

# “The Manner of My Going”: Death and Life beyond the Anthropocene in Michael Yobu Swai’s Poetry

Amy Stambach

University of Wisconsin-Madison, United States of America

## Introduction

We live on a planet where people’s activities have permanently altered the geochemical cycles of the earth. Burning fossil fuels on a large scale has created a greenhouse effect that traps heat and warms the planet. For millions of years, our ancestors lived within the means of the earth, yet today human activity exceeds the resources needed to replenish and sustain the world. This realization of resources as finite challenges us to face our possible extinction. Should we do what we can while there is time? Does that mean that we should conserve our resources or live extravagantly? Perhaps we are victims of generations before us whose modernist development ideologies framed humans’ mastery over nature as a triumph of plastics and petroleum technologies. Regardless, we are all part of an era in which human activity is shaping the planet in permanent ways.<sup>1</sup>

Yet, to ask, as some scholars of the environmental humanities do, “is ecology fundamentally opposed to the Enlightenment project of modernity as we know—or fantasize—it?”<sup>2</sup> comes close to presupposing that “we” are all products of the Enlightenment. On the contrary, Enlightenment dichotomies of indigeneity-modernity, primitive-civilized, and underdeveloped-developed are rooted in culturally and historically specific norms and values. Ecology as an analytic form of natural scientific history-making (Kingsland, 87) traces its roots from ancient Greece thought to Enlightenment Age thinkers, including Immanuel Kant, John Locke, and Jean-Jacques Rousseau. Four hundred years of European expansion and colonization carried that worldview of natural history-making to settler colonies, including eastern Africa. Although African national independence movements overthrew colonial powers, racialized frameworks of white-settler management and black-African labor still shape the post-independence narratives of development, progress, and apocalypse in the Anthropocene.

Today, transnational corporations and businesses seeking access to cheap labor, markets, and raw materials challenge independent states to control a global economy. Old racialized frameworks deeply rooted in western Europe’s classification systems manifest themselves in

today's financial and labor markets. Yet, even though the corporate colonization of state systems may reflect this settler legacy, people have not everywhere been bulldozed by colonizing conceptions of an indigenous "other" or robbed of diverse views. Given this, today's post-Enlightenment ecological project might be better understood not in terms of modernity and the apocalyptic consequences of climate change but of decolonization. That is, as a matter of re-envisioning the political-economic matrix of power created by settler-colonialism and lifting ecology out of the tropes and narratives of European modernity.

A generation ago, Dipesh Chakrabarty elucidated what he called *the provincialism of Europe* and, by implication, the conceits of European settler populations in North America, by which he meant that Europe and its traditions were themselves narrowly framed, wildly destructive, and culturally particularistic (*Provincializing Europe*, 2000). In a similar vein, Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o called for the decolonization of the mind in a volume titled *Decolonising the Mind: The Politics of Language in African Literature* (1986). Both Ngũgĩ and Chakrabarty understood that the language and rhetoric of Europe's colonial expansion were deeply embedded in a seventeenth- and eighteenth-century European Enlightenment view that regarded humans as separate and superior to nature and treated non-Europeans as inferior Others. Both traced and destabilized "modernity" to open possibilities for addressing social and ecological predicaments without continuing the western modernist project of conquering nature with technology or human "reason."

In this article, I continue Ngũgĩ's call for decolonization and Chakrabarty's efforts to historicize European-cultural modernity. I do so by drawing on works by Catejan Iheka (*Naturalizing Africa* 2018) and Elizabeth DeLoughrey (*Allegorizing the Anthropocene* 2019) to address the question: what happens to ecology, a branch of biology dealing with relationships between living organisms and their environment, when we take European modernity and its teleological sense of progress, regression, and apocalypse out of the horizon? Reinstating and expanding Chakrabarty's and Ngũgĩ's early work, postcolonial ecocritics such as DeLoughrey and Iheka have challenged the anthropocentrism of Anthropocene scholarship, arguing that it largely continues to position people as rational actors and treats the natural environment as a slowly changing backdrop to rapidly changing human history. Examples of anthropocentric scholarship include a version of the "noble savage" evident in works by Wendell Berry and Mary Oliver;<sup>3</sup> and in old evolutionary paradigms that continue to inform models of African development. For example, writing as though a natural evolution of economic systems exists separate from political power and the control of information, Luc Christiaensen and Miet Maertens write, "many African countries still

find themselves in an early stage of the agricultural and rural transformation” (2022).

The Anthropocene, as a cultural construct, is a rhetorical trope of European modernity carried, along with natural history classification schemes, around the world. A cultural way of framing time, “Anthropocene” marks and measures humans' destruction of the environment, yet is not the way people everywhere experience or conceptualize ecology. Iheka, for example, analyzing African art and literature that travels around the world, challenges anthropocentric eco-critical analyses that place a premium on human agency. In Iheka's words, focusing on “human lives to the detriment of [nonhuman] Others carries the risk of reifying the anthropocentrism that leads to ecological disasters in the first place” (2). Whereas interdisciplinary conversations about multi- and inter-species entanglements embed Euro-modernist species-categorizations that Iheka aptly scrutinizes, a non-Enlightenment view such as Swai's work manifests takes the position that people and the environment are mutually constitutive. Environmental anthropologist Patience Mususa puts it well in saying that people are “immanent in the environment, and, in turn, the environment is imminent in them” (*There Used to Be Order*, 13).

In a similar vein, Elizabeth DeLoughrey parochializes the Anthropocene to “uncover its place-based allegories” (34). DeLoughrey (2019) demonstrates that “the recent scholarly turn to pinpointing an origin for the Anthropocene is caught up in the history of empire and modernity” (33). Writing about post-plantation life and literature in the Caribbean and Pacific, DeLoughrey disentangles earth-atmospheric tropes of excavation and prediction from co-existing historical poetics of telos and human progress. For DeLoughrey, the “Anthropocene” signifies humans' destruction of the environment yet is not the only way people experience or conceptualize ecological ruptures. DeLoughrey's reading of Erna Brodber's (2007) *The Rainmaker's Mistake* demonstrates how co-existing parallel spaces and temporalities disorient and disrupt “the violence of plantation modernity and its implications for naturalizing the relations between humans and place” (54). Swai's work, too, parochializes the Anthropocene by using established Chagga-cosmological figures such as Mount Kilimanjaro to ground people in place through what DeLoughrey calls a “foundational” (60) allegorical symbol or what, again, Cajetan Iheka calls “strategic anthropomorphism,” the blurring of lines between human and nonhumans “to undercut notions of superiority” (14).

The context for my raising the question, what happens to ecology when we take European modernity and its teleological sense of progress, regression, and apocalypse out of the horizon, is my study of the works of Tanzanian poet Michael Y. Swai and my having spent years living and working in Tanzania as a cultural anthropologist

(Stambach 2000; Stambach and Kwayu 2021).<sup>4</sup> Swai's work shows that people and the landscape are immanent in one another and that, per Iheka, there exists a "distributed network of agency between human beings and other components of the ecosystem" wherein agency is not necessarily intentional but carries action and effect (3). In Swai's work, equatorial Mount Kilimanjaro operates semiotically as an emplaced agent and object affecting life, death, time and generationality. This does not mean that people are passive. People's carbon-based lifeways have destroyed the glaciers of Mount Kilimanjaro. Anthropogenic climate change has wiped away eighty percent of the mountain's ice cover in as many years. Yet focusing on anthropogenic climate change fails to tap the full potential of Swai's allegorical, agentive landscape.

### Michael Swai's Life and Work

Situating Swai's work within a popular literary tradition can broaden African literature's analytic investments in artistry beyond publication for a wide readership. Born in Kilimanjaro Region, Tanzania, in 1940 and raised on a small farm in Hai District, east of the Serengeti, Michael Y. Swai later joined the State Security Forces shortly after Tanzania obtained independence from Britain in 1961. In that position, he encountered some of the country's most economically anguished people and communities. Suffering, despair, and tragedy feature in his work. After forty years of service, Swai retired to his family farm to be closer to his children and grandchildren. Colonization and independence mark his life but are not his works' primary themes or tensions. Contra the tenets of "linguistic nativism,"<sup>5</sup> Swai's work does not uphold Ngũgĩ's insistence that language needs to preserve one's mother tongue. Instead, it represents a more homegrown genre than the texts more frequently analyzed as "African literature."<sup>6</sup>

To date, Swai's poetry has only been available to readers in Tanzania. Published by the Tanzania-based Moshi Lutheran Church printing press, the title work *Journey to Freedom and Other Stories*, a mixed-genre collection of forty-seven pieces from which the two poems interpreted here come, opens with an essay telling the story of Swai's own trip to urban Dar es Salaam and his ultimate "freedom" returning home. That essay's theme exemplifies a genre that historian Emily Callaci calls an "unintended archive" (*Street Archives* 13) of everyday life, or that Karin Barber, in her classic essay "Popular Arts in Africa," identifies as "a new kind of art created by a new emergent class" (14). I, too, regard Swai's work as everyday popular literature that evokes elements of a time and place that exist within but is not defined by an African-nationalist or church-moral vocabulary. Found in church and city bookshops, school libraries, personal collections,

and roadside kiosks, Swai's work circulates among a school- and university-educated readership who themselves also move between urban and rural areas. However, as library and school collections move and some works are permanently checked out or lost, copies have dwindled.

This article's title draws from one of Swai's poems, "The Manner of My Going," in which he imagines his own death. I have selected this and the second poem, "The Loyal Guardian," on the basis that they extend the domain of African literary studies to a consideration of human-nonhuman relations. In Swai's work, there is no separation of nature from culture, indigeneity is contextual, and borders are porous if conventionally well-known. Swai's style emphasizes the co-constitution of human-nonhuman beings through physical and metaphysical actions and effects. His emphasis on human-nonhuman mutuality moves poetry and art from a Euro-modernist premium on nature in beauty (and beauty in nature)—a view of human-history versus natural-history that continues in the environmental humanities and in African literary studies. It situates African postcolonial literature within an approach that sees as a starting point the mutuality of landscapes and people. Next, I highlight key elements of his poetry and detail aspects of the world implied in his writing. Then, I discuss how Swai's work allows scholars of "modernity" to rethink the relationship of ecology to indigeneity, where indigeneity refers to cultural identity in postcolonial time and ecology refers to the study of living organisms, including people, in relation to their physical environments. In the conclusion, I sum up my argument that Swai's work does not dispute so much as circumnavigate relationships of power and Eurocentricity in its images and messages.

### Death and life in Michael Yobu Swai's poetry

As a form of communication, poetry and artistic narrative evoke emotional and intellectual responses. Artistic messages may be intended to teach or engage in an exchange, they may be commemorative, they may provoke action (Guest). Swai's work teaches via a narrative style reserved for elders in the Chagga ethnic community he is from. Eschewing the heroic "quest" that, notwithstanding writers' efforts to the contrary, remains characteristic of western modernity (including in Hemingway's mid-twentieth century work *Under Kilimanjaro*<sup>7</sup>), Swai blends irony, criticism, essay, and playfulness within three regional narrative genres that he also mixes: *utenzi*, *hadith*<sup>8</sup>, and *misemo*. *Utenzi* is a verse-style of poetry that documents meaningful events such as the passing of a well-known person (Minerba).<sup>9</sup> *Hadith* conveys a moral message, often with

reference to the land. *Misemo* are short riddles in which a message is hidden beneath the surface meaning.<sup>10</sup>

Two of Swai's works mix these artforms to speak intimately to his conception of time and ecology as socioculturally produced generational relations rooted in physical landscapes. "The Loyal Guardian," a ten-line *utenzi*-like expression of thanks to Mount Kilimanjaro, stages the dynamics of life and death through the concatenation of rain, wind, sun, and snow, attesting to the power of the environment to shape worldviews, and of worldviews to shape the environment. "The Manner of My Going," the second of the two poems analyzed here, is a hybrid *utenzi* and *hadith* work full of riddles that asserts a strong sense of being and of time passing.

Unlike tropes of modernity and its colonial Other that one finds in discourses of climate change or the Anthropocene,<sup>11</sup> the onto-epistemological underpinnings of Swai's work hinge on a semiotic framework relating qualities of people, objects, and metaphysical concepts to one another and through time. Ugandan philosopher John Mbiti's suggestion that "categories of the dead [as sometimes animate, sometimes not] are determined by time depth and the capacity of the living to remember the dead"<sup>12</sup> aptly describes Swai's approach to being in the world today.

### *The Loyal Guardian*

At its core, "The Loyal Guardian" (Appendix A) is a poetic enactment of human-nonhuman interdependence and of Iheka's concept of strategic anthropomorphism, geared toward a message of earths' action and control, through rain, snow, and sun, over humans' generational, dispensational, and philosophical time. Swai situates both the mountain and its "living reality" at the center of life and death. There "she stands, the great dignified colossal; come rain, come wind or come sunshine; she is always there, for everybody's disposal."

Partly rhyming "colossal" and "disposal," and seeming to contrast dignity with denigration, Swai's allegory might at first glance be too easily read through a modernist lens of multiple contrasting and nested binaries. For example, he connects an ideational "symbol" with a "living reality" and describes "her" as looking "typical" yet standing alone, like no other "Loyal Guardian." He presents male and female imagery of a suffering mother, maternal pain, a "pillar," and a border guardian. Yet Swai complicates these binaries. In rhyming "pain" and "cane," Swai reconfigures the relationship between Kilimanjaro and exogenous colonizers. Kilimanjaro's "wisdom" upends the modernist settler-colonized dichotomy and hints at settler-savagery. "She guards our borders with wisdom, not by cane," he writes, re-naturalizing "wisdom" in the landscape. In his allegorical handling, pain belongs to

the mountain, to Mother Africa; the cane, to colonists and foreign traders.

Writing three times “there she is” (and later “she is always there,” and again, “she is there”), Swai invokes a sense of deep time that consolidates temporalities of generation and cosmo-ontological vitality. When people die, in this Chagga cultural cosmology, their spirits return to Iruwa, the creator known as God in English and the name locally associated with the massif Kilimanjaro (Hasu). Swai’s use of the *utenzi* style commonly adopted at funerals, in elegies, connotes the passing of generational time embedded in this mountain landscape. “She” conjoins social and geological temporalities, reckoning calendric periodization with her timelessness, watching and tracking human history.

Strategically using anthropomorphism to blend human-nonhuman elements, Swai mobilizes the timeless, infinite power of this massif to underscore the moral necessity of looking beyond human-centered models of ecosystems. A key metaphor in this and his other works is that of genealogical time and ancestral belonging. People everywhere track primary relationships through “blood” relatives and affines. But, contra human reckoning, wherein place-based ancestor spirits traverse generational time, this Loyal Guardian spans political-ecologies. The presence of ancestral spirits in living people moves beyond forever-fixed, enclosed territories. “Across the borders” of Kenya and Tanzania, Swai writes, “she exemplifies” the fine role of guardianship.

In nationalists’ hands, references to nations often entwine images of kinship and family to lay claim to resources and territories. Yet in Swai’s gracious handling, metaphors of kinship, homes, children, and guardians stand above the maps Europe penned on Africa. In writing, “She is there, conspicuous, obedient and fine,” Swai indicates that Kilimanjaro stands before, during, and after Europe’s carving of Africa. However, he also raises an uncomfortable, implicit question: Should she be there for everyone? Should she exist “for everybody’s disposal”? The moral ecology of the Guardian hinges on humans’ immanence in nonhuman elements of the environment.

Circumnavigating without denying Anthropocene-motivated apocalyptic visions, Swai de-naturalizes any single “natural” mountain landscape, showing this mountain’s command of epochal time and geologies to be an element of “her” ecological “wisdom.” “A living reality,” full of “pain,” the Loyal Guardian knows the world from having seen and felt—indeed, from having carried “with her snowing cap” the seasons of change across generations.

### *The Manner of My Going*

Maintaining his focus on the porousness of boundaries in “The Manner of My Going,” Swai marks life’s end using imagery of resolution not

judgement, and he acknowledges the realities of colonization without reproducing the world through Enlightenment-derived “natural history” terms that painted Africa as Europe’s “other.” “The Manner of My Going” opens with one long and fulsome gasping breath but its punch to the gut is best understood when we feel the pulse of Swai’s life in the mixed-genre *hadith-utenzi* narrative. Swai writes (Appendix B):

When, finally, it’s my time to go,  
And when my last breath has been taken away,  
When, eventually, my tenure in this world elapses,  
When, at last I am disowned by this capricious world,  
When I can no longer think, feel, or care:  
When everybody, including my own wife and children look at me in horror,  
When, at the very end I can no longer protest being addressed to by the  
fearful name “corpse”!  
I wish to go down with dignity.

The humor of “protesting” being called a corpse; the repetitions, quasi-oppositions, rhetorical questions; and the suggestion of time passing in the six lines beginning “when”—these motifs place “The Manner of My Going” in the genre, again, of funereal *utenzi*, in which humor can diffuse the gravity of death, and disorienting juxtapositions (“I can no longer think,” but I must consider my passing) blur distinctions between the living and the dead. But the open-ended riddle, the perplexing *misemo* in this section is: What is Swai thinking in writing “I wish to go down with dignity” now that he “can no longer protest being addressed to [sic] by the fearful name “corpse”!?”

In the regional lexicon, to be called a corpse is to have moved ontologically from a class of beings known as humans to a class of beings that are dry and desiccated. A “natural,” dignified death involves moving to ancestral realms, to Iruwa or to God. In contrast, an undignified death may involve remaining forever in the interstitial, subterranean worlds of caves and underwater tunnels. In part, how one writes or talks about death effects its quality. A group of men standing in the back of a pickup truck, carrying a deceased body to a family funeral, once debated for hours whether the body they carried was a living dead body or an inanimate object. The distinction inhered in language structure and mattered existentially for these men. To some involved in this debate, a well-treated deceased person needed immediately to be honored with a person-noun prefix.<sup>13</sup> Others argued that the body was inanimate and only later could be referred to with a person-prefix—and only then if properly venerated. The former group gasped at their adversaries’ horrifying suggestion that a corpse could become forever, as a spirit, dead.

Swai, too, voices horror at his becoming a being without a life. Pondering death, Swai envisions himself passing from one kind of being to another. The poet continues:



I wish to pass away quickly, but peacefully  
I wish when the final moment comes, I should not suffer.  
I fear suffering! I hate Suffering!  
I just wish and pray that I'll go quietly, with eyes and mouth closed in  
finality.

Swai's dirge-like "I wish," his capitalized S in the second "suffering" suggest, in the manner of a riddle or *misemo*, a willful refusal of obsession with "Suffering," perhaps with a Christianized suffering if we can read that into his capital S. Here Swai struggles with the pain of finality. Unlike the Loyal Guardian, with "her" eye toward socio-ecological longevity, Swai turns his gaze to the panic-sweat of lifetime mortality. Rather than praying to heal or get better again, or hoping for a natural recovery, Swai wishes "to pass away quickly" with "mouth closed in/ finality." Quickly, peacefully, quietly, finally. The "manner of my going," of human death, is best conducted swiftly. What has this security officer seen that he might hope to die not saying? Another riddle, another *misemo*.

Contemplating death, Swai invokes a prayerful tone familiar to the missionaries who baptized him and moves rhetorically into a quality of *hadith* that conveys religious teachings. "Let me, O God, be ready for this final ordeal so that I do not go blaming myself or anyone else." Forgive me my trespasses and let me forgive others, Swai essentially writes, lest I carry my curses to my grave and live forever as a troubled ancestor. In Chagga culture, carrying a curse to the grave is endless, and continues across future generations. However, returning to images of "wisdom" and "courage" attributed to the Loyal Guardian in the previous poem, Swai commands those who carry and bury his corpse exactly what to do: "my remains should be preserved in an ordinary box with the lid closed firmly." And he tells them why: "For, I have seen many a dead body, and I can swear all of them look ugly and unreal. Mine will not look better either." Swai marks life's end not in the form of final judgement as would environmentalists lamenting at humans' self-destruction or via possible end-times views by which an angry deity punishes the greedy, but in relation to life around him, hoping to have resolved disputes such that no ill-will will emanate from or follow him. He asks for "the wisdom and courage to settle my debts" so that "I do not go blaming myself or anyone else for anything done or undone."

In bypassing Euro-normative dichotomies of nature and culture, tradition and modernity, Swai's work calls into question the social-evolutionist paradigm that "the west" imposed on people it presumed to be its others. This is not to say that Swai resists them; he does not fight or contest colonial legacies as, for example, Ngũgĩ did and still does. Instead, Swai observes and notes that, yes, European worldviews exported to Africa held that Africa represented Europe's past. This denial of coevalness reduced Africans to Europe's lesser, but Swai will have none of this. In his view, the traditions of the west can be

gruesome and unholy, as Swai writes in the second half of this *utenzi*: “I forbid the western style custom of filing past my remains in the pretext of ‘paying last respects.’” Instead, Swai wishes “to be laid to rest alongside members of my family at Nda-wa-Ufoo,” the ancestral lands of his family. And he anticipates, in a manner both teasing and serious (as noted by his rhetorical syntax): “It’s good, you know, to have company even below there.” In naming western-style end-of-life rites and choosing to ignore them, Swai explicitly overlays the social-evolutionist paradigm of Africa as the cultural descendant of settler colonialism with his own philosophical knowledge that western-derived “natural history” does not define or register progress.

Then, in a final writing of his life that is not yet written, Swai closes with his own epitaph: “When all has been said and done, let the waiting young men fill the pit quickly, firmly, and forget me!” Writing in his national language of Kiswahili, the only place in the work where he departs from English, Swai concludes:

*Kwa kufanya hivyo, ukurasa wa mtu aliyeishi kati ya tarehe 20/12/1940 na hapo akiitwa Michael Yobu Swai utakuwa umefungwa na ndivyo ninavyoomba iwe.*

“By doing so, the page of the man, Michael Yobu Swai, who lived between December 20, 1940 and then, will be closed, and that is what I am begging for.”

Likening life to the page of a book, Swai presents life as being like *utenzi*: a morality tale, full of activity, performed and repeated generationally.

Swai himself is a phenomenally strong and intelligent man, not with a death wish nor depressive. He jokes with his classmates now all eighty years and older, calling one another nicknames. “Hello, Class President, how are you?” “Fine Chairman, and you?” He has survived, to this moment, the corona virus global pandemic through September 2022, as well as bouts of malaria. He is a record keeper of his extended Swai family, having created an extensive written account of who is related to whom and how, who has married whom and where, had children, lives where at the moment, and about whom there are no longer any records or news. I say this because this is not a socially isolated man but a person intimately connected with the world he makes and that makes him. The “manner of his going,” like the “loyal guardian” observing him, is like no other person or poet, and yet like everyone.

Swai and many other philosopher-poets circumvent the Enlightenment Age premise that there is a nature-culture binary. Swai’s *utenzi*-style portrayal of life and death moves artistic expression beyond any final world apocalypse. In writing from a position that knows but exceeds western ideology, Swai’s work invites readers to recontextualize ecology not as built around the classification of people and things—not as a “natural history”—but as one way of many ways

to organize and see the world. Whereas Ngũgĩ wrote *Decolonizing the Mind* with reference to himself and his fellow Kenyans, Swai, in the spirit of Chakrabarty's *Provincializing Europe*, inspires readers to rehistoricize Europeanized minds. Or, as Iheka puts it, Swai's work provokes readers to "re-naturalize Africa," not in the sense of stereotyping Africa, all over again, as a pristine natural-history landscape but seeing "Africa's complex ecologies" through the lens of African literary narratives (11).

Even as some scholars may continue to write about "the Enlightenment project of modernity as we know—or fantasize about—it,"<sup>14</sup> Swai knows that western modernity was—and is—its own kind of indigeneity.<sup>15</sup> In the rest of this essay, I will explain how I see Swai's artistic work broadening, through African literary allegories and poesy, "modernity's" narratives of progress, regression, and apocalypse in the Anthropocene.

## Discussion

If we were to ask "are we culturally predisposed to think in terms of apocalypse," or "does it still make sense to act ecologically when it is already, in some sense, too late,"<sup>16</sup> the answer from Swai's work is resoundingly "no." The cultural predisposition to think in terms of apocalypse is precisely that: a cultural, rather than inevitable, predisposition. In view of this, the antecedental question "and therefore unable to see and react to the slow unfolding of devastating environmental change currently occurring" needs clarification. Can people see environmental death? Polluted waterways? Loss of forests? Certainly. Everywhere people have eyes and ears that we use to experience and register life and death. Everywhere, people project themselves onto other species and onto rocks, water, land, and air. Patently, we are able to see and react to slow unfolding environmental change. However, are we culturally predisposed to see such changes as signs of inevitable apocalypse, or the endpoint of an Anthropocene? There is no indication of this predisposition in Swai's work, nor among his family and neighbors.

Such a telos is a product of a highly idiosyncratic (if globally hegemonic) cultural framework: of a logic of progress that begins with a "big bang" and must exhaust itself similarly; of salvation and end-of-days where judgement supposedly brings about the end; of capitalism where limits of resources and labor conspire to exhaust the possibility of creating surplus wealth—or consumers—for reinvestments. Swai subscribes to all of these, as many people do in different settings, but to contain or see these teleological trajectories as the primary or only way of thinking is certainly too small for Swai.

To act ecologically in Swai's and many other sensibilities is to laugh at the western-modern idea that progress is zero-sum: that

building new infrastructure is progress that “necessarily” destroys ecosystems and interrupts migratory pathways. Certainly, Swai does not fight for the earth. He is not an environmental activist, nor does he work with any NGO. Rather, Swai’s work steps around activism and instead sees ecology as a matter of living and being with the mountain—a mountain, any mountain.

Is this view naïve? Is it “indigenous” and as such “Romantic” from the perspectives of Enlightenment descendants? Is Swai’s point of view (and I am disheartened to even pose this), a remnant of Europe’s (and European-Americans’) views of the “noble savage”? Recall that Rousseau no less than many Romantic-through-Victorian era continental and English poets thought the “simple” qualities of people living in Africa was an element that Europe and Europeans had lost. Yet it is precisely this element of historicist thinking—that “indigenous cultures” can “teach us today”—that remains problematic about the question: “What would it mean for our environmentally destructive culture to be willing to—finally learn from the indigenous cultures that we so viciously repressed in the name of modernity over the past four centuries?”<sup>17</sup> It is this element of historicist thinking that is foreign to Michael Y. Swai.

If one had to answer a particular question from the vantage of Swai’s poetry, one might imagine that to the question “How do indigenous cosmologies, philosophies, and ‘teaching stories’ challenge the very notion of Modernity when it comes to ecological reconciliation with the biosphere?” the answer would be the following:

The very notion of modernity is itself inherent in Europe’s cosmologies, philosophies and “teaching stories” as is the distinction between tradition and modernity, primitive and civilized, etcetera. But to reverse the question and ask what “we” can “learn from the indigenous cultures” provokes a retreat to “cultures” as discrete rather than continuous and is Eurocentric.<sup>18</sup> Rather than reverse these signs and reverse the question—“What can the civilization of Africa teach provincial Europe”—Swai and many writers work with the immanent present, which in thinking goes like this: “Given we are here today, and given we inhabit an animated world of people, gravity, solar energy, (de)composition, what are we to make of it? Not, what are we to do, but how are we to live now?” Swai’s rhetorical reiteration in *The Manner of My Going*, “when my tenure expires, when I am disowned, when I can no longer think, feel, or care,” followed by his lines of “I wish,” might stand for a sort of stop-and-reset, such that doing something requires doing it quickly. Not suffering or stalling, not speaking or waiting, but living in the first place less destructively, moving instantly and immanently to the realm of the Loyal Guardian. “And that is what I’m begging for,” Swai offers.

Acting with wisdom or “moving immanently” may seem unspecified and naïve, but placing ecology in relation to Swai’s “Loyal

Guardian” and history “parochializes the Anthropocene” in the sense advanced by DeLoughrey (34). DeLoughry writes that agriculture in the form of a “garden is one of the most established allegorical symbols” of western modernity. Clearing, plowing, planting, and living off the land amounts, in a western-legal framework, to owning and commanding it. However, in Swai’s lexicon, land is active, it gives, it guards. “The Loyal Guardian” is a foundational symbol that, like most allegory, can be “disorienting to read” because it “disrupts expectations of chronological sequencing and constructs co-existing parallel spaces and temporalities” (DeLoughrey, 47). However, Iheka’s concept of nonintentional agency, like Latour’s nonhuman “actants” helps solve the riddle of “how the landscape, animals, and other nonhumans produce effects on humans as well as the broader ecosystem” (18). Namely the environment exists, and might better exist, without humans doing anything.

Iheka writes: “the relationship between humans and other life forms in African literature has significant implications for rethinking questions of agency and resistance in African studies as well as in postcolonial studies” (2). The Loyal Guardian exerts an agency that Iheka analytically would call agency without intentionality. When it comes to ecological “reconciliation” with the biosphere, the manner for Swai is more one of living (and dying) under “her guardianship” than it is restoring ecosystems and planting trees.

The scramble for natural resources that took nineteenth-century Europe to Africa, then twentieth-century United States and now twenty-first century China to the continent, continues to pit wealthy resource extractors against poor and still very much black-racialized African labor.<sup>19</sup> To dwell on what indigenous life can teach “Europe” about living sustainably moves perilously close to reproducing Rousseau’s patronization of the “noble savage.” My reading of Swai as already knowing that Europe’s allegories, too, are native and indigenous avoids, I hope, reproducing a Eurocentric universe.

Swai’s life and work *could* be framed through a narrative of progress, regression, and apocalypse in the Anthropocene, but that— notably—is not the only way he lives and sees it. Rather his life and work are of a continuous past-future-present, rife with “maternal pain” and young generations waiting to take over from the old, a mountain wiser than people, a religion more soulful than one viewing corpses in caskets. The world does not end, in Swai’s work, in an apocalypse but unfolds in spite of the Anthropocene.

## Conclusion

In reading for evidence of strategic anthropomorphism and the mutual immanence of people and the environment in Swai’s work, I have reasoned, with the writings of DeLoughrey and Iheka, past nineteenth-

and twentieth-century European-expansionist ideologies of modernity and progress. I have done so by thinking through the semantic structures and imagery of Swai's poetry, linking his allegorical symbol of the mountain to his reflections on life and death. I have argued that the onto-epistemological underpinnings of Swai's work hinge on a semiotic framework relating qualities of people, objects, and metaphysical concepts to one another and through time; and that Swai's two poems mix locally resonant narrative forms to speak intimately to his conception of ecology as socioculturally produced generational relations rooted in physical landscape.

Like most poetry, Swai's evokes emotional and intellectual responses—not political action or conservation, specifically, but recognition and insight. Coming and going—maternal pain and death—reveal qualities of power, time, and generationality. Although some popular portrayals today, derived from centuries-old western art and literature, continue to treat indigenous peoples as a stereotype of the ecologically noble savage, Swai's work does not conform to that. His work suggests that, in today's Anthropocene, western legacies of colonization themselves need to be decolonized, that is, revised away from the settler logic dividing human from nonhuman nature; that indigenous groups are heterogeneous; and that indigenous cosmologies, philosophies, and “teaching stories,” when called such, do not challenge the notion of modernity, they are, by their very label, part of it. Swai's poems disrupt the aesthetic and philosophical assumptions of western nature writing and eco-politics wherein people are separate and superior to the environment and seen as the cause and solution to earth's demise. His poetry marks life's end using imagery of resolution not apocalypse, and it acknowledges the realities of colonization without reproducing the world through “natural history” terms.

Now, as Swai's work journeys electronically around the world, I hope it is not re-co-opted into a Romantic narrative of an Other, another authentic, or indigenous art. Because Swai's world is already too big for that age-old modernity-tradition distinction. His work presses scholars to rethink the relationship of ecology to indigeneity by recognizing we have always, and always will, influence one another.

## Appendix A

### *The Loyal Guardian*

by Michael Yobu Swai

There she stands, the great dignified colossal  
Come rain, come wind or come sunshine  
She is always there, for everybody's disposal.  
She is there, conspicuous, obedient and fine.  
With her snowing cap, she looks typical  
She shows plenty of maternal pain.  
She's the pillar and symbol for all  
She's such a living reality, as genuine as wine  
Across the borders she exemplifies this fine role  
She guards our borders with wisdom, not by cane.

## Appendix B

*The Manner of My Going*  
by Michael Yobu Swai

When, finally, it's my time to go,  
And when my last breath has been taken away;  
When, eventually, my tenure in this world elapses,  
When, at last I am disowned by this capricious world,  
When I can no longer think, feel, or care:  
When, everybody, including my own wife and children look at me in  
horror,  
When, at the very end I can no longer protest being addressed to by the  
fearful name "corpse"!  
I wish to go down with dignity.  
I wish to pass away quickly, but peacefully  
I wish when the final moment comes, I should not suffer.  
I fear suffering! I hate Suffering!  
I just wish and pray that I'll go quietly, with eyes and mouth closed in  
finality.  
Let me, O God, be ready for this final ordeal so that I do not go  
blaming myself or anyone else for anything done or undone. For this  
reason, give me the wisdom and courage to settle my 'debts' to the best  
of my ability. May I also proclaim here, and now, that my remains  
should be preserved in an ordinary box with the lid closed firmly. For,  
I have seen many a dead body, and I can swear all of them look ugly  
and unreal. Mine will not look better either. Therefore, I forbid the  
western style custom of filing past my remains in the pretext of  
'paying last respects.'  
What I have been, I have been, and with that to the grave I go!  
My final request will be to be laid to rest  
Alongside members of my family at Nda-wa-Ufoo  
It's good, you know, to have company even below there;  
I feel it's only fair for me to stay close to those of mine who have gone  
ahead of me.  
And, when all has been said and done, let the waiting young men fill  
the pit quickly, firmly, and forget me!  
Kwa kufanya hivyo, ukurasa wa mtu aliyeishi kati ya tarehe  
20/12/1940 na hapo akiitwa Michael Yobu Swai utakuwa umefungwa  
na ndivyo ninavyoomba iwe.



## Notes

1. Prompting Crutzen and Stoermer to term this era the Anthropocene.
2. See: <https://networks.h-net.org/node/73374/announcements/6466988/ecology-modernity%E2%80%99s-new-horizon-narratives-progress-regression>. I treat this URL as a primary document, illustrative of Europe's post-Enlightenment intellectual legacies, circulating today.
3. I am relying here on Lynne Keller 's analysis of these authors' works.
4. Beginning in 1990 and continuing intermittently through 2018.
5. Briefly discussed in Jackson, pp. 35-36.
6. Such as the African novels Jeanne-Marie Jackson analyzes.
7. Hemingway's fictionalized memoir of his 1953-1954 East African quest to assist his wife in killing a lion. The white-hunter trope of manhood relies on racialized stereotypes of Africans (Strong).
8. The word *hadith* in Kiswahili, which presumably comes from the Arabic to refer to Muhammad's sayings, is here used in its secular sense. (The Editor's Note)
9. The genre derives from a Swahili poetic tradition with roots in Indian Ocean commercial networks that passed through Kilimanjaro and extended to Lake Victoria.
10. The singular form of *misemo*, riddles, is *msemu*, riddle.
11. For critical analyses of these tropes, see the works of Simpson (2020) and of Vaughn, Guarasci, and Moore (2021).
12. Mbiti (1969: 83-84) quoted in Pratten, p. 73.
13. In many languages spoken across eastern Africa, a living person belongs in a noun class specifically designated for "people." An object goes in a different class.
14. See again endnote 2.
15. Nor did he read Latour, whose work *We Have Never Been Modern* explores the nature-society Euro-modernist distinction. Swai did not need to; Latour discovered what Swai already knew: that Euro-modernity was its own form of magical thinking, discovering itself through imperialist journeys. I am grateful to the late David Graeber

for conversations during our graduate school days about Euro-modernity as a form of magical thinking. Graeber and Wengrow's *The Dawn of Everything* unpacks the objectification and embodiment of "Others" embedded in previous centuries' Euro-modernity (see also Fabian, *Time and the Other*).

16. Again, see endnote 2.

17. Again, see endnote 2.

18. An observation so ubiquitous in postcolonial studies and cultural anthropology since the 1980s that it warrants only restating key references, many already noted: Chakrabarty, DeLoughrey, Fabian, Karera, Iheka, Ngũgĩ, Pesambili, Simpson, and Vaughn, Guarasci, and Moore.

19. See Nixon 2011.

#### Works Cited

Stambach, Amy E. *Lessons from Mount Kilimanjaro: Schooling, Community, and Gender in East Africa*. Routledge, 2000.

Stambach, Amy and Aikande C. Kwayu. "Witness to a Passing: The Silent Death of Local Water Management and the Quiet Hand of Government." *HAU Journal of Ethnographic Theory*, vol. 11, no. 2, 2021, pp. 412-427. <https://www.journals.uchicago.edu/doi/10.1086/716216>

Barber, Karin. "Popular Arts in Arica." *African Studies Review*, vol. 30, no. 3, 1987, pp. 1-78.

Brodber, Erna. *The Rainmaker's Mistake*. New Beacon Books, 2007.

Callaci, Emily. *Street Archives and City Life: Popular Intellectuals in Postcolonial Tanzania*, Duke UP, 2017.

Chakrabarty, Dipesh. *Provincializing Europe: Postcolonial Thought and Historical Difference*. 2000, Princeton UP, 2008.

Christiaensen, Luc and Miet Maertens. "Rural Employment in Africa: Trends and Challenges." *Annual Review of Resource Economics*, vol. 14, no. 1, 2022, online.

Crutzen, Paul J., and Eugene F. Stoermer. "The 'Anthropocene'." *Global Change Newsletter*, vol. 41, 2000, pp. 17-18.

- DeLoughrey, Elizabeth M. *Allegories of the Anthropocene*. Duke UP, 2019.
- Fabian, Johannes. *Time and the Other: How Anthropology Makes its Object*. Columbia UP, 1983.
- Graeber, David and David Wengrow. *The Dawn of Everything: A New History of Humanity*. Allen Lane Press, 2021.
- Guest, Kenneth J. *Cultural Anthropology: A Toolkit for a Global Age*. 3rd ed., Norton, 2020.
- Iheka, Cajetan. *Naturalizing Africa: Ecological Violence, Agency, and Postcolonial Resistance in African Literature*. Cambridge UP, 2018.
- Jackson, Jeanne-Marie. *The African Novel of Ideas: Philosophy and Individualism in the Age of Global Writing*. Princeton UP, 2021.
- Karera, Axelle. "Black Feminist Philosophy and the Politics of Refusal." *Oxford Handbook of Feminist Philosophy*. Edited by Kim Q. Hall and Ásta. Oxford UP, 2022.
- Keller, Lynn. *Recomposing Eco-poetics: North American Poetry of the Self-Conscious Anthropocene*, U of Virginia P, 2018.
- Kingsland, Sharon. "Conveying the Intellectual Challenge of Ecology: An Historical Perspective." *Frontiers in Ecology and the Environment*, vol. 2, no. 7, 2004, pp. 86-109.
- Latour, Bruno. *We Have Never Been Modern*. Translated by Catherine Porter, Harvard UP, 1993.
- Mbiti, John S. *African Religions and Philosophy*. Heinemann, 1969.
- Mbembe, Achille Joseph. "Decolonizing the University: New Directions." *Arts and Humanities in Higher Education*, vol. 15, no. 1, 2016, pp. 29-45.
- Minerba, Emiliano. "From Andalusia to Yemen: The Origin of the Swahili Stanzaic Metres." *Kervan: International Journal of Afro-Asiatic Studies*, vol. 24, 2020, pp. 63-88.
- Mususa, Patience. *There Used to Be Order: Life on the Copperbelt after the Privatisation of the Zambia Consolidated Copper Mines*. U of Michigan P, 2021.

Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o. *Decolonising the Mind: The Politics of Language in African Literature*. Heinemann, 1986.

Nixon, Rob. *Slow Violence, Gender, and the Environmentalism of the Poor*. Harvard UP, 2011.

Pesambili, Joseph. "Glocalized Research Design: Exploring the Encounter Between Indigenous and Western Methodologies among the Maasai Pastoralists in Monduli, Tanzania." *AlterNative: An International Journal of Indigenous People*, vol. 14, no. 1, 2021, pp. 1-10.

Pratten, David. "'The Thief Eats His Shame': Practice and Power in Nigerian Vigilantism." *Africa: The Journal of the International African Institute*, vol. 78, no. 1, 2008, pp. 64-83.

Sides, Kirk B. "Seed Bags and Storytelling: Modes of Living and Writing After the End in Wanuri Kahiu's *Pumzi*." *Critical Philosophy of Race*, vol. 7, no. 1, 2019, pp. 107-123.

Simpson, Michael. "The Anthropocene as Colonial Discourse." *EPD: Society and Space*, vol. 38, no. 1, 2020, pp. 53-71.

Strong, Amy. *Race and Identity in Hemingway's Fiction*. Palgrave, 2008.

Swai, Michael Yobu. "The Loyal Guardian." Appendix A.

—. "The Manner of My Going." Appendix B.

—. *A Journey to Freedom and Other Stories*, Moshi Lutheran Printing Press, 2002.

Vaughn, Sarah E., Bridget Guarasci, and Amelia Moore. "Intersectional Ecologies: Reimagining Anthropology and Environment." *Annual Review of Anthropology*, vol. 50, 2021, pp. 275-290.