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‘great words carrying the world’: Intercultural Translation in B. Kojo Laing’s ‘*No needle in the sky*’

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# 'GREAT WORDS CARRYING THE WORLD'

## INTERCULTURAL TRANSLATION IN

### B. KOJO LAING'S '*NO NEEDLE IN THE SKY*'

**JOSEPH HANKINSON**

*three Ghanaians plus three equals / three Ghanaians still*

B. Kojo Laing. 'More hope More dust'<sup>1</sup>

First published in 1989, B. Kojo Laing's *Godhorse* collects together poetry written over a period of nearly twenty years. The volume is preoccupied with the developing state of Ghana: a Ghana, as Laing suggests in 'One hundred lines for the coast', 'grown old without wisdom by generations of dire disconnection.'<sup>2</sup> This sense of 'disconnection', of a nation neglected both by its political leaders and the pace of global development around it, pervades the thirty-one poems of the collection. In 'The same corpse', a poem concerned with international conceptions of Ghana and its culture, such uneven development is lamented explicitly: 'in an interdependent world, the / inter does not belong to Ghana.'<sup>3</sup>

This concern – with the 'disconnection' experienced by nations often considered 'peripheral', and with the relationship between centres and peripheries in general – is a persistent theme of Laing's published work. Laing's final novel, *Big Bishop Roko and the Altar Gangsters* (2006), recounts the efforts of Gold Coast city's Bishop Roko Yam to forestall the global north's experiments to make interaction between rich and poor countries almost impossible; whilst Laing's second novel, *Woman of the Aeroplanes* (1988), centres on the mutual benefits of a cultural exchange between the immortal residents of Tukwan, a town in Ghana's Asante region, and Levensvale, a town in the 'non-mango country' of Scotland.<sup>4</sup>

<sup>1</sup> B. Kojo Laing, *Godhorse* (Oxford: Heinemann International, 1989), p. 38.

<sup>2</sup> *Godhorse*, p. 50.

<sup>3</sup> *Godhorse*, p. 36.

<sup>4</sup> B. Kojo Laing, *Woman of the Aeroplanes* (London: Picador, 1988), p. 72.

His novels (all of which were written after the poems that comprise *Godhorse*), posit explicit solutions to the problems of disconnection the poems attest to, frequently imagining a global system of intercultural communication in which ‘the / inter’ belongs to every country. The exchange of ideas between Scotland and Tukwan in *Woman of the Aeroplanes* serves to demonstrate the ‘blast of freedom from freely-mixed bodies and worlds’ – a claim reiterated in *Big Bishop Roko*, whose narrator proposes that the ‘thing was to free all the truths locked up in the different cultures’.<sup>5</sup> This emphasis on the importance of equal cultural communication influences Laing’s language use. In his ‘Author’s Note’ to his third novel, *Major Gentl and the Achimota Wars* (1992), Laing identifies language itself as one of the sites in which cultural communication can take place. Referring to his inclusion of diverse words from a selection of Ghanaian languages in his writing, he explains that

The motive behind them is to internationalise the English. I believe that more parochial areas of the world need a broadening of vocabulary – hence many of the words are repeated in my novels and poetry. Some are invented, most are direct translations from Akan and Ga and sometimes Hausa. It is usual in Ghana (with such a cosmopolitan mix of cultures) to intersperse one language with words from another. This ought to be done universally for the idea is to create one gigantic language.<sup>6</sup>

This call for a ‘broadening of vocabulary’ capable of creating ‘one gigantic language’ aligns Laing’s writing with what Boaventura de Sousa Santos, in his recent study, *Epistemologies of the South* (2014), has called ‘intercultural translation’.<sup>7</sup> For Santos, ‘intercultural translation’ represents ‘the alternative both to the abstract universalism that grounds Western-centric general theories and to the idea of incommensurability between cultures’, and consists of

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<sup>5</sup> *Woman of the Aeroplanes*, p. 86; B. Kojo Laing, *Big Bishop Roko and the Altar Gangsters* (Accra: Woeli, 2006), p. 365.

<sup>6</sup> B. Kojo Laing, *Major Gentl and the Achimota Wars* (Oxford: Heinemann, 1992), p. vi.

<sup>7</sup> Boaventura de Sousa Santos, *Epistemologies of the South: Justice Against Epistemicide* (Boulder & London: Paradigm, 2014), p. 212.

searching for isomorphic concerns and underlying assumptions among cultures, identifying differences and similarities, and developing, whenever appropriate, new hybrid forms of cultural understanding and intercommunication.<sup>8</sup>

Laing's writing consistently posits that the development of 'new hybrid forms of cultural understanding and intercommunication' can serve to repair the damaging consequences of peripheral isolation, and inaugurate the 'new humanity of a new cosmology': one in which a collective, global subject could emerge.<sup>9</sup>

This article will analyse the role of intercultural translation in one of the poems collected in *Godhorse*, 'No needle in the sky'. It will show how Laing's engagement with influence – particularly the poem's use of Gerald Manley Hopkins's 'The Windhover' as a model – prefigures the emphasis on intercultural exchange which characterises his later works. By returning to the poetry, I hope to draw attention to the ways in which the concerns of Laing's later works are also the concerns of his earliest writings, and to suggest ways in which recent criticism could reposition its arguments in light of this. Ultimately, it will be proposed that Laing's uses of intertextuality in *Godhorse* can act as a template for what Fredric Jameson has called an 'aesthetic of cognitive mapping', or a 'pedagogical culture which seeks to endow the individual subject with some new heightened sense of its place in the global system' – an aesthetic which Jameson suggests might be used as a corrective to the stagnating and isolating tendencies of much of late capitalism.<sup>10</sup>



Whilst the poems of *Godhorse* often lament the 'disconnection' Ghana experiences as a consequence of its peripheral place in the global system, it is important to note that many of

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<sup>8</sup> Santos, p. 212.

<sup>9</sup> *Big Bishop Roko*, p. 323.

<sup>10</sup> Fredric Jameson, *Postmodernism, or, The Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism* (London & New York: Verso, 1991), p.54.

them are themselves products of the sort of cultural exchange described in *Woman of the Aeroplanes*. Some of the poems were first printed in Scotland, such as ‘Funeral in Accra’, published in 1968 (during Laing’s graduate studies at the University of Glasgow) in Robin Fulton’s *Lines Review*. This journal had a predominantly Scottish readership, regularly featuring the work of important native poets such as Iain Crichton Smith. Others were first published with African (or, at least, Africanist) audiences in mind, such as the opening poem of the volume, ‘Festival’, first appearing in the London-based *West Africa* on 19 March 1984. Other poems were published in a solely Ghanaian context. Just after his graduation, in 1972, Laing established himself within Ghanaian literary circles, publishing a long poem, ‘Resurrection’, in the fifth volume of the Ghana Society of Writers’ influential magazine *Okyeame*. The magazine, edited at the time by Efua Sutherland, was responsible for the publication of some of the most celebrated and well-known figures of Ghanaian literature, such as Ayi Kwei Armah, Ama Ata Aidoo, Kofi Awoonor (who was a former editor of the journal), and Mohammed Ibn Abdallah.

*Godhorse*, therefore, is the product of a period of Laing’s life marked by cultural transitions, and includes poems that were begun in Europe, and completed in Africa.<sup>11</sup> These transitions, despite the ‘disconnection’ that represents one of the volume’s dominant themes, find their textual correlative in several of the poems’ attestation to forms of cultural contact, particularly a clear engagement with British poetic traditions. This engagement is most explicit in the volume’s ninth poem, ‘No needle in the sky’, which was written, according to the author, in 1982.<sup>12</sup> The poem, a version of Gerard Manley Hopkins’s ‘The Windhover’, performs ‘intercultural translation’, simultaneously gesturing to points of

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<sup>11</sup> M. E. Kropp-Dakubu, ‘Kojo Laing’s Poetry and the Struggle for God’, *FonTomFrom: Contemporary Ghanaian Literature, Theatre and Film*, ed. Kofi Anyidoho & James Gibbs (Matatu 21-22; Amsterdam & Atlanta GA: Rodopi, 2000), p. 237.

<sup>12</sup> Kropp-Dakubu, p. 237.

similarity and difference between imaginative responses to natural phenomena in England and Ghana.

Laing's interest in a poetic style characteristic of Hopkins's work can be traced back to one of his earliest printed poems, 'African Storm', published in *Lines Review* in 1968. The poem, not included in *Godhorse*, describes the chaos of a storm utilising various poetic techniques associated with Hopkins, such as internal rhyme, a stress-based rhythm, and the frequent use of alliteration. In the poem, the storm's 'silence grows great layers to protect itself, and bursts / by gusts grabbing roofs, birds close their wings, nestless,' forcing the onlooker to 'bend, pick pennies in dust,' as the 'wind stokes warm storm'.<sup>13</sup>

Despite Laing's employment of these techniques, and the fact that the relationship between 'No needle in the sky' and 'The Windhover' is signalled both typographically and by the use of identical vocabulary and similar syntax, no critic has yet discerned the relationship between Laing and Hopkins. Both 'No needle in the sky' and 'The Windhover' feature the voice of someone watching the flight of a bird (for Laing, a weaver bird, and for Hopkins, a kestrel), both introduce their respective conclusions with a capitalised 'AND', employ similar syntax (Laing's 'up, up in the sky', reflects Hopkins's 'off, off forth on swing'), and both poems utilise a vocabulary characteristic of Hopkins's natural imagery.<sup>14</sup> Laing's use of 'dappling' and 'dap', for example, reflects Hopkins's use of the words 'dapple' and 'dappled' in nine poems ('The Windhover', 'The May Magnificat', 'St. Winefred's Well', 'Spelt from Sibyl's Leaves', 'Duns Scotus's Oxford', 'Pied Beauty', 'Morning Middy and Evening Sacrifice', 'Inversnaid', and 'The Wreck of the Deutschland').<sup>15</sup>

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<sup>13</sup> B. Kojo Laing, 'African Storm', *Lines Review*, ed. Robin Fulton, No. 27 (November, 1968), p. 22.

<sup>14</sup> Hopkins, p. 144.

<sup>15</sup> Hopkins, pp. 120, 144, 154, 156, 163, 167, 180, 191.



becomes the product of literary creation – a kente cloth woven by perception. The power of perception to change an object is compared to the power of poetic description to reimagine an object or action in new terms. The simple act of kneeling in gravel humorously gives rise to an ‘instant geology’ – the displaced earth is reimaged as the consequence of an act of creation akin to raising mountains.

Aside from sharing vocabulary and typographical techniques, Laing signals the relationship between ‘No needle in the sky’ and ‘The Windhover’ by gently parodying that poem’s conclusion. Hopkins’s poem ends by describing the ‘fire that breaks’ from the falcon in its descent, a fire that enhances its loveliness and beauty:

Brute beauty and valour and act, oh, air, pride, plume, here  
     Buckle! AND the fire that breaks from thee then, a billion  
 Times told lovelier, more dangerous, O my chevalier!

No wonder of it: shéer plod makes plough down sillion  
 Shine, and blue-bleak embers, ah my dear,  
 Fall, gall themselves, and gash gold-vermilion.<sup>18</sup>

Like the ‘embers’ that ‘fall’ and ‘gash gold-vermilion’, the falcon’s descent dramatically exposes a ‘wonder’ hitherto kept hidden. The bird’s flight path is formally rendered, as the reader’s eye drops from the asyndetic and breathless ‘oh, air, pride, plume, here’ to ‘Buckle!’, the delayed verb that signals the moment of transformation. ‘The Windhover’ concludes with a powerful evocation of the falcon’s intensity and beauty, a beauty that has a strong effect on the observer, whose explanation of the witnessed beauty is interrupted by a further sighing recognition of its effect: ‘ah my dear’.

In ‘No needle in the sky’, Laing parodies the intensity of the falcon’s movement in Hopkins’s poem, concluding with a very different, more gentle descent:

Behold, down from the ironed sky  
     with its steam of rain and birds,  
 drops the giant kente flagless,

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<sup>18</sup> Hopkins, p. 144.



twisting and unfurling,  
   unstitching  
 the great words carrying the world,  
   AND:  
 gently dropping the wonder  
   right back into the poet's lap.  
 Poor man carries his own universe, for  
   even literature has its donkeys, I lie?<sup>19</sup>

Also rendering formally the movement he describes (the kente unfurls and unstitches as the line itself unfurls across the page), 'No needle in the sky' finishes with a bathetic, rather than powerful descent. Landing in 'the poet's lap', the kente produced by his imaginative appreciation of the weaver bird unstitches both itself and his words, leaving him, with 'knees full of gravel', to reflect that the 'universe' carried by the 'Poor man' is precisely this 'wonder': a kente that exists for the poor man only insofar as it is imagined. Challenging the reader to dispute his modesty, Laing compares himself as a poet to a donkey, carrying his meagre reflections on the weaver bird's flight and little else. This playfulness corresponds to Laing's tendency to prioritise ordinary experience in his work. Elsewhere in *Godhorse*, such as in the short poem 'Steps', Laing criticises the big man who 'feels / he is so important / that one step for him / is / a hundred for others'.<sup>20</sup> Laing's gentle parody of the intensity of 'The Windhover' acts to remind his readers that the bathos of ordinary experience is as much a part of imaginative engagement with nature as the exceptional perception demonstrated by Hopkins.

Although this parody suggests a point of departure from Hopkins, both poems reflect on the ways in which the line between inner and outer experience can be blurred, and Laing has associated this blurring with a way of seeing he thinks is characteristic of Ghanaian culture. In an interview with Pietro Deandrea (15 December 1993), Laing urged Ghanaians 'not to make the same mistake that the West has made, creating a dichotomy

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<sup>19</sup> *Godhorse*, p. 12.

<sup>20</sup> *Godhorse*, p. 24.

between the external world and the inner self, regarding the external dimension as something to be controlled and manipulated, whereas with the African-Ghanaian way it's an extension of the spirit of man.<sup>21</sup> This leads Deandrea, reiterating an argument made by Kropp-Dakubu, to argue that Laing's poetry is characterised, above all, by '[t]he finding of a means of communion between [...] two poles', between 'the concrete and the abstract, outer and inner, the object and the thought'.<sup>22</sup> This sense of 'two poles', however, makes the same 'mistake' Laing describes: it reinforces the very binaries Laing is interested in collapsing. Rather than pursuing a 'means of communion between [...] two poles', Laing's verse is more characteristically interested in challenging the tendency to separate 'the concrete and the abstract, outer and inner, the object and the thought' in the first place.

If Laing's poem exemplifies an 'African-Ghanaian way' of conceiving the self in relation to the word (not as something isolated from it, but rather as something continuous with it), it finds in Hopkins's poem a conceptual, though not cultural, equivalent. Yet, this sense of equivalence is contested by Laing's uses of parody, and his commitment to repositioning the perceptual arguments of 'The Windhover' in a Ghanaian context. To this extent, the poem appears to demonstrate a version of a relationship that Franco Moretti has described in his essay, 'Evolution, World-Systems, *Weltliteratur*' (2005). For Moretti, postcolonial literature is often characterised by 'a struggle between the story that comes from the core, and the viewpoint that "receives" it in the periphery. That the two are not seamlessly fused is not just an aesthetic given, then, but the crystallization of an underlying *political* tension.'<sup>23</sup> It is, however, important to notice how Laing's poem deviates from the model Moretti delineates here. Rather than being forced by historical circumstances to accept a 'struggle' between 'the story that comes from the core', here Hopkins's poem, and

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<sup>21</sup> cited in Pietro Deandrea, *Fertile Crossings: Metamorphoses of Genre in Anglophone West African Literature* (Amsterdam & New York: Rodopi, 2002), p. 174.

<sup>22</sup> Deandrea, p. 169.

<sup>23</sup> Franco Moretti, *Distant Reading* (London & New York: Verso, 2013), p. 134.

‘the viewpoint that “receives” it in the periphery’, Laing’s poem is less symptomatic of the colonial encounter than it is indicative of an active and creative proposal for a new form of intercultural relationship: one in which Ghana is no longer merely a disconnected, peripheral and passive ‘secondary’ culture, and in which Britain is no longer afforded the primacy of a cultural ‘centre’. In this sense, Laing’s poem is hyperstitional; it attempts to inaugurate the ideal cultural relationships of a fictional future.<sup>24</sup> Rather than solely reflecting concrete and contemporary inequalities and struggles, Laing anticipates a future in which such struggles are unnecessary. Furthermore, Moretti’s distinction between ‘story’ and ‘viewpoint’ does not account for Laing’s poem’s use of story elements that are sourced from the ‘periphery’, and a perspective in part borrowed from the ‘core’. ‘No needle in the sky’ mixes stories and viewpoints from both core and periphery, challenging the neatness of Moretti’s distinction with a hybridity resulting from the complex intercultural interaction the poem foregrounds.

The poem’s complication of the difference between inner and outer experience, therefore, corresponds with a formal palimpsest (Laing’s poem, in a sense, overwrites Hopkins’s) that performs the very intercultural dialogue his later works prescribe. Allusion in ‘No needle in the sky’ works to encourage readers to think comparatively across cultural boundaries. The poem demands a way of reading capable of registering a dialogic relationship between two cultural products. Laing’s poem at once accentuates its own similarities to ‘The Windhover’ and tempers Hopkins’s poem’s presentation of exceptional perception by ‘dropping the wonder’ in the lap of the ‘Poor man’. Quotation is used not just to demonstrate points of equivalence, but also to foreground points of departure: Laing’s ‘AND’, for example, introduces a very different conclusion to Hopkins’s. Rather than

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<sup>24</sup> For recent discussions of hyperstitional processes see Mark Fisher & Judy Thorne, ‘Luxury Communism’, *Futures and Fictions*, eds. Henriette Gunkel, Ayesha Hameed & Simon O’Sullivan (London: Repeater, 2017), p. 162; Nick Srnicek & Alex Williams, *Inventing the Future: Postcapitalism and a World Without Work*, revised and updated edition (London & New York: Verso, 2016), p. 75.

merely an ‘African-Ghanaian’ version of an already existing poem, ‘No needle in the sky’ is both a response to and development of an antecedent poem.

Rather than accepting the peripheral status conferred on Ghanaian writing by both global markets and the anglophone academy, ‘No needle in the sky’ demonstrates a form of intertextuality very different from the type Fredric Jameson has associated with postmodernism’s ‘renunciation of the new’ and its drive ‘to eschew originality and to embrace repetition’.<sup>25</sup> Instead, Laing’s uses of reference and intertextuality appear to gesture towards the ‘aesthetic of cognitive mapping’ which Jameson suggests as a corrective to the stagnating tendencies of much of postmodernist culture; and the cognitive mapping Laing’s work regularly delineates depends on an ability to conceive of the cultural and economic development of both centres and peripheries as intimately combined.<sup>26</sup> This is literalised in a characteristically surreal way in *Woman of the Aeroplanes*, in which ‘a snore in Levensvale could originate in Tukwan, and [...] an elbow in Tukwan could have its counterpart in Levensvale’.<sup>27</sup>

What emerges in Laing’s novels is an acute awareness that the ‘disconnection’ to which the poems attest is not indicative of real economic disconnection, but rather the result of the unevenness of development within a combined global system. As Korner Mensah argues in *Woman of the Aeroplanes*, regarding the perceived inferiority of countries held to be peripheral: ‘when you can’t get a biological reason for the so-called backwardness then you look for cultural reasons ... of course economic ones can’t exist’.<sup>28</sup> This ‘mapping’ of the global system within which he writes aligns Laing’s works with the Warwick Research Collective’s recent attempt to reposition debates about world literature in light of an awareness of the ways global systems are

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<sup>25</sup> Jameson, p. 104.

<sup>26</sup> Jameson, p.54.

<sup>27</sup> *Woman of the Aeroplanes*, p. 86.

<sup>28</sup> *Woman of the Aeroplanes*, p. 190.

Combined *and* uneven: the face of modernity is not worn exclusively by the “futuristic” skyline of the Pudong District in Shanghai or the Shard and Gherkin buildings in London; just as emblematic of modernity as these are the favelas of Rocinha and Jacarezinho in Rio and the slums of Dharavi in Bombay<sup>29</sup>

Confirming that this conception of the global system reflects the experience of writers in the global south, Kofi Anyidoho’s poem ‘Slums of Our Earth’ (published thirty years before the Warwick Research Collective’s description of these ‘necessary flipsides’ to perceived modernity) proclaims that ‘The darkness of the slums / is the shadow side of / proud structures on Wall Street’.<sup>30</sup>

‘No needle in the sky’ refuses to be ‘the shadow side’ of Hopkins’s poem. Instead of an aesthetic reflective of the unevenness of development, Laing’s poem enacts an aesthetic of combined and *even* intercultural dynamics. Meaning is created in the various types of friction between the two poems, and is therefore created through cultural contact: a contact that is seen as a potential solution for the economic disconnection experienced by ‘peripheral’ nations. The poem’s recognition that ‘great words’ can carry ‘the world’ is in part a recognition of the ways in which language can act as the site of these international interactions. In this sense, it provides a template for the ‘new hybrid forms of cultural understanding and intercommunication’ Santos associates with the function of ‘intercultural translation’, and evidences that such ‘new hybrid forms’ were an imaginative priority for Laing right from the start of his career.

To conclude, it is worth recalling that critics of postmodernism, from Jameson to the late Mark Fisher, have concentrated on the effects that ‘capitalist realism’ has had on the lives of individuals, who frequently find themselves radically isolated from each other, unable to construe the ‘required subject – a collective subject’ that late capitalism

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<sup>29</sup> Warwick Research Collective, *Combined and Uneven Development: Towards a New Theory of World-Literature* (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 2015), pp. 12-3.

<sup>30</sup> Kofi Anyidoho, *Earthchild with Brain Surgery* (Accra: Woeli, 1985), p. 31; Warwick Research Collective, p. 13.

‘permanently defers’.<sup>31</sup> This ‘collective subject’, however, has been an essential structural and thematic concern of Laing’s work since the late 1980s. His work can be read as a literary attempt to develop a form of intercultural translation capable of exemplifying a collective model for the creation of meaning; a model able to show that, as Ayesha Hameed has recently argued, ‘there is still the possibility for fictioning to undo the “dreamwork of imperialism”’.<sup>32</sup> ‘No needle in the sky’ inaugurates this hyperstitional process (that is, ‘the process whereby fictions make themselves real’), by exemplifying the ways in which opportunities for creativity can be found in free and equal cultural contact.<sup>33</sup> More critical work is required to reveal the full extent of Laing’s vision of an aesthetic capable of construing this collective subject, but it is clear that this work cannot ignore the poems’ contribution to the development of this aesthetic.

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<sup>31</sup> Mark Fisher, *Capitalist Realism: Is There No Alternative?* (Winchester: Zer0 Books, 2009), p. 66.

<sup>32</sup> Henriette Gunkel, Ayesha Hameed & Simon O’Sullivan, ‘Futures and Fictions: A Conversation’, *Futures and Fictions*, eds. Henriette Gunkel, Ayesha Hameed & Simon O’Sullivan (London: Repeater Books, 2017), pp. 4-5.

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