past is perhaps less disabling than enabling. It underscores the remembering of wrongdoing and loss that is essential to the moral work of forgiving. Indeed, it is important to distinguish forgiveness from forgetting. Following the French philosopher Vladimir Jankélévitch, Potts notes that “insofar as an act of forgetting ... erases or lessens the reality of a wrong,” it “diminishes the constitutive grace of forgiveness.”⁹² Forgetting may bring a sort of healing, but to fail to remember an offence is to mitigate it and so lessen the need for remission. As Wolterstorff puts it, “forgetting forestalls forgiveness.”⁹³ The painful work of remembering that Chinonso undertakes allows no such distancing or minimizing of the past to occur. When he later utters words of pardon, he does so without denying the scale of his loss.

The letter-scene is also crucial as the climax of Chinonso’s violence against Jamike. This embrace of retaliation, however, is far from affirmed, for the act of violence confronts Chinonso with the inadequacy of retribution. Critiquing what she calls “the *road of payback*”, Martha Nussbaum argues against “the mistake of thinking that the suffering of the wrongdoer somehow restores ... the important thing that was damaged.” Harming the offender does nothing

⁸⁷ Obioma, *Orchestra*, 412.

⁸⁸ Obioma, *Orchestra*, 419.

⁸⁹ Obioma, *Orchestra*, 416–17.

⁹⁰ Obioma, *Orchestra*, 421–2, 424.

⁹¹ Obioma, *Orchestra*, 422.

⁹² Potts, *Forgiveness*, 48.

⁹³ Wolterstorff, *Justice*, 167.

to recover what has been lost. Additionally, notes Nussbaum, retribution often proceeds down “the *road of status*”. It is undertaken with the aim of “[l]owering the status of the wrongdoer” so as to “put me relatively up.”⁹⁴ If a victim perceives a wrong against them as “down-ranking”, retaliation may feel like compensation for a loss of standing, yet it is a moral calculus that inflates the value of “relative status” to a primary good.⁹⁵ It also wrongly presupposes that reducing another’s dignity has the effect of elevating one’s own. Chinonso’s experience of vengeance illuminates its problematic logic. Harming his enemy does not even reduce his pain—for the memory of his violation persists in “striking vividness” throughout—let alone alter the past. After beating Jamike, he simply kneels “beside his enemy weeping”; faced with the restorative failure of vengeance, he turns to lament.⁹⁶ Retribution, moreover, has no elevating effect on Chinonso’s status either. His honor code pushes him to regain standing, but his violence does more to diminish his dignity than enhance it. The chi ponders its host’s actions and the mental state that has prompted them. “To harbour hatred in the heart is to keep an unfed tiger in a house,” it muses: Chinonso “risks being destroyed by his own dark desire.” In attempting to lower Jamike through retribution, Chinonso feeds hatred instead of restoring dignity, doing more harm than repair. “That night, my host realised these things,” says the chi. Chinonso recognizes, in other words, that to pursue vengeance is to inflict new violence on himself.⁹⁷

4. PARTIAL FORGIVENESS

The failure of retribution makes forgiveness a greater possibility for Chinonso. Also crucial is Jamike’s revelation that he intends to return the stolen money; while the loss cannot simply be financially redeemed, Jamike’s willingness to offer restitution encourages Chinonso’s inclination to reframe the offender. “If indeed the Jamike who damaged his life was dead,” he ponders, “why punish the new one for the sins of the other?” It is at this point that Chinonso offers sincere words of forgiveness—“I will forgive you from now on, Jamike”—and resolves to no longer hold past crimes against him.⁹⁸ But the trajectory from this significant moment continues to be uneven. The narrative traces Chinonso’s profound struggle as he experiences and occasionally succumbs to the resurgence of vengeful impulses. When he attempts and fails to repurchase his land, he is filled again with hatred. “You promised never to hold anything against him any more,” thinks Chinonso, but the impulse to do harm proves overwhelming: on this occasion, he urinates into Jamike’s bottle of fanta.⁹⁹

The issue here is that Chinonso struggles to enact his resolution to forgive. He has been attempting to distance the offender from his actions, by distinguishing between the Jamike of the past and the Jamike of the present. In Wolterstorff’s terms, Chinonso is gesturing towards a distinction between moral and personal history; Jamike’s deeds will always remain something he has done—they are part of his personal history—but Chinonso resolves to no longer regard them as actions that “contribute to determining his moral condition.”¹⁰⁰ Chinonso falters, however, in his efforts to act on this determination. Critically, this faltering is a response to a deepened appreciation of the irrevocability of his loss. The fact that his “land is not open for negotiation”, since it is now being used for a school, has a finality to it that punctures his hope of recovery. There are hints too that Chinonso realizes a new dimension of loss. When he hears “a little crowd of children” in the yard, the chi perceives that it “opened a sudden hole in the shield

⁹⁴ Martha C. Nussbaum, *Anger and Forgiveness: Resentment, Generosity, Justice* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016), 5.

⁹⁵ Nussbaum, *Anger and Forgiveness*, 26–7.

⁹⁶ Obioma, *Orchestra*, 423.

⁹⁷ Obioma, *Orchestra*, 425.

⁹⁸ Obioma, *Orchestra*, 427.

⁹⁹ Obioma, *Orchestra*, 434–5.

¹⁰⁰ Wolterstorff, *Justice*, 170.

of his spirit, large enough for the dart of hatred to again penetrate"; his years in jail have cheated him of Ndali, but perhaps also of fatherhood.¹⁰¹ Even after deciding to forgive, new sources of resentment can surface that trouble this resolution and its enactment.

It might be tempting to read Chinonso as an exemplar of failed forgiveness, but this would sell short the dynamics that the novel plays out at length. Rather, the interactions between Chinonso and Jamike stage partial forgiveness. Wolterstorff argues that accounts of forgiveness should pay heed to its often incomplete or ongoing nature. "One's resolution not to hold the deed against the wrongdoer may be partial," he suggests, "in that it consists of resolving not to hold the deed against him in some ways but not all." It is possible to forgive part of an offence without forgiving all of it. Likewise, a victim can have some success in embodying forgiveness without doing so fully: "one's enactment may be partial, in that one succeeds in enacting one's resolution in some ways but not all." And finally, since forgiveness is more a process than an event, "the *scope* of one's resolution may expand over time, as may the scope of one's enactment."¹⁰² Chinonso resolves not to hold Jamike's crime against him, but this does not include all aspects of the offence immediately; when he becomes aware of new dimensions of the offence, this initial resolution is tested. His ability to enact the resolution, moreover, is neither instantaneous nor entirely consistent. Indeed, Chinonso is acutely aware of this, deciding at one point to distance himself from Jamike to protect him from any resurgence of "murderous rage": "rather than do harm to Jamike, he would not see him any more."¹⁰³ Chinonso, in other words, perceives and responds to his own limited ability to enact the forgiveness he has offered.

In *An Orchestra of Minorities*, then, forgiveness is an unfinished enterprise that evades clear-cut resolution. This reality proves vexing for the wrongdoer, Jamike, who craves full rather than partial forgiveness. While he initially promises to "respect [Chinonso's] desire" for distance, he is ultimately unwilling to accept it. An earlier promise to help "find Ndali, and restore her" authorizes him to resume contact when he discovers her whereabouts.¹⁰⁴ Jamike's desire to assist is not in doubt, but he also has difficulty in living with what Volf calls "the wound of unforgiveness."¹⁰⁵ In fact, Jamike is so eager for complete forgiveness that he sins against his own conscience, agreeing to spiritually manipulate Ndali's husband to solicit information: "I will, my brother, even though this is sinful ... I will tell him that ... I want to know everything about his relationship with his wife so I can pray against anything in their past trying to destroy their future."¹⁰⁶ In insisting on resumed contact, Jamike may also make the error of conflating forgiveness with reconciliation. Forgiveness is necessary for reconciliation, and is often given in pursuit of that end, but it is a misconception to assume that forgiving a wrong inevitably entails the restoration of relations between parties.¹⁰⁷ Indeed, conflating the two concepts overloads forgiveness with additional "concessions or actions between parties" that more properly belong to the moral work of reconciliation.¹⁰⁸ Jamike genuinely desires reconciliation, telling Chinonso that "I want to be your friend," but he may be placing an excessive expectation on the victim. Chinonso also desires reconciliation—for the chi notes that "[h]e missed Jamike's friendship" during their separation—but his struggles with violence suggest that it might be beyond his gift.¹⁰⁹ Ultimately, Jamike's desire for reconciliation and inability to settle for partial forgiveness

¹⁰¹ Obioma, *Orchestra*, 432–3.

¹⁰² Wolterstorff, *Orchestra*, 169–70.

¹⁰³ Obioma, *Orchestra*, 438.

¹⁰⁴ Obioma, *Orchestra*, 438, 429.

¹⁰⁵ Volf, *Free*, 210.

¹⁰⁶ Obioma, *Orchestra*, 472.

¹⁰⁷ Wolterstorff, *Justice*, 176–7.

¹⁰⁸ Potts, *Forgiveness*, 8.

¹⁰⁹ Obioma, *Orchestra*, 438–9.

has damaging consequences, for by resuming contact he renews Chinonso's relentless pursuit of Ndali and precipitates the act of arson that has sent the chi rushing to Chukwu.

The moral work of forgiveness is not only unfinished in the novel because Jamike's pardon is partial and evolving. Rather, it is unfinished because Chinonso is not only a victim but an offender who does wrong to others. This is clear in the ferocity of his retribution against Jamike. The extent to which retaliation is justifiable is highly debatable, but Chinonso's actions go beyond what is often considered a foundational principle of retributive justice: *lex talionis* or the "law of like for like". As Potts notes, "[e]tymologically, retaliation is fundamentally rooted in the idea of careful proportion"; it "assumes a justice meted out as an eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth".¹¹⁰ Chinonso's actions are not grounded in this notion of proportionate response but are characterized by a lack of restraint. Even if Chinonso's response is justifiable, moreover, there are other senses in which he wrongs Jamike. In particular, he ascribes considerably more blame to Jamike than is due. Volf notes that a challenge of forgiving well is "to blame correctly," for forgivers "may blame more or less than is just" or otherwise "misconstrue the offence."¹¹¹ Chinonso appears to hold Jamike to account for all his experiences in Cyprus, even though other agents—like Fiona or the perpetrators of rape—hold more direct responsibility; in their absence, Jamike becomes a scapegoat onto whom blame is imputed for expediency.

Forgiving perfectly is an impossibility. Rightly determining a wrongdoer's blameworthiness, as Volf suggests, would require a total and unattainable grasp of the offence and the offender's circumstances.¹¹² Chinonso not only overburdens Jamike with blame, but pays inadequate attention to the circumstances of the wrongdoing. Indeed, Jamike is a participant in a structural problem: when he duped Chinonso, he was a "yahoo boy", a Nigerian term for an online fraudster.¹¹³ While this marks his behavior as intentionally criminal, involvement in cybercrime in Nigeria is correlated with "high levels of poverty and unemployment".¹¹⁴ *An Orchestra of Minorities* intimates these issues when Chinonso encounters Jamike's Nigerian friends in Cyprus, who assure him that "many people are here like you". At least one of them is himself a victim of similar fraud and is now working "a menial job" to support his studies.¹¹⁵ These friends also connect Jamike's "major big deal" to economic migrancy; he has defrauded Chinonso to pay to be "smuggled" into the European Union by crossing the border between Turkish-occupied Northern Cyprus and Southern Cyprus.¹¹⁶ How much Jamike's participation in a structural problem mitigates responsibility is not clear-cut, but it does not figure in Chinonso's calculus at all.

Wrongs committed against Jamike in childhood have clearer bearing on his blameworthiness. A conversation between his chi and Chinonso's informs us that Jamike "was not a bad person at first" but "was made so by people" who bullied him, "calling him Nwaagbo for having big breasts".¹¹⁷ Since Chinonso contributed to this abuse, Jamike's fraudulence may itself be retaliation for earlier wrongs. Chinonso shows some awareness of this longer context, wondering if what his old friend "had now done to him was a revenge for this time in the past", but it factors little in his deliberations of blame.¹¹⁸ Chinonso, moreover, never openly acknowledges or repents for his childhood behavior. This failure to seek forgiveness, and to adequately consider the effects of his own wrongdoing, mean that his moral interactions with Jamike are incomplete.

¹¹⁰ Potts, *Forgiveness*, 21–2.

¹¹¹ Volf, *Free*, 210.

¹¹² Volf, *Free*, 210.

¹¹³ Obioma, *Orchestra*, 213.

¹¹⁴ Cassandra Cross, "Marginalized Voices: The Absence of Nigerian Scholars in Global Examinations of Online Fraud". In *The Palgrave Handbook of Criminology and the Global South*, edited by Kerry Carrington, Russell Hogg, John Scott, and Máximo Sozzo (Cham: Palgrave Macmillan, 2018), 271.

¹¹⁵ Obioma, *Orchestra*, 277.

¹¹⁶ Obioma, *Orchestra*, 276.

¹¹⁷ Obioma, *Orchestra*, 437.

¹¹⁸ Obioma, *Orchestra*, 243.

Perhaps more unresolved are Chinonso's wrongs against Ndali. By failing to apprise her of his situation in Cyprus, he is evidently negligent. And although he attempts to send her a message from jail that shows some recognition of the harm he is causing her, he gives little consideration to the suffering caused by his disappearance.¹¹⁹ Instead, Chinonso positions himself in relation to Ndali as a victim rather than a wrongdoer, showing more concern with his own woundedness than hers. As he puts it to Jamike: "I cannot accept to lose her ... After all I have suffered for her sake."¹²⁰ Increasingly he attributes blame in excess, holding her to account for marrying after he was sentenced to twenty-six years in prison. "She has spat on a man who sold everything he had to be able to marry her," he protests: "I cannot forgive."¹²¹ In inflating Ndali's blameworthiness, and turning a blind eye to his own, Chinonso resists a construal of the past that holds him accountable. Jamike sees this oversight in Chinonso's moral reasoning, stressing that locating Ndali is an opportunity to "get forgiveness from her from whom you must get and give it."¹²² But Chinonso is not persuaded by this invitation: "It was not healing and forgiveness he wanted, not the things Jamike spoke of. Instead he wanted his life back."¹²³ During a brief face-to-face encounter with Ndali, he utters an unspecific apology—"I am sorry. I am sorry"—but he never manages to embrace repentance.¹²⁴

Instead, Chinonso's meeting with Ndali provokes a resurgence in his honor-shame code, for he detects a slight in her expression that wounds his dignity: "he was convinced that what he'd seen in her was contempt."¹²⁵ This is compounded by the realisation that Ndali abandoned her efforts to retrieve him from Cyprus and that, as the biological father of her child, he has been deprived of parenthood; all this is experienced as a diminishment, a dehumanising reduction to "a djinn, a man-spirit, a vagabond."¹²⁶ The crux of the novel is how Chinonso will respond. Recalling the example of Jamike—one who "had left the province of his shame"—he resolves to distance himself from his sources of pain by leaving Umuahia, but the plan is quickly arrested by a resurgence of "the old rage, the terror."¹²⁷ When he sets fire to the pharmacy, Chinonso opts for retaliation. In the decisive moments, the martial grammar of Igbo *mgbà* confirms Chinonso's return to the retributive "road of status": "a man like my host," states the chi, "cannot leave a fight just like that ... He cannot stand up, after a great defeat, and say to his people, to all those who have watched him being turned about in the sand, to all who have witnessed his humiliation, that he has made peace."¹²⁸ Rather than restoring balance, his final act only deepens his misconstrual of Ndali's actions and does her irrevocable harm: "You paid me evil for all I did for you ... You threw me in prison. You shamed me," he mutters, while committing a crime that will leave her with life altering injuries.¹²⁹ At the end of the novel, the open question is whether Chinonso can undertake the moral work of seeking forgiveness for an act that, like Jamike's, has consequences that far exceed his intentions.

5. POLITICAL FORGIVENESS

The dynamics of interpersonal forgiveness played out in *An Orchestra of Minorities* also open questions of forgiveness in political space. If interpersonal forgiveness is unfinished in the

¹¹⁹ Obioma, *Orchestra*, 382.

¹²⁰ Obioma, *Orchestra*, 445.

¹²¹ Obioma, *Orchestra*, 470.

¹²² Obioma, *Orchestra*, 441.

¹²³ Obioma, *Orchestra*, 455.

¹²⁴ Obioma, *Orchestra*, 489.

¹²⁵ Obioma, *Orchestra*, 491.

¹²⁶ Obioma, *Orchestra*, 501.

¹²⁷ Obioma, *Orchestra*, 505–6.

¹²⁸ Obioma, *Orchestra*, 507.

¹²⁹ Obioma, *Orchestra*, 508.

novel, matters of political and historical forgiveness are even more unresolved. Arguing that Chinonso's predicament invokes the political does not rely on Fredric Jameson's much debated contention that the literature of the global south necessarily allegorizes the nation.¹³⁰ Rather, such connections are invited by the Igbo ontology within which the narrator exists. With previous hosts including Yagazie, transported as a slave to Virginia, Yee Nkpotu, who lived under colonial rule, and Ejinkeonye, who fought in the Biafran War, the chi brings a transhistorical perspective stretching back at least 300 years.¹³¹ By regularly interpreting Chinonso in relation to former hosts, particularly the enslaved Yagazie, the chi identifies continuities with the past. When Chinonso travels to Cyprus, for instance, the chi returns to the language with which it described the forced diaspora: the transcontinental flight over "the interminable expanse of water ... Osimiri" recalls the middle passage traveled by its earlier host, who was "bound like a sacrificial animal" and shipped across "the great Osimiri, that which we see interminably around the world".¹³² In connecting contemporary economic migrancy with the forced migration of the slave trade, the chi situates Chinonso as a direct inheritor of regional and national traumas whose legacies are ongoing. To the extent that the chi is central to Chinonso's personhood, he carries with him these historical experiences albeit without his knowing.

Chinonso, then, is a postcolonial subject wronged by the injustices of the colonial past, which are still unsettled. He has, as the chi puts it, "been wronged by man and history"; he is "a man whose poverty extended beyond the diameter of time."¹³³ Chinonso is equally a representative of those marginalized in contemporary Nigeria, a state of colonial origin that perpetrates further wrongs against its citizens. When his rage resurfaces towards the end of the book, it is imbricated with political grievance at the nation: "it wasn't he alone who harboured hatred or a full pitcher of resentment ... it was many people, perhaps everyone in the land, everyone in Alaigbo, or even everyone in the country in which its people live, blindfolded, gagged, terrified ... They must be angry at the lack of electricity, at the lack of amenities, at the corruption."¹³⁴ Chinonso's rage, therefore, is not simply against the individuals who have wronged him but—reminiscent of Frantz Fanon's anticolonial anger on behalf of the "wretched of the earth"—against the political circumstances of the postcolonial present.¹³⁵

These transhistorical injustices complicate the question of forgiveness that the novel ponders, for to the extent that Chinonso's anger is against the colonial past and the inequities of contemporary Nigeria, it is surely justified. Whether such wrongs can, or should, be forgiven is debated by African scholars. For Wole Soyinka, forgiveness is of questionable value in political discourse in the aftermath of colonialism. Specifically, he objects to a version of forgiveness that lacks the "moral element" of "remorse, and thus repentance" and in which the "material" matters of reparation and restitution are neglected.¹³⁶ In the case of the Atlantic slave trade, he acknowledges, the "practical implementations" of reparations are complex; nevertheless, "[w] here there has been inequity ... of a kind that robs one side of its most fundamental attribute—its humanity—it seems only appropriate that some form of atonement be made."¹³⁷ Indeed, Soyinka suggests that reparations are also owed for the "internal slavery" of African populations by dictatorial regimes who have followed "the European precedent in the expropriation of a continent".¹³⁸

¹³⁰ Frederic Jameson, "Third-World Literature in the Era of Multinational Capitalism", *Social Text* no. 15 (1986): 65–88.

¹³¹ Obioma, *Orchestra*, 268–9, 352, 317, 200.

¹³² Obioma, *Orchestra*, 202, 200.

¹³³ Obioma, *Orchestra*, 370, 284.

¹³⁴ Obioma, *Orchestra*, 505.

¹³⁵ On the importance of anger in Fanon's work, see David Macey, *Frantz Fanon: A Biography* (New York: Picador, 2001), 28.

¹³⁶ Wole Soyinka, *The Burden of Memory, The Muse of Forgiveness* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999), 34–5.

¹³⁷ Soyinka, *The Burden of Memory*, 83–4.

¹³⁸ Soyinka, *The Burden of Memory*, 86.

Many African theologians, while alert to such critiques, have placed greater store in forgiveness. Indeed, where African theology has contributed most to analyses of forgiveness is precisely in its relation to political questions. Most famously, in grounding his response to South African Apartheid in Christian theology and the philosophy of “ubuntu”—an understanding of humanness rooted in generosity, hospitality and care—Desmond Tutu argued that there was “no future without forgiveness.”¹³⁹ As he saw it, forgiveness was politically enabling, allowing change to a regime that may otherwise not have been possible. As Ngong summarizes, “forgiveness frees oppressors to take action that they would otherwise not take for fear of reprisals on the other side of their power.”¹⁴⁰

The version of forgiveness operative in the Truth and Reconciliation Commission has of course been criticized as too “unilateral” and “unreciprocated”. In the context of ongoing inequalities in South Africa, it seems to have done too little “to help the suffering of victims” and challenge systems of exploitation.¹⁴¹ Some African theologians, however, have urged that forgiveness rightly construed would not allow for the neglect of repair. Pondering what it means for exploited peoples to offer forgiveness to their exploiters, in the context of global economic injustices, Musa Dube argues it is far from politically passive. Rather, exploiters “are forgiven, not so that they may continue in their practices in good conscience but precisely as a statement against their exploitative systems”. The offer of forgiveness constitutes a “call for repentance: the turning away from oppressive and exploitative economic and political policies.”¹⁴² In this construction, forgiveness should not preclude systemic change but instead provoke it.

The scope of forgiveness is pushed further in the political theology of Emmanuel Katongole, where it presents a radical alternative to the economy of violence he detects in many African states formed by colonialism. Violence, Katongole contends, is not exceptional but “part of the ‘normal’ functioning of nation-state politics in Africa,” to the extent that it appears central to the “political imaginary of Africa’s modernity.” In this situation, it is the “reinvention of the visions, imaginations, and stories that sustain modern political life in Africa” that is most pressing.¹⁴³ For Katongole, forgiveness can provide just such another story; it is a “radical interruption of politics as we know it,” that resists the logic of retribution and can arrest damaging cycles of violence.¹⁴⁴ This account, he stresses, should be differentiated from the ways forgiveness tends to be promoted in the context of “transitional justice”, or the “judicial and nonjudicial processes” used to address “a legacy of large-scale past abuses.”¹⁴⁵ Such practices, especially when detached from theological frameworks, all too often instrumentalize forgiveness, reducing it to a “useful” political technique for ushering in peace and reconciliation.¹⁴⁶ Katongole, by contrast, proposes a stronger theological position in which an “ontology of forgiveness”, a way of being rooted in a larger story of God’s redemptive work, might open possibilities for “a different order and logic of society.”¹⁴⁷

¹³⁹ Desmond Tutu, *No Future Without Forgiveness* (London: Rider, 1999), 34–5.

¹⁴⁰ Ngong, *Senghor’s Eucharist*, 106.

¹⁴¹ Ngong, *Senghor’s Eucharist*, 109–10.

¹⁴² Musa W. Dube Shomanah, “Praying the Lord’s Prayer in a Global Economic Era”, *The Ecumenical Review* 49 no. 4 (1997): 447.

¹⁴³ Emmanuel Katongole, *The Journey of Reconciliation: Groaning for a New Creation in Africa* (Maryknoll: Orbis Books, 2017), 26–7.

¹⁴⁴ Katongole, *Journey*, 33.

¹⁴⁵ Katongole, *Journey*, 17.

¹⁴⁶ Katongole, *Journey*, 33. See also Emmanuel Katongole, *The Sacrifice of Africa: A Political Theology of Africa* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2011), 163.

¹⁴⁷ Katongole, *Journey*, 31, 33. Katongole draws the term “ontology of forgiveness” from Alan J. Torrance, “The Theological Grounds for Advocating Forgiveness and Reconciliation in the Sociopolitical Realm”. In *The Politics of Past Evil: Religion, Reconciliation, and the Dilemmas of Transitional Justice*, edited by Dan Philpott (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 2006), 45–86.

An Orchestra of Minorities participates in conversations congregating around political forgiveness, by neither rejecting nor unequivocally endorsing it. The book's extended examination of forgiveness between persons certainly prevents any hasty effort to dismiss it from more public arenas; the logic of the novel ensures that we take its political possibilities seriously. Yet the same interpersonal plot equally poses remission in such arenas as an intractable problem, by illuminating that the conditions in which it could be meaningfully offered—from the “orchestra of minorities” to their oppressors—have not yet been met. The novel insists on remission in the context of repentance. If the dynamic between Jamike and Chinonso offers any steer, the work of forgiving begins when the offender joins with the victim in sincerely condemning the wrong. It often requires, moreover, much more than a single transaction; Chinonso's struggle in resolving to offer pardon and then to enact it, stages forgiveness as an arduous process that is supported by the offender's sustained efforts to make restitution. Grappling with the history of colonialism and ongoing inequities, the novel suggests, would not only make demands of those who have been wronged but place a burden of responsibility on wrongdoers.¹⁴⁸ Forgiveness, on this understanding, could not be instrumentalized as political technique, nor elicited by the sort of public apologies often offered by politicians, in which questions around reparations are readily sidestepped. Obioma does not presume to propose what adequate repentance for historical and structural injustices might look like, but his novel makes clear that the process has not begun. Indeed, while Chinonso's retaliation against Ndali, a member of the social elite, is certainly reprehensible at the level of the interpersonal plot, it points to a latent anger on the part of Nigeria's citizens towards wrongs that are yet to be redressed.

The stakes of the novel's postcolonial critique are at their highest in raising these matters. In its creative synthesis of Christianity and Igbo cosmology, as I have shown, *An Orchestra of Minorities* problematizes celebratory versions of forgiveness that circulate in Anglo-American culture and popular theology. But the inadequacies of such positions appear even more starkly in the face of the thorny political questions that Obioma opens. In presenting unresolved injustices, moreover, the novel also invites repentance by confronting some readers with their own blameworthiness; there is no single agent responsible for the condition of the oppressed “orchestra of minorities”, but the novel's preoccupation with personal penitence invites its international audience, composed in no small part of western consumers, to ponder where they are implicated in or beneficiaries of historical and ongoing global inequities.

In a radical formulation, Jacques Derrida argues for a concept of forgiveness as unconditional gift, entirely outside systems of exchange and obligation. Such forgiveness, he suggests, would require performing the impossible: “One cannot, or should not, forgive; there is only forgiveness, if there is any, where there is the unforgivable. That is to say that forgiveness must announce itself as impossibility itself.”¹⁴⁹ A pure forgiveness is impossible, moreover, for it involves the assumption of sovereignty over another. Indeed, Derrida even proposes that the stance adopted in the offer of forgiveness would itself require forgiveness: “one would even have to be forgiven forgiveness, which itself also risks involving the irreducible ambiguity of an affirmation of sovereignty.”¹⁵⁰ The quarry here, suggests Mihail Evans, is “a forgiveness that is excessive” and that critiques the impure and interested dynamics of most scenes of forgiving.¹⁵¹ Derrida's aim, as

¹⁴⁸ Obioma, *Orchestra*, 505.

¹⁴⁹ Jacques Derrida, *On Cosmopolitanism and Forgiveness*, translated by Mark Dooley and Michael Hughes (Abingdon: Routledge, 2001), 32–3.

¹⁵⁰ Jacques Derrida, *Perjury & Pardon*, Vol. 1, translated by David Wills (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2022), 3.

¹⁵¹ Mihail Evans, “Derrida and Forgiveness”. In *Compassion and Forgiveness*, edited by Edward Alam (Beirut: University of Notre Dame Press-Louaizé, 2013), 22.

Potts astutely puts it, is “to help us recognize how morally complex and complicit even the most honorable practices of forgiveness might be.”¹⁵²

An Orchestra of Minorities is similarly attuned to the moral complications of forgiveness. Yet Obioma erects no “pure” notion against which to lay bare the imperfections that characterize acts of forgiving. Instead of proceeding from an impossible concept, he explores how forgiveness might be imaginable, even if always limited, by dwelling on the murkiness of human exchanges. Working from the position that forgiveness is evoked when wrongdoers confess and condemn their offence, Obioma offers a forensic examination of repentance. In the interactions between Jamike and Chinonso, repentance has problematic shades of triumphalism and yet still enables the victim to begin reframing the offender. It is fraught but nevertheless essential. The work of forgiveness that ensues is far from linear. In Chinonso, the novel follows a push and pull between remission and retaliation that illuminates the difficulties of offering and enacting forgiveness. The novel’s acute account of this moral and social activity is generated by a postcolonial Nigerian context and, more specifically, by the protagonist’s Igbo and Christian-influenced moral framework. By having Chinonso’s honor code complicate his own inclination to forgive, the novel critiques the logic of retaliation on the one hand and any simple or therapeutic model of forgiveness on the other. Indeed, Obioma’s novel encourages us to make space for partial forgiveness in our moral discourse. Rather than reading the limits of Chinonso’s enactment simply as failures, I have argued that they dramatize forgiveness as a process that can happen in part without happening in full. The novel undoubtedly brings into focus problems that beset the practices of forgiveness: repentant offenders can underestimate the victim’s loss, push too hard in seeking reconciliation, and otherwise rework those they have wronged; victims can blame imperfectly, misconstrue offences, and otherwise wrong those who have wronged them. Just how the faltering work of forgiveness might translate into political arenas is left provocatively open-ended. Ultimately, *An Orchestra of Minorities* envisages forgiveness not as impossible but as unfinished and still in process. In this sense, Obioma’s critique elevates rather than diminishes forgiveness by calling attention to where it remains incomplete or not yet begun.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I am most grateful to *Literature and Theology*’s two peer reviewers for their valuable comments on this article.

¹⁵² Potts, *Forgiveness*, 56.