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**War-scapes: The Nigerian Postcolony
and the Boundaries of the Human**

Direttore della Scuola Ch.ma Prof. Rosanna Benacchio

Supervisore e Coordinatore d'indirizzo Ch.ma Prof. Annalisa Oboe

Dottoranda Giulia D'Agostini

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Abstract

La tesi analizza le raffigurazioni dell'umano e del rapporto tra sovranità e soggettività nella letteratura nigeriana anglofona. Concentrandosi in particolar modo sulla narrativa di recente produzione, il lavoro parte dall'osservazione di come la Nigeria postcoloniale venga dipinta nelle opere in esame quale luogo di eccezione permanente, i cui soggetti, più sudditi che cittadini, sono sovente ridotti a quel che il filosofo Giorgio Agamben ha definito "nuda vita": una vita esposta alla violenza sovrana, o al sovrano abbandono, che diventa sempre più impunemente uccidibile. La tesi discute quindi le strategie adottate da più generazioni di scrittori nigeriani dal post-indipendenza a oggi per fornire un'elaborazione, estetica ed etica al contempo, delle declinazioni possibili del vivere umano nello stato d'eccezione e della mancata tutela diritti fondamentali. In questo senso, essa rileva come le opere prese in considerazione facciano ampio uso di un immaginario di guerra e conflitto e registra non solo la riscrittura, a volte astratta, della sanguinosa Guerra Civile di fine anni Sessanta, ma nota altresì che molti dei momenti (pseudo)democratici nella storia del paese vengono configurati in termini che ricordano la definizione foucauldiana di politica come "guerra continuata con altri mezzi".

La prima parte, "The Exception", esamina la rappresentazione di momenti di emergenza pubblica dichiarati nell'ambito di un confronto armato. Il primo capitolo si sofferma su una selezione delle molte opere che, fin dagli anni Settanta, hanno proposto una narrativizzazione della Guerra Civile. Il capitolo successivo fornisce invece una lettura in chiave comparata e interdisciplinare di due brevi romanzi che raccontano un conflitto non nominato e contribuiscono, attraverso la

descrizione dei due giovani protagonisti, all'acceso dibattito internazionale riguardante la figura del bambino soldato.

La seconda parte, dal titolo "The Rule", considera opere che narrano del fallimento democratico dello stato nigeriano, sottolineando come l'eccezione e la sospensione costituzionale diventino regola nella normale anormalità della Nigeria dittatoriale del dopoguerra. Particolare attenzione viene dedicata, in questo contesto, allo studio della raffigurazione di due spazi, quelli della prigione di regime e della famiglia postcoloniale, all'interno dei quali questo fenomeno assume evidente riconoscibilità.

La terza parte, intitolata "Camps on the Move", analizza romanzi che raccontano di donne combattive che, vittime o complici di pratiche illegali, tentano di contrastare la loro dichiarata superfluità all'interno delle gerarchie biopolitiche che si sviluppano nei 'panorami di guerra' a cui il titolo della tesi fa riferimento. In questo contesto, il capitolo conclusivo rileva come i desideri di mobilità verticale, sociale e ontologica, dei personaggi tendano a risolversi in un movimento orizzontale tra 'campi' agambeniani, tra condizioni di sostanziale invisibilità, ed abbandono, di fronte alla legge.

Si nota infine che i testi studiati non si limitano a denunciare la riduzione dei loro protagonisti a uomini e donne che, secondo la formulazione di Hannah Arendt, non avendo "diritto ad avere diritti" sono paradossalmente esclusi dall'umanità stessa. Ponendo l'accento sul paradosso, senza peraltro risolverlo, essi invitano anche un continuo, ed indispensabile, lavoro di ridefinizione ed espansione delle categorie dell'umano e dell'universale, sottolineando la necessità di riconfigurare il paradigma dei diritti umani e i rapporti tra individuo e stato.

*

This dissertation is concerned with the representation of the human and of the relationship between sovereignty and subjectivity in Nigerian literature. It argues that the Nigerian postcolony is portrayed in the texts under investigation as a site of perpetual emergency, where a progressively more vivid biopoliticisation of politics sanctions the reduction of the postcolonial (non-)citizen to what Italian philosopher Giorgio Agamben has termed “bare life” – a form of life that, exposed to sovereign violence, or caught in the sovereign ban, may be killed without committing homicide. Concentrating in particular, but not exclusively, on contemporary fiction writing, this dissertation aims at examining the aesthetic strategies adopted by a number of postcolonial writers in order to signify the lack of rights protection all too often suffered by the postcolonial (non-)citizen. It will be pointed out that an imagery of war is often employed to describe postcolonial Nigeria as a country where the state of exception and the withdrawal of constitutional protection have become the rule. This study thus will not only investigate the depiction of the Civil War of the late 1960s, but will also show that Nigeria’s fractured post-war times are often configured in terms that recall the Foucauldian definition of politics as “the continuation of war by other means.”

Part One, “The Exception,” aims at analysing the portrayals of moments of state emergency declared in the context of armed struggle. The first chapter is devoted to the discussion of a selected number among the numerous works that, ever since the 1970s, have enlarged the rich corpus of Nigerian Civil War literature. Chapter Two provides a cross-disciplinary, comparative reading of two war novels which narrate an unnamed conflict and which, through the depiction of their young protagonists, contribute to the heated debates regarding the figure of the child soldier.

As indicated by the title of Part Two, “The Rule,” I will then discuss how war – a period of emergency conducive to the supposedly momentary suspension of the rule of law – is presented as becoming the rule in the normal abnormality of post-war dictatorial Nigeria. In this context, particular attention will be devoted to the literary representation of two sites, namely the autocrat’s overcrowded jail and the dysfunctional postcolonial family, where, it will be argued, the phenomenon of the perpetuation of the exception acquires great visibility.

Part Three, captioned “Camps on the Move,” investigates texts recounting the lives of combative women who, either victims or accomplices of illegal practices, do not resign themselves to their superfluous status within the biopolitical hierarchies produced in the context of ‘war-scapes’ of unending exception. It will be noticed that the characters’ ambitions of upward social and ontological mobility are often reduced to a horizontal movement between Agambenian ‘camps,’ between conditions of essential invisibility, and abandonment, before the law.

The texts under examination, however, do not only protest their protagonists’ exclusion from an effective regime of rights, and thus, paradoxically, from humanity itself. By highlighting without resolving the paradox itself, they also invite to resignify and expand the concepts of the universal and of the human, underscoring the need for an agonistic, future-oriented reconfiguration of the human rights paradigm and of the relationships between the individual and the state.

Theoretical Background and the Nigerian Civil War

1. War-scapes of emergency

In 1966, some time before the eruption of the anti-Igbo riots that, killing thousands, contributed to triggering the Biafran secession from the Federation of Nigeria, Igbo photographer Emmanuel Ogbona was abducted and murdered by two non-Igbo soldiers of the 3rd Battalion, his body thrown into the bush. Charged with the crime, the two ‘suspects’ were to be released without trial a short time afterwards, after the case had been withdrawn by the public prosecutor on request of the army authorities, who claimed that it came under their jurisdiction. Such a prevention of the activation of a machinery of justice – a machinery that still functioned *when the victims were not Igbo* – assumed exemplary importance in the eyes of Wole Soyinka. In his prison memoir, *The Man Died*, the writer interpreted the *de facto* impunity granted to the two soldiers as “a deliberate, selective decision of [General] Yakubu Gowon’s government” (24) explaining the “doctrine of justifiable genocide” (21) underpinning the 1966 massacres and the inevitable war that followed. The dramatic episode, Soyinka remarked, emphasised

what happens to human beings and to a nation when any group within that nation is tacitly declared to be outside the law’s protection and is fair game for any man with the slightest grudge of fanatical inclination that turns to homicide. (*Man* 21)

Soyinka’s caustic words on the consequences of the sovereign’s biopolitical

power to confine (part of) its populace to a space that is outside the polity clearly resonate with the main preoccupation of this dissertation, concerned with the representation of the human and of the relationship between sovereignty and subjectivity in Nigerian literature. In what follows, I will argue that postcolonial Nigeria is portrayed in the texts under investigation as a site of perpetual emergency, where a progressively more vivid biopoliticisation of politics sanctions the reduction of the postcolonial (non-)citizen to what Italian philosopher Giorgio Agamben has termed “bare life” – a form of life that, exposed to sovereign violence, or caught in the sovereign ban, may be killed without committing homicide. Concentrating in particular, but not exclusively, on contemporary fiction writing, this dissertation thus aims at examining the aesthetic strategies adopted by the so-called “children of the postcolony” (Waberi) in order to signify the lack of rights protection all too often suffered by the postcolonial subject. An imagery of war is often employed to describe postcolonial Nigeria as a country where the state of exception, and the withdrawal of constitutional protection that goes hand in hand with it, has become the rule. This study thus will not only investigate the depiction of the bloody Civil War of the late 1960s, but will also show that Nigeria’s post-war times are often configured in terms that recall the Foucauldian definition of politics as “the continuation of war by other means” (*Society* 15).

Part One, “The Exception,” has the aim to analyse the literary portrayals of moments of state emergency, declared in the context of armed struggle. The Nigeria-Biafra conflict, the “season of anomy” (Soyinka, *Season*) *par excellence* in Nigerian post-independence history which also initiated the first long-term period of military rule in the country, constitutes an apt point of departure in this respect. The first chapter is thus devoted to the discussion of a selected number among

the numerous works that, ever since the 1970s, have enlarged the rich corpus of Nigerian Civil War literature. It will be contended that these texts highlight the existence, both in Nigeria and in runaway Biafra, of a biopolitical hierarchy of problematic connivances and unexpected oppressions, where sovereign power and private interests often mingle to the point of becoming inextricable, even indistinguishable. Chapter Two provides a cross-disciplinary reading of war novellas by Chris Abani and Uzodinma Iweala, whose unnamed West African conflicts transcend the specifics of the Civil War even as they recall it in many respects. I will consider how the depiction of the young combatants who are at the centre of the narratives, boys who are both victims and perpetrators, contribute to the heated debates regarding the figure of the child soldier and, by means of an in-depth exploration of questions of agency and responsibility, problematise the post-industrial Western notion of childhood as a necessarily innocent status.

As indicated by the title of Part Two, “The Rule,” I will then discuss how war – a period of emergency conducive to the supposedly momentary suspension of the rule of law – is presented as becoming the rule in the normal abnormality of post-war dictatorial Nigeria. The texts studied in this section, while registering the process of dehumanisation suffered by the objects of postcolonial terror, highlight also the (often ambiguous) strategies of resistance to which they recur notwithstanding their disenfranchisement. Chapter Three will focus on the aesthetic representation of indefinite detention in the autocrat’s overcrowded jail by examining texts in which the prison emerges as a metonymy for the Nigeria of the military, a site of violence and limited freedoms. In the following chapter, I will then consider novels where the postcolonial dysfunctional family run with a heavy hand by an omnipotent *paterfamilias* may be read as a synecdoche for a fragmented state that is

similarly characterised by the excesses, or by the uninterested abandonment, of an authoritarian sovereign. In this respect, it will be noticed that intergenerational conflicts which remain essentially unresolved see the fathers paradoxically reproducing within the private sphere those very same forms of “masculine domination” (Bourdieu) to which they too are subjected on a national level.

It thus becomes clear that Nigeria is often presented in contemporary Nigerian writing as a locus where the economically disempowered (non-)citizen is either reduced to expendable life or, at best, condemned to socio-political and economic stasis. Part 3, captioned “Camps on the Move,” recounts the lives of combating women who do not resign themselves to such a condition and rather aspire to achieve social and ontological upward mobility within both local and global biopolitical ladders that are founded on the superfluity of those who, like them, occupy the lower rungs. This last section explores questions of agency and vulnerability as portrayed in three stories of trafficking and smuggling, “narratives of illegality” (Gunning) that suggest that the postcolonial subject’s ambitions of upward mobility are often reduced to a horizontal movement between Agambenian ‘camps,’ between conditions of essential invisibility, and abandonment, before the law. The notion of illegality assumes different articulations and different degrees of ethical and legal decidability in the texts under consideration here. However, what their characters have in common is that they all refuse to be considered simply passive victims of exploitation, and rather reassert their agency – either by countering the commodification of their bodies, or by attempting to manipulate such a commodification to their own advantage.

The depiction of the postcolonial perpetual exception produces an image of Nigeria as an expansive ‘war-scape’ where happiness – and on occasions, mere

survival – is often configured as a daily struggle in which the subject is forced to take up arms, either metaphorically or factually, in order to resist the dehumanising powers of the sovereign. The term ‘war-scape’ is borrowed from US ethnographer Carolyn Nordstrom’s 1997 *A Different Kind of War Story*, her ethnography of the Mozambican conflict. Elaborated on Arjun Appadurai’s notion of ‘ethnoscape,’ Nordstrom’s coinage is there employed to illustrate the interaction between the local and the global in the development of war situations. The neologism does not only refer to material translocal processes of movement of people and goods, but also, and importantly for the purposes of this dissertation, to the continual negotiations of meaning to which the realities of war are conducive, and which determine a “cultural construction of conflict that is continually reconfigured across time and space” (37). This concept, Nordstrom argues, allows “to transcend individual expressions of the war in particular locales, to understand the creation of a *culture of war* throughout Mozambique” (39, emphasis added).

Although aware of the risks of essentialising the specificities of both collective and individual experiences of suffering, I would argue that the “culture of war” Nordstrom writes about can be fruitfully read as a peculiarity of the African postcolonial existence at large, since, as Ato Quayson warns,

[w]ar, the ultimate culture of impunity, is only an exacerbation of what is essentially an endemic form of social disorder whose spasmodic expressions can be glimpsed in the violent land seizures in Zimbabwe today, the chaotic violence on the streets of Lagos, and the pillage of natural resources in Sierra Leone, Angola, and other places. (Quayson, *Calibrations* 73)

Nordstrom’s ‘war-scape’ can thus be expanded as a signifier to include the physical and metaphysical consequences of the excesses of postcolonial power, and will be employed here to identify the aforementioned trend in contemporary Nigerian

writing, where an imaginary of unending conflict is produced through the representation of the postcolony, and of the postcolonial subject, as locked in a condition of perpetual exception.

The Nigerian war-scapes portrayed in the works I will discuss testify to the failure of the postcolonial state – or rather, they disclose the overlapping economies of violence apparently embedded in the history of a (dys)functional, or consistently chaotic, state. Although more or less explicitly considering the causes and potential responses to the socio-political crises that have troubled Nigeria since its birth, these texts place particular emphasis on the actual consequences that such an instability has on the day-to-day existences, on the humanity, of the men and women who are caught in the ensuing culture of violence. This dissertation will thus investigate images of the human subjected to, but also conniving with, multifarious forms of oppression and exploitation. At the same time, it will identify the complex, and at times controversial or contradictory, patterns of resistance to brutalisation that these narratives tentatively offer as a means to reassert the characters' humanity.

As suggested above, with the exception of the first chapter, this study will predominantly concentrate on contemporary fiction writing, and in particular on the works of authors such as Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie, Chris Abani, Uzodinma Iweala, Helon Habila, Chika Unigwe and Sefi Atta – all of whom are representative voices of what is commonly referred to as 'third-generation' Nigerian literature. These writers have been garnering increasingly appreciative reception in the last decade, their texts being part of a rapidly growing corpus of new-millennium Nigerian fiction that has been almost immediately canonised, particularly in international circuits, and that, because of its challenging breadth, variety

and beauty, is often perceived as a meaningful template for initiating an inquiry into the field of contemporary African writing (cf. Adesanmi and Dunton “Nigeria’s Third Generation” 14-15). Their predecessors – first-generation writers such as Chinua Achebe, Wole Soyinka, Flora Nwapa and Cyprian Ekwensi, as well as slightly younger, second-generation writers such as Buchi Emecheta, Femi Osofisan, Festus Iyayi and Niyi Osundare – began to publish their works respectively in the period around the country’s independence and during the 1970s. While all of them were born into the colonial event, the formative years of second-generation writers “were mostly shaped by independence and its aftermath of disillusionment and stasis” (Adesanmi and Dunton 14). By such a generational account, third-generation African literature comprises instead those authors whom Djiboutian writer Abdourahman Waberi has called, with a famous formulation, “the children of the postcolony”: born after 1960, the emblematic year of African independence, their texts began to appear in the mid-1980s – a literary production that, in the Nigerian context, was at least for a decade characterised by the dominance of the poetic medium (Adesanmi and Dunton 8).

This genealogical terminology, which has achieved widespread authority in literary criticism, might certainly “lose coherence and lapse into pointillistic absurdity when examined too closely” (Kurtz 24). Nevertheless, it does retain some usefulness when deployed to systematise certain aesthetic and thematic trends broadly characterising each generation’s production. Critics have generally emphasised, for example, that third-generation texts, “born into the scopic regime of the postcolonial and the postmodern” (Adesanmi and Dunton 15), exhibit a common tendency to avoid counter-discursive aesthetics in favour of textualities which often assume transnational, on occasions even post-national, contours. Other dis-

tinctive aspects detected in contemporary Nigerian writing include the backward-looking thematisation of the recent and less recent traumas of the civil war and of the dictatorial regimes of the 1980s and 1990s, alongside the fact that these authors labour under a certain “anxiety of influence,” determined by the awareness of the long shadows cast by those giants of Nigerian literature who preceded them (Kurtz 25).

Of course, as Harry Garuba has noticed, the messy, if unavoidable, business of literary categorisation, while helpful insofar as it provides an interpretive paradigm that enables strategic generalisation, produces temporal labels which are descriptive rather than prescriptive, and which must in fact be continuously challenged, the porousness of their boundaries inviting continuous revision, “their reversibility inscribed, as it were, at the heart of their making” (“Unbearable Lightness” 51). And this is not only, or not so much, due to the fact that individual collocations within a strict generational paradigm often remain uncertain,¹ but also to the awareness that in certain cases it is more useful to recognise common orientations, rather than concentrating on ruptures, between generations. In particular, within the context of Nigerian Civil War fiction, which is what most interests me for the purposes of this dissertation, the aforementioned generational differentiation is best substituted in favour of an analytical framework subsuming first- and second-generation writers’ war literature under a sole category. As all of these writers were adults or young adults when hostilities broke out, their production can be analysed along comparable lines, as the different degrees of fictional elabo-

¹ A writer such as John Munonye, for example, is difficult to classify along strict generational lines: born in 1929, he “qualifies by his age and experience to be classified with the older generation except that the bulk of his works were written and published only after the Civil War” (Osofisan, “The Alternative Tradition” 174).

ration and aesthetic success it exhibits do not strictly depend on the individual writer's age or on the chronological distance from the war but rather on the craft of each author and on his/her ability to master a traumatic subject matter after achieving a certain degree of emotional detachment from it (Feuser, "Nigeria's Civil War in Fiction" 150; Nwahunanya, "Aesthetics").

This study will thus not adopt a generational categorisation, and will rather refer to the war literature that has been published in the 1970s and early 80s as a coherent, if multi-faceted, 'first-wave' production. As will be noticed in Chapter One, after a decade of relative silence in the 1990s, this first-wave production has been followed by a second wave at the turn of the century – a turn that has coincided, amongst other things, with the end of military despotism and with the return of the genre of the novel to the forefront of Nigerian literature (Adesanmi and Dunton 9; see Chapter 1.1).

2. From the exception to the rule

The theoretical premises on which this dissertation is founded owe much to the endeavour of Italian philosopher Giorgio Agamben, and in particular to his analyses of the state of exception and of the biopolitical hold of the sovereign on those *homines sacri* who are reduced to "bare life" in a modernity of oxymoronic perpetual emergency. In his seminal *Homo Sacer: Sovereign Power and Bare Life*, Agamben revises the Foucauldian discussion of bio-power as a practice of state discipline marking the transition to modernity. Foucault has famously written that, starting from the 17th century, the traditional, 'negative' right of the sovereign "to take life or let live" when its own survival was in danger was replaced by a regula-

tory, positive “power to *foster* life or *disallow* it to the point of death” (*Sexuality* 138). The “controlled insertion of bodies into the machinery of production and the adjustment of the phenomena of population” thereby ensuing constituted indispensable aspects of the development of capitalism (141), and it was in this context, Foucault explains, that “*for the first time in history* [...] biological existence was reflected in political existence” (142, emphasis added). Man, who had been for millennia the Aristotelian “living animal with additional capacity for a political existence,” became thus “an animal whose politics places his existence as a living being in question” (143).

Albeit not denying the increased biopoliticisation of modern life, Agamben, differently from Foucault, contends that biological life and the political have always been essentially integrated – so much so that it can even be maintained that “*the production of a biopolitical body is the original activity of sovereign power*” (*Homo Sacer* 6). In other words, he argues that sovereignty is not simply, as Carl Schmitt had defined it, a power external to the law that decides on the exception, thereby suspending law itself. On the contrary, it is the exceptional structure through which law refers to life and includes it in itself through its own suspension (28). The form of life that is thus produced by the sovereign is called “bare life” by Agamben, and is described as a politicised zone of indistinction that does not conform to either ideas of life as retrieved in ancient, and in particular Aristotelian, philosophy: Agamben’s bare life is neither $\zeta\omicron\bar{\epsilon}$, biological life, nor *bios*, “the form or way of living proper to an individual or group” within the context of the polis (1). Bare life, Agamben insists, is rather a form of life that is produced whenever $\zeta\omicron\bar{\epsilon}$ is separated from *bios*, and *bios* calls $\zeta\omicron\bar{\epsilon}$ into question. It is a life that is simultaneously inside and outside the realm of the political, with which it is in a relation of inclusive

exclusion, of sovereign abandonment, relegated to a space where it is at the constant mercy of sovereign violence. In order to explore the nature of this “bare life,” or “life exposed to death” (88), that “constitutes the first content of sovereign power” (83), Agamben’s analysis focuses on an obscure figure of Roman law, *homo sacer*, which designated a human being who, having committed a serious crime, could not be sacrificed and yet may be killed with impunity. Simultaneously excluded from human and divine law, *homo sacer* is therefore the emblem of the human exposed to sovereign exception: because “the sovereign sphere is the sphere in which it is permitted to kill without committing homicide and without celebrating a sacrifice, and sacred life [...] is the life that has been captured in this sphere” (83).

Agamben further argues that since modern politics has increasingly turned into biopolitics, in parallel with the process by which the exception, as Walter Benjamin had predicted, has become the rule (“Theses” 257), late modernity is an age in which the founding, intimate relationship linking the sovereign and the biopolitical body has been brought to the fore with extreme, dramatic clarity: in Agamben’s words, “our age is that of an unsacrificeable life that has nevertheless become capable of being killed to an unprecedented degree” (114). It is in this sense that it can be stated that “we are all virtually *homines sacri*?” (115): indeed, “[w]hen life and politics – originally divided, and linked together by means of the no-man’s land of the state of exception that is inhabited by bare life – begin to become one, all life becomes sacred and all politics becomes the exception” (148). In this context, the totalitarian states of 20th-century Europe constitute exemplary sites of biopolitical power – a power that has become exclusively thanatopolical – while the camp emerges as the hidden matrix of contemporary politics: it is,

Agamben writes, “the pure, absolute, and impassable biopolitical space (insofar as it is founded solely on the state of exception) [...], whose metamorphoses and disguises we will have to learn to recognize” (123).

I believe that the Agambenian paradigm offers invaluable resources for interpreting the history, and the aesthetic representation, of the Nigerian postcolony – and, for that matter, of a contemporaneity that has all too often seen the violent resurgence of a sovereign power that was too quickly declared dead, or dying, on the part of hasty analysts. All the same, the literature under scrutiny in this study has confirmed that the critic must be ready to contest, or at least complete, some of its most generalising contentions.

In particular, it seems to me that the texts tend to dispute Agamben’s description of the world of the exception as a polarised one, inhabited by the sovereign and its counterpart, in the form of a bare life that is the de-politicised outcome of its originary biopolitical activity. Such a depiction is for example complicated by the paradoxical alliance between sovereign and non-sovereign actors in the exercise of forms of biopolitical and pseudo-biopolitical violence against specific groups defined along ethnic, class and gender lines. It is therefore no coincidence that Cameroonian scholar Achille Mbembe, one of the major theorists of the postcolonial state, has provided an extensive definition of sovereignty. Distanting himself from traditional accounts based on the Westphalian state-nation-territory triad, Mbembe “assumes that the ultimate expression of sovereignty resides, to a large degree, in the power and the capacity to dictate who may live and who must die” (“Necropolitics” 11). As he has asserted elsewhere, it is indeed essential to remember that in the context of the postcolony thanato-power is often diffracted at all levels of society by means of violent practices which are conducive

to “a confusion between power and fact, [...] public affairs and private government” (“At the Edge” 260).

Moreover, the literary corpus of this dissertation seems to resist Agamben’s depiction of the subject reduced to bare life as inherently passive, or rather ‘passivized,’ by presenting the reader with multifarious forms of *political* agency – either resistant or affirmative – that are enacted on the part of presumably *de-politicised* subjects. This is an aspect that does not seem to be contemplated, let alone presented as potentially effective, within the Agambenian discourse on bare life. Indeed, if we intend bare life as an expendable life that has been banned from the domains of the legal and the political, then it remains to be explained how these non-citizens can, on occasions, manifest forms of social and political agency. In what follows, it will be noticed that subjects can (attempt to) contest the very original activity of the sovereign, its very right to decide on the lives of its subjects. Even more interestingly, first-wave authors have often imagined processes of politicisation of bare life – examples of which could be, as will be seen, Ken Saro-Wiwa’s Sozaboy’s claims of inclusion within the human family, or the sneers of Achebe’s starving refugees.

It is debatable whether these characters’ actions are effective in questioning the biopolitical violence that, Agamben contends, lies at the basis of sovereign activity, or whether they, in the final analysis, do not, in fact cannot counter the inevitable production of those encamped sites that are created in the state of exception. As William Walters has put it, talking about the small acts of *de facto* or “informal citizenship” (Sassen) through which migrants often manage to constitute themselves as political agents, followers of Agamben would probably point out that such agonistic expressions of agency, while on occasions successful, ultimate-

ly do not dismantle the logic of sovereign power, in that they “do not necessarily challenge the space of the camp but [...] merely reshape the lines which define it” (“Mapping” 204). However, he continues, the appreciation of such acts of affirmation, even when not heroic, or radical, has the potential to reveal that “the sovereign lines associated with the camp are more mutable than otherwise might be assumed” (206). Judith Butler, herself very much indebted to Agamben’s theorisations, has similarly observed that forms of performative resistance and affirmation such as these do not find easy collocation within the Agambenian (and, for that matter, the Arendtian) paradigm and call for the development of a new language capable to describe them (Butler and Spivak, *Who Sings* 62), while at the same inviting to oppose any “unacceptable juridical restriction on the political” as simply co-terminous with citizenship status (39).²

The texts under consideration here often resist the seemingly apocalyptic tones of certain Agambenian assumptions, leaving space for some forms of resistance in the face of tyranny even when they do not present them as simplistically successful, let alone decisive. Their characters’ fights do not necessarily suggest the need to move into that post-biopolitical world that, for Agamben, is necessarily post-sovereign, and is the only site from where a solution to the historical impasse in which our late modernity is currently caught can be imagined. And indeed, as Butler has pointed out, it is by no means certain that such a post-

² Jenny Edkins and Véronique Pin-Fat have argued that the sole strategies for displacing the logic of sovereign power lie either in the refusal of drawing any distinction between *zōē* and *bios* or in the complementary acceptance of bare life, whereby the subject demands recognition of his/her status as nothing but bare life. Their reading, although extremely fascinating, is also discouraging, as the examples illustrated to explain its workings are so extreme, or heroic (such as for example the phenomenon of lip sewing among asylum seekers) as to raise doubts regarding their feasibility.

sovereign order is possible, let alone desirable (*Who Sings*). However, through their depictions of the brutal victories of the sovereign, and of their consequences, as well as of the tiny successes of its subjects, these works do highlight the need to reformulate the categories through which we think of the human, of sovereign power, and of the relationship between the two. In so doing, they point at the fact that these redefinitions must be accompanied by the urgent task of rethinking human rights discourse as such – a discourse whose legal articulation has too often proved incapable of protecting human beings from sovereign, as well as non-sovereign, abuses. So, if they certainly call for a reconfiguration of human rights, highlighting many of its founding paradoxes, at the same time they do not (always) seem to share Agamben’s scepticism about human rights as a mystification that, by positing as object of protection that same bare life that is the first content of sovereignty, shares a “secret solidarity” with the powers it seeks to oppose (*Homo Sacer* 133).

Doubts such as those just outlined suggest that future engagement with Agamben’s oeuvre should perhaps be more careful than has so far been. Still, it is undoubted that certain concepts, as developed in his political philosophy, have proved extremely useful for the analysis of the texts discussed here. For example, it will be noticed that traces of Agamben’s morphic ‘camp,’ as the archetypal locale of modern biopolitics, can be found in different guises in contemporary Nigerian writing. Chronotopes such as refugee camps, the prison under despotic rule or the metropolitan slum – peripheral topologies at the centre of many of the texts under discussion here – although of course exhibiting different degrees of similarity with the historical phenomenon of the concentration camp, similarly epitomise

the entrenched reality which originates when the exception becomes the rule.³

The Nigerian postcolony is indeed represented in contemporary Nigerian literature as a reality that is turning into one of Achille Mbembe's "*death-worlds*" ("Necropolitics," 40) – namely, zones where the central project of sovereignty is "*the generalized instrumentalization of human existence and the material destruction of human bodies and populations*" (14). In other words, the diffuse presence and "necropower" of the morphing, opposing "war machines" (Deleuze and Guattari 351-423) which will be encountered in these works are not only conducive to, but, more importantly, founded on, an axiom asserting the expendable nature of (certain forms of) human life.

3. The Nigerian Civil War and the unending transition to democracy

In the introduction to their edited volume *The Politics of Memory*, Ifi Amadiume and Abdullahi An-Na'im comment on the importance of the Biafran tragic débâcle within the context of Africa's modernity. "[T]he first expression of massive suffering inflicted on society by an internal African war" (2), the Civil War has emerged as an early symbol of internecine postcolonial conflict, emblematic in that it followed Nigerian independence from British rule by less than seven years, resulting in the death of estimated one to three million people before its conclusion, in January 1970. Writing in 2000, the editors noticed that the war had paradoxically sunk into oblivion in contemporary political discourse. This was a consequence, amongst other things, of the post-war governmental invitation to forgive (or ra-

³ Indeed, as Catherine Mills clearly puts it, "for Agamben the camp is a *topological* figure. Rather than describing and delimiting a particular locale, the camp reveals an abstract logic that is by no means limited to the geographical space of internment" (90).

ther forget) the events of Biafra as the only means to achieve reconciliation (Amadiume 41). And yet, Amadiume and An-Na'im add, "30 years later, the ghost of Biafra haunts the discourse on social justice and national security in Nigeria" (3) – a country that today, more than fifty years after its independence, is torn apart by many of the causes that led to the outbreak of the hostilities in 1967. Returning to the traumatic past in order to acknowledge, if not exorcise, the haunting of the Nigerian Civil War is therefore the responsibility of the intellectual interested in countering the "politics of amnesia and selective memory" promoted by much post-war governmental policy (Amadiume 41), so as to find a way to "truth, healing and social justice" (54). The lack of political closure regarding the Nigerian Civil War is confirmed, for Amadiume, by the fact that "the unvoiced suffering of trauma continues to surface on at critical moments" (41) – a thesis which has been recently confirmed by the words of neo-elected President Goodluck Jonathan, who in April 2011 described the sectarian violence which followed his appointment as a "sad reminder" of the political unrest that, decades before, had led to the Civil War (BBC News).

The Nigerian Civil War of 1967-1970, also known as the Nigeria-Biafra War, began after the unilateral declaration of independence of the former Eastern Region of Nigeria, which seceded from the federation in the belief that the safety of its – predominantly Igbo – population could not be guaranteed in a united country. The years since independence had been extremely turbulent, as "the federal system that had solidified regional divisions in the 1950s devolved into utter dysfunction" (Falola and Heaton 165). The contest among the major political parties had assumed indeed a highly confrontational dimension both at the regional and the federal levels, reaching critical proportions during the fraudulent 1962-1963

elections and, even more, in the following years, when the partially boycotted elections of 1964 and 1965 were held in a climate of fear, obstruction and intimidation.⁴ It is no wonder that the coup d'état of January 15, 1966, when Prime Minister Tafawa Balewa was killed, alongside two regional premiers and a number of northern military officers, was initially welcomed by the majority of the population, whose expectations about the democratic process had been bitterly disappointed. However, the central role played by Igbo officers during the killings and in the following months corroborated the alarmed views that had emerged in many Northern quarters, where the coup had been interpreted as an Igbo attempt to seize power. This fomented strong anti-Igbo sentiment in a country that, no doubt also as a consequence of the "divide-and-rule" colonial policy which had strategically institutionalised and sanctified ethnic diversity (Amuta, "The Nigerian Civil War" 87), had thus far been characterised by entrenched regionalism and widespread, reciprocal fears of ethnic "domination" (Falola and Heaton 165). In the July counter-coup that followed, the Igbo Head of State Aguiyi Ironsi was captured and murdered along with numerous Igbo officers, and Lieutenant Colonel Yakubu Gowon succeeded him as supreme commander of the armed forces and new head of state.

Meanwhile, the Igbo and the other easterners who resided in the North had been the target of violent attacks which reached an unprecedented peak in September, when they led to the death of estimated thousands, arousing also minor

⁴ These events suggests that, even as the Nigerian Civil War no doubt constitutes an emblematic moment, both symbolically and factually, within Nigeria's history of exceptional rule, it is by no means obvious that prior to the events of 1966 constitutional protection was intact, or even meaningful, in a country born into the exception of colonial rule. This aspect is hinted at in many of the texts taken into consideration here (see in particular Chapter Three).

revenge killings of northerners who lived in the Eastern Region (Stremlau 38). When, on May 30, 1967, Lieutenant Colonel Chukwuemeka Ojukwu, up till then the governor of the Eastern Region, unilaterally declared the independence of the newly founded “Republic of Biafra,” Gowon’s government proclaimed the state of emergency in Nigeria and imposed an embargo on the runaway region. What was meant to be a quick “police action” to regain control of the oil-rich eastern area turned into a thirty-month-long “total war” (Gowon, qtd. in Uwechue 8) and resulted in heavy casualties, concentrated in particular on the Biafran side as a consequence of the economic blockade imposed on a progressively shrinking enclave. The humanitarian crisis that followed was so devastating that it earned Biafra wide international sympathies on the part of both non-governmental and governmental organisations.⁵ Despite its notable resilience, the defeat of the Republic of Biafra proved inevitable, and on January 10, 1970, Ojukwu fled to the Ivory Coast “in search of peace” (qtd. in Odogwu 169). Two days later, Major General Philip Efiang announced Biafra’s surrender.

International observers writing in the months that followed tended to agree that the aftermath of the war, generally speaking, was “bloodless” and “merciful” (de St. Jorre 404). Gowon declared a general amnesty, claiming that there was no “victor” nor “vanquished” in what must be considered a “war of brothers” (qtd. in Osaghae 69).⁶ Even as it is undoubted that “several ethnic and regional fissures

⁵ Four African states (Tanzania, Gabon, Ivory Coast, and Zambia) even recognised Biafra in 1968, while Haiti’s recognition followed 1989 (Stremlau 127-141). As John Stremlau notices, diplomatic recognition did not result in the establishment of normal diplomatic relations (128) and should be “best regarded as one more indication of the rising international anxiety over the fate of the Ibo people rather than as any endorsement of Biafran secession” (141).

⁶ In this respect, however, in a polemical passage of his controversial 2012 war memoir, *There Was a Country*, Achebe has written: “There are many international observers who

continued to exist” in Nigeria, they were temporarily marginalised in the 1970s due to the rapid expansion of the petroleum industry, Nigeria’s blessing and curse (Falola and Heaton 181). Shortly after the war, Gowon announced that the country would return to civilian rule within two years, but the state of emergency proclaimed in 1966 would not be lifted until 1979, when the new constitution signalling the establishment of the Second Republic was signed into law (Osaghae 95). Gowon had been in the meantime removed from power in the 1975 bloodless coup that had initiated the so-called Mohammed/Obasanjo regime.

The short-lived Second Republic exhibited more continuities than discontinuities with the previous military regimes, as it was characterised by “corruption, mismanagement of funds, and blatant disregard for the democratic process” (Falola and Heaton 208). As had happened in 1966, the discontent of civil society began to be voiced in an apparently paradoxical invocation of military intervention. The coup d’état of December 31, 1983, which ended the Second Republic and brought General Muhammadu Buhari to power, ushered in a fifteen-year-long era of military rule that reasserted the army’s political hegemony in the country. As Marcella Emiliani has noticed, not only had the military acquired such an authority that they could pose themselves above law and politics, but “politics itself [...] was by now becoming an inherently military business” (125, my translation).⁷ The

believe that Gowon’s actions after the war were magnanimous and laudable. There are tons of treatises that talk about how the Igbo were wonderfully integrated into Nigeria. Well, I have news for them: the Igbo were not and continue not to be reintegrated into Nigeria, one of the main reasons for the country’s continued backwardness, in my estimation” (235). A similar contention had been made by Achebe some time before in an article titled “The Genocidal Biafran War Still Haunts Nigeria,” which appeared in online edition of *The Guardian* newspaper on October 2, 2012 and which has predictably triggered a veritable cyber-war on many Nigerian websites (see Verissimo).

⁷ For an analysis of the militarisation of Nigerian life, see Agozino.

end of the Second Republic, in other words, confirmed that “[m]ilitary coups and military rule (which began as an emergency aberration) [had become] a seemingly permanent feature of Nigerian politics” (Siollun 11).

During Muhammadu Buhari’s dictatorship, after the suspension and modification of sections of the 1979 constitution, a series of decrees were adopted that, by legitimating any abuse of power – including detention without trial for virtually any reason – paved the way for the flourishing of the successive military regimes (see Emiliani 129-130). The years of General Ibrahim Babangida’s and General Sani Abacha’s dictatorships are indeed remembered as some of the bleakest of Nigerian history. Babangida’s supposed commitment to democratic transition turned out to be, once again, an unending process which, continuously postponed, manipulated and distorted, ultimately seemed to have the only, “circular” aim of consolidating what turned out to be a eight-year-long rule, in the tradition that Achille Mbembe has recognised as peculiar of (post)colonial *commandement* (*Postcolony* 32). The June 1993 presidential elections that should have led to the (in fact abortive) Third Republic were *de facto* annulled by the Babangida junta. Most historians, however, read this event as one that, while thwarting all hopes of democratic transition in the country, also precluded the imminent end of the dictator’s rule. Indeed, in the great unrest that followed the elections, Nigeria appeared to be on the brink of anarchy (Falola and Heaton 277) – so much so that not even Babangida’s apparatus of state suppression proved sufficient to quell the revolts.⁸ The spectre of Biafra reappeared with insistence when many activists, particularly in the West and in the East, began to threaten secession from the federation if the

⁸ His impotency was confirmed by the dictator’s tragicomic threats to proclaim the state of emergency in many areas of the country (Osaghae 257).

election results were not restored. It was in this context that the dictator agreed to hand power to an Interim Governing Council. The latter, however, was soon dissolved at the hands of General Sani Abacha, who proclaimed himself head of state and was to become the bloodiest dictator of Nigeria's postcolonial history.

The events of the post-war context that have been sketched so far provide clear evidence of the process which slowly transformed the Nigerian postcolony into a country of virtually continual exception, with the figure of the violent military autocrat becoming the ultimate embodiment of a form of absolute sovereignty. As Wale Adebani and Ebenezer Obadare have effectively put it,

From [the 1966 coup onwards], a specific form of local *politicised* violence – not unrelated to, even if sometimes in opposition to, the old metropolitan and now neo-colonial apparatuses of political violence – re-defined itself as an elaborate instrument of organising for and against power. [...] Whether that violence consolidates, re-establishes or attempts to break existing violence; whether it is practised as a military coup or counter-coup, a civil uprising or ethno-regional, interethnic, interfaith or political violent clashes, hegemonic or counter-hegemonic suppression, oppression or revolt, pro-democratic, student and workers' riots or election violence, police killings, pogrom, rebellion or civil war, Nigeria has become a permanent *state of emergencies* with hardly any means, method, or institutions for efficiently addressing emergencies beyond more violence. ("Introducing" 391)

The Abacha regime was emblematic in this sense, as it reached such unparalleled levels of suppression of dissent that the country found itself increasingly isolated from the international community. The event which is remembered, both in Nigeria and abroad, as epitomising Abacha's utter disregard for justice and human rights is of course the execution of writer and minority rights activist Ken Saro-Wiwa. Saro-Wiwa had been the founder, in 1990, of the Movement for the Survival of the Ogoni People (MOSOP), an organisation which campaigns non-violently against the pervasive environmental damages caused by oil extraction in the area of the Niger Delta. On November 10, 1995, he was hanged alongside

eight other fellow dissidents for their alleged implication in the killing of four pro-government Ogoni leaders (Cayford). However, the sanctions imposed on Nigeria on the part of the international community following Saro-Wiwa's death were so inadequate that, rather than stimulating a democratising response on the part of the regime under attack, they evidenced the weakness of its international counterparts (Emiliani 279). Similarly to what had happened during Babangida's rule, the scheduled procedure for the transition to democracy, which should have begun in 1994, was not being respected, and the sham transition to civilian rule that would have led to Abacha being presumably re-elected as the single presidential candidate was prevented by his untimely death from an apparent heart attack on June 8, 1998.

Power was finally transferred back to a civilian administration in 1999, when former military ruler Olusegun Obasanjo became president after severely flawed elections. His controversial two-term presidency, while garnering undoubted successes at the international level (Alli), has been widely criticised by a number of scholars who have argued that this period, expected to lay solid foundations for a renewed democracy, is in fact responsible for the stage of suspended democratisation in which the country is apparently stuck. Said Adejumobi, for example, has observed that the "culture of executive impunity" that characterised the Obasanjo regime led to the continuous accumulation of power in the hands of a president who "became the fulcrum of policies, decisions, actions, and virtually all matters of state" (7). More vitriolic analyses, commenting on the autocratic decay of the last years of his tenure,⁹ have gone so far as to emphasise the "astonishing and

⁹ On the occasion of the race for presidency in 2007, Obasanjo was indeed at the centre of a fierce controversy as a bill was introduced in the federal legislature for the purpose of amending the 1999 constitution so as to allow him to run for a third presidency. The

chilling similarities between the end of the Abacha inquisition and the tail end of the Obasanjo dispensation,” once again indicting the worrisome erosion of democratic governance in favour of a process where the “normalisation of the abnormal” has taken place (Williams). Femi Falana, amongst others, has noticed that the credibility of the Obasanjo administration ebbed also as a consequence of an alarmingly poor human rights record, with extrajudicial killings and cases of brutal political assassination committed at the hands of the numerous formal and informal war machines competing for the monopoly of violence in post-military Nigeria. A still powerful army, ethnic militias, killing squads hired by prominent politicians, the police: all of these forces have contributed to generating a widespread sense of insecurity, fear and latent violence that, Falana suggests, is discernible in many areas of the country (see Falana, esp. 134 ff.).

The appointment of Umaru Yar’Adua as president in 2007, once again after massively rigged elections, was nonetheless significant in that it signalled the first transfer of power from civilian to civilian in the country. Yet, the post-military era has seen the resurgence of “inter-ethnic and inter-faith low-intensity wars” (Adebanwi, “Contesting” 13) that have manifested themselves also in the form of terrorist attacks by the jihadist terrorist organisation Boko Haram – a fact that testifies to the still fractured nature of Nigerian society, where the spectre of the emergency represents a palpable threat that, on many occasions, has become, again, reality.¹⁰ Governmental unaccountability, corruption and power abuses,

bill was ultimately not ratified and Obasanjo stepped down from office after the 2007 elections. Obasanjo has rejected all accusations of being implicated in the so-called “Third term agenda,” but the event has received mixed interpretations.

¹⁰ After the transition to democracy, the state of emergency has been proclaimed on several occasions in certain states of the federation. Obasanjo declared it in May 2004 (Plateau State), in October 2006 and April 2007 (Ekiti State). President Goodluck Jonathan,

alongside the extreme poverty of the majority of the putative citizens of Nigeria, who have little or no access to infrastructural, medical and educational facilities, are only some of the socio-political issues that keep on plaguing the federation and that are captured in much contemporary Nigerian literature. This suggests the need to be aware of the complex history of the country when reading the beautiful literature through which the aforementioned writers describe the failures and resilience, the connivances and humanity of those people who, like their fellow countrymen and women, are forced to live in the exception. If it is true that the Nigerian Civil War “remains perhaps the greatest signifier of what many assume to be the irreconcilable nature of the world views and the aspirations of the component parts of the Nigerian union” (Adebanwi and Obadare, “Introducing” 392), then its imaginative representation and metamorphic reconfiguration in this recent writing speaks of a sore that is still bleeding, and of expansive “war-scapes” whose biopolitical logic demands to be addressed.

4. Representing postcolonial citizenship and human rights

Writing in the aftermath of the Second World War, Hannah Arendt famously declared that the horrific events that had occurred in totalitarian Europe had sanctioned “the end of the Rights of Man” (*Totalitarianism* 267). The massive denaturalisations that followed the Great War had shown how the supposedly inalienable ‘natural’ rights, to which a human being should be entitled for the sole reason of being human, “proved to be unenforceable [...] whenever people appeared who

Yar’Ardua’s successor, after the escalation of religious tensions that took place in December 2011, declared the emergency in certain Local Government Areas of the Borno, Yobe, Plateau and Niger States. The emergency was lifted in July 2012.

were no longer citizens of any sovereign state” (293). Not only were *apatrides* and refugees not granted the protection of any ‘human’ right as such; it also became apparent that the human being deprived of political status, the “man who is nothing but a man,” was destined to lose “the very qualities which ma[de] it possible for other people to treat him as a fellow-man” (300).¹¹ In Arendt’s formulation,

[w]e became aware of the existence of *a right to have rights* [...] and a right to belong to some kind of organized community, only when millions of people emerged who had lost and could not regain these rights because of the new global political situation. (296-297, emphasis added)

Arendt writes that such a “right to have rights,” a concept she glosses as “the right of every individual to belong to humanity” (298), is one that may be guaranteed only by a cosmopolitan community (or rather, by “humanity itself”). However, she is quick to warn, “[i]t is by no means certain whether this is possible” (298). Arendt thus couples her commentary on the decline of the nation-state with strong scepticism about a ‘world government’ as an ideal allowing the promotion and realisation of human rights. Thus, saying that the non-citizens living in the world of totalitarianism have no “*right to have rights*” meant that they were granted neither the first ‘right’ of Arendt’s phrase, which evokes a universal “moral imperative,” nor the second, where the term is used in its “juridical-civil” meaning (Benhabib 56 ff.).

Merging discourses on citizenship rights and human rights can be seen as an

¹¹ Agamben’s “bare life” is indebted to but does not perfectly overlap with Arendt’s notion of the “abstract nakedness of being human” (*Totalitarianism* 299) since, as Agamben warns, “a biopolitical analysis is altogether lacking” in Arendt’s discussion of the perplexities of the rights of man (*Homo Sacer* 4). Arendt’s figure of the stateless human being is perhaps closer to what Agamben refers to as *zōē*. The confusion about the two notions that plagues many commentaries on Agamben’s *oeuvre* derives partially from Agamben’s own inconsistencies, as he himself at times seems to conflate the two notions of “bare life” and *zōē* (Mills 75).

inappropriate analytical operation, as it conflates the categories of the particular and of the universal. However, it is still very often the case that “although, under a mantle of institutionalized human rights discourse, the rights of the person transcend those of the citizen, they are still realized through membership in a state” (Soysal 165). In other words, notwithstanding the current expansive redefinition of ‘individual’ rights as ‘human’ rights at the transnational level, and the apparent crisis of the Westphalian (nation-)state and of the traditional concept of citizenship under the centrifugal politico-economic forces of globalisation (Falk, “Decline”),¹² human rights are for the most part implemented at the level of the state, an institution that is, paradoxically, “both indispensable and at the same time in need of deep repair or transcendence” (Benhabib in Gordon-Zolov 277).¹³ Despite the considerable appeal of the inclusive idea that “every person anywhere in the world, irrespective of citizenship or territorial legislation, has some basic rights, which others should respect” (Sen 315), yet it cannot be denied that supranational protection of human rights is on most occasions still very weak. As the works discussed in this dissertation suggest, moreover, it is essential to bear in mind that the state often remains one of the most virulent perpetrators of human rights abuses against its putative citizens.

¹² More generally, it must be remembered that this discourse on citizenship and its changing character refers to an essentially Western experience, which “has not taken existential hold in non-Western societies nearly to the extent as have such other quintessential Western conceptions as territorial sovereignty, international diplomacy, the rule of law, and even human rights” (Falk, “Decline” 6).

¹³ As some of the novels studied Chapters 4 and 5 make clear, the resilience of Westphalian citizenship is particularly evident in the control of world mobility, which is still an eminently statist prerogative (Falk, *Achieving* 72). The case of the right to asylum provides an emblematic example of this: indeed, even if it is recognised as a *human* right under Article 14 of the UN Universal Declaration, still “the *obligation to grant asylum* continues to be jealously guarded by states as a sovereign privilege” (Benhabib 69).

It is in this context that Arendt's discussion of citizenship and human rights provides a valuable insight into the encounters, and confrontations, between the (non-)citizens of Nigeria and their country in Nigerian writing. The stories told by the authors I analyse in what follows can indeed be broadly read as stories of statelessness. And this is not only true of the civil war narratives of Part One, where competing claims to state sovereignty leave human beings at the mercy of the violence of a neo-hobbesian world; nor is this reading limited to the case of the undocumented women whose attempts to find happiness abroad will be studied in Part Three. On the contrary, it will be shown that also the characters of Part Two, who either decide or have no choice but to stay put, are in fact depicted as "stateless citizens" – an oxymoronic phrase that I employ to indicate the condition of *de facto* statelessness that is born in the perpetual exception where constitutional protection is withdrawn.¹⁴

In other words, it will be shown that the characters of these works, in the emergency that turns the postcolony into an all-encompassing camp of limited liberties and not-so-porous borders, are presented as if they were *apatrides in their own country*. Although formal members of the postcolonial sovereign state, they find themselves in a condition of inclusive exclusion in relation with it, as suggested by Olufemi Taiwo's provocative claim that "there are *no* citizens in Nigeria, we only have citizens *of* Nigeria" (qtd. in Adebani, "Contesting" 15). As Obadare

¹⁴ While some scholars are of the view that a person's nationality can be ineffective both inside and outside of his or her country of nationality, in international law, *de facto* stateless persons are generally more restrictively defined as "persons outside the country of their nationality who are unable or, for valid reasons, are unwilling to avail themselves of the protection of that country" (UNHCR, "Expert meeting" 6). The concept of *de facto* statelessness as employed here is thus obviously not rigorous in legal terms and is rather meant to suggest the absence of a state-society compact in postcolonial Nigeria.

and Adebani have stated, the concept of citizenship is in fact ideologically vacuous “in a typically African postcolony” such as Nigeria. Indeed,

[i]f a “citizen” constitutively lacks the modalities and social instrumentalities of demanding egalitarian intervention from the state – as it is understood and assumed to exist – and its apparatuses, institutions, and representations, can we reasonably speak of a state, let alone a state-society compact? (*Encountering* 10)

Contemporary Nigerian fiction, thus, illustrates the lives of *homines sacri* (and *mulieres sacrae*) who, borrowing from Agamben’s description of their Roman antecedents, could be defined as being caught in a double exclusion from the realms of both domestic and international law. Unable to lay representational claims to effective citizenship rights, they rarely, if ever, manage to find shelter in the universalistic, and still utopian, frame of “world citizenship” (Archibugi). Therefore, as sacred life, they are trapped in a limbo of denied freedoms. What is especially important about this literature, however, is that it imagines a humanity that does not resign to the nihilistic reduction to “bare life” but attempts, at times through informal “acts of citizenship” (Isin and Nielsen), at times by admittedly controversial, apparently self-defeating, or even illegal, expedients, to resist, move beyond or, at least, circumvent its own disenfranchisement. In so doing, this literary production does not uphold the representation of the disenfranchised Other as an utterly powerless victim in need of Western help that undergirds many Western humanitarian texts.

As will be shown, the representational strategies employed by contemporary authors in order to reveal their characters’ sacredness (and their resistance to it) vary a lot on the basis of their thematic interests, stylistic preferences and conception of the potential agency and politicisation of bare life in the face of sovereign

violence. While some of them make pervasive use of an animalising rhetoric, others resist the stark visualisation of biopolitical violence in favour of other stylistic and narratological approaches evidencing the changes that the violence embedded in the interlacing war-scapes of Nigeria bring about in their characters' lives. The ambivalent use of spectral, angelical and grotesque imagery in the description of violating and violated souls and bodies, for example, are but some of the ways in which third-generation authors attempt to respond to the controversial question of how it is ethically possible to represent the atrocious consequences of biopolitical excess on humanity, to narrate the unnarratable (Dawes, *That the World May Know*; Agamben, *Remnants*).

In the 2006 *PMLA* special issue on human rights and the humanities, Samera Esmeir has critiqued the logic of dehumanisation shared by contemporary human rights law and humanist critics alike in referring to the subject who is not protected by the law as a 'de-humanised' one. As she puts it, by configuring a person's humanity as a (juridical or 'existential') status that, as such, can "be recognized and conferred, or seized and taken away" (1544), these discourses are reminiscent of colonial rationalities and might carry with them reductionist "closures in thinking the parameters of the human" (1547). Although concurring with Esmeir's preoccupations, I would also argue that, as far as aesthetic representation is concerned, hardly are there more effective metaphors than that, for example, of metamorphic animalisation to illustrate the condition of rightlessness and legal abandonment of the sacred human.

Agamben has remarked that in the state of exception the life of *homo sacer* constitutes a "threshold of indistinction and of passage between animal and man, *physis* and *nomos*, exclusion and inclusion." Indeed, *homo sacer* is, like the morphing

werewolf at its origin, “the figure of the man banned by his community” (*Homo Sacer* 105).

And this lupization of man and humanization of the wolf is at every moment possible in the *dissolutio civitatis* inaugurated by the state of exception. [...] The transformation into a werewolf corresponds perfectly to the state of exception, during which [...] time the city is dissolved and men enter into a zone in which they are no longer distinct from beasts. (106-107)

Rather than upholding a vision that endorses the possibility of ontologically losing one’s humanity *tout court*, the imagery of animalisation employed by some of the authors studied here speaks of such a zone of indistinction between opposites, where the human is simultaneously included in and excluded from humanity itself. Similar force imbues other tropological images, such as those of the ghost and of the grotesque body, whose emancipatory potential is inherent in their becoming nature, in an only apparently self-defeating hybridity. It is also by imagining further metamorphoses of these hybrid figures of bare life that one might begin to move beyond them, in an ethical, future-oriented quest which might enable us, if not to trace the contours of a post-biopolitical world of lives “over which sovereignty and right no longer have any hold” (Agamben, *Means* 114–15), at least to configure new form of sovereignty, new “world borders,” as Homi Bhabha would have it (212), capable to look into the interstitial, to intuit and recognise the humanity of those “incommensurable elements” who are “neither One nor the Other but *something else besides, in-between*” (219).

As will be noticed, however, since these ambivalent metaphors of indistinction are constitutively difficult to master, their ineffective handling can indeed compromise the legibility of the admittedly complex representation of the ‘not-quite-human’ human being, thus falling back into an apparently (neo-)colonial

epistemological framework.¹⁵ Still, I believe that the ethical and aesthetic force of these depictions, perhaps at its highest in Chris Abani's *oeuvre*, might result in an even more fruitful cross-fertilisation of the creative arts and human rights discourse.

5. Narrative and human rights

The connection between human rights and the humanities, as Domna Stanton has remarked in her introduction to the aforementioned *PMLA* special issue, has a long history, which goes back at least to the tradition of Western humanism. However, it is undoubted that their pairing in scholarly inquiry is a relatively recent development, one which is “rooted in questions and approaches developed over several decades in trauma, postcolonial, holocaust and genocide, and feminist studies” and that has been aided in the last decades by two converging phenomena, viz the so-called ethical turn in literary studies and the specular narrative turn in the social sciences (Swanson Goldberg and Schultheis Moore 2, 4). Many commentators have moreover emphasised that this interdisciplinary interest has received a boost in the post-Cold War era, and in particular following the 9/11 terrorist attacks,¹⁶ when the US administration's controversial justifications for

¹⁵ For example, it is telling that Uzodinma Iweala's *Beasts of No Nation*, which will be analysed in detail in Chapter 2, has been often hailed by Western reviewers and readers as a brilliant journey into the late modern African “heart of darkness” (see, for example, Maslin “Conscripted”).

¹⁶ Such a heightened interest is confirmed by the number of academic journals that have recently devoted special issues to the interdisciplinary study of human rights and the humanities: see for example the already mentioned *PMLA* 121.5 (2006), “The Humanities in Human Rights: Critique, Language, Politics”; *Peace Review* 20.1 (2008); *Comparative Literature Studies* 46.1 (2009), “Human Rights and Literary Forms”; *Journal of Human Rights* 9.2 (2010), “Comparative Human Rights: Literature, Art, Politics.”

waging war in the name of human rights and democracy disclosed with unprecedented clarity the ambiguity of the emancipatory rhetoric of human rights – a rhetoric that, historically, has been often manipulated and usurped to legitimate imperialist aggression.¹⁷

One of the fields of interest within this burgeoning interdiscipline, and one which is particularly interesting in the context of this dissertation, regards the role played by narrative in shaping human rights laws and ideals and, vice versa, the impact that human rights culture has had on literary production and consumption since modern times. In his 1997 essay “A Question of Narration: The Voice in International Human Rights Law,” Joseph Slaughter, elaborating on Elaine Scarry’s assumption that violence has the peculiar power to destroy the speaking subject, has argued that a human rights abuse can be characterised as “an infringement of the modern subject’s ability to narrate her story” (413). For this reason, human rights, and human rights law in particular, “can be productively formulated in terms of narrative genres and narrative voices” (407). It is therefore no coincidence that, as Slaughter writes in another context, personal stories of human rights violations hold the centre of human rights projects, interposing a third ‘actor,’ civil society, between the two main actors in the human rights arena – the state and the individual (“Foreword” xiii). In other words, as James Dawes has succinctly put it, human rights work can be described as “a matter of storytelling” (“Human Rights” 394).

¹⁷ This apparent paradox, as Sophia A. McClennen and Joseph Slaughter, among others, have remarked, has an evident precedent in the nineteenth-century idea of the civilising mission, which cloaked the colonisation of Africa under a guise of edifying progress (3). Such an ambivalence might in fact be considered a structural aspect inherent in the Enlightenment roots of the human rights project.

The development of an interdisciplinary approach in the study of narrative and human rights has led to the production of excellent scholarship that has developed at the junction among the ethical, the aesthetic, the historical, the political and the legal realms. To name but a few areas of inquiry that have proved particularly fertile, one might recall Kay Schaffer and Sidonie Smith's exploration of life narratives as vehicles for advancing human rights claims in their 2004 *Human Rights and Narrated Lives*. Another aspect that has been widely discussed regards of course the questions of the ethics of representation, and of the aestheticization of violence, in narratives of atrocity authored either by humanitarian aid workers or by artists who are neither witnesses nor survivors – questions that are tackled in texts such as James Dawes's *That the World May Know* (2007) and Elizabeth Swanson Goldberg's *Beyond Terror* (2007). The means and practices of “mobilisation of empathy” in humanitarian intervention have often been investigated with reference to narrative production, as confirmed by the 2008 collection of essay *Humanitarianism and Suffering*, edited by Richard Ashby Wilson and Richard D. Brown. Again, a number of literary critics, such as for example Alexandra Schultheis in her “African Child Soldiers,” have been concerned with the literary reproduction of West-centric biases in human rights and humanitarian texts meant to be distributed in global marketplaces. Others have analysed the relationship between literary forms and human rights problematics, law and practice – a topic which Joseph Slaughter has masterfully examined in relation to the *Bildungsroman* genre in his 2007 *Human Rights, Inc.* The normative potentialities of human rights narratives, and of cultural production more generally, to endorse or contest certain human rights ideas, has been researched as well, and some scholars, such as historian Lynn Hunt in her 2007 book *Inventing Human Rights*, have argued that there

exists an enabling relationship between the rise of the novel, in particular in its sentimental variant, and the emergence of the modern human rights sensibility, since the former invited forms of empathic identification that lie at the basis of the latter.

As this study will concentrate predominantly on fiction writing, and specifically on the novel, I would like to pause for a moment on Joseph Slaughter's 2007 book *Human Rights, Inc.: The World Novel, Narrative Form, and International Law*. In this seminal text, Slaughter makes the case that the idealist *Bildungsroman* is the literary genre whose conventions most clearly overlap with the normative developmental "plot" of human rights law which, as stated in the 1948 Universal Declaration of Human Rights, aims at achieving the "free and full development" of the human personality (Art. 29). The author contends that by fictionalising the incorporation of the marginal individual into the rights and duties of citizenship, this consensual, reformist genre played an important role in legitimating the institutions of the emerging nation-state. It is for this reason that the historical alliance between the *Bildungsroman* and human rights law "is neither unproblematic nor uncomplicated," particularly as a consequence of

the *Bildungsroman*'s ambivalent capacity to disseminate and naturalize not only the norms of human rights but also the paradoxical practices, prejudices, and exclusions codified in the law. (5)

The reason why Slaughter's insights are particularly interesting in the context of this dissertation lies in the fact that, as has been noted elsewhere (Hron), the *Bildungsroman* is one the most explored genres in contemporary Nigerian literature. This trend, variously interpreted,¹⁸ is reflected also in the corpus that will be inves-

¹⁸ Hron puts forward a number of hypotheses as to the reasons for the prominent pres-

tigated here. Coupled as it is with a thematic preoccupation with the issues of state violence and human rights protection, or lack thereof, this generic prevalence appears to confirm Slaughter's argument as to the mutually enabling relation between the *Bildungsroman* and human rights discourse. However, it is significant that, differently from the idealistic *Bildungsroman*, most of the narratives under scrutiny here do not envision the individual's final incorporation into the (nation-)state, his or her becoming a right-and-duty-bearing person before the law.¹⁹ On the contrary, it will be observed that characters are generally either excluded from citizenship *tout court* or left in a condition of "suspended incorporation" in texts whose endings do not provide any reassuring aesthetic closure. And indeed, as will be shown in detail in the following chapters, the writers examined here employ a multiplicity of stylistic and narratological devices in order to signify the impossibility of an egalitarian, incorporative imaginary when the state is undemocratic – or, in the case of a host country, at best unwelcoming. What is more, by playing with the formal conventions of the *Bildungsroman*, they contest the validity of certain human rights and humanitarian notions whose supposed universality in fact belies

ence of children in contemporary Nigerian literature: she suggests that the hybrid space of childhood is a fertile ground for the exploration of the complexities of postcolonial societies and cultures; she also argues that the figure of the child may reflect the young postcolonial state that has to "define itself anew in the global world order" (30); further, she adds that the Western audiences for whom these texts are mainly marketed "may be more easily initiated to the complexities of Nigerian culture or politics through a children's perspective" (29). As Joseph Slaughter reminds us, moreover, it is essential to remember that "marginal" literary commodities, and particularly the *Bildungsroman* as the canonised genre for the "historically marginal author," have been gaining increasing market value within the "international marketplace of literature and human rights" (312). On this, see also Huggan.

¹⁹ As Slaughter has suggested, the lack of an incorporative imaginary is a very common trait of postcolonial *Bildungsromane*, which "tend to be novels of disillusionment, in which the promises of developmentalism and self-determination are revealed to be empty, or at least exaggerated" (215).

an inherently modern Western logic. I am referring to constructs such as the representation of the child as a pure repository of passive innocence and vulnerability and, more generally, the representation of the ‘victim’ of human rights abuse as a passive non-agent whose semi-rationality legitimises Western humanitarian intervention as a form of ‘enlightening aid’ – aspects that resonate with what Makau Mutua has described as the ‘savage-victim-saviour’ “damning metaphor” that underlies the “grand narrative” of human rights (201).

As suggested above, a number of scholars have considered the potential of imaginative literature, and of the novel in particular, to foster human rights sensibilities by stimulating the reader’s empathy. Lynn Hunt, drawing from Benedict Anderson’s argument on the creation of an “imagined community” following the rise of print capitalism, has suggested that the “imagined empathy” (32) that eighteenth-century sentimental novels aroused contributed to what she calls the “invention” of human rights. By encouraging their readers’ empathic identification with the Others they read about, she observes, novels instilled in them the awareness of the ultimate inner equality of humankind – a necessary condition for the birth of the very idea of human rights.²⁰ Similar claims have been made by Martha Nussbaum, who has argued that narrative art has the power to “cultivate our humanity” by “mak[ing] us see the lives of the different with [...] involvement and sympathetic understanding” (10, 88), and, much more problematically, by philosopher Richard Rorty, who in his 1993 Oxford-Amnesty lecture has encouraged

²⁰ James Dawes has noticed that arguments such as this, similarly carried out also by literary scholars such as Margaret Cohen and Lynn Festa, have been criticised for relying upon the undemonstrated assumption that “literary works perform a cultural labor that can bring about broad perceptual shifts.” However, he continues, “whether or not it is true that the rise of the novel played a role in causing the changes that made modern human rights possible, it is certainly reflective of the changes” (“Human Rights” 397).

sentimental education as a means through which sympathy can be “manipulated” by hearing or reading “sad and sentimental stories” (129, 119) – stories which,

repeated and varied over the centuries, have induced us, the rich, safe, powerful, people, to tolerate, and even to cherish, powerless people – people whose appearance or habits or beliefs at first seemed an insult to our own moral identity, our sense of the limits of permissible human variation. (131-132)²¹

In contrast with these contentions, however, I would like to argue that the peculiar ethical resonance of the works discussed here lies not so much in their potential to elicit an empathic response on the part of the readers – a reaction that, as will be noticed, is on occasions even provocatively shunned.²² More importantly, by putting a face on human suffering without trivialising, or essentialising, its diverse articulations, these texts often give visibility to forms of violence that are unknown, or meant to remain unknowable, and that have been declared, as narratologist Gerald Prince would say, “unnarratable.” This is an important epistemological operation in an increasingly biopolitical (or rather, necropolitical) world, where there exists a hierarchy that hegemonically establishes which lives are worth living (and, one may add, narrating) and which are not. By relocating knowledge in the (global) public sphere, recent Nigerian literature therefore contests, and endeavours to modify, presumably stable patterns of differential “allocation of grievability” of human life (Butler, *Precarious* xiv). While endorsing the concept of the equal value of all human lives, these texts eschew romanticised visions of the universality of what it means to be human. On the contrary, they place par-

²¹ This approach has been not unjustifiably criticised by, among others, Joseph Slaughter, who sees it as a form of “cosmopolitan solipsism” with a “tendency to become a patronizing humanitarianism that is enabled by and subsists on socioeconomic and political disparities” (*Human Rights, Inc.* 325).

²² See, in particular, Chapter 2.

ticular emphasis on the relativistic notion that the actual experiences of being human vary world-wide, being strictly dependant on the biopolitical contingencies that determine the major or minor degree of expendability, or ‘purchasability,’ of a certain life – or body – in a certain locale. These narratives, therefore, often highlight the structural gap between human rights theory and practice by showing how the moral postulate of human equality, theoretically a given, rests in fact on the inclusion of the individual into an effective regime of rights, be it realised at the domestic or at the international level.

The stories of war and human rights I am about to consider are stories that, similarly to human rights themselves, are constantly caught between competing polarities: the particular and the universal, the individual and the state, life and death, North and South, mobility and stasis, protection and violence, silences and voices. The existences they tell us about are at times heroic, other times grotesque. I would hardly call them “gay matter” (Bakhtin, *Rabelais* 195). And yet, these war-scapes of suffering retain some of the regenerating potential of the Bakhtinian real grotesque, for they challenge us to the constant redefinition of our conceptions of the human – of human rights, and of human wrongs. It is also by approaching this literature of war that we might learn to reconfigure the ever-changing project of human rights.

PART ONE THE EXCEPTION

1.

The Nigerian Civil War in Fiction

1.1. Nigerian Civil War literature: patterns of publication

Nigerian writer and literary critic Obi Nwakanma begins a 2007 review of Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie's *Half of a Yellow Sun* remembering how in 2000 he was refused publication of a short story that dealt with the topic of the Nigerian Civil War. "Thanks very much," the accompanying note said, "your story is beautiful and touching, but I'm afraid the subject of the Nigerian civil war has been exhausted." In the following years, however, this improbable interpretation as to the presumed 'exhaustion' of the war story was confuted by the appearance of a number of fictional and non-fiction texts that add on to the very rich corpus of Nigerian war literature, a corpus to which virtually all major first-wave writers have contributed. Adichie's acclaimed novel is a case in point, being arguably the most ambitious attempt to capture the reality of the Biafran enclave written so far,¹ and exhibiting such "unapologetic Biafran sympathies" (Adichie, "African 'Authenticity'" 50) that reviewers have often hailed it as a retrospective war *epic* (see for example Ezard; Maslin "The Complex Business"). Its publication and phenomenal world-wide success confirm, and have further enhanced, what Edward Said would call the "permission to narrate" a story that many myopic ana-

¹ As such, it has achieved a great deal of critical attention since its 2006 publication (see Tunca *The Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie Website*).

lysts had declared part of a (best-)forgotten past.

In order to identify the changing fortunes of the Nigerian Civil War as a topic of literary representation, it may be rewarding to cast a glance at the most recent comprehensive bibliography of Nigerian war literature, the one drawn by Chinyere Nwahunanya in his critical anthology *A Harvest from Tragedy*, presumably updated to 1997.² Here, out of a total of 150 entries, including novels, plays, poetry, short stories and memoirs, less than 20 have been published after 1985, the year that signalled the beginning of Ibrahim Babangida's dictatorship. Of these, only 4 appeared in the years 1990 to 1997. These patterns of publication are of course reflective of the "total clamp-down on creative and intellectual activities" in Nigeria under military despotism (Egya, "Art and Outrage" 50) – an aspect that, as will be observed in Chapters Three and Four, is thematised in much contemporary Nigerian fiction. If the literary market did not thrive during the economic recession of the 1980s and 90s (Griswold 37), the restrictions on freedom of expression that were imposed during the two decades further contributed to silencing aspiring writers. It is therefore no coincidence that the literature issued in the 1990s, often self-published, consisted almost only of poetry.³ Nigerian poets writing during military rule indicted the arrogance of an unbearably violent sovereign, and the "aggressive vision" which characterised their compositions, "powered by a righteous

² While the bibliography includes one text published in 1997, the year of the book's second edition, it does not list one 1998 source I am aware of, namely Adichie's play *For love of Biafra*. It is therefore arguable that the bibliography was not revised for the 2002 edition. For previous bibliographic accounts, see Amuta "A Selected Checklist," McLuckie "A Preliminary Checklist," and the Bibliography in Theodora Akachi Ezeigbo's *Fact and Fiction in the Literature of the Nigerian Civil War*.

³ For a detailed analysis of the other interlacing reasons that might have contributed to the stagnation of the novel in the period, see Adesanmi and Dunton, "Nigeria's Third Generation Writing."

rage,” had the immediate, urgent aim “to reclaim [the] nation, its psyche and collective dream, from the claws of the military oppressor” (Egya 50). The subject of the war, understandably enough, did thus not feature prominently in this poetic output. However, it has acquired renewed importance in Nigerian literature with the turn of the century – a turn that has coincided with the transition to democracy and that, as recalled in the Introduction, has also marked a significant shift from poetry back to the novel as the predominant genre of Nigerian creative writing (Adesanmi and Dunton, “Nigeria’s Third Generation Writing” 8).

In this context then, *Half of a Yellow Sun* is far from being the only recent example of Nigerian war literature. On the contrary, a number of scholars, writers and former members of the military establishment have recently authored their accounts of the event, demonstrating that the historical and imaginative interpretation of this controversial conflict, still in the process of being written and rewritten, is far from settled. And in fact, as Nwakanma wonders, “[h]ow could a *story* be *exhausted?*” (emphasis added). Amongst the numerous recent texts that explore the war theme, one might cite Anthonia Kalu’s finely wrought short-story collection *Broken Lives and Other Stories*; Dulue Mbachu’s novel *War Games*; Adichie’s short stories “Half of a Yellow Sun” and “Ghosts”; Chris Abani’s narrative poem, *Daphne’s Lot*, a tribute to his British mother’s courage in raising her children in shrinking Biafra; again, his novella *Song for Night*, which will be studied in Chapter Two and which, although set in an unnamed country, draws evident inspiration from the events of the late 1960s. Adding to these works are the numerous literary and political memoirs that have been proliferating and shed new light on the complexity of the political choices and behind-the-scenes intrigues that unfolded in Nigeria/Biafra during the war, while recalling the hardships suffered by the

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population. Illustrious contributors to this genre are late General Philip Efiang, who was second only to General Ojukwu in the Biafran hierarchy, and took his place when the latter left the Republic (Diala 114); and, notably, Chinua Achebe, whose controversial *There Was a Country: A Personal History of Biafra* overcomes the author's past reticence on an admittedly distressing topic.⁴ Of course, the list provided here is by no means exhaustive. However, it does give an idea of the relevance that Nigerian war literature has acquired in the last few years, alongside emphasising the generic diversity that characterises it.

The war is not only referenced in those texts, such as those just mentioned, that are directly concerned with the representation of the country's civil strife. On the contrary, it appears to be a spectral presence which also haunts a number of contemporary works depicting the contradictions and violence of Nigeria's post-war society. Indeed, as will be seen in Chapter Four, the theme resurfaces, often via the authorial insertion of minor narrative threads, also in novels such as Chris Abani's *GraceLand* and Helon Habila's *Measuring Time*, set during the chaotic years that should have led to the re-birth of a peaceful nation but saw it sinking into the abyss of military oppression. There, the Civil War is presented as the exacerbation of a state of anomy that is constitutive of postcolonial political life, and as such it becomes an emblematic reminder of the culture of violence still embedded in contemporary Nigeria.

⁴ Chinua Achebe acted as a spokesperson of the Biafran government abroad during the three-year confrontation. Until the publication of his memoir in September 2012, he was one of the few Nigerian writers who, after witnessing the war, had not tackled the painful subject in any long text in prose. Up till then, Achebe's war production consisted of non-fiction writing, short fiction narratives such as the short stories "The Madman," "Girls at War" and "Civil Peace," and the lyrical poems collected in his *Christmas in Biafra*. On this, see Neogy and Achebe 231. See also Lindfords, qtd. in Ogungbesan 50.

If this study posits as its departure point an analysis of the literary representation of the Civil War, it is in the belief that the numerous, interlacing war-scapes that will emerge, reflective of gender, class and ethnic exclusions, identify a repertoire of discriminatory practices that can be recognised, in different forms, in the Nigerian literature of disillusionment that is investigated in subsequent chapters. The texts under examination here are representative of the multiplicity of thematic and ideological approaches that have characterised, not unexpectedly, the literature inspired by a highly divisive event such as the civil war. Moreover, they are in line with the preoccupation, shared by many contemporary writers, with the deep fissure existing between an abusive sovereign power and those abused subjects who are all too often reduced to expendable pawns in a superior power game. All the same, some of them explore another, certainly more controversial, theme that also lies at the heart of much contemporary writing. I am referring to the paradoxical complicity between certain non-sovereign actors of violence and the powerful figures who metonymically embody the sovereign, in their common dehumanisation and exploitation of fellow human beings. This ambivalence points at the existence of a shifting biopolitical hierarchy where it is often difficult, if not impossible, to distinguish victims from perpetrators, public from private interests, enemy from friend. It thus adds further complexity to the exploration of the complex moral and biopolitical landscapes of Nigerian literature.

1.2. First-Wave War Writings: a thematic review

1.2.1. Civic urgency and aesthetic success

Ernest Emenyonu predicted in 1973 that the literary harvest following the Nigeri-

an Civil War would constitute a rich booty for the scholar willing to enter the imaginative world “of deep social criticism, aggressive political commitment, and the symbolic search or questioning of self” that the harrowing events and dramatic resolution of the conflict were bound to generate (“Post-War Writing” 54). And he was certainly right, as the thematic and ideological variety of Nigerian war literature has proved a very fertile ground for investigation, inspiring numerous analyses on the part of fine critics such as, among others, Willfried F. Feuser, Chidi Amuta, Craig McLuckie, Theodora Akachi Ezeigbo, Chinyere Nwahunanya and Emenyonu himself. Discussing this vast body of literature is thus not an easy task – nor is it one to be taken lightly. In this section, I shall endeavour to provide a re-reading of selected examples of first-wave Nigerian war fiction through lenses that are meant specifically to highlight the multi-faceted biopolitical articulations that this conflict, like all wars as exemplary moments of declared emergency, inevitably manifested.

First-wave war fiction has often been defined “witness” literature (Emenyonu, “Nigerian Civil War”; Feuser, “Anomy” 121): mainly authored by Igbo writers,⁵ it is generally realistic in mode, and tends to exhibit great historical detail and accuracy. Such a “documentary – or near-documentary” (Riemenschneider

⁵ Critic Chidi Amuta has explained the predominance of ex-Biafran, and especially Igbo, voices in Nigerian Civil War literature as determined by two reasons: first of all, by the fact that the “traumatic impact of the war was relatively evenly distributed among the Biafran populace,” and sensitised their creative instincts; secondly, by “the high level of formal literacy among the people of the former Biafra” (“The Nigerian Civil War” 96). Notable exceptions to this trend are Wole Soyinka (whose war production includes *The Man Died*, *A Shuttle in the Crypt*, *Season of Anomy* and *Madmen and Specialists*) and Kole Omosoto (with his absurdist allegory *The Combat*). As Amuta has noticed, the other federal writers who have tackled the topic have often done so by means of “tangential references” to this event as a “significant experience in national life” (96). Examples of this trend are Femi Osofisan’s plays *The Chattering and the Song* and *Once Upon Four Robbers*.

61) stance seems to have its roots in a civic urgency in line with Chinua Achebe's contention that African writers "should march right in front" in the battle for the necessary, unavoidable task of re-education and regeneration of their own societies ("Novelist," 45). In the much-quoted lecture "The African Writer and the Biafran Cause," which he delivered in Uganda while the war was raging, Achebe famously claimed:

It is clear to me that an African creative writer who tries to avoid the big social and political issues of contemporary Africa will end up being completely irrelevant – like that absurd man in the proverb who leaves his burning house to pursue a rat fleeing from the flames. (78)

Staying with this metaphor, and (poorly) elaborating on it, it appears however that some federal and former Biafran writers did not manage, after their houses had been reduced to ashes, to find a moment in which the loss could be, to echo William Wordsworth, "recollected in tranquillity." Nwahunanya's study of the aesthetics of first-wave war novels has for example confirmed that their admittedly cathartic,⁶ and understandably didactic intents are on occasions unrestrained, as the interpretation of plot development is often explicitly provided rather than conveyed by means of stylistic or narrative elaboration ("Aesthetics"). Some of them are thus marred by excessive sensationalism (Cyprian Ekwensi's *Survive the Peace*), and melodramatic resolution of conflict (Andrew Ekwuru's *Songs of Steel*), while others (such as S.O. Mezu's *Behind the Rising Sun*) are replete with moralising passages which suggest lack of formal control and jeopardise their aesthetic quality. Flora Nwapa's 1975 novella *Never Again*, a semi-fictional account of the au-

⁶ For an interesting insight into this cathartic dimension of civil war writing, see for example the author's notes to Buchi Emecheta's *Destination Biafra* and Kalu Okpi's *Biafra Testament*.

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thor's experiences in beleaguered Biafra,⁷ is for example often recalled as one of the less impressive examples of Nigerian war literature. Yet, if Nwapa's *Never Again*, albeit interesting in many respects, is certainly not her most successful work, still the Nigerian Civil War has inspired the writing of some of the most beautiful texts of Nigerian literature, many of which have been canonised as paradigmatic examples of African war fiction. In what follows, some of the works that will be given comparatively more attention than others, as a consequence of a selection informed by both thematic and aesthetic considerations, are Chinua Achebe's short story "Girls at War" (1972), Eddie Iroh's *Toads of War* (1979), Buchi Emecheta's *Destination Biafra* (1982), Ken Saro-Wiwa's *Sozaboy* (1985), alongside Wole Soyinka's 1971 play *Madmen and Specialists*.

1.2.2. "Monkey de work, baboon de chop": a biopolitical hierarchy

Nowhere is the traditional hold of the sovereign over the lives of its subjects more easily detectable than in those contexts where it has the right legitimately to expose them to death by forcing them to take up arms and fight in order to guarantee its own survival. Michel Foucault, as part of his wider argument concerning the evolution of the technologies for the deployment of human bodies and sexualities in Western modernity, has famously contended that modern wars, particularly since the nineteenth century, have no longer been founded on the sovereign's traditional "right of seizure: of things, time, bodies, and ultimately life itself" (*Sexuality I* 136). Rather, they must be inscribed within the modern process aiming at ex-

⁷ Although Nwapa is adamant about emphasising the fictional quality of her text, many a commentator have noticed that her own experiences of the war very closely resemble those of her heroine Kate (Bryce 30; see also Ezeigbo "Vision and Revision": 478-480).

erting a positive control over biological life, which endeavours to optimise and multiply it through disciplinary practices. Modern wars, Foucault observes, are thus

no longer waged in the name of a sovereign who must be defended; they are waged on behalf of the existence of everyone; entire populations are mobilized for the purpose of wholesale slaughter in the name of necessity: massacres have become vital. (137)

The Nigerian Civil War appears to occupy an uncertain position within such a polarised developmental schema, apparently confirming the difficulty of applying Foucault's interpretive paradigm to certain contexts, such as the postcolonial, where the sovereign exhibits liminal traits, which tend to blur the divide between absolute sovereignty and late-modern, positive bio-power.⁸ On the one hand, it is indeed undoubted that, in accordance with Foucault's argument, the "naked question of survival" (137) played a fundamental role in justifying Biafran secession, and as such its rhetoric was widely employed in Biafran documents and propaganda. Indeed, on the Biafran side, after the 1966 massacres the perceived reason for going to war was, at least initially, not so much the existence of sovereignty, but rather the biological existence of a whole population. And yet, many of the former Biafran authors who have written about the conflict have acknowledged that the war soon acquired the contours of a more traditional form of confrontation,

⁸ Foucault was of course aware of the fact that ancient sovereignty has not been completely replaced by modern bio-power, and that the two powers to "to take life or let live" and to "make live," and their respective techniques, have on occasions been integrated. Still, Agamben notices, the two remain conceptually distinct in Foucault's theorisation. Agamben argues instead that maintaining such a heterogeneity becomes problematic in the analysis, for example, of the great late-modern totalitarian states, when "an unprecedented absolutization of the bio-power to *make live* intersects with an equally absolute generalization of the sovereign power to *make die*, such that biopolitics coincides immediately with thanatopolitics" (*Remnants* 83).

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where all able-bodied men were violently coerced into fighting for the mere juridical survival of the sovereign. At the same time, the gap between those acting on behalf of the sovereign and the subjects of sovereign decision widened considerably, to the dismay of those who had hoped they would have seen the birth of a country free of corruption and violence.

Ernest Emenyonu has provocatively commented on the disillusionment that followed this turn saying that

a large population in Biafra, barely half-way through the three-year debacle, wanted and prayed for the fall of their dream republic where every Biafran was to be “his brother’s keeper”.⁹ They wished the fall of Biafra not necessarily because of the agony of starvation, suffering and disease, but because the goings-on in Biafra had killed the dream of those who gave their lives for the young republic. Biafra had become a terror unto itself and the way its leadership trampled on moral and social values of the people left in the common man nothing to hope for. (Emenyonu, “The Nigerian Civil War” 90-91)

Emenyonu’s generalising remarks are probably over-stated. Nevertheless, they suggest that one of the major reasons for the Biafran collapse lay in the abyss separating the tiny elite and the exploited, underprivileged (non-)citizens who were turned into animals for slaughter. And this is no doubt a topic of primary importance in first-wave war literature, whose world is inhabited by big warlords, petty tyrants and expendable subalterns.

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In a moment of proverbial calm before the storm, Igbo volunteer Agwu Mong, one of the characters of Kalu Okpi’s thriller *Biafra Testament* (1982), mulls over one of his “pet theories,”

⁹ This phrase, with evident Biblical undertones, is a quote from Ojukwu’s June 1969 speech, known as the Ahiara declaration (see below).

a sure-fire method to end all wars for ever. It went like this: if all the kings and presidents and generals and queens and prime ministers and emperors and premiers in the world were to be transported to either the Onitsha or the Vietnam fronts, if all those rulers stayed in those mosquito- and death-infested trenches for only one week, the planet earth would see and hear a whole lot less about wars. The trouble with wars was that they were not fairly fought. They were usually fought by the wrong people. (129)

Minutes later, idealist Agwu will lose his life during the so-called “Abagana miracle,” here fictionalised under the heading “Onitsha ... the impossible victory” (126), an ambush that has gone down in history as one of the most glorious episodes of Biafran resistance. The utopian nature of his reflections is thus ironically uncovered: not only are wars not fought by kings and prime ministers; what is more, the valueless life of the common soldier, like Agwu’s, is lost in the bigger picture of a body count that determines victories and defeats.

The question of the divide between those who risk their lives, on both sides of the front line, and the figures of power, who declare wars but never fight them, is very common in Nigerian war literature, and it is often dramatised in works that reinvent the historical phenomenon of war-front fraternisation. Okpi’s Agwu recalls one such episode:

A young Nigerian soldier, who was obviously fed up with the whole crazy mess, had shouted up from his trench across no-man’s land, ‘Gowon and Ojukwu was for their house and drinking coffee, and me and you was for here and kill ourselves! I not know you and you not know me. I get no palaver with you and you get no palaver with me, so why we want to kill ourselves...?’ (129)

In the Biafran headquarters, this “fraternisation thing,” as the Biafran Commander of Military Intelligence rather derogatorily calls it a few pages later, is considered as a Nigerian strategy for spurring defections on the part of the by now hungry, demoralised Biafran soldiers. As such, it must be stopped at all costs: it is the

“very existence” of the Biafran army that is at stake here, and along with it, the existence of the Biafran state itself (140). In order to put an end to the threats posed by the unacceptable mutual truce, Major Malu, an experienced, Sandhurst-trained official, is asked to organise a “brotherhood party” for Biafran and Nigerian officials, a trap celebration at the end of which all the participants will be arrested. The action plan rather unexpectedly turns out successful, to the utter dismay of Malu himself, who is left with “an unequal mixture of sorrow, sadness and remorse all the way down the pit of his stomach” (159).

The reason why I have dwelt at some length on this specific, and of course highly sensationalistic, incident is that the question of fraternisation is nowhere as explicitly tackled in Nigerian War literature. Even a seasoned official like Major Malu finds it difficult to carry out an action that negates the brotherhood, and ultimately the common humanity, of the fighting men: war, by its own nature, does not contemplate, nor does it allow, fraternity amongst fellow human beings. The image of the “human family” within which all human beings should act “in a spirit of brotherhood” has proved one of the staples of human rights rhetoric to state the equality of all human beings and point to the solidarity that should inform the relationship among them. It is no coincidence that the first words of the Preamble to the 1948 UN Universal Declaration of Human Rights posit as the recipient of human rights “all members of the human family,” whose “inherent dignity and [...] equal and inalienable rights” are recognised as “the foundation of freedom, justice and peace in the world.” A similarly metaphorical language is reinstated in Art. 1, which famously reads thus: “All human beings [...] are endowed with reason and conscience and should act towards one another in a spirit of brotherhood.” The repudiation of war-front fraternisation in Okpi’s novel assumes thus a

double meaning: an undoubted commentary on the state of fratricidal civil strife that tropes the de-construction of the mythology of the nation as an inclusive family, it can also be inscribed within the wider frame of reference of human rights discourse.

This dual connotation is similarly present in the works that discuss how the concept of brotherhood is reduced to mockery, or straightforward insult, in the day-to-day life of the common Biafran. The indictment of the unjust relationships which developed within the runaway Republic is often carried out by evoking with a derisive sneer the grand rhetoric of the so-called “Ahiara Declaration,” a speech of socialist inspiration which was delivered by Ojukwu on June 1, 1969. The idea of fraternity was indeed a key one in this grandiose document which, drafted by the Biafran National Guidance Committee chaired by Chinua Achebe (Ezenwa-Ohaeto 146), was meant to proclaim the principles of the Biafran revolution while listing the qualities that the “Biafran of the new order” should possess. Amongst his numerous attributes, it was asserted that the Biafran citizen

must be his brother’s keeper, he must help all Biafrans in difficulty, whether or not they are related to kin by blood. He must avoid, at all costs, doing anything which is capable of bringing distress and hardship to other Biafrans. (Ojukwu 50)

Of course, as is indeed admitted in parts of the document,¹⁰ the reality in Biafra was (as of yet) far from this idyllic vision.

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Perhaps Eddie Iroh’s novel *Toads of War* most evidently takes on the moralising

¹⁰ See in particular the section titled “Shaking off Nigerianism” (24-26), where the corruption of the new state, as the heading implies, is seen as a hideous remnant of typically Nigerian attitudes that must be eradicated.

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task to expose the vulgarity of “the war racketeers and profiteers, the disaster millionaires, the big shots, the toads of war, civilian and military, who fought their own war by proxy” (1), turning the utopia of Biafran fraternity into outright mockery. *Toads of War* is a short novel that, alongside *Forty-Eight Guns for the General* (1976) and *Siren in the Night* (1982), composes Iroh’s war trilogy. The story, set during the last days of the war, revolves around the figure of Kalu Udim, a young war veteran “with an amputated right arm for a medal” (45) who after being dismissed from the Biafran army embarks on another, personal mission, a new war of his own. As a mild epileptic, Kalu should have been exonerated from conscription. However, as the reader discovers in first-person flash-back chapters that are interlocked with the main third-person narrative, he was sent to the front by his employer as a punishment for a minor act of insubordination – and even more, for the laughter with which he greeted his boss’ enraged overreaction (52). After losing his right arm in battle – and his mother, who dies of heartbreak when she gets news of his son’s misfortune – he begins to keep track of the man who caused his suffering so as to get his revenge over him. By recording Kalu’s peregrinations, the author offers a cynical portrayal of a corrupt society where lower-class citizens who want to survive cannot waste their time in recalling the “beautiful platitudes proclaimed at Ahiara a few months [before]” (63). The reader thus becomes acquainted with hyperbolic figures of corruption such as Major Mere, who holds all-night parties without apparently noticing their incongruity with the massacres that are taking place at the front, only a few miles from town; Father Nwobi, whose relief centre is run with whips, and who refuses to give food to starving people while standing in front of doors that, left ajar, reveal stores where cartons of foodstuff are “piled ceiling-high and spilling on to the floor” (66); and a

civilian Big Man who remains unnamed and who, in a chapter tellingly titled “Brother’s Keeper,” hurls to the ground a pathetic couple of soldiers on crutches who are asking for a lift.

Readers are finally introduced to Chima Duke, Kalu’s former employer, who works as associate director at the Price Control Directorate. The man is caricatured as

a short, very fat man of middle age and revoltingly prominent features. His head was as big as a palm-wine gourd. His stomach protruded like that of a pregnant woman on the eve of labour. He had huge, thick-set arms and legs that allowed him only a waddle when he walked. His plump face was perpetually greasy from fat and sweat. A short, ill-kept goatee below his thick lips certainly did not improve things for Chima Duke’s looks. (40)

This grotesque depiction of a man who used to be called “gorilla,” or “gargoyle” before the hostilities (40), but has turned into a “Duke” thanks to the increasing power and dubious respectability that the war has conferred him, is purposely excessive. Iroh’s satire can be considered a textual correlative, and a very Bakhtinian one, to Kalu’s mocking laughter in Chima Duke’s face. Through the use of satirical typification such as this Iroh, “a master in the evocative use of antithesis” (Ezeigbo, “War, History, Aesthetics” 70), identifies the Duke and the other characters sketched above as the arch-villains of the novel. The repulsive body of this (literally) *Big Man*, one of the many Big Men who will be encountered in this dissertation, becomes the signifier of the sick fattening of the bloated “toads” who gain immensely from the war situation, as opposed to figures such as Kalu Udimma himself, whose amputation is a metaphorical reminder of his belonging to the wider group of the underdogs of Biafran society, those who have lost (nearly) everything. In other words, Kalu Udimma and Chima Duke are presented as “two re-

markably disparate breeds of men” (5) also by means of these visual strategies, and they epitomise the opposite poles of the Biafran socio-political spectrum: while the first stands as a metonym for a sovereign that has the right to send his subjects to death, the other is the victim of such unconditional power. What is more, it is essential that this power is here presented as one which only responds to private interests, as Kalu’s conscription is by no means justified by the need to guarantee the sovereign’s existence, but rather satisfies the omnipotent desires of a corrupt petty tyrant. If Kalu in the end manages to get his revenge, the latter is presented as cathartic and self-defeating at the same time: after killing his antagonist against his loving girlfriend’s pleas, he walks straight to Death Row. The open-ended Epilogue sees him in the uncertain limbo of the Biafran prison, coldly awaiting death while the radio announces the surrender of the state which should carry out his execution. The fate of the subject in Nigeria/Biafra is thus left unclear.

The emphasis on the body as signifying either biopolitical privilege or subjection to biopolitical violence is similarly present in Chinua Achebe’s short story “Girls at War,” which tackles many of the themes present in Iroh’s novel with that succinct, understated elegance that only Achebe is capable of. Even as the text will be more carefully investigated in the following section,¹¹ in this context I would like to comment briefly on a scene, set in front of a refugee centre, where Reginald Nwankwo, a senior civil servant, is caught by sudden embarrassment as his driver loads his car with relief food until it overflows.

[T]he starved crowds that perpetually hung around relief centres made crude, un-

¹¹ Indeed, it sheds light on the question of gender relationships during the emergency, which is the topic at the centre of Section 1.2.2.

gracious remarks like ‘War Can Continue!’ meaning the WCC!¹² Somebody else shouted ‘Irevolu!’ and his friends replied ‘shum!’ ‘Irevolu!’ ‘shum!’ ‘Isofeli?’ ‘shum!’ ‘Isofeli?’ ‘Mba!’ (107)

As Emenyonu remarks, the irony of this passage lies in the fact that the crowd acknowledges that they are considered part of the revolution only insofar as they are asked to fight and suffer for the cause. “But to the question ‘Isofeli?’ (‘Do you share with *them* in the eating and feasting?’), the stark reply is ‘Mba!’ (‘Not at all, Never!’)” (Emenyonu, “Post-war Writing” 52, emphasis in the text). Achebe adds further complexity to this when he writes that

Nwankwo was deeply embarrassed not by the *jeers* of this *scarecrow crowd of rags and floating ribs* but by the independent accusation of their *wasted bodies and sunken eyes*. Indeed he would probably have felt much worse had they said nothing, simply looked on in silence, as his boot was loaded with milk, and powdered egg and oats and tinned meat and stock-fish. [...] But what could a man do? (107, emphasis added)

The body itself, through its partial nudity and excessive thinness, becomes a sign of the violence that has reduced this “crowd of rags and floating ribs” to a similarly *naked*, and precarious, life exposed to death. Here, however, the process of reduction to bare life is resisted, as the men’s sharp tongues still have the power to insult the injustice they are faced with, in a communal act that is essentially political and reasserts a humanity that, as Aristotle has taught us, resides in language.

As Achille Mbembe has pointed out in his discussion of postcolonial sovereignty as founded on a representational regime of vulgarity, in a context characterised by extreme scarcity such as that of postcolonial Africa the metaphor of food

¹² This is a reference to the World Council of Churches, the Christian ecumenical organisation which played a major role in transporting and distributing humanitarian relief supplies in Biafra during the emergency.

(alongside those of digestion and defecation) is an extremely powerful one. “Food and tips (*pourboire*) are political,” Mbembe explains, and “‘food,’ like ‘scarcity,’ cannot be dissociated from particular regimes of ‘death,’ from specific modalities of enjoyment or from therapeutic quests” (131). The representation of food as a metaphor for power is not unsurprisingly employed very often in texts that depict the realities of war in Biafra, a runaway state on which a *de facto* embargo on relief flights was imposed. What is more, this metaphor is one that effectively emphasises the relations of force within a mobile biopolitical hierarchy.

In this context, I would like to recall the story of Biafran Chuma Mong, one of the characters in Okpi’s *Biafra Testament*, who deserts after losing an eye in battle and becomes involved in the illegal trafficking of relief food within the blockaded enclave, where he and his collaborators will sell the stolen supplies at the black market. Chuma is aware that his activities will cause the death of many. However, he decides, this is “none of his business. As Gowon never tired of saying, it was Ojukwu’s war anyway” (210). Episodes such as this, variations of which will be analysed in Chapters Four and Five, suggest that when human life loses its value, new frontiers of man’s inhumanity to man are opened, as human beings are often willing to act on the side of a sovereign powers of which they themselves are, paradoxically, victims. Interestingly, it will be during one of his raids at the Uli airstrip that Chuma Mong meets his nemesis, when he witnesses the death of his beloved former girlfriend Mgbeke, killed in a bombing attack while attempting to put to safety starving children on a plane leaving for Gabon. Okpi’s attempt to restore some form of poetic justice in the conclusion of this narrative thread is therefore partial, and ironically so, in that it emphasises the corruption of ruthless Chuma by fictionalising the death of an antithetical character, Mgbeke, an epitome

of morality. The question as to whether, in the world of exception, the survival of the honest is possible remains open.

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The texts commented on thus far provide interesting insights into the biopolitical dimension of the Biafran war. However, nowhere is the question of the biopolitical exploitation of the population more brilliantly fictionalised than in Ken Saro-Wiwa's beautiful *Sozaboy: A Novel in Rotten English*. This novel addresses another motif of Nigerian war literature, since through the story of its protagonist it recounts the naïve enthusiasm and subsequent disillusionment of the many youths who enlisted in the Biafran army out of superficial idealism and vague ambition.¹³ This theme is here coupled with a specific preoccupation to give voice, and narrative visibility, to the predicament of the Ogoni, Saro-Wiwa's ethnic group, "who were not only being physically decimated as a people but who had also been representationally erased from national and international consciousness" – a "mission" that, Harry Garuba reminds us, was central to Saro-Wiwa's activities both as an artist and as a minority rights activist ("Ken Saro-Wiwa's *Sozaboy*" 26). The first-person narrator, Mene, is a boy from Dukana,¹⁴ an apprentice driver who proudly, and naively, discards his name in favour of the generic "Sozaboy," soldier-boy, when he begins fighting in a war he does not understand and for a cause no one ever bothers to explain to him: "What he mean by we are going for front? No be inside lorry we dey?" (80).

The much commented "rotten English" employed by this anti-heroic protagonist plays no minor role in the definition of his marginalised social position.

¹³ See the opening of Ike's *Sunset at Dawn*; see also Ossie Onuora Enekwe's *Come Thunder*.

¹⁴ As Saro-Wiwa has remarked, Dukana is a market in Ibibioland ("English" 17).

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As Saro-Wiwa explains in his oft-quoted Author's Note, Sozaboy's language, "a mixture of Nigerian pidgin English, broken English and occasional flashes of good, even idiomatic English,"

is disordered and disorderly. *Born of a mediocre education and severely limited opportunities, it borrows words, patterns and images freely from the mother-tongue and finds expression in a very limited English vocabulary. To its speakers, it has the advantage of having no rules and no syntax. It thrives on lawlessness, and is part of the dislocated and discordant society in which Sozaboy must live, move and have not his being.* (emphasis added)

Critic Seiyifa Koroye has rightly noted that Saro-Wiwa is far less concerned with the linguistic accuracy of his description of this peculiar brand of English than with "the analogy he sees between the syntactical and lexical lawlessness of this language, on the one hand, and the social consciousness and experience of its speakers on the other." This implies that "the nightmare of Mene's life is not limited to the Civil War period" (89) but must rather be viewed in the light of his social, ethnic and political disenfranchisement within a country – be it a Biafra that is never named or a "Nugwa" (141), Nigeria, whose name is mangled up to the point of becoming meaningless – that does not protect his and his fellow villagers' rights. What the texts suggest, therefore, is that the de-politicised condition suffered by his character predates the coups and the emergency declaration, and is rather inscribed in the very fabric of a dysfunctional country where citizenship rights have historically been the privilege of selected groups.

As Michael North has observed, the lack of specificity deriving from the fact that the references to the countries at war remain vague should not be viewed as a gesture aimed at universalising the conflict (104). On the contrary, it signals the alienation of the Ogoni within a national sphere where they are caught, and obliterate

rated, between two opposing forces, neither of which can possibly represent them. And Mene, tellingly, will fight for both parties: first against what he calls, with an abstracting personification, “Mr. Enemy,” who must be a “strong man pass Hitla self” (78); then on his side, nursed back to health after being found unconscious in the forest where he had fled. It is equally relevant that on both sides he will find the same man, an unscrupulous double-crosser he and his friend Bullet christen “Manmuswak,” a term Saro-Wiwa glosses as “a man must live (eat) by whatever means” (184). Manmuswak has no ideology, but fights and kills, as his name implies, for his own survival. “I am soza and I am war,” Manmuswak says of himself (121). And he does indeed embody the very concept of ruthless violence on which war is necessarily grounded, whatever the side.

Manmuswak is coupled with Sozaboy, “an internalizing character” (Chukwuma 39), as a figure who exposes him to the realities of war. The way in which the events unravel after their first encounter, when Manmuswak, now a federal agent, tricks Mene’s battalion into falling out with their commander, will lead Sozaboy to recognising that “[e]very soza is dead body” and that “war is very bad thing. War is to drink urine, to die and all that uniform that they are giving us to wear is just to deceive us” (113). Sozaboy thus slowly enters a world suspended between life and death that is more and more often punctuated with images of human existence reduced to animality or spectrality, the former recalling the materiality and physical pain of a condition of living death that cannot be reduced to some form of impalpable volatility. His nightmarish flight into the forest epitomises such a liminal state, as Sozaboy loses his senses several times – his fainting associated to death on each occasion:

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I was running until my leg cannot carry me again. And then I just stopped under one big tree and just die.

I don't know how long I die. But I think I die for a very long time. When I wake up, I no fit carry up my hand sef. [...] Everywhere na soso water. So I just ask myself who born dog? Who born dog?

[...] I begin to beg God make the rain stop. But impossible. That rain continue to beat me and after it have beat me well well, I come consider myself like an animal. Yes, I was like animal. No shirt, only knicker, would for my body, no food to chop, no house to sleep, only inside bush and rain beating me like no man business. [...] And then I come die again. (113-117)

Given this pervasive employment of a rhetoric of dehumanisation, it comes as a mild surprise that when Sozaboy goes to Dukana in search of his wife and mother, the cripple Duzia confidently tells him that “Sozaboy have already dead in the army. If he is here, it must be his ghost” (131). The fact that such a tropology is employed to describe the figure of this ignorant, naïve soldier, who fights on both sides and deserts from both, acquires great relevance in the context of Saro-Wiwa’s efforts on behalf of minority rights, as it is meant to uncover how the politics of bare life that emerged during the Nigerian Civil War were informed by both class and minority exclusionary practices. The fascinating figuration of bare life through images of spectrality does not only have the power to provide a stark visualisation of the consequences of biopolitical power on the humanity of those who are asked to take up arms for the sovereign’s survival. What is more, this spectre, as a *visualisation* of what, to go back to Garuba’s remarks on subalternity and epistemological erasure, has been reduced to *nothing*, attempts to make knowable what has been declared non-existent, thereby countering the violence of hegemonic discourse. The ethically compelling nature of this imagery derives from the fact that it forces the readers to move, albeit only imaginatively, in a space that is caught between life and death. And, in Derrida’s formulation, it is in this space

that one can “*learn to live*” (xvi) – a homodidactic process that can be achieved only by coming to terms with death, “[m]ine as (well as) that of the other” (*Specters*, xvii). If learning “to live – alone, from oneself, by oneself,” as Derrida writes, is indeed “ethics itself,” then being faced with this ghost of history, who is one yet many, who has died and survived, who occupies multiple temporalities, turns inevitably into a call for justice.

After deserting for the second time, Sozaboy goes on a quest for his beautiful wife Agnes and his mother, whom he has left behind when he joined the army. While looking for them in the refugee camp where the Dukana people who have survived are now staying, however, Chief Birabee and Pastor Barika, fellow villagers, report him to the soldiers as a renegade, and he is made prisoner of war. It is only then that he realises that the two were indeed “very fat like pig” while the other refugees looked “thin and hungry” (158). Sozaboy becomes aware that Chief Birabee and Pastor Barika are the aberrant “bellymen” (158) the wise Terr Kole had warned him about: they trade in Red Cross food and “cloth,” and, as Sozaboy beautifully puts it, they “are friends of the sozas and of the politicians and the traders. And they are all trading in the life of men and women and children. And their customer is death” (156). Saro-Wiwa’s feat, here, consists in managing to convey with unprecedented force the expendability and commodification of human life in the exception. In terms that recall Zygmunt Bauman’s theorisation of the concept of ‘wasted life’ (2004), the refugee camp “born by the foolish war” (150) is presented as a “proper human compost pit,” a “town of ghost” (148) populated by infrahuman, lethargic “rubbish people [who] do not know themselves” (149).

When first entering the camp, Sozaboy compares the life of refugee to that

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of the soldier, whom the war has forced to “live like rat inside pit.” However, while he accepts that a soldier may lead such an animalised existence, “because sozaman life is nonsense and rubbish. Sozaman can die at any time. Na him choose him choice,” the fact that civilians can be reduced to living in similar conditions makes him “ashamed and angry” (153). As noted above, he will soon realise that not all the refugees of the camp are suffering to the same degree: for Chief Birabee’s hut may have a leaking roof, but behind it “there are many bags of gari, rice, and bundles of stockfish” (158). Yet, if Sozaboy becomes finally able to distinguish the privileged from those, like the soldiers and the refugees, who are the content of sovereign decision, still his increased awareness never goes as far as identifying the justifications for a conflict, or for the ensuing biopolitical power relations, both of which remain, in the end, unintelligible. Such a dynamic of partial character development, critic Jago Morrison has remarked, inverts the conventions of the *Bildungsroman* (“Imagined,” 22). Another aspect which counters the incorporative imagination of the genre is that Sozaboy has no ‘home’ to return to after the war: his wife and mother, he discovers, have died during an air raid, and he is rejected by the Dukana community, where everybody believes he is a ghost, the cursed bearer of all the misfortunes and epidemics that have devastated the village since the beginning of the war. The reconciliation between the interiority of a “problematic individual” and “concrete social reality,” which Georg Lucas identified as a definitional aspect of the *Bildungsroman* as a genre (132), is not, cannot be achieved, and the protagonist’s incorporation remains an impossibility.

In his fine reading of the novel, Michael North has argued that the phrase “my brothers” with which Sozaboy often addresses his audience is an attempt to recreate at the level of narration a new community replacing the one he has lost for-

ever. In this context, North interprets Sozaboy's "rotten English" as a proof of the character's positioning within a national frame, "some larger version of the multiethnic population that speaks rotten English in the car parks of Port Harcourt" (108), where Sozaboy used to work before the war. North further elaborates on this argument stating that "to propose brotherhood and sisterhood within that language is to propose a Nigeria that is not divided along ethnic and linguistic lines" (109). It seems to me, however, that this analysis underestimates the fact that in this text "we see no process of building, no struggle to articulate the counter-myths of Biafra or Nigeria as national ideas" (Morrison 21) and that Sozaboy's ostracism from his village community undermines the very foundations of such an ideal of national inclusion and fraternity. Moreover, as Saro-Wiwa has observed, if Sozaboy were speaking

to people of his own class, he probably would use Pidgin English throughout, but in trying to get to a wider audience, people who know much better than himself, he tries to rise to their level and what he achieves is this strange mixture. ("English," 13)

The author's limited faith in a united, 'post-ethnic' Nigerian nation that seems to emerge from these observations substantiate Alexandra Schultheis's contention that Sozaboy's voice is most effectively situated "in the cosmopolitan space of world literature" ("Global Specters" 34), where the novel has, incidentally, achieved great success (Saro-Wiwa, "English" 14). Read thus, then, the second-person address could be understood as a call for inclusion in that "human family" to which Sozaboy should belong by birth but from which he has been *de facto* excluded by means of biopolitical practices which have put his very humanity in doubt. Still, Sozaboy's deracination, alongside the fact that his understanding of

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the ultimate causes for the crumbling of his world remain so superficial, provide an image of this character as a liminal figure, who has been excluded from the local without (yet) finding effective inclusion in a global human rights regime – if not by means of a narration which is certainly presented as a first, emancipatory step towards actual empowerment but, tellingly, does not attempt to fictionalise its achievement.

1.2.3. Multiple exclusions, multiple wars: from the ethnic to the gender front

Ken Saro-Wiwa's coupling of the theme of the horizontal divide between the higher and the lower classes with a preoccupation for ethnic subalternity draws attention to the multi-faceted nature of the Nigerian Civil War – a conflict that, it emerges, was fought on many ideological fronts. Determining the necessary renegotiation of the idea of nationhood, the war brought to the fore the exclusions that jeopardised the national mythologies of unity and inclusiveness of both parties involved. As many first-wave works show, even the newly founded Republic manifested the paradoxical reproduction of those class- and ethnic-based discriminatory practices which had played central role in justifying secession. Amongst the different layers that composed the complex conflictual structure of the Nigerian Civil War, the “women's war,” to borrow a caption from Buchi Emecheta's *Destination Biafra*, is one that critics have often been reluctant to analyse, as confirmed for example by the relative silence on Emecheta's novel at least until the publication in 1996 of the timely volume edited by Marie Umeh and entirely devoted to the writer's *oeuvre*.

Generally speaking, female figures have been excluded, or relegated to minor roles, in the predominantly male-authored Nigerian war fiction.¹⁵ It is for this reason that Theodora Akachi Ezeigbo has rightly acknowledged the importance of Flora Nwapa's 1975 *Never Again* ("Vision"). Notwithstanding its undeniable weaknesses,¹⁶ the novella has indeed been a welcome addition to the Nigerian Civil War corpus, as it has authorised women's presence as both subjects and objects of representation in African war literature. The first example of war fiction written by an African woman, *Never Again* has shed light on women's ability to resist and counter the impact of war on their families and societies. Nwapa's text, Ezeigbo writes, was thus one of the first to counter what she considers a problematic trend in the fiction authored by male writers, most of whom

neglected th[e] aspect of women's contribution but chose to highlight and exaggerate women's moral laxity, forgetting that this was insignificant in comparison with women's efforts towards winning the war, towards survival of the family, and towards the rearing of children. ("Vision" 483)

It is irrefutable that some of the novels Ezeigbo cites as "exaggerating women's moral laxity," such as Cyprian Ekwensi's *Survive the Peace*, or Isidore Okpewho's *The Last Duty*, do indeed provide highly masculinist views of gender relationships that I also find questionable – if not irritating.¹⁷ Still, her outrage at the

¹⁵ Exceptions to this trend are, for example, the figure of Abigail in Andrew Ekwuru's *Songs of Steel*, or that of Fatima in Chukwuemeka Ike's *Sunset at Dawn*. The latter, however, is the only relevant female character in a choral novel which depicts the middle-class world of Dr Amilo Kanu and his male entourage.

¹⁶ In her 1991 *Fact and Fiction on the Nigerian Civil War*, Ezeigbo herself defines Nwapa's rhetorical technique "irritating" and criticises her "unmitigated emotional involvement and [...] tendency to moralise issues" (96).

¹⁷ For example, the protagonist of *Survive the Peace*, James Odugo, has had many wartime girlfriends, one of whom is now pregnant, but once reunited with his adulterous wife, who *forgets to ask after her children*, criticises her behaviour and justifies his own by remembering that, by custom, he is allowed several wives, "conveniently forget[ting] that none

portrayal of wives who become unfaithful during wartime and of “sex objects whose only means of survival is the selling of their bodies to the highest bidders” (483),¹⁸ although understandably induced by a preoccupation with the rehabilitation of womanhood in Nigerian literature and society, is to my mind overemphasised. Ezeigbo seems to ignore the ironies that complicate the politics of gender representation in texts, such as Achebe’s “Girls at War,” Iroh’s *Toads of War*, or I.N.C. Aniebo’s *The Anonymity of Sacrifice*, where women she would not define “respectable” (484) ultimately act as antithetical counterparts to their war-time sugar-daddies, customers or husbands, either underscoring their myopic self-righteousness (Achebe and, at least in part, Iroh) or their appalling violence (Aniebo).¹⁹ In other works, such as Kalu Okpi’s *Biafra Testament*, or O.O.

of the women he has taken were considered as potential wives at the time” (McLuckie *Nigerian Civil War Literature* 41). Isidore Okpewho’s *The Last Duty*, which Ezeigbo exonerates in part from criticism (“Vision” 495), is to my mind even more problematic, because even the only female character subscribes to the vision of women as hysterically weak and luxurious shared by all the male voices who narrate the events. Aku, the wife of an unjustly imprisoned man, is indeed presented as a victim *both* of rich, but impotent, Toje’s sexual advances *and* of her own womanly weakness: “If it was now my lot to be Toje’s whore, did I not have a right at least to be purged of my desire – unwilling as I might be – as often as it suited him to invite me to play the role? [...] I found myself wishing that someday he would summon up the power to slake the desire that he was continually working up on me!” (162).

¹⁸ On this, see also her essay on the short story genre as explored in Civil War literature (Ezeigbo, “Taste of Madness” esp. 202-204).

¹⁹ Achebe’s short story will be analysed below. Iroh’s main character, for his part, changes his view on the moral corruptibility of women when he meets Kechi, the woman who has a number of sugar daddies but falls in love with him: as he puts it comparing his own condition with hers, “[t]he big boss could send you to the battle-front and your death with a snap of his fingers. The suddenly wealthy toad could send desperate women running towards him with another snap of his fingers” (104). One of the two main characters of Aniebo’s novel is Cyril Odumo, an embodiment of blind violence who beats his wife “systematically with his leather belt” for “play[ing] around with officers” (28) – an insinuation that is not substantiated at the level of the plot. Interestingly, Odumo’s life is saved during the anti-Igbo pogrom by a prostitute he has slept with, an old acquaintance who “receive[s] a beating on his behalf” for refusing to tell some Northern rioters his ethnic origins (25).

Eneke's *Come Thunder*, female characters are presented as rare examples of decency in a corrupted society. However, they tend to be mono-dimensional and often abstracted to embody the stereotypical image of the woman at war as nurturer, as "Beautiful Soul" (Elshtain x, qtd. in Nnaemeka 236). Male-authored first-wave texts therefore, by generally relegating women to playing such minor or instrumental roles, ultimately obliterate their suffering, resilience, and agency. Ezeigbo is thus right when she asserts the importance of hearing the war stories "from 'the horse's mouth'" (229), so as to understand what has remained unsaid in the Nigerian war literature written by men.

*

"I meant to live at all costs. I meant to see the end of the war" (1), says Kate, the narrator of Nwapa's *Never Again*. What Ezeigbo has called "the poetics of survival" ("Vision" 483) is indeed a motif that extends through much of Nwapa's war fiction, whose heroines are invariably presented as responsible for the well-being of their husbands and children. Nwapa's depiction of women during the emergency of war, on the whole, tends to conform to the above-mentioned gendered view that opposes the figure of the nurturing woman to that of the fighting man. I would however argue that, albeit not abandoning or disputing the traditional dichotomies that war discourse associates with gender difference,²⁰ Nwapa also highlights how her women characters' fights for survival, countering as they do the death threats of war, have a clear, if understated, (bio)political validity.

It is true that, as Jane Bryce has observed, in Nwapa's *Never Again* there is little "of the political rights and wrongs of the War" (30). However, both in *Never*

²⁰ For an interesting analysis of women's texts that instead attempt to counter such stereotypical discourses, see Pape.

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Again, an “anti-war rhetorical text” (Oha 434), and in the aesthetically more convincing short stories collected in *Wives at War and Other Stories*, the author’s evident emphasis on the domestic sphere does not prevent her from depicting her protagonists as well-informed, perceptive figures who often have more insight into the war situation than their male counterparts. What is more, Nwapa suggests that the domestic is inevitably, and painfully, invaded by the political in a world where biological life is bound to be caught in the sphere of sovereign influence. In *Never Again*, for example, the narrator recounts how a Civil Defender – “the Intruder,” she calls him – knocked on her door in the dead of night and started to search her house for infiltrators. “Nothing was private anymore,” Kate comments. “We had lost our freedom and democracy. We lost them the day that the Army took over” (35).

It is in this context that the ‘mere’ will to survive at the centre of Nwapa’s war texts assumes a political dimension, as it is meant to resist the sovereign’s right to lead its subjects to wholesale destruction. This aspect becomes all the more evident in the short story “A Certain Death,” published in the collection *Wives at War and Other Stories*, where the woman narrator prevents the suicidal conscription of her brother, who has not recovered from the gory death of his wife and children during an air raid, by paying a young adventurer to take his place. The young man has done it on more than one occasion, and has always managed to cheat death and flee from the front. Surviving at all costs, then, becomes for Nwapa’s women a means of reasserting ownership of their own lives, as well as of those of their family members. In Agambenian terms, it can be seen as an attempt to counter the tentacular claims of the sovereign over the private dimension inhabited by *zōē*, in order to counter the formation of that realm of indistinction be-

tween the private and the public spheres where life is brought into the orbit of sovereign power and thereby subdued to the violence of its decision. Nwapa's works, therefore, must be discussed and interpreted not only in terms of the 'poetics' of survival, but also in terms of the 'politics' of survival, as they manage to show that the efforts of women such as her heroines, by countering the sovereign's primary biopolitical activity, attempted to maintain, or rather reconstruct, some form of socio-political order so as to "bring normalcy (or the semblance of it) to an abnormal situation" (Nnaemeka 253).

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Chinua Achebe's short story "Girls at War" offers, I believe, the most interesting portrayal of a woman figure in male-authored war fiction, as it represents another articulation of the women's war of survival through the story of Gladys, a young, beautiful single woman, who becomes the protégée of sugar daddies from the Biafran elite after things start to turn for the worse in the beleaguered enclave. Achebe's tripartite time frame enumerates the encounters between Gladys and the male focaliser Reginald Nwankwo, a civil servant working at the Biafran Ministry of Justice. In so doing, Achebe identifies the three main phases of the war, which also signal three main changes in the young woman's life and aspirations. During the "first heady days of warlike preparation" (103), Gladys attempts to join the militias; at the beginning of the war effort, after being told "to go back to [her] school or join the Red Cross," she has "patch[ed] up with Civil Defence" and is briefly shown while she carefully inspects the car of irritated Nwankwo, who is not granted the preferential treatment he expected because of his status; but it is in the "tight, blockaded and desperate world" of a country about to fall that the narration develops. Gladys is now "a beauty queen," Nwankwo says. She wears

expensive clothes and “a high-tinted wig” (108).

Nwankwo is portrayed through an intricate web of ironies that are meant to underscore the incongruity between his moralising posture, which no doubt accords with his institutional role (after all, he works at the *Ministry of Justice*), and his and his colleagues’ actual demeanour as “gay bachelors” in the “swinging town of Owerri” (110), from which their wives and children have been evacuated on the pretext of air raids. It is thus highly ironical that Nwankwo is offended by the rather coarse phraseology Gladys employs when referring to sex while he is taking her to bed; or that he feels entitled to reproach her for dancing during a party to which he himself invited her: “‘I am sorry I didn’t dance,’ he said as they drove away. ‘But I swore never to dance as long as this war lasts’” (117). Nwankwo is thus an unreliable focaliser, in that his comments on the symbolic relevance of Gladys as a “mirror reflecting a society that had gone completely rotten and maggoty at the centre” (119) fail to recognise the corruption of the powerful, like him, as a potential cause of the presumed amorality he so self-righteously indicts when he sees it in others.

The paternalistic civil servant engages in quasi-missionary attempts to save Gladys, making her change her countenance, vocabulary and looks (121), while kissing her and mumbling “something about victims of circumstance, which went over her head” (120). This talk of victimhood, the reader suspects, would have probably been rejected by the young woman, as she never feels the need to excuse her behaviour, but rather matter-of-factly points out that hers are conscious choices determined by need. The time of great expectations, she comments, “done pass. Now everybody want survival. They call it number six.²¹ You put your

²¹ “Number six” is a pidgin phrase meaning ‘intelligence.’

number six; I put my number six. Everything all right” (114-115). Achebe’s Gladys is thus an independent woman who, after attempting to challenge traditional gender roles by deciding not to “go back to her school or join the Red Cross” (105), finally adapts to the new, wartime ‘law of demand’ and, through the strategic use of her body, finds protection “in the keep of some well-placed gentleman” (109). As she reminds Nwankwo, “That is what you men want us to do” (114).²²

The short story ends as the young woman, during an air raid, endeavours to rescue a disabled soldier from the car where she is travelling with Nwankwo, while the civil servant dives for cover in the bush. After the attack, Nwankwo

woke up to human noises and weeping and the smell and smoke of a charred world. He dragged himself up and staggered towards the source of the sounds.

From afar he saw his driver running towards him in tears and blood. He saw the remains of his car smoking and the entangled remains of the girl and the soldier. And he let out a piercing cry and fell down again (123).

The “charred world” of which Nwankwo becomes finally aware is one where words have turned to “noises,” and the entangled “remains” of objects and human beings are so contiguous as to become ontologically almost indistinguishable. However, it is telling that the girl, here presented as a non-conventional agent of change,²³ does in the end not survive the war, while the powerful man does. In

²² Indeed, I do not read Gladys’ retorting comment simply as an attempt to put moral responsibility for her behaviour on Nwankwo. The reason why I rather prefer to see it as an explanation of how she has adapted to the new ‘demands’ of war is due to the fact that, very interestingly, it echoes the words she said to the annoyed civil servant while, as a member of Civil Defence, she was inspecting his car: “Sorry to delay you, sir. But you people gave us this job to do” (104).

²³ Not only does she lead Nwankwo to increased awareness of the logic and consequences of war through her last, self-immolating decision; she is also able to make him conscious of his own inconsistent behaviour – so much so that he will ask his astonished driver to pick up the invalid soldier, while he had previously left on the roadside an old woman asking for a lift: “I never give lifts these days” (109).

this conclusions, both Gladys and the disabled soldier, notwithstanding their different stories, are opposed to Nwankwo as examples of honourable behaviour. However, their comparable moral agency becomes self-evident only in an embrace of death which, problematically, sees them lose their struggle for survival.

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Buchi Emecheta's *Destination Biafra* is probably the Nigerian war novel that has most clearly introduced a gendered perspective on the question of biopolitical violence. The novel is very ambitious in scope, as it "combines issues of gender and sexuality with a very detailed negotiation of national formation and the idea of community" (Morrison 12). Part One, which begins with the fictionalisation of the General Elections of 1959 and ends with the Biafran Declaration of Independence, aims at exposing the British colonial and neo-colonial influence on Nigeria, while pointing out the structural instability of a country where ethnic tensions were manipulated and consecrated to the point of preventing any possibility of peaceful governance. It is the figure of Alan Grey, a British military training officer, who embodies his mother country's interested presence in Nigeria. Alan Grey, interestingly, is also the lover of Emecheta's main character, Debbie Ogedembgbe, the Oxford-educated daughter of the Nigerian Minister of Finance.

The second part of the novel is set during the wartime period and recounts the mission on which Debbie, now a soldier in the federal army, embarks. Saka Momoh, a thinly disguised allegorical character who stands for the Nigerian leader Gowon, has thought of her as the perfect ambassador to convince Eastern leader Chijioke Abosi (alias Chukwuemeka Ojukwu) to renounce his secessionist projects. Interestingly, his motivations for the choice of Debbie as a peace emissary in this "delicate mission" (122) is tinged with sexual innuendos that the protagonist

does not miss: “[Y]ou can use your feminine charms to break that icy reserve of his” (123), suggests Momoh. Debbie’s nightmarish, highly symbolical trek in the forests and swamps dividing the two warring countries is of particular relevance here: accompanied by a peaceful army of women and children, Debbie and the Igbo refugees she is travelling with are on a physical and metaphysical quest for peace. The “destination” of the title, it soon becomes clear, is not so much the geographical country that claims sovereignty, but rather a theorised symbol, a utopian haven, the ideal of a land that has been decolonised, detribalised, and freed from gender discrimination. This is what Debbie, who, as an Itsekiri, is “neither Ibo nor Yoruba, nor [is] she Hausa, but a Nigerian” and hence an epitome of national unity (126), aims at achieving by attempting to talk Abosi into surrendering. Needless to say, hers is a quest that is bound to fail, as metaphorically confirmed by the death of the orphaned baby that Debbie and the other women have collectively adopted and christened ‘Biafra.’ And when Debbie is finally received by Abosi, she is confirmed that her efforts have been useless: as the Biafran leader says, “I am sorry if you’ve risked your life for nothing. What good could you have done, just you, little you?” (239).

Emecheta provides a complex negotiation of womanhood that is caught between subversion and tradition. Debbie’s initial attempts to have a career within the army represent an unconventional vocation that is determined by her hope to serve her country well, while challenging the stereotypical roles that a patriarchal society has in store for her. But when the reader is first presented with the woman in uniform, Debbie is caricatured as adopting “an uncharacteristically and ridiculously heartless and macho pose” (Porter 321) in order to counter the derisive laughter with which her claims to gender equality are met. While on her mission,

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however Debbie progressively undergoes a process of ‘feminisation,’ and as the war draws to a close she aligns with a more traditionally feminine role in her desire to bring up the orphaned children of Nigeria. Interestingly, her desire to act as a nurturer is however not perceived as a natural prerogative based on biological considerations, but is rather the rational choice of an autonomous woman who rejects her white lover and claims her right to play whichever role she desires within her society – as a woman, but emphatically not as a wife. As critic Ann Marie Adams has argued, indeed, “the fact that Debbie is not married (and has no intention to be married) suggests that a patriarchal family structure will not be reimplemented” (297). Emecheta thus proposes a revision of womanhood and motherhood that, while rejecting emulative discourses of ‘masculinisation’ as the sole means to achieve parity, reinstates gender difference without conforming to its traditional articulation.

This text plays an essential role within the analysis of the portrayal of the sovereign’s biopolitical hold on the body because of the centrality that the act of raping, as the form of bodily violence and violation *par excellence*, assumes in the novel. Many commentators have noted that rape is a practice that has often been erased both in historical and in literary records of the Nigerian Civil War. In particular, with the exception of texts such as Eddie Iroh’s thriller *Forty-Eight Guns for the General* and Ben Okri’s “Laughter Beneath the Bridge,” rape does not feature in male-authored war literature – a silence that is of course telling, operating as it does a selective remembrance and fictionalisation of the historical event that refuses to include the fact of gender violence. Approaching Buchi Emecheta’s novel, instead, the reader is confronted with numerous instances of rape, to which young, old, pregnant women, and even nuns, are subjected. The heroine herself is

assaulted on more than one occasion. Just after accepting Momoh's assignment, Debbie is gang-raped by federal soldiers – a scene reproduced in stark detail in a passage that Ezeigbo has described as “unprecedented in Nigerian Civil War literature” (“Horse” 228):

She could make out the figure of the leader referred to as Bale on top of her, then she knew it was somebody else, then another person. . . . She felt herself bleeding, though her head was still clear. Pain shot all over her body like arrows. She felt her legs being pulled this way and that, and at times she could hear her mother's protesting cries. But eventually, amid all the degradation that was being inflicted on her, Debbie lost consciousness. (134)

Critic Tuzyline Jita Allan has noticed that the theme of sexual violence is a major preoccupation in Emecheta's *oeuvre*, evidencing “at once her rejection of silence in the face of gender oppression and the attendant difficulty of fashioning a voice of protest” (208). *Destination Biafra*, Allan argues, “inaugurates Emecheta's attempt to put women into African rape discourse next to the symbolically ravished body of Africa” – an attempt that, she contends, is however only partially successful in that it “forc[es] a compromise that undercuts the centrality of women's rape experience in the novel” (215). Since Debbie Ogedembgbe, as noticed above, is a figure laden with evident symbolic resonance, her rapes in the novel no doubt signify the violation of the ideal of a peaceful, united Nigeria. However, it is relevant that Debbie is not the only woman who is raped in the text. Moreover, also in the light of the above-mentioned considerations on Emecheta's innovative depiction of womanhood and motherhood, I would argue, with Ann Marie Adams, that the author manipulates the traditional trope of ‘Mother Africa,’ employing it

not as an unproblematic symbol [...], but as a positive (and greatly refigured) alter-

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native to the neo-colonial ploys of the British and the separatist drives of Nigerian males who have torn apart the country in their quest to control the fatherland. (288)

In this context, Adams notes for example that the fact that the sexual intercourse between Debbie and Alan is consensual is quite relevant, as it confirms that Emecheta, who at times no doubt abstracts the experiences of Debbie's rapes so as to reduce them to violent acts lacking a wholly convincing "emotional correlative" (Allan 216), refuses to conform *in toto* to the traditional iconography that has the raped woman embodying exploited Africa/Nigeria (Adams 298).

What is more, Emecheta in *Destination Biafra* introduces another important variation to the traditional handling of the rape theme in African literature that specifically positions it within the context of war discourse: the perpetrators of rape in the novel are indeed not only men, but male soldiers, and they even assault a fellow (female) soldier, Debbie herself. This underscores a very important aspect in terms of Emecheta's representation of the biopolitics of the Nigerian Civil War: the Nigerian sovereign is invariably, inescapably, male. In this context, women's claims to equality, inclusion and participation within the nation-state are met by mockery or outright violence. Emecheta therefore, although not repudiating *tout court* the trope of Mother Africa, appropriates and re-writes it from a perspective that aims at highlighting the gendered practices of biopolitical power. Such a counter-discourse confronts the personification of the (mother)land as a womanly body that, as Florence Stratton has famously argued, "implicitly gives men license to exploit, rape, oppress, and dominate nations" (54), and that, by reducing the female body to a mere embodying symbol, ultimately "justifies and therefore serves to perpetuate the status quo of male domination" (55). Debbie might be a

symbol, an ideal, but her characterisation is on the whole convincing. In other words, she, alongside the other women trekking through swampy lands, is not only a symbol, but also a human being, a woman – and a woman who has learnt to become one. However, the fact that Emecheta, at the end of the novel, positions her heroine in a site of uncertain inclusion within the future state testifies to the difficulty of imagining an active role for women in a Nigeria that is still far from Debbie's theorised ideal. The Biafra of Debbie's dreams remains, it seems, a far-away destination.

1.2.4. Madness, disability, wasted lives: violence, the body and the mind

The powerful opening of Wole Soyinka's *Madmen and Specialists* introduces the audience to a play that provides the most challenging re-figuration of biopolitical power of Nigerian Civil War literature. Four disabled characters, a choric presence known collectively as the Mendicants, are intent on gambling parts of their already maimed bodies in a game of dice:

AAFAA. Three and two, born loser. What did you stake?
GOYI. The stump of the left arm.
CRIPPLE. Your last?
GOYI. No, I've got one left.
BLINDMAN. Your last. You lost your right stump to me yesterday.
GOYI. Do you want it now or later?
BLINDMAN. Keep it for now.
CRIPPLE. When do I get my eye, Aafaa? (223)

Aafaa, a former chaplain, and the other three, former soldiers, pleaded insanity after narrowly escaping death at the front, and are the by-products of an unnamed conflict, the grotesque spectacle met by the passer-by who walks on the

roadside before the home and surgery of Dr Bero, the Specialist. The latter, as stage directions explain, has “lately returned from the *wars*” (223, emphasis added) – a plural that encapsulates and supersedes the Nigerian Civil conflict as the immediate context for dramatic action. A medical doctor in times of peace, after enrolling Dr Bero has become a ‘specialist’ in the military Intelligence Section, where he will manage to satisfy his desires of total control over the human body. His father, Old Man, used instead to be in charge of a convalescent home for those, like the Mendicants, whom the war had forced into the threshold between life and death. There, to Dr Bero’s dismay, not only did Old Man cure what was left of their bodies, but he also took care of their minds: in Dr Bero’s words, “he began to teach them to think, think, THINK! Can you picture a more treacherous deed than to place a working mind in a mangled body?” (253). Old Man has indeed initiated the Mendicants into the mysteries of “As,” of which he himself is an “ironizing evangelist” (Jeyifo 152). The man is the founder of this enigmatic pseudo-religion, whose nature is never explained but rather hinted at in excruciatingly fragmentary, elusive, and tautological form throughout the play: “As Was the Beginning, As Is, Now, As Ever Shall Be, World Without” (289). Critics have generally noted that As defies unambiguous definition: its meanings remain purposely vague, being displaced as they are by means of interlacing, baffling metonymic chains. In its most easily recognisable articulation, however, As seems to signify the faith in the power deriving from the ruthless manipulation of human life, an ubiquitous creed that the war(/s) has(/have) only brought to the fore, and of which Bero, an agent of the System, has become the epitome.

In fact, As seems to have no real *content*, no *meaning* as such – hence the inappropriateness of calling it, as many commentators have done certainly for want

of a better term, an ‘ideology.’ Exactly as the conjunction of the Christian doxology it clearly echoes and mangles (“Glory be to the Father, and to the Son, and to the Holy Ghost; *as* it was in the Beginning, Is Now and Ever Shall Be, World Without End”), it is purely instrumental and constitutively lacks any referent. However, by becoming the grammatical subject in the mantra-like formulations of its followers, As becomes a simulacrum, a fetish, an all-powerful, if empty, divinity, the brutal force that lies at the basis of all human enterprises: as Old Man explains, “the System is its mainstay though it wear a hundred masks and a thousand outward forms” (287). In a way, thus, As represents the natural human instinct for prevarication. It seems therefore coherent that what is sacrificed at its altar (or rather, at its table), in a grotesque Eucharist that is in fact a cannibalistic – or rather, necrophiliac – feast, are the bodies of the soldiers who lost their lives in battle. Old Man, indeed, left for the front provocatively stating that he was willing “to try and persuade those fools not to waste all that meat” (250), and he then served human body parts, after blessing them, to the table of unaware officers, including his son – a last supper after which he would be declared insane. Old Man will later explain the perverse rationale underlying his ambiguously subversive acts in a mocking clue that addresses the audience directly (Harding 93), implicitly assimilating it to the shocked officers to which he offered the delicacy:

OLD MAN. Your faces, gentlemen, your faces. You should see your faces. And your mouths are hanging open. You’re drooling but I am not exactly sure why. Is there really much difference? All intelligent animals kill only for food, you know, and you are intelligent animals. Eat-eat-eat-eat-eat-Eat! (267)

Madmen and Specialists, thus, appears to be the dramatic correlative of Soyinka’s belief that “human beings are simply cannibals all over the world, so that their pre-

occupation seems to be eating up one another” (Soyinka in Duerden and Pieterse 173) – a belief that the Civil War dramatically confirmed.

Dr Bero is now holding his father captive in his subterranean surgery room, an inferno entered after a katabatic voyage which is a constant metaphor in Soyinka’s war literature (Whitehead). There, Old Man is the victim of psychological torture on the part of his son, who wants him to explain and systematise the contents and meanings of a doctrine of which he is, evidently, an unwitting disciple. The audience soon comes to know that the officers whom Old Man tricked into the cult of As refused to come to terms with the fact of cannibalism as the ultimate form of human exploitation representing their role in the war(s): “Oh yes, you rushed out and vomited,” Old Man recalls in a conversation with his son. “You and the others. But afterwards you said I had done you a favour. Remember?” (267). And as Bero himself admits, indeed,

Afterwards I said why not? What is one flesh from another? So I tried again, just to be sure of myself. It was the first step to power you understand. Power in the purest sense. The end of inhibitions. The conquest of the weakness of your too human flesh with all its sentiment. (252)

Old Man’s feast becomes for Dr Bero a gory variation on the theme of the Bakhtinian banquet, where man triumphs over the world through the act of swallowing – an act that, in this context, denies the difference between human and other forms of animal life.

Old Man is presented as a character who aims at deconstructing the System, exposing its violence by forcing its agents to a cannibalism they find repulsive. All the same, he does not seem to deny that he “worship[s]” the new god, who “abominates humanity – the fleshy part, that is” (266). Furthermore, as Ato Quay-

son has noted in his excellent reading of the play, the gory feast he puts up does not counter, nor does it negate, “the mindless illogicality of war, but rather [extends] that illogicality toward the annulment of all sentiment about what it is to be human” (*Nervousness*, 137). The two figures, father and son, are thus far from antithetical. In Quayson’s words, Old Man’s hospital is in fact

not diametrically opposed to Dr. Bero’s laboratory as such, but is rather dialectically related to it. It represents an overlap and counterpoint to Bero’s torture chamber, and each of them represents the instrumentalization of biopower [...] for different effects. (134)

Indeed, what Bero calls his father’s “bed-ridden audience” (252), here represented by the Mendicants who have been under his care, have not been taught to “think” for self-emancipatory purposes.²⁴ On the contrary, the Mendicants are meant to be employed by Old Man as instruments of subversion. The coupling of their disabled bodies, signs of the consequences of a war logic, with their thinking minds explains why the Mendicants are the only who are able to challenge the workings of the System – from within, of course, since, as Old Man clearly states, there is no way out of the System. To quote again from Quayson, their condition “helps them articulate the dominant logic of war within their own bodies *and* to subvert this logic by the resituation of their fragmented bodies as sites of thought” (*Nervousness*, 136). The Mendicants are therefore “the cyst in the System that irritates, the foul gurgle of the cistern, the expiring function of a faulty cistern” (287), the “heresiarchs of the System arguing questioning querying weighing puzzling insisting rejecting” (288). In a hammering, climactic passage which leads to the open

²⁴ In fact, they claim that it was his proselytising that, paradoxically, made them insane (253-4).

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ending of the play, Old Man rehearses the epithets that identify such “heresiarchs,” literally deconstructing the language on which all human ideologies, religions, and institutions are founded:

OLD MAN (*his voice has risen to a frenzy*). Practise, Practise, Practise . . . on the cyst in the system. [...] you cyst, you cyst, you splint in the arrow of arrogance, the dog in dogma, tick of a heretic, the tick in politics, the mock of democracy, the mar of marxism, a tic of the fanatic, the boo in buddhism, the ham in Mohammed, the dash in the criss-cross of Christ, a dot on the i of ego an ass in the mass, the ash in ashram, a boot in kibbutz, the pee of priesthood, the peepee of perfect priesthood, oh how dare you raise your hindquarters you dog of dogma and cast the scent of your existence on the lamppost of Destiny you HOLE IN THE ZERO of NOTHING! (292)

Old Man is here interrupted by Cripple, a figure who articulates a voice of internal dissent and who now repeatedly says he wants to ask a question. The paradoxical nature of Old Man’s dogmatic resistance to the dogmatic violence of the System becomes finally manifest when he orders the Mendicants to “shut that gaping hole or we fall through it” (292). Old Man, after putting on the surgeon’s coat, cap, and gloves, picks up a scalpel and approaches the table where Cripple is now hold down by the others, in a synaesthetic will to “taste just what makes a heretic tick” (293). When he is about to cut him open, however, Dr Bero enters the surgery and shoots him. Old Man “*spins, falls face upwards on the table as the CRIPPLE slides to the ground from under him*” (293), substituting his designated victim on the altar of As. This enigmatic open ending resists univocal interpretation, but might be read as suggesting that Dr Bero, by preventing his father’s act of annihilation, aims to reassert his own exclusive power to “control lives” (279), thereby reclaiming his quasi-divine right to decide on the life of human beings, while also getting rid of “the last proof of the human in [him]” (265), of the man who kept on reminding him he was not omnipotent (282). Viewed this way, the play would

therefore reinstate at the level of the plot the god-like power of an unrestrained sovereign that cannot, will not be countered – not even by a similarly biopolitical form of resistance. However, the very fact that Dr Bero seeks validation of his power seems to hint at an ultimate, if well-disguised, powerlessness. And, as Achille Mbembe has remarked, it is from powerlessness that the most vicious situations of violence arise (*Postcolony* 133).

Ato Quayson has argued that the representation of disability triggers a short-circuit in the dominant protocols of literary representation – a process he has termed “aesthetic nervousness,” whereby the reader is forced to negotiate the relationship between the domains of the ethical and the aesthetic, which become analytically inseparable. Indeed, he remarks, since the re-presentation of the disabled is something “always having an ethical dimension that cannot be easily subsumed under the aesthetic structure,” it inevitably orients towards the “active ethical core” of the literary text (19). Given these considerations, it is no surprise that Nigerian Civil War literature is replete with crippled bodies and demented minds, as their very presence in a narrative of war, the ‘maiming’ human activity *par excellence*, has of course the disturbing potential to elicit ethical reflection over the consequences of biopolitical violence on humanity as such. Mainly through the typologies of disability representation that Quayson has called “disability as moral test” (37),²⁵ “disability as the interface with otherness (race, class, sexuality, and social identity)” (39)²⁶ and “disability as moral deficit/evil” (42),²⁷ a number of first-wave

²⁵ Suffice it to recall the invalid soldiers of Eddie Iroh’s *Toads of War* and of Chinua Achebe’s “Girls at War,” or the figures of the crippled Job and Duzia in Andrew Ekwuru’s *Songs of Steel* and Ken Saro-Wiwa’s *Sozaboy* respectively.

²⁶ A telling example might be Odibo, in Isidore Okpewho’s *The Last Duty*, a cripple who is constantly brutalised by his powerful uncle, Toje. A character like Saro-Wiwa’s *Sozaboy* somehow invites this kind of reading as well, because even if he states that he was good

authors have indeed confronted the ethical quandaries that became manifest with the traumatic madness of war.

Madmen and Specialists is the most thoroughgoing attempt to view the war(s) – that is, war discourse – through the prism of disability. Not only does it feature the most numerous group of physically disabled characters of Nigerian war fiction; it also presents madness as the pervasive, if ambivalent, condition of a society at war – a condition from which only the women of the play seem to be, at least in part, excluded. When Si Bero, the Specialist’s sister, discovers how her brother has desecrated the earth by consuming human flesh, she is told that she should stay in her “little world” of ignorance: “Don’t come out from where you’re safe. (*Quietly.*) Or sane,” Dr Bero warns her (252). It also bears noting that in the play insanity, as a status, is at times pleaded (as is the case for the Mendicants), other times feigned (as Aafaa’s St Vitus spasms seem to be), or again imposed and rejected (as in the case of Old Man). The concept thus assumes multiple connotations that problematise the possibility of individuating with clarity each individual’s role within the play, and the power relations by which he lives. What is more, it is difficult to understand to what extent the ‘madness’ of the title overlaps with those ‘specialised’ practices of violence on the body that, far from being Dr Bero’s exclusive prerogative, are perpetrated by all the male characters in the play. This is confirmed by Aafaa’s words in a scene where, presumably aping Dr Bero’s acts of torture, he provides a disturbing pantomimic reproduction of the Latin dictum

at school (11), the reader often has the feeling that his naïveté is the result not only of poor education and alienation, but also of “limited intelligence” (North, 102).

²⁷ Of which two examples are the above-mentioned Toje, the exploitative, and impotent, Big Man of Okpewho’s *The Last Duty*, or the figure of one-eyed Chuma Mong in Okpi’s *Biafra Testament*.

“Rem Acu Tetigisti” by threatening Goyi with a ‘needle’ while at the same time appropriating Old Man’s philosophising vocabulary. He then tells Goyi: “[t]hink not that I hurt you but that Truth hurts. We are all seekers after truth. I am a Specialist in truth” (230). In other words, it looks as if all the male characters of the play, in different guises and for different reasons, are both madmen and specialists.

In this context, the representation of the Mendicants is particularly complex, as it does not portray them simply as victims of the Beros, but rather emphasises their corruptibility and connivance with the very powers they are subjected to. Aafaa might well state, referring to Old Man, that “if we have anything to thank it’s him down there” (241), but it is they who, on Dr Bero’s request, imprisoned him “down there.” Cripple, “the dreamer” (292), admits that he collaborates with Bero in the hope that he will perform a miracle on his disabled body (260), and while Goyi and Blindman meet this revelation with consensual silence, Aafaa, their leader (or the “quickest of the underdogs” [268], as Old Man used to call him) is puzzlingly outraged by it. This leaves the audience wondering what are the reasons that lead him to obey Dr Bero: while claiming independence from his will, still – perhaps out of fear, or ambition – he remains his greatest supporter. The Mendicants’ inconsistent attitude towards the Beros is confirmed when it becomes clear that, if on the one hand they hope that the Specialist will give them back fully-abled bodies, on the other they also fantasise about the day when Old Man will take them on a circus world tour, as he once promised: a “Travelling Exhibition of As Grotesques.” They do not appear to grasp the instrumental violence that would be implied by this display of their disabilities in a freak show, and Cripple, the only one who was offended when Old Man first told them about his project,

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apologised straight after being explained that “Grotesque only meant Greatest” (284). Ultimately, what emerges from the portrayal of the power relationships between the Mendicants and the Beros is that, either as Dr Bero’s “*watchdogs*” or as Old Man’s “*underdogs*” (268), they nevertheless remain confined to a status of exploitable sub-humanity. And in both cases, they are only partially aware of their condition.

Disturbingly, however, shared sub-humanity is not equated with solidarity. The politics of representation of the play are indeed further complicated by the self-defeating violence that characterises the relationships *within* the group of the Mendicants. Although Aafaa reminds Bero that they are “a team – one for all and all for one” (241), in fact they continuously threaten each other, either verbally or physically, in pantomimic or actual fights where rattles, staffs, and crutches, signs of common disability, become the very weapons they use against one another (238). The Mendicants thus constitute a nervous site of “failed synthesis between opposing ideological standpoints” (Quayson, *Nervousness* 144), figures who fail to articulate a counter-discourse but are in fact liminally standing between different discourses of prevarication, and participative of both. The stark depiction of this violence-dominated world recalls Achille Mbembe’s theorisation of postcolonial sovereignty as an intimate mode of domination, where the belonging of both dominated and tyrants to the same episteme requires the analyst to go beyond the binary categories used in standard interpretations of regimes of power so as to detect its convivial nature (*Postcolony*, ch. 3). A conviviality that, in *Madmen and Specialists*, is cannibalistic – or rather, as seen above, necrophiliac.

Quayson, following Foucault, has argued that bio-power as portrayed in *Madmen and Specialists* has the aim of producing docile bodies (Quayson, *Nervousness*

134). However, it seems to me that the peculiar brands of postcolonial violence on the body that Soyinka dramatises here teeter on the fine line dividing two different forms of power on human life, which are interwoven so as to become virtually indistinguishable: on the one hand, we see Old Man's Foucauldian attempts to positively discipline his apostles; on the other, we see Dr Bero's absolutistic will of total control, manifested through the power to give death and make the most of it through the consumption of human flesh. Interestingly, Old Man's regulatory enterprise proves ultimately unsuccessful, as the Mendicants are unpredictable and unreliable, certainly the objects of his manipulative practices but in fact not so docile, changing, as they do, allegiances with the wind. Similarly, Dr Bero's disturbing, unrestrained practices of power for power's sake produce no real victor, resulting in a mutual "zombification" (Mbembe's term) that leaves all actors impotent. No one sheds a tear at Old Man's sacrifice: after a "*momentary freeze on stage,*" the Mendicants "*break gleefully in their favourite song*" (293). Dr Bero is thus for a moment at the centre of the postcolonial universe. Still, one cannot help but think that his triumph is bound to be ephemeral, his death perhaps soon met with equal mirth. This is confirmed when the Old Women, herbalists who have shared their knowledge of the secrets of the earth with Si Bero, throw glowing embers into the store where Si Bero has collected her herbs and roots. Their wisdom cannot be shared with dangerous Dr Bero. As the Old Women walk away, all the other characters, innocent Si Bero included, are in the subterranean surgery that will soon burst into flames. As Jane Wilkinson has beautifully put it, in this "apocalyptic conclusion"

good and evil are finally put to the test of fire. [...] What will now emerge is once again left open, but the seeds for the resurgence of a new, more human existence

from the ashes of the purificatory fire have at least been sown. (“Daring” 610)

1.2.5. A lingering threat: when the war goes on

Biafra surrendered on January 13, 1970. The armistice that followed, however, did not lead to the restoration of an unproblematic normality in the country. On the contrary, it ushered in a season of uncertain peace, whose more or less latent violence has been often depicted in post-war Nigerian literature as becoming a constitutive trait of the country’s society. Unsurprisingly then, while certain first-wave works, such as Elechi Amadi’s *Estrangement* and Kalu Okpi’s *Biafra Testament*, end imagining symbolic gestures of inter-ethnic understanding and mutual help, thus hinting at the need to overcome divisiveness so as to recreate a peaceful community, a great number of first-wave texts tend instead to resist such a conciliatory rhetoric. In this section, I would like to examine briefly some of the narrative and thematic strategies employed by first-wave writers in order to signify the perpetuation of the exception in a state where the “continuation of civil war by other means” took place (Feuser, “Nothing” 72).

On some occasions, this idea of unending conflict is conveyed formally, either by means of narratological choices that prevent aesthetic closure or through the narration of a plot whose time frame is not co-extensive with the duration of the war but is rather embedded in it, so that the narrative closure chronologically precedes the end of the war. Exemplary instances of the first category are works such as O.O. Enekwe’s *Come Thunder*, or Chukwuemeka Ike’s *Sunset at Dawn*, whose open endings leave the narrative suspended at a time when the Biafran defeat is clearly looming but the war is still going on. Enekwe’s main character, the

boy soldier Meka, is portrayed as he starts a presumably suicidal run under federal fire, while Ike's text draws to a conclusion with the image of Mr Akwaelumo diving for cover under a bed during a very violent Nigerian air raid.²⁸ Aniebo's novel *The Anonymity of Sacrifice*, for its part, is perhaps the clearest representative of the second category, as it recounts the clash between two members of the Biafran army who both die way before the end of the hostilities. Their personal conflict, the main object of narration, has been resolved in death, but the last words of the text hint at the fact that a bigger, bloodier conflict extends outside the boundaries of the text: "[m]eanwhile, the civil war continued" (Aniebo 115). These novels, by portraying the war as a non-entirely-finite phenomenon, structurally hint at the state of permanently deferred normalisation which was the hallmark of Gowon's post-war rule and that, during the military dictatorships of the following decades, would become the sign of a country steeped in a perennial war-like condition. As Andrew Ekwuru writes by way of conclusion of his *Songs of Steel*, indeed, "although the fighting was over, the conflict still remained. And that, in fact, was the trouble" (160).

²⁸ Ike's last chapter is followed by a one-page "Postscript" (246) where the author does tell of the Biafran surrender: "From Biafranism back to Nigerianism. Each person sought his own hideout, to bury his discarded Biafran skin." Hugh Hodges has read the postscript as emphasising an underlying desire, which this work shares with "much Biafran War fiction, to close the book on the episode – a desire encapsulated in the title of Flora Nwapa's *Never Again*" (11). I would argue, however, that the postscript is much more ambivalent and open-ended than that. Indeed, Ike also recounts that the fighting madly continued in certain sectors even after the sun of the Biafran flag had set forever. Moreover, he conveys the pain, and difficulty, of this "instant moulting," the tone being rather grim – particularly if compared with the very ironic, even sarcastic, narrative voice that has been employed so far. In this regard, it is telling that even *Never Again*, notwithstanding its outspoken title, does in fact *not* portray a fictional pacification but ends as the war is still going on. The "desire" for closure that Hodges talks about is there, of course, but the absence of any facile cathartic reconstruction of a national community at the level of the plot must be registered.

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The theme of the perpetuation of the emergency has been on occasions explored explicitly by first-wave authors. This is the case of texts such as Achebe's "Civil Peace" or Cyprian Ekwensi's *Survive the Peace*, whose oxymoronic titles are *per se* evocative of a situation where 'war' is only formally replaced by 'peace,' but an informal war of survival still rages on. Ekwensi's novel *Survive the Peace*, for example, opens with the symbolic portrayal of civilians picking up the guns and ammunition that Biafran soldiers have promptly discarded after the Biafran surrender (11). The obsession for the phenomenon of armed robbery that pervades this work and that, by means of this image, is directly connected to the war, is also at the centre of Femi Osofisan's play *Once upon Four Robbers*, which dramatises this same theme defining it as "an apt metaphor of our age" (Osofisan, "Notes"). The continuity between the war and the post-war uneasy peace is made evident in Osofisan's work through the display of violence, the still powerful presence of the military, and the representation of the life of the postcolonial subject as waste, as a condition of living death. As one of the characters, Angola, tells Major, employing an imagery of decay and filth that will be on occasions retrieved in contemporary Nigerian writing,

What are you if not a corpse? Tell me. You were born in the slum and you didn't know you were a corpse? Since you burst out from the womb, all covered in slime, you've always been a corpse. You fed on worms and left-overs, your body nude like a carcass in the government mortuary, elbowing your way among other corpses and the stink is all over you like a flodded [*sic*] cemetery in Lagos . . . (10)

Chinua Achebe's short story "Civil Peace" is also concerned with the representation of post-war violence. The main character, Jonathan Iwegbu, is robbed of the twenty-pound ex-gratia award he has just received for turning in all his Biafran money. And in the night when this happens, while the gentlemen thieves patiently

wait outside Jonathan's house to be given all his money, the leader tells their unfortunate victim: "We no be bad tief. We no like to make trouble. Trouble done finish. War done finish and all the katakata wey de for inside. No Civil War again. This time na Civil Peace. Na be so?"(87). The man's poor pun, alongside his threats to call the soldiers to settle the dispute between him and Jonathan, encapsulate some of the paradoxes of post-war Nigeria. And yet, notwithstanding this little tragedy that befalls him, Jonathan Iwegbu does not lose heart: not only, he reasons, has he come out of the war with "five inestimable blessings – his head, his wife Maria's head and the heads of three out of their four children" (82), but the blood-soaked earth is also metaphorically returning what it took during the war. The bicycle Jonathan had buried a year before "in the little clearing in the bush where the dead of the camp, including his own youngest son, were buried" is still intact when he digs it up again (83). And the land is also tellingly fertile, in a world where life and death are contiguous and inextricably linked, in a cyclical alternation of mortality and consumption that might restore, in the long run, some form of normality:

His children picked mangoes near the military cemetery and sold them to soldiers' wives for a few pennies – real pennies this time – and his wife started making breakfast akara balls for neighbours in a hurry to start life again. (84)

"Civil Peace" is thus a tribute to the resilience of the vanquished, to the courage of those who, despite all odds, were willing to fight this new war of survival in an unjust state.

1.3. *Half of a Yellow Sun*: resistance and humanitarian representation

The texts discussed so far have pointed out that connivances and what Mbembe has defined as the people's "desires for majesty" (131) problematise any facile description of the power relationships emerging out of the postcolonial exception as a polarised spectrum of stable positionalities. Also, they have highlighted that the Agambenian discussion of bare life, not contemplating the possibility of resistance in the face of sovereign violence, seems to underestimate the potential of those small acts of defiance that, albeit perhaps incapable of subverting the logic of expendability on which sovereign power rests, have nonetheless the potential to suggest that such a logic is less incontrovertible than generally believed. Chimamanda Adichie's *Half of a Yellow Sun* is a novel that can be usefully inscribed in this discussion on resistance and non-citizenship, the shattered dream of a Biafran republic being re-imagined through the depiction of acts of survival in a context where the happy pre-war existence of its predominantly upper-middle-class characters is put to the brutal test of war. Weaving together questions of gender, class, race and ethnicity, this Orange prize-winning novel is a character-driven narrative that covers the time span of a decade, from the early years of Nigerian independence to the immediate aftermath of the war. The events narrated in the novel are seen through the eyes of three different focalisers: Ugwu, a child from the village who at the outset starts working as a houseboy for university lecturer Odenigbo; Olanna, Odenigbo's beautiful and gentle girlfriend, the daughter of a wealthy Igbo businessman; and Richard, the Englishman who has fallen in love with Igbo-Ukwu art *and* with Olanna's confident, if less pretty, twin sister,

Kainene.²⁹

The carefully structured plot is divided into four parts, the first and third of which are set in the early 60s, while the second and fourth are set in the late 60s. Such a juxtaposition interrupts the linearity of narrative development, thus emphatically pitting the relative quiet of the pre-war life against the horrors that take place on a wider national scale and are recounted in Parts Two and Four. The second section of *Half of a Yellow Sun* begins on the day of the first 1966 coup, an event that is seen as throbbing “with possibility, with newness” (126). The political situation, however, soon deteriorates as Adichie depicts, in quick sequence, the gory death of Olanna’s relatives in Kano at the hands of a Muslim neighbour during the anti-Igbo riots, the arrival of the first Igbo refugees, “limping and defeated” ciphers of bare life (145), in the Eastern Region, the Biafran secession and the beginning of the war. As the federals enter the university town of Nsukka, the first of a series of displacements force Odenigbo, Olanna, little Baby and Ugwu to move progressively towards the heart of Biafra, in a shrinking territory that gets increasingly crowded and punctuated with refugee camps. While in the third section Adichie takes her readers back in time to explain the reasons for the hostility among her main characters that has been perceptible in Part Two, the fourth, and longest, section of the book is set again during the war. Then, familial unity is restored while the conflict rages on and finally draws to a close, very much to the bewilderment of Adichie’s patriotic characters, who up to the very last believe that they “will win this thing” (397). It is in this section that Kainene forgives Olanna

²⁹ For an analysis of the relationship between Richard and Kainene in terms that reconsider how the construction of the postcolonial exotic is reworked in the novel, see Krishnan, “Abjection.”

and Richard's intercourse – an act that, for its part, was Olanna's revenge against Odenigbo, who had betrayed her with Amala, the village girl who later gave birth to his baby girl (250).³⁰ The highly traumatic events that both twins witness after the beginning of the war will indeed lead Kainene to recognise that “[t]here are some things that are so unforgivable that they make other things easily forgivable” (347).

The fact that Adichie's main characters are educated, upper-middle-class members of the Nigerian elite when the war breaks out clearly posits them as figures whose chances of surviving in Biafra are much higher than those of the majority of their fellow countrymen and women. They can rely on high-placed connections and have friends and family who send them money and goods from abroad. Their social status guarantees *per se* their entitlement to a number of privileges: at the beginning of the war, for example, Olanna manages to skip the cue at the hospital by only “keep[ing] her English accent crisp and her head held high” (263). Like the other Biafrans, Adichie's characters are *de facto* citizens of nowhere: targeted as expendable lives on the part of the federals, they emphatically reject their Nigerian identity and citizenship to embrace proudly the Biafran dream, supporting a fledgling country that, however, is in fact a stillborn and does not, will never, grant them any form of rights protection. They refuse to abandon the newly proclaimed country using their Nigerian passports, as Olanna and Kainene's parents have done, her mother “wip[ing] her eyes with her palm, although there were no tears” (189). Still, also as a consequence of the above-mentioned expedi-

³⁰ For interesting interpretations of the centrality that love relationships and the language of sex and intimacy play in a novel that Adichie has provocatively defined “more a love story than a war story” (“African ‘Authenticity’” 53), see Norridge and Strehle.

ents to which they can resort, none of them dies the undignified death of the camp inhabitant, as they manage to circumvent the reduction of their families to those extreme forms of bare life that, on the threshold between human and inhuman, are inevitably doomed to death. This does not mean that Adichie's work rejects the Agambenian discussion on the exception and bare life *tout court*, as John Marx seems to suggest in his analysis of *Half of a Yellow Sun* as an example of failed-state fiction (612). Rather, it registers, *contra* Agamben, the importance of factors such as class and education in aiding the deferral of the transition to increasingly pathetic forms of bare life. Moreover, it sheds light on the ways in which non-citizens can performatively reassert their right to a decent, happy existence – an aspect that, as noticed in the Introduction, is one of the blind spots of Agamben's *oeuvre*.

In this context, it is particularly women who are seen as capable, if not of interrupting, at least of delaying such a continuous process of brutalisation of the human. Kainene's entrepreneurial spirit is not dampened in the emergency: the woman, who used to work as an army contractor with a licence to import stockfish, is now in charge of a refugee centre, to which she delivers the precious protein- and salt-rich food (343). Olanna manages as well, initially with some difficulty, to adapt to her new condition, in the process becoming increasingly independent from her partner, the self-confident Odenigbo on whom she relied blindly before the war. The decision that marks her transition into a sphere of self-reliant resistance is so distant from any rhetorical depiction of the war heroine that it might appear, at first sight, even trivial: she makes soap. This happens after a series of very violent federal air raids, when Olanna comes to realise that

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[i]f she had died, if Odenigbo and Baby and Ugwu had died, the bunker would still smell like a freshly tilled farm and the sun would still rise and the crickets would still hop around. The war would continue without them. Olanna exhaled, filled with a frothy rage. It was the very sense of being inconsequential that pushed her from extreme fear to extreme fury. She had to matter. She would no longer exist limply, waiting to die. Until Biafra won, the vandals would no longer dictate the terms of her life. (280)

And to confirm all this, *she makes soap*. The odd-smelling mash made of ashes, water and palm oil becomes a veritable symbol of resistance, marking a victory against the logic that has declared her expendability. However tiny, this success is indeed emblematic in that Olanna refuses to consider waste as something that – like human lives in the exception – is “inconsequential.” On the contrary, it gives it another, useful, shape, while positing Olanna as a self-sufficient agent who does no longer rely on class prerogatives.³¹

The importance of this episode becomes evident if compared with Olanna’s early reactions to the violence of war in the form of bitter regret for the bourgeois normality left behind. The first air raid she is victim of, for example, takes place – ironically enough – during her open-air wedding reception. The white dress that should be a signifier of happiness metamorphoses into a threat, an easy target that her friend Okeoma covers up with his army shirt.³² During this symbolic scene, that concludes Part Two presaging the bleak, abnormal times lying ahead, Olanna remains numb, as if she was not willing to acknowledge, as if she could not come

³¹ It is thus significant that some time later, when Olanna puts on her wig in an attempt to impress the soldier she is bribing to prevent Ugwu’s conscription, Ugwu notices that the wig, “which she hardly wore these days[,] [...] was lopsided on her head” (351-352). This vaguely grotesque detail signifies not only her progressive avoidance to rely on her privileged status, but also the incongruence inherent in attempting to do so in a context where people are dying of starvation.

³² The character of Okeoma is inspired to the figure of poet-soldier Christopher Okigbo, who died in Nsukka in 1967 during military action.

to terms with, the enormity of what has happened. She neatly folds Okeoma's uniform and puts it on a chair, and as the chapter ends she is still wearing her dress, cutting a slice of the wedding cake that no one but her has been willing to taste (204). This character has little in common with the combative woman who, some time later, will make soap, delighted by "the sweat that trickled under her arms, [...] the surge of vigour that made her heart thump" (280). And it is telling that the agonistic development of Olanna's character is emphatically pitted against Odenigbo's change – a change which proceeds in the very opposite direction. The once charismatic man who exuded self-confidence and revolutionary enthusiasm is confronted, after his mother's death, with a human vulnerability he had never experienced before. Odenigbo, differently from Olanna, does not manage to adapt to the disorder of the emergency, and will never find a role in an increasingly de-politicised environment that challenges and asks to find alternatives to any received notion of the political and of political agency.

It is evident that Adichie, through the depiction of her central characters, does not acquiesce to the representation of life in the exception as inevitably, or homogeneously, reduced to its most debased state. However, she does provide some images of a life that has been stripped bare of any human semblance, in particular towards the ending of the book, when Kainene shows Olanna what she cynically calls "the Point of No Return" (347) – the rooms of the school converted to refugee centre that are inhabited by the moribund.

[Olanna] didn't know what the smell was but it was enlarging and she could almost see it, a foul, brown cloud. She felt faint. They went into the first classroom. About twelve people were lying on bamboo beds, on mats, on the floor. No one of them reached put to slap away the fat flies. The only movement Olanna saw was that of a child sitting by the door: he unfolded and refolded his arms. [...]

'That woman is dead. We have to get her removed,' Kainene said.

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‘No!’ Olanna blurted, because that woman with the steady stare could not be dead. But Kainene meant another woman, who lay face-down on the floor, with a thin baby clutching her back. Kainene walked over and plucked the baby away. She went outside and called out, ‘Father! Father! One for burial,’ and then sat on the steps outside and held the baby. The baby should have cried. (348)

The author avoids lingering too long on similar scenes – the one just reported, the most explicit of the book, consists of a couple of pages in a paperback edition of more than 400. Moreover, Kainene’s pragmatic comments function as counterpoints to such emotionally charged images – a choice that aims at preventing excessive sentimentalism in the portrayal of a condition that, as Agamben has shown, is on the limits of the testifiable (*Remnants*). In so doing, Adichie provides a negotiation of the complexities inherent in the ethics and politics of representation of the de-humanised human that, very importantly, goes hand in hand with an explicit point often reiterated in the novel and concerning the instrumental, and dubiously cathartic, Western depiction of Africa through an iconography of sacredness (cf. Palmberg and Petersen 96). Therefore, I do not agree with Brenda Cooper’s claims that Adichie, while “outraged by the distorted representations of Africa[,] [...] is sucked into the discourse which produces them” (150) because of her graphic portrayals of starving refugees, or of the gruesome events of 1966. Cooper argues that passages such as the one reported above contribute to the Western archive of negative images of the continent, and do not add to the reader’s knowledge of Africa. On the contrary, it seems to me that Adichie’s feat lies in the fact that she resists fetishisation and essentialisation by juxtaposing images of powerlessness and violence with *equally true* images of resistance and solidarity. Thus, for example, during the Northern pogrom portrayed in the second section of the book, while Hausa Abdulmalik brutally slaughters Olanna’s relatives, crying

that “It was Allah’s will,” Hausa Mohammed brings Olanna to safety, murmuring that “Allah will never forgive this” (148).

As Ugwu writes in the book where he recounts the story of the Biafran nation, of a nation that never was, the fact of starvation as an indecent but legitimate federal weapon of war heightened the visibility of the civil conflict on the international stage. In one of the eight snippets from Ugwu’s book that are interlaced with the main narrative line, the reader is told that it was starvation that “made the people of the world take notice,” that “made Zambia and Tanzania and Ivory Coast and Gabon recognize Biafra,” that “brought Africa into Nixon’s American campaign.” Again, it was starvation, Ugwu/Adichie more polemically adds, that “aided the careers of photographers” (237) – a connection between fame of the Self and death of the Other that is, to say the least, problematic.

The aspect of the Western humanitarian depiction of Africa is altogether missing in first-wave war fiction. The importance it is accorded in Adichie’s text no doubt derives from her *a posteriori* awareness that Biafra marked a pivotal moment in the formation of the stereotypical “iconography of famine” (Campbell) that has been increasingly employed in Western humanitarian circuits to mobilise shame by means of the metonymical portrayal of African food crises through figures of children with bloated bellies and large, supplicating eyes. Indeed, the pictures of the “starving children of Biafra war” made it to the front cover of the US magazine *Life* on July, 12 1968, once the humanitarian crisis had achieved alarming proportions.³³ Adichie writes in an era in which the language of human rights has

³³ The feature on Biafra was written by journalist Michael Mok, who later published his account of the war in *Biafra Journal*, a book illustrated with black-and-white pictures taken by photojournalists such as Hubert le Campion, Terence Spencer and others.

become increasingly dominant in international politics, and which has seen, not incidentally, a proliferation of such depoliticising representations of the African continent. In her novel, she thus takes on the task of exposing the paradoxes inherent in humanitarian projects that, ostensibly aimed at resolving the predicaments they represent, deny the agency to their silent objects of representation. It is thus unsurprising that *Half of a Yellow Sun* is the first Biafran novel to pay considerable attention to the phenomenon of humanitarian journalism, the encounter between two US reporters and Richard being devoted an entire chapter. The two reporters, “Charles the plump one” and “Charles the redhead” (368) are two representatives of the same category, epitomes of Western views of Africa that are different but, the author suggests, similarly suspicious. The former, more sympathetic, gives candies to children, takes pictures of “lovely smile[s]” (270). The latter is an outright racist and staunch supporter of the US policy of non-intervention in Nigerian internal affairs. What the narrative implies, however, is that the two share equally superficial, if divergent, views of the peculiarities of the country’s situation – views that are either pseudo-missionary, as is the case of “the plump one,” or pseudo-imperialist, as in the case of his colleague.

Interestingly, the chapter ends with a poem, penned by Ugwu, that addresses a US (/Western) readership reminding them of the *Life* pictures, taken in Biafra by the likes of the two Charleses. Adichie is probably not at her best when writing poetry. However, the relevance of these verses lies in the fact that they suggest that the explicit portrayal of the spectacle of starving children has voyeuristic undertones. The author thus points out the dangers of the stark representation of bare (and often literally *naked*) life as a form of silencing violence, of epistemological “pornography” (Omaar and de Vaal; Halttunen):

Imagine children with arms like toothpicks,
With footballs for bellies and skin stretched thin.
It was kwashiorkor – difficult word,
A word that is not quite ugly enough, a sin.

You needn't imagine. There were photos
Displayed in gloss-filled pages of your *Life*
Did you see? Did you feel sorry briefly,
Then turn round to hold your lover or wife? (375, emphases added)

These pictures, Adichie implies, did not leave anything unsaid, showing in minute detail the deformed, suffering bodies of human beings who were thereby turned to fetishised objects of representation – arms, bellies, skin, body parts whose humanity was effaced behind the hyper-visibility of the gloss-filled magazine. The ambiguously cathartic pleasure deriving by the sight of these children is not explicitly sexualised in the poem. Nevertheless, its sensuous nature seems to find an oblique correlative in the embrace between the two Western lovers, which functions as a response to the sight itself and signifies a disinterested retreat into an everyday, and tellingly sensual, normality.

The very title of Ugwu's book, *The World Was Silent When We Died*, speaks therefore of the divide between the two poles of the spectrum of the potential objects of biopolitical decision. On the one hand, we find *homines sacri*, those who are exposed to death, those who are voiceless and therefore represented; on the other, the rest of the "world," the space inhabited by *homines sacri* who are only "virtually" so (Agamben, *Homo* 115), those who either represent or are spectators, those whose silence is a choice and not the marker of subalternity. Hence, Ugwu's title is one that hints at how power "functions differentially, to target and manage certain populations, to derealize the humanity of subjects who might potentially belong to a community bound by commonly recognized laws" (Butler, *Precarious*

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Lives 68) – a function that, Butler argues, Agamben does not elucidate with sufficient clarity. *Half of a Yellow Sun* thus provides the reader with a compelling representation of that biopolitical hierarchy that has often been mentioned in this chapter, in that it articulates at all levels – from the local, to the national, to the transnational – the complex patterns of privilege and dispossession that determine its (more or less) mobile nature.

2.

“No Nations” and Child Soldiers

Uzodinma Iweala’s *Beasts of No Nation* and Chris Abani’s *Song for Night* are two war novellas that share a similar concern for the consequences of violence on young combatants.¹ More or less evidently drawing from the events of the Nigeria-Biafra war (see Section 2.3), the texts are indeed part of a vast corpus of child-soldier narratives that has recently gained great popularity and increasing critical attention in international literary and academic circuits. This body of works includes memoirs,² as well as memoir- and non-memoir-style novels,³ whose success parallels that of a vast documentary, humanitarian and dramatic film production.⁴

¹ Although the protagonists of Iweala’s and Abani’s novellas carry weapons and take a direct part in hostilities, it is worth recalling that the most recent nomenclature regarding the involvement of children in armed conflict tends towards a more inclusive designation. According to the guidelines drafted during an international conference which was organised by the French government with the support of UNICEF and was held in Paris in 2007, a child “associated with armed forces or armed groups” (that is, with state armies or non-state armed entities) is “[a]ny person below 18 years of age who is or who has been recruited or used by an armed force or armed group in any capacity, including but not limited to children, boys, and girls used as fighters, cooks, porters, messengers, spies or for sexual purposes. It does not only refer to a child who is taking or has taken direct part in hostilities” (UNICEF, “The Paris Principles” 7).

² Such as for example China Keitetsi’s *Child Soldier: Fighting for My Life* (2002), Ismahel Beah’s best-selling *A Long Way Gone: Memoirs of a Boy Soldier* (2007) and Emmanuel Jal’s *War Child: A Boy Soldier’s Story* (2009).

³ Apart from the two texts analysed here, other child-soldier novels include Ahmadou Kourouma’s *Allah Is Not Obligated* (2000), Emmanuel Dongala’s *Johnny Mad Dog* (2002), Delia Jarrett-Macauley’s *Moses, Citizen and Me* (2005) and Dave Eggers’ *What is the What: The Autobiography of Valentino Achak Deng* (2006).

⁴ A (by no means exhaustive) list would include films as different as *Invisible Children: Rough Cut* (2003); *War Child* (2008); *Johnny Mad Dog* (2008); and the extremely controver-

Such an artistic and documentary interest, for its part, mirrors, and speaks to, the lively debates that the figure of the child soldier has generated amongst international legal scholars and social scientists since the 1990s, and which were particularly heightened after the 1996 United Nations report *Impact of Armed Conflict on Children* by Graça Machel. The analyses that fictional works such as Iweala's and Abani's are eliciting emphasise the potential of cross-disciplinary approaches that mutually enlighten fields such as human rights and humanitarian studies,⁵ the social sciences and the humanities. At the same time, they also underscore the need to understand the dynamics of global marketing and "humanitarian consumption" (Schultheis, "African Child Soldiers" 31) of postcolonial stories which for the most part come from, or represent, the African continent.⁶ It is thus relevant to

sial short *Kony 2012*.

⁵ The classic distinction between human rights and humanitarian law posits that while "human rights are understood to regulate the relationship between states and individuals under their jurisdiction in every aspect of ordinary life," humanitarian law, also known as the law of war, is a set of rules that govern "the wartime relationship of belligerent states and of states and protected persons, which include enemy persons and neutrals, but not a state's own nationals" (Provost 7). The discourses associated with the two disciplines have been overlapping particularly since the end of the 1960s, when humanitarian practice has been thoroughly redefined with the development of human-right based, and increasingly politicised, humanitarian NGOs. It was at this time, and primarily in response to the 1968 Biafran famine, that relief NGOs began to move "from emergency humanitarian aid to long-term developmentalism" (Chandler 682). For a discussion of humanitarianism as an ethos, see Richard Ashby Wilson and Richard D. Brown's Introduction to their edited volume *Humanitarianism and Suffering*.

⁶ It is generally estimated out of the 300,000 (or less, see Drumbl 26) children directly involved in hostilities today, 40% are in Africa. As cultural anthropologist David M. Rosen has recently noticed, the reasons explaining why the contemporary gaze remains fixed on Africa, notwithstanding the deployment of young boys and girls in wars worldwide, are unclear (*Child Soldiers* 23). While certainly due to the fact that Africa seems to be "a place already prepared in the Western imagination for the African child soldier as a subject of violence in need of human rights intervention and rehabilitation" (Moynagh 41; see also Rosen, *Child Soldiers* 23 ff.), such emphasis may also have to do with the visibility that several recent African conflicts, to wit, the DRC, Uganda, Rwanda, Sudan, and Sierra Leone, have obtained as a consequence of having become internationally judicialised (Drumbl 5).

define how these works position themselves within the Western human rights and humanitarian paradigms, so as to comprehend the strategies through which they give voice to, or contest, some of their essential propositions. The insights into young soldiers' minds that Abani and Iweala imagine also ask us to engage in a compassionate quest into the recesses of humanity – trying to grasp what it means to be human in contexts where human life has in fact no value.

It has often been noticed that the definition of childhood in human rights doctrine is generative *per se* of a thorny set of paradoxes, insofar as it is posited as a state “romanticized and utopianized and at the same time peculiarly disenfranchised and disempowered” (Bhabha J. 1528). The post-industrial Western notion of childhood as an innocent state that must be sheltered from violence and exploitation is indeed coupled with a developmental rhetoric that sees the child, a “human being below the age of eighteen years” (Convention on the Rights of the Child, CRC, Art. 1),⁷ as not yet having achieved the “full and harmonious development of his or her personality” (CRC, Preamble). Childhood thus becomes a condition that, as opposed to adulthood, is denied a “capacity for agency and entitlement to autonomy, subjecthood, and voice” (Bhabha J. 1528). Moreover, as political scientist Vanessa Pupavac has forcefully shown, implicit in the international children’s rights regime is the universalisation of a Western social construct that pathologises the South, since “in the absence of the universalisation of the conditions upon which the model arose, non-Western societies where the Western model of childhood has not been realised become delegitimised as moral agents”

⁷ “Unless,” it is then said, “under the law applicable to the child, majority is attained earlier.” For a detailed analysis of the discrepancies in the definition of the child status in international humanitarian and human rights law, see Breen. See also Rosen, “Who Is a Child?”.

(103).

Given these controversial issues, it comes as no surprise that the phenomenon of children's participation in armed conflicts, which nowadays occurs predominantly, but not exclusively, in non-Western countries,⁸ has spurred contrasting analytical interpretations. Indeed, it is often stated that "[t]he binary *child-soldier* produces an oxymoron" (Honwana, *Child Soldiers* 33) between the (problematic) fiction of childhood as a utopian state of innocence and the child soldier's capability of commit crimes – an irreconcilability that, as works such as the ones studied here show, is of course only illusive. Therefore, one of the most hotly discussed themes by legal scholars and social scientists alike regards the capacity for agency of the children involved in war, and, consequently, their accountability for the possible crimes committed.⁹

As Myriam Denov has remarked in her 2010 study on the "making and un-making" of Sierra Leonean child soldiers, even though the question of child soldiering has increasingly moved to the forefront in political, academic and humanitarian agendas, its iconography in the media and in policy discourse is still for the most part superficially bound to what she terms an "(il)logic of extremes" (5). This means that child soldiers are invariably presented as either hapless, passive

⁸ For a recent geographical overview on the use of child soldiers worldwide, see Denov 21-33. See also Drumbl, Chapter 2.

⁹ For an excellent analysis of how the accountability of child soldiers for involvement in acts of atrocity is conceptualised in the international legal imagination, see Drumbl, Chapter 4. The scholar notices that although the criminal prosecution of child soldiers for acts of atrocity "is permissible under international law, it increasingly is viewed as inappropriate and undesirable" (102). This impulse is *per se* "both laudable and appropriate," but it "has come to hollow the rigor of transitional accountability mechanisms from outside the criminal law" (133) – accountability modalities, such as endogenous ceremonies, truth commissions, reparative mechanisms and community service, which should instead be encouraged as a means to re-establish post-conflict justice (see Drumbl, Chapter 6).

victims, dangerous and disorderly *bandits*, or redeemed *heroes* (5-10) – depictions that purportedly ignore the ambiguous, interstitial “triad of victimization, participation and resistance” (185) in which the child soldier’s life, as sundry ethnographic accounts have demonstrated, is caught. Legal scholar Mark A. Drumbl, while adding a fourth representational category to Denov’s iconographic classification – namely the one defining child soldiers as “*irreparable damaged goods*” (7) – has emphasised that there exists a clear hierarchy among the four “with regard to their operational influence in shaping official policies and sculpting conventional wisdom” (8). In this context, it is “the faultless victim image” that “has achieved widespread traction within – and is avidly disseminated by – influential intergovernmental organizations and UN agencies, along with NGOs and other actors that populate global civil society” (8) and that, as such, dominates international discourse.¹⁰

The success of this representation is partly determined by its top-down portability. This makes it an extremely effective ‘mythological’ figure to fill the role of the victim, object of Western help, in the moral “humanitarian story” that the so-called ‘new’ humanitarianism (see note 5) often promotes for the purposes of marshalling resources and extending the terms of protection to a given category. The humanitarian “fairy tale,” political scientist David G. Chandler explains, generally features three main actors: the unfortunate victim in distress – in this case, the prelogical, prepubescent child who is forced to fight because easily manipulated; the villain – here, in the form of the non-Western army or armed group that abducts the child; and the saviour, namely “the external aid agency, the international institution, or even the journalists covering the story whose interests [are]

¹⁰ Drumbl examines the reasons for the ascension of the image of the faultless passive victim as the archetypal representation of the child soldier in Chapter 2.

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seen to be inseparable from those of the deserving victim" (Chandler, "The Road" 690). In this context, cultural anthropologist David M. Rosen's polemical comments on the "politics of age" that shapes the concept of childhood in international law require special attention. Indeed, they emphasise how the representations of childhood authorised on the part of different local and international actors, and particularly on the part of increasingly politicised humanitarian groups, "are political constructs used to support legal and political agendas, and they discount the more varied and complex local understandings of children and childhood found in anthropological research" ("Child Soldiers" 296). According to Rosen, it is the so-called "straight-18" position that is utterly problematic: advanced by advocates of an international legal ban on child soldiers, it "seeks to prevent the recruitment and use of children (any person under 18 years of age) in armed forces or groups and to bar the criminal prosecution of children for war crimes" ("Child Soldiers" 296). Thus intended, Rosen argues, the "straight-18" position ultimately counters the possibility of developing a "more nuanced view of both the vagaries of war and the contextual definition of childhood" (304). It thus prevents the formation of more fine-grained approaches capable to both protect the most vulnerable members of society and restore some form of post-conflict justice for the victims of war, thus paving the way for the reconstruction of a peaceful community.

The image of the child soldier as a hapless victim, albeit certainly reflecting the real experiences of those children who are forcibly recruited all over the world, ultimately constitutes a "legal fiction," and one that Mark A. Drumbl has recognised as a "neglective" one (19, terms borrowed from Lon L. Fuller and Hans

Vaihinger respectively).¹¹ Hence, it becomes important to discuss the modes in which such an abstractive fiction is either problematised, or upheld, by the recent – and similarly fictional – literary portrayals of child soldiers, in the attempt to define the discursive formation of an image that occupies such an uncertain position within the human rights paradigm. This is a task that has recently been taken on by a number of literary scholars who have produced excellent interdisciplinary readings of child-soldier narratives (see especially Moynagh, "Human Rights" and Schultheis, "Global Specters") and whose analyses have not only been limited to content and characterisation, but have also investigated the authors' formal choices in terms of genre.

As will be noticed below, the works studied here invite the reader to delve deep into the complex moral world of war, to consider the themes of the individual's agency and responsibility in conflict. They thereby examine the parameters through which we define the *persona ficta* that is the object of children's (/human) rights protection. In this sense, they complicate the current "international legal imagination" – a notion that Drumbl has glossed as the "normative, aspirational and operational mix of international law, policy, and practice" (9) – in particular, I would argue, concerning the question of the moral and legal culpability of child soldiers involved in acts of atrocity. More generally, by experimenting with, and contesting, the formal characteristics of the *Bildungsroman* genre, these works also investigate the consequences of the lack of human rights protection during the

¹¹ Lon L. Fuller has defined a fiction as "either (1) a statement propounded with a complete or partial consciousness of its falsity, or (2) a false statement recognized as having utility" (qtd. in Drumbl 19, n. 38). Moreover, citing Hans Vaihinger, Fuller adds that fictions of the "neglective" type constitute "a series of methods in which the deviation from reality manifests itself specifically as a disregard of certain elements in the fact situation" (qtd. in Drumbl 19, n. 40).

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emergency of war. If, as Joseph Slaughter has argued, the *Bildungsroman* gives legitimacy to the human rights narrative of the free and full development of the human personality by fictionalising the incorporation – that is, the legal personification – of the subject as a right-and-duty-bearing unit into a regime of rights and citizenship, corruption of the *Bildungsroman* form signifies some form of corruption of the norms of human rights (Slaughter, *Human Rights, Inc.* 29). Moreover, the use of other generic forms, such as the picaresque or the ghost story, to recount the (non-)development of the child's personality can also point to the impossibility, for the subjects represented, of aspiring to the promotion to the status of a person before the law in the absence of a state capable of acting as human rights protector (see Section 2.3).

In what follows I will discuss Iweala's and Abani's explorations of the ambiguous terrain of children's (and, more broadly, human) agency and responsibility in war situations, and shall argue that their writings comment on the complex ethical foundations of normative discourses (legal, but also religious) that are predicated upon notions of culpability and punishment. Moreover, I shall contend that their texts can be more widely interpreted as 'explorations in humanity': explorations of a continuum of human feelings and relationships that reminds us of the fact that mercy, love, hate and 'bestiality' are similarly valid, equally true expressions of what it means to be human – however disturbing this might seem.

2.1. Becoming a soldier, becoming a man: agency and responsibility in war

Neither the protagonist of Iweala's *Beasts of No Nation*, Agu, nor Abani's *My Luck*

conform *in toto* to the romanticised trope of the faultless victim that has gained currency in much humanitarian literature (see Moynagh). However, it is undoubted that the politics of representation of the two novellas exhibit different degrees of distancing from the conventions that have been rehearsed above – and this is particularly true as regards the agency of their fictional child soldiers. *Agu* and *My Luck*, as will be shown, are two apparently incomparable representatives of a category that moral philosopher Jeff McMahan has described as composed by “people who have a diminished capacity for morally responsible agency and who act in conditions that further diminish their personal responsibility for their action in war” (34). This brings the reader to confront the thorny ethical quandary, which also has a strong legal counterpart, concerning the different degrees of moral agency that child soldiers have/retain in contexts of war.

Mark A. Drumbl, relating to the ethnographic accounts on the (more or less limited) capability to act that most children involved in hostilities manage to maintain, notwithstanding the constraints imposed on them,¹² has proposed to approach the question of the individual responsibility of child soldiers through a model of “circumscribed action.” A “circumscribed actor,” he explains,

has the ability to act, the ability not to act, and the ability to do otherwise than what he or she actually has done. The effective range of these abilities, however, is delimited, bounded, and confined. Yet, the abilities themselves are neither evanescent nor ephemeral. Circumscribed actors exercise some discretion in navigating and mediating the constraints around them. Circumscribed actors dispose of an enclosed space which is theirs – the acreage of which varies according to an oscillating admixture of disposition and situation – in which they exercise a margin of volition. Within this space, they make short-term decisions. [...] Although acted upon, [circumscribed actors] also act upon others. (98)

¹² The literature on the topic is very extensive. For a select number of representative, and authoritative, examples, see Utas; Honwana, “Innocent and Guilty”; Shepler.

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Intended not as a status, but rather as a "continuum that embraces the inherent diversity among the individuals aligned along its axis," this model has the advantage of providing an interpretative paradigm adaptable to figures as different as the fictional Agu and My Luck, to understand and interpret the multiple articulations that the phenomenon of child soldiering can assume depending on the context. The child soldiers at the centre of the two novellas studied in this chapter can be positioned at the two extremes of the spectrum, being a 'minimal agent' and a 'maximal agent' respectively. As will be shown, however, although exhibiting different levels of moral agency, neither can be considered simply a victim.

Beasts of No Nation is a memoir-style first-person tale in which young Agu recounts his experiences as a fighter in the rebel militias of an unnamed country involved in a civil conflict. The figure of this boy soldier might be reminiscent, at least at first glance, of the humanitarian archetype of the very young, exploited child who is barely able to carry his kalashnikov: Agu is violently conscripted after witnessing his father's gory death at the hands of a bunch of enemy soldiers; he is very young, so small that he has to fold the sleeves of his shirt "a whole six time" (44); he is perceptive, but evidently young and immature; he has been thoroughly indoctrinated. Also through the consistent employment of a naïve narrative voice, Agu is therefore characterised as a victimised boy who most of the times is coerced into perpetrating the crimes he commits.¹³ However, while it is undoubted that Agu is portrayed as a *victim* of the circumstances, and of his violent superior,

¹³ The simplified, repetitive "adaptation of pidgin English" (Iweala, "Uzodinma Iweala") that the author employs also seems to contribute to the characterisation of Agu as a naïve child (see Hron 41). Many commentators have pointed out that Iweala's language in *Beasts* is reminiscent of the (undoubtedly more articulated) "rotten English" that Ken Saro-Wiwa forged in his *Sozaboy* (see Lambert).

he is certainly not an *in-nocent* one. *Beasts of No Nation* refuses to offer a 'sanitised' portrayal of the main character. On the contrary, countering potential forms of unrestrained empathy, Iweala disturbingly details the scenes of active violence featuring his protagonist, and gives them great prominence within the narrative line – differently from what happens in most humanitarian records, where, as Maureen Moynagh has shown, active violence tends to be glossed over or tacitly acknowledged (44-45).¹⁴ Agu's ambivalent wartime status as both a victim and a perpetrator is conveyed through disquieting, graphic fragments where the boy recounts the brutalities he commits and suffers in the present. Importantly, these scenes are interlaced with the boy's nostalgic memories of his peaceful pre-war life.

Norwegian philosophers Helene Ingierd and Henrik Syse, in an essay where they provide a philosophical background for the debate on the ethics of war, have argued that "to be morally responsible for a given action, one must somehow have the character of a decision-maker" (95). In other words, a morally responsible agent, one who can be considered accountable for the crimes he or she might commit, is defined as a person who "could have acted differently, but made the decision not to" (86). Given the centrality assumed by the elements of free choice and volition to evaluate a person's responsibility, the dilemma arises as to whether a child like Agu can be said to be a full moral agent. Indeed, particularly as a consequence of his very young age, Agu often does not seem to be in the position to decide freely about his actions. As a person who "lacks the moral resources to resist the command to fight," he should therefore be considered, in McMahan's

¹⁴ As regards child-soldier memoirs, Moynagh notices that even while they "cannot entirely uphold the vision of childhood innocence, they do often exploit it to point up the injustice of the child-soldier experience" (48).

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terms, "a nonresponsible threat" (33). All the same, Agu is not completely deprived of the capacity to think and act morally, the clearest example of which being his decision to refuse protection to his superior when Rambo, a fellow soldier, threatens to shoot him. Agu's action is, no doubt, a conscious one entailing consequences of which the child is fully aware:

Rambo is sliding his finger to the trigger of his gun and I am sliding my finger to my own trigger because I am fearing what Commandant will be doing to me if I am not protecting him, but then I am remembering how much he is hurting me when he is chooking me and I am saying never. Never will I be feeling sorry for him. Never will I be helping him. I am lowering my gun. (152)

Even if we concede that Agu is a 'pure' non-agent in the scenes where, without being ordered to, he and his comrades rape and kill indiscriminately, still *Beasts* delineates a provocative ethical conundrum: the child, ostensibly deprived of free will, is nevertheless presented as the perpetrator of atrocious, revolting crimes. The novella thereby elicits shifting empathic responses on the part of a reader who does not easily identify with a figure portrayed in such ambivalent terms. Thus, even admitting that the majority of Agu's deeds might not be 'actions' as such, but rather 'reactions' to outside stimuli or constrictions, still *Beasts of No Nation* raises the question of the attribution of responsibility for the terrible suffering these alleged 'non-actions' produce. So, while being in line with a number of child-soldier memoirs in pointing up "the injustice of the child-soldier experience" (Moynagh 48), the novella, by giving visibility to the consequences of child soldiers' crimes, also asks how justice for their victims might be restored.

The perception of the problematic nature of Iweala's main character is further intensified when the reader realises that Agu, once initiated into the brutalities of war, alternates mantra-like attempts to confirm his self-contested morality –

such as when he repeats "I am not bad boy. I am not bad boy. I am soldier and soldier is not bad if he is killing" (29) – with moments of undeniable, if at times drug-induced, pleasure deriving from his murderous 'non-acts.' The following passage, for example, reports the predictable ending of a chilling sexual assault perpetrated by Agu and some fellow soldiers, who have found a mother and her daughter hiding under a bed during the looting of a semi-abandoned village:

You are not my mother, I am saying to the girl's mother and then I am raising my knife high above my head. I am liking the sound of knife chopping KPWUDA, KPWUDA on her head and how the blood is just splashing on my hand and my face and my feet. I am chopping and chopping and chopping until I am looking up and it is dark.

Another night. (63)

The very long rape scene that introduces this excerpt is emblematic in that each of Agu's violent actions, alongside the woman's curses that follow, finds a contrapuntal echo in a self-assuring response meant to confirm the child soldier's moral nature. What makes the passage even more provocative is that Agu appears to be aware of the innocence of the two women, as he implicitly compares them to his own mother and sister, whom he has not seen since the beginning of the hostilities.¹⁵ And still this boy, who attempts to attest his humanity by claiming that he cannot be a Devil as he had a father, and a mother, and he comes from them, is here severing the only familial ties that have survived the total war of *Beasts*. What is more, he "lik[es]" doing it (63). The same strident overlapping of remorse and pleasure is visualised in the boy's contradictory physical reactions to his first killing, a perverse rite of passage that is meant to sanction his transition

¹⁵ In another passage, this parallel becomes all the more evident, as Agu admits that "[e]very time we are seeing woman or girl, I am looking at them well well to be knowing if they are my mother or my sister" (45).

into the sphere of soldier life.¹⁶ Then, Agu has an erection just after "vomiting everywhere," and is left wondering: "[i]s this like falling in love?" (26). The conundrum regarding the moral responsibility, and the accountability, of child soldiers is here brought to the fore in all its dramatic force.

Chris Abani's *Song for Night* similarly problematises notions of innocence and guilt through its narration of the experiences of mine diffuser My Luck. In a much-quoted passage that is reminiscent of the one just commented on, Abani's protagonist sardonically asks:

If we are the great innocents of this war, then where did we learn all the evil we practice? [...] Who taught me to enjoy killing, a singular joy that is perhaps rivaled only by an orgasm? (143)

My Luck's self-conscious, blunt refusal to accept victimhood as a justification for those "sins" that, he muses, are "too big even for God to forgive" (79) is substantiated by Abani's depiction of his fifteen-year-old character through the lyrical voice of a mature adolescent who appears to be (almost) always in charge of his own destiny and claims full responsibility for his acts. My Luck, in other words, is undoubtedly a 'full' moral actor. Far from being abducted, or forcibly recruited, he and his comrades enlisted voluntarily, at a time when "there was a clear enemy, and having lost loved ones to them, [they] all wanted revenge" (19).¹⁷ My Luck is

¹⁶ Transition to military life is not presented as co-terminous with transition to adult manhood here, as is often the case in traditional societies (Honwana, *Child Soldiers* 52). On the contrary, as Maureen Moynagh, amongst others, has noticed, war casts the pre-pubescent Agu into "a kind of developmental limbo" (51), as his forced conscription has occurred before he was eligible for the traditional ritual initiation to manhood: as he muses some time after his abduction, "if war is not coming then I would be man by now" (70). Instead, all he knows now is that "before war we are children and now we are not" (46).

¹⁷ Mark A. Drumbl, amongst others, has remarked that while "the international legal imagination disclaims the possibility that children, including older adolescents, can be found to exercise initiative or actually volunteer to join armed groups and, increasingly, even

aware of having exhausted his "appetite" for death "somewhere along the line" (92), but he is still "fighting" (60), at least metaphorically, in a quest for his lost platoon whose metaphysical nature will be confirmed in the open ending of the book. The last lines indeed reveal that *Song for Night* is the parable of a ghostly soul who is seeking to come to terms with his dark past, finally accepting his own death and finding rest in his late mother's arms.

As critic Daria Tunca has noticed in an essay where she draws on Dominik LaCapra's notion of "emphatic unsettlement" to examine the nuanced strategies Abani employs to circumvent unrestrained sentimentality in the text ("We Die Only Once"), My Luck is adamant about emphasising that killing has been, on some occasions, a "pleasure" for him (79), and does not apologise for this. His "personal cemetery" (38), a field of cross-shaped scars he has carved onto his own forearms as a constant reminder of the lives that have been lost during this three-year war, is thus divided into two parts: on the left, the loved ones; on the right, those men and women he "enjoyed killing" (39). The patent complexity of the task of ethical questioning that Abani takes on in *Song for Night* becomes all the more thought-provoking when one considers that the types epitomised by the victims of My Luck's unrepentant killings, far from inviting the reader's sympathy, are bound to be viewed as morally repulsive. The boy soldier enumerates them: 'John Wayne,' the cowboy-booted officer "who was determined to turn [him and his comrades] into animals – until [he] shot him" (39); the four old cannibal women he caught feasting on a dead baby; and a step-father who used to beat him hard

armed forces," child soldiers, in fact, often are not forcibly recruited (Drumbl 62). The figure of adolescent My Luck also reminds us of the fact that most child soldiers are not young, pre-pubescent children like Agu – an instrumental portrayal that, Drumbl writes, is "simply not indicative of the norm" (12).

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because My Luck, a crochet lover, "didn't play the rough games like other boys" (63). My Luck's reactions to hyper-masculine cruelty and, perhaps more problematically, to the taboo of cannibalism as an extreme manifestation of (in)human exploitative behaviour, constituting an unsettling satisfaction of the reader's revenge fantasies, further complicate the moral economy of the text.

In a 2009 essay, presumably alluding to his prison experience,¹⁸ the author admitted:

My knowledge of blood, of the terrible intimacy of killing, has taught me that though I have never killed a man, I know how, I know I could. The only thing that terrifies me is that I may not feel sorry. ("Ethics" 168)

This preference of revenge over justice that My Luck and the reader plausibly share carries profound implications for the inquiry into the ethical landscape of the novella, as it uncovers the fact that war, the ultimate form of enmity, inherently compromises the utopia of the "human family" (UN Universal Declaration of Human Rights, Preamble) within which all members are supposed to act "in a spirit of brotherhood" (Art. 1). This is a fiction that, Abani suggests, loses much of its narrative force in the face of the unspeakable. In other words, the unpredictable, changeable paths of empathy and repulsion that have been detected so far are meant to guide us into the recognition that we all might be standing "at the edge of the same abyss" (Abani, "Ethics" 168).

Abani seems to mark certain conducts, such as John Wayne's, as inexcusable, in that their main aim is that of depriving human beings of a dignity that

¹⁸ During the regime of Ibrahim Babangida, Abani was imprisoned on several occasions for his subversive literary production. His prison experiences are recorded in the poetry collection *Kalakuta Republic*, which will be given due attention in Chapter 3.

should be inalienable. All the same however, the novel refuses to resort to easy certainties and tends to invite abstention from judgement, as exemplified by Abani's complex engagement with the theme of sexual violence. My Luck, remembering his traumatic discovery of the "taste for rape" that all wars apparently induce in men in arms (86), recounts how once, under John Wayne's order "[r]ape or die," he reluctantly "climbed" onto his victim, hurt by the perception that "some part of [him] was enjoying it." But My Luck recalls:

The woman's eyes were tender, as if all she saw was a boy lost. She stroked my hair tenderly, whispering as I sobbed: "It's all right son, it's all right. Better the ones like you live." (85)

This poignant reinvention of the act of raping is one that cynics might define utterly unrealistic, but it confirms that *Song for Night* is an exploration of the ultimate impossibility of articulating an absolute truth regarding the morality of children – or, more generally, of human beings – in extreme situations. In legal terms, My Luck commits the crime in conditions of 'duress,' as he is threatened with execution and therefore deprived of free choice. He could not have acted differently. For this reason, in a hypothetical trial he would presumably be exempted from legal responsibility, which "may result in partial or full exculpation" (Mæland 59; see also Ingiers and Syse 94). In moral terms, My Luck is forgiven by his victim, and even while committing the crime. However, this does not necessarily entail that the boy, in fact, is not morally culpable for his actions: after all, as he admits, "some part of [him] was enjoying it." Even more importantly, the victim's forgiveness has not freed My Luck from the *feeling* of being morally guilty – at least until he re-lives the episode and, still perceiving the woman's eyes on him, he "decide[s] to rest" (86). This passage "reminds us of the fact [...] that the absence of

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clear-cut legal culpability does not take away moral responsibility or moral culpability altogether" (Ingiers and Syse 97). *Song for Night* is thus a sorrowful journey that explores the boundaries of the human – of human suffering, and of human bestiality.

Comparable perspectives of ethical undecidability can be found in Iweala's novella, where the ambivalent quality of the child soldier's identity as both a victim and a victimiser is extended to describe the condition of all men at war, irrespective of age and fighting side. Ethical distinctions collapse as both parties involved in the archetypal civil war of *Beasts* are exposed to incessant reversals from the status of victim to that of perpetrator, and vice-versa. The regular soldiers who raid Agu's village, for example, are at first portrayed as indecent beings who "smile" widely, and keep on "laughing," while reducing the civilians they massacre into grotesque, semi-human stumps who run "with no head like chicken," or, like Agu's father, "dance everywhere" when caught by deadly bullets (89). In the above-mentioned passage recounting Agu's first killing, however, it is the rebels who become embodiments of obscene violence. Their enemies, now filled with fear "like they are already dead" (20), are disarmed, forced to strip, tortured and finally slaughtered in cold blood by Agu and his comrades, who, exactly like their opponents in the scene commented upon above, smile, laugh and mutilate, cutting their victims' arms and "using [them] to beat somebody else's head" (27). This parallel, belittling the strategic validity of ideological discourses based on the definition of Manichean opposites epitomising good and evil to justify the acts of war, shows that human beings can easily become blind to human commonalities in extreme contexts that have the power to turn them into bestial butchers – or into animals for slaughter.

Similarly to Abani's John Wayne, in *Beasts of No Nation* Agu's superior, simply called "Commandant," appears to be uncompromisingly refused the chance to engage the reader's sympathies. Commandant is markedly different from all the other fighting men: the only "real soldier" (43) in an armed group of starving wretches, he walks "like his leg is a wooden pole that is not bending for anything" (42). His imposing, towering bearing is a metaphorical confirmation of the prominent position of this Big Man and is contrasted with the small size of those men and children who live in his shadow, and whom the war has equally reduced to something 'less' than they used to be: as Agu explains, "this war is coming to make most men small like children and children small like baby" (42). The parallel between children and men is particularly interesting insofar as it counters the "excessively idealized version of adult autonomy" that humanitarian narratives tend to propose to contrast the alleged irrationality of children to the independent agency of their adult counterpart (Rosen, "Child Soldiers" 299).

Commandant, an embodiment of unrestrained necropower (see Mbembe, "Necropolitics"), seems to be the only one who has the right to decide over the life and death of his subordinates – at least up till the day when he is killed by Rambo, the rebellious soldier, with Agu's collaboration (152). Iweala's pervasive deployment of imagery denoting filth when describing him distances the reader from this figure right from the very beginning of the novella, and even before the discovery of the repeated rapes to which Agu, alongside other fellow soldiers, is subjected in exchange for small favours. And yet, it is exactly after a sodomy scene that we are allowed a brief glimpse into the psychology of an apparently mono-dimensional character. It is indeed in this context that Commandant, putting his hand on Agu's back, softly says to the boy: "Let me tell you something [...]. Agu. I

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am not bad man" (107-108) – in a sentence whose phrasing echoes Agu's excuses for his own acts of violence and violation. This analogy complicates the terms of the debate over the attribution of responsibility for the crimes depicted in the novella, as it demands to define the parameters that might entail the culpability or the exculpation of neither, one, or both of these allegedly very different perpetrators, both in moral and in legal terms.

Although very different, the portrayals of child soldiers that Abani and Iweala offer disrupt the fiction of childhood innocence by presenting the reader with young boys who are indeed capable of committing atrocious acts of violence against fellow human beings. These texts, therefore, dismantle the idea of the irreconcilability of the notions of childhood and active violence to show that the term 'child-soldier' might indeed not be an oxymoron. As Mark Sanders has recently remarked in an essay where he invites a psychoanalytical reading of child-soldier fiction and memoirs, these novellas highlight that it is essential to recognise that, "[i]f there is a capacity for violence, it is at the origins" (204). In the words of Birahima, the protagonist of Ahmadou Kourouma's novel *Allah is not Obligated*, "[c]hild-soldier or soldier-child is *keif-keif*, same difference" (45) – a chiasmic construction that, by providing an "alternation [...] between mutually implicated meanings, as substantive takes the place of modifier, and modifier the place of substantive" (Sanders 203), cautions against the utopia of childhood as a necessarily innocent state. All the same, the two novellas do remark the difficulty of assessing the moral and legal culpability of child soldiers, but also, if to a lesser extent, of adult agents, implicated in war crimes. The texts show that human beings under eighteen can exhibit degrees of moral agency comparable to those of adults, while also recalling that adults, on the contrary, might not be as independent and

rational as the international legal imagination assumes. It is for this reason that *Beasts of No Nation* and *Song for Night* constitute 'explorations in humanity': texts that force the reader to move beyond the ideal moral 'comfort zone' of the fairy tale, where the distinctions between heroes and villains, victims and perpetrators, are clear, to come to terms with the complex moral universe of war.

2.2. Animality and hybridity

The universe of the exception is not only a space where the above-mentioned moral distinctions can lose their meaning. It is also a space where the axiom of the individual as a being whose dignity and self-respect cannot be put into question is disrupted. Its representation thus forces the reader to negotiate the ethical validity of concepts that are seen as unequivocally constitutive of what it means to be human. The process of tropological 'dehumanisation' to which the human is subjected when reduced to bare life is conveyed through different rhetorical strategies in the two texts. In this section, I will thus attempt to examine the polysemous metaphorical clusters that Iweala and Abani employ to explore the consequences of brutality and statelessness on the humanity of their characters.

In a short chapter of *Homo Sacer* titled "The Ban and the Wolf," Giorgio Agamben provides a suggestive analysis of the figure of the werewolf as a metamorphic creature whose inclusive exclusion from the polity effectively illustrates the structure of the ban, a central concept in Agamben's political philosophy. As the author explains, indeed, the werewolf at its origin is the *bandito*, the man who is banned from his community as a consequence of sovereign decision. It is decisive, Agamben remarks, that the werewolf is defined not simply as a wolf, but ra-

ther as a wolf-man, a form of life in which the feral and the human become indistinct. Indeed, such an ambivalent overlapping shows that

[t]he life of the bandit, like that of the sacred man, is not a piece of animal nature without any relation to law and the city. It is, rather, a threshold of indistinction and of passage between animal and man, *physis* and *nomos*, exclusion and inclusion: the life of the bandit is the life of the *loup garou*, the werewolf, who is precisely *neither man nor beast*, and who dwells paradoxically within both while belonging to neither. (105)

Neither *bíos*, social/political life, nor *zōē*, biological/animal life, the werewolf, like *homo sacer*, inhabits a zone at the limits of the ethical and political realms, caught in the sovereign ban and thus simultaneously included and excluded from the city.

In the light of these considerations, Agamben reconsiders Thomas Hobbes's "mythologeme" of the state of nature – a state where man, tellingly, is said to be a *wolf* to man – and provides a reading that is meant to dehistoricise it. The Hobbesian state of nature, writes the philosopher, should not be regarded as a real epoch chronologically preceding the foundation of the state. On the contrary, it is "a principle internal to the state" that becomes manifest in the moment in which the state is considered, as Hobbes himself put it, "as if it were dissolved (*ut tanquam dissoluta consideretur*)" (Hobbes, *De Cive* 79-80, qtd. in *Homo Sacer* 36). Hobbes's mythologeme does not identify, Agamben insists, a prejudicial condition inherently indifferent to the law of the city, but rather "the exception and the threshold that constitutes and dwells within it" (106). Rather than being glossed as a war of all against all, the state of nature thus intended should therefore be more precisely recognised as an exceptional circumstance, "in which everyone is bare life and a *homo sacer* for everyone else" (106), and thus can kill and be killed without the occurrence of homicide. It is essential to recall, he continues, that in European folk-

lore the werewolf is generally perceived as a figure whose metamorphic nature is temporary in character, whose transformations from one status into the other are limited in time and, importantly, reversible. The transformation of man into a werewolf, thus, "corresponds perfectly to the state of exception, during which (necessarily limited) time the city is dissolved and men enter into a zone in which they are no longer distinct from beasts" (107).

I have dwelt at length on Agamben's interpretation of the figure of the werewolf as I believe it emphasises the potential of the tropological use of the imagery of metamorphic bestialisation as employed in some of the texts discussed in this dissertation, and in particular in *Beasts of No Nation*. Rhetorical animalisation is the most pervasive strategy through which Iweala signals his characters' entering into an Agambenian zone of indistinction between animal and man. Tropological clusters indicating animalisation are on occasions combined with similes indicating the spectralisation and reification of human beings – figurative images that similarly signify their simultaneous expendability and brutality, their becoming limit concepts that are only illusively 'inhuman.' All these are effective strategies to illustrate the consequences of the condition of rightlessness and legal abandonment to which the sacred human is exposed in the neo-hobbesian *dissolutio civitatis* inaugurated by the total war of *Beasts*. In the novella, men are likened to dogs (3) and ghosts (4). They are reduced to things (6). One soldier is portrayed as he runs "like mad horse," his gun "banging against his back" (17) as if it were a whip.¹⁹ Sodomy scenes are also reproduced by means of animal similes: Commandant, Agu says,

¹⁹ The reification and animalisation of human beings often find an inverted correlative in the personification of objects, and particularly of weapons. Another example of this has Agu saying that his gun "rides my back like it is king and I am servant to be doing whatever it says" (160).

"is entering inside of [him] the way man goat is sometimes mistaking other man goat for woman goat and going inside of them" (104). Again, when high on "gun juice" (54), Agu feels "like man with big muscle and small head, [...] like leopard hunting in the bush" (56), and imagining himself as a predatory animal, he goes on a killing rampage with his comrades.²⁰

The scene of raping that follows is intertwined in the narrative with the tale of the Ox and the Leopard, the founding myth of Agu's village which the boy recalls on hearing the screams of the women he is attacking: "AYIIIIIEEE, like it is the creation of my village when long ago great warrior and his army are just fighting fighting enemy in the bush near my village" (60). The myth recounts the fratricidal fight against two twins who, having the power to metamorphose into whichever animal they desired, one day took the appearance of an ox and a leopard respectively, engaging in a mortal fight during which they did not realise that "they are brother and not enemy" (62). As Alexandra Schultheis has noticed, however, "the folkloric narrative fails to provide that critical distance on the violence at hand, and instead seems to displace its material effects onto an imaginative realm for which Agu feels no responsibility." Indeed, while "[t]he creation story links the placement of the village to mythic parents of the village mourning over the 'abomination' [62] of their sons killing each other" ("Global Specters" 38), Agu insists "I am grabbing the woman and her daughter. They are not my mother and my sister. I am telling them, it is enough. This is the end" (60). Once again, the fiction of human brotherhood proves unfeasible when men become wolves to men – *homines sacri* who are disposable, but certainly not necessarily in-

²⁰ Such a metaphorical self-depiction becomes all the more interesting in the light of the fact that, as many critics have recalled, the name 'Agu' means 'leopard' or 'lion' in Igbo.

nocuous.

By figuring the human as beast the text disrupts the common, sentimental image that posits bare life as a good and hapless form of life. It is the figure of Strika that most clearly embodies this seeming paradox. The voiceless boy, who will become Agu's best friend, is presented at the outset of the novella through an iconography that clearly recalls the often-mentioned humanitarian depiction of the starving African child. At first, Strika is not described as a human being, but is metonymically reified as "a short dark body," a body

with one big belly and leg thin like spider's own. The body is so thin that his short is just blowing around his leg like woman's skirt and his shirt is looking like dress the way it is hanging from his shoulder. His neck is just struggling too much to hold up his big head that is always moving one way or the other. (3)

But Strika is far from harmless: on the contrary, he has feral "yellow eyes," and, "sniffing like a dog," he approaches Agu and starts beating him, dragging him out of the shack where he is hiding. Agu is thereby conscribed and becomes an unwilling fighter in the rebel militias.

It is thus apparent that the boys and men of *Beasts of No Nation* are both human and 'bestial' – and are so at the same time, in the form of bare life whose depiction forces the reader to reconfigure what is generally considered bestial, violent (in short, 'inhuman') as a potential articulation of humanity itself. In other words, the reader must recognise that the so-called 'inhuman' in fact lies at the core of the human. The (I insist, figurative) bestiality that defines these human beings thus holds multiple, ambivalent significations: it emphasises their ruthless violence, while also pointing up their condition as subjects who, cast outside of the political, become expendable to an unprecedented degree. It is thus telling that

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Strika, for example, after deserting with Agu and his companions, will also *die* like a dog, his grotesque body left on the roadside, "looking like one piece of refuse on this road" (164). *Beasts of No Nation* delineates a zone of the human where concepts such as dignity, self-respect and, to a certain extent, mutual help, make little or no sense. However, as Giorgio Agamben reminds us,

if there is a zone of the human in which these concepts make no sense, then they are not genuine ethical concepts, for no ethics can claim to exclude a part of humanity, no matter how unpleasant or difficult that humanity is to see. (*Remnants*, 63-64)

The multi-faceted symbolic representation of animality in the novella acquires a further semantic layer if one considers the intertextual dimension evoked by its very title. The phrase "Beasts of No Nation" is indeed borrowed from the lyrics of the eponymous hit by iconoclastic musician Fela Kuti,²¹ an indictment of those bestial politicians disguised in smart suits who, Fela sung, "wan dash us human rights" even as "human rights na my property / You can't dash me my property."²² It is significant to recall that the song explicitly referred to a 1986 statement by then South African Prime Minister P.W. Botha, whom Kuti quotes as claiming that he would be forced to react violently if the protracted rebellions against the apartheid regime did not stop: "this uprising will bring out the beast in us." Botha, alongside English Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher and US President Ronald Reagan, is caricatured on the album cover as a predator whose long, animal fangs are covered in blood. Such a depiction draws on "a long-standing tro-

²¹ It is therefore not, or at least not primarily, a quote from Wole Soyinka's *Season of Anomy*, as Coundouriotis conjectures.

²² As glossed by Michael E. Veal, "want to bribe us with human rights" even as "human rights are my property / You cannot bribe me with my own property" (210).

pology of beastly sovereignty" (Menely 568) which is here turned against itself to protest against the exceptional force that lies at the basis of the sovereign right to kill – or to connive at consigning to death. The aesthetic domain, in this context, emerges as a site from which the artist launches an offensive against what Derrida has called the "irresponsibility" of bestial sovereignty – an irresponsibility that is one of the causes determining the failure of the human rights regime as configured today. Indeed, Derrida explains, the sovereign, similarly to the animal,

does not respond, he is the one who does not have to, who always has the right not to, respond [*répondre*], in particular not to be responsible for [*répondre de*] his acts. He is above the law [*le droit*] and has the right [*le droit*] to suspend the law [...]. He has a right to a certain irresponsibility. (*Beast* 57)

The sovereign, thus, has the feral right to kill indiscriminately and with impunity. However, as critic Tobias Menely has observed discussing Thomas Hobbes's theorisation of the relationship between sovereign and subject,

[t]he paradigmatic act of sovereign violence [...] is not the killing but the naming that precedes the killing. The role of the sovereign, according to Hobbes, is to determine who is and who is not human – which is to say, who is and who is not protected by the law. (569)

It is in this sense that title of the novella can be read as obliquely indicting, by means of its reference to Fela Kuti's lyrics, the right that sovereign actors at the top of global political hierarchies hold in either determining or supporting exclusionary policies that ostracise large portions of humanity from humanity itself – from the realm of those who should have a 'right to have rights' simply by virtue of being human. As there is no recognisable, or legitimate sovereign in the unnamed, dissolved country of *Beasts of No Nation*, the novella is hence to be read more generally as a cry against current global inequalities that perpetuate the dif-

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ferential allocation of 'humanity' on which racist, colonial and neo-colonial systems have historically been founded. As will be noticed below, however, the abstraction from historical specificity that Iweala carries out for the purpose of focusing exclusively on the question of human rights protection is in fact one of the weakest points of *Beasts of No Nation*, as it runs the risk of replicating the very a-historicising, de-humanising discourses it aims at deconstructing.

The fact that Iweala's symbols of animality refer to both the dominated and the dominating reflects Agamben's argument that the sovereign and *homo sacer*, dwelling "at the two extremes of the order," are in fact

two symmetrical figures that have the same structure and are correlative: the sovereign is the one with respect to whom all men are potentially *homines sacri*, and *homo sacer* is the one with respect to whom all men act as sovereigns. (*Homo Sacer* 84)

In keeping with the tropology of animality, the sovereign can thus be identified as a predator that retains its "natural right to do anything to anyone" (*Homo Sacer* 106). His counterpart, *homo sacer*, is similarly bestly, a creature who has undergone a figurative metamorphosis as a consequence of a sovereign abandonment that has cast him outside the political – outside humanity itself.

*

In contrast to Iweala, in *Song for Night* Abani has his protagonist, My Luck, actively contrasting the (proto-)sovereign violence meant to reduce him to a less-than-human being.²³ This is most clearly confirmed by the above-mentioned act of insubordination, when My Luck shoots his commander, the soldier who was like an

²³ Although Abani resists the use of a tropology of animalisation in *Song for Night*, he proposes images of bestialisation in other works, such as for example *Becoming Abigail* and the poetry collection *Dog Woman*. *Becoming Abigail* will be taken into consideration in the last chapter of this dissertation.

"animal" (41) and was willing to turn him and the members of his platoon into "animals" (39) as well.²⁴ Abani's main character manages to retain a complex, multi-faceted personality even in the midst of horror: even in the midst of horror, he loves and hates, he is capable of sorrow and shame. As suggested by the title of the novella, in *Song for Night* the writer explores such a wide spectrum of human feelings by means of a symbolic interplay of darkness and light, the metaphysical relationship between which constitutes one of his central preoccupations. Understanding "how far into darkness" human beings can go "and still find their way back to light," and perhaps even more importantly "how much [it is] necessary for there to be darkness for the concept of light to exist" (Abani, "Chris Abani") is indeed one of the main themes that *Song for Night* seeks to examine. Abani's compassionate exploration of the humanity of the young My Luck cautions that guilt and redemption are two sides of the same coin. Put differently, the beauty of the redemption he writes about is inextricably linked to the darkness of his main character's guilt.

As argued above, Abani invites the reader to complicate the view of ethical opposites as mutually exclusive, and rather attempts to emphasise their constant interlacing, which points out the essential complexity of human existence. Living is never, the writer suggests, a black-or-white affair, and the story of My Luck's nightmarish adventure is a constant reminder of this. At the beginning of his metaphysical trek into the painful memories of his life, My Luck gropes in the dark. "Night blends into day blends into night, seamlessly" (65), but "even in *daylight*

²⁴ John Wayne can indeed be seen as a metonym for aspiring sovereignty in that, similarly to Iweala's Commandant, he is a real, trained soldier, one of the few official representatives of the rebel army that is contesting the legitimacy of the status quo.

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[...] [he is] plagued by vivid *nightmares*" (66, emphasis added). Although he manages to sleep, still rest eludes him – an interior peace he has not been able to attain since the day when, witnessing the old women's cannibalistic feast, he discovered that man can, indeed, be wolf to man (27-29). My Luck, however, slowly comes to realise that even sins can be "luminous" (157), thus learning to forgive his weaknesses and errors to proceed towards redemption – that is, towards (perpetual) rest:

This morning, unaccountably, I am filled with an almost unbearable lightness. This light comes not from a sudden wholeness on my part, but from the very wounds I carry on my body and in my soul. Each wound, in its particular way, giving off a particular and peculiar light. (151)

In *Song for Night*, thus, darkness and light are inseparable, truth and falsity are the same (69), and even life and death overlap, as confirmed by the depiction of the protagonist's journey, during which My Luck's ghostly nature becomes, paradoxically, progressively more visible to the reader.

The author's interest to explore the meanings of ambivalent hybridity is confirmed by his characterisation of the protagonist: both in the past he remembers and re-lives and in his present quest for the acceptance of death, My Luck is presented as standing on the threshold between many contrastive worlds. He is part of them all, and yet does not fully belong to any. In this context, it is meaningful that before joining the army My Luck lived in a Northern Sabon Gari, the strangers' quarters inhabited by the Christian Igbos who, like him, resided in the predominantly Muslim North of a country that, albeit unnamed, is clearly recognisable as Nigeria. And it is even more telling that he is the son of an imam, a "gentle" Igbo (64) who decided at a very young age to embrace the Muslim reli-

gion. My Luck's father will be repeatedly punished for daring to challenge established social categories: not only with the resented exclusion from both religious communities, but also, and finally, with death. Indeed, My Luck reflects, it was

a terrible thing in this divided nation, even in its infancy, for an Igbo man to be a Muslim. [...] Everyone hated the mosque, sitting as it did by decree of the Sardauna in the midst of the Christian enclave. Everyone hated my father. [...] For a long time I hated my father too, but since he died, I have been trying to love him. (92)

My Luck's father is murdered, as the Igbo press says, at the hands of "*other Muslims because he married a Catholic*" (110). He is killed in his deserted mosque while in a trance that has put him in "communion with angels and jinn" (155). The mosque, in this sense, becomes a quintessential site of hybridity, a camp within the camp, a locus twice excluded from the city, a space whose sacredness does not constitute a sufficient deterrent against committing a homicide. My Luck recalls that on that day, following his mother's premonitory dream, he went to the holy place to warn his father about his imminent death. However, on seeing the shapes of his sword-carrying assailants, he panicked, "ran and hid in the courtyard."

When they fled, I came out to him. He smiled at me and touched my face, smearing his blood on my cheek. He tried to speak, but only blood came. I pushed back from him and he died in the sand like a dog. (157)

My Luck will soon be cleansed of a sin that he perceives as being unforgivable: when he got back home his mother was indeed "waiting with a bowl of water and a rag and she washed my face and said nothing" (157).

The unacceptable hybridity that has determined My Luck's father's death will however prove a source of salvation for the boy during the anti-Igbo riots that constitute a clear, if loose, reinvention of the massacres that took place in

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Northern Nigeria from 1966 onwards, triggering Biafra's secession. Abani here draws on, and revises, a recurrent image of Biafran war fiction: a number of first-wave writers have indeed recounted how during the disturbances victims of violence were often requested to demonstrate to be members of the same ethnic or religious group as their aggressors by speaking a certain language or reciting a certain prayer. Abani's rewriting of this highly symbolical moment of intercultural tension takes place when My Luck is attempting to flee to safety by reaching the train station in a city "alive with mobs" (96) chasing the Igbo infidels. The Igbo boy, who speaks fluent Hausa, is asked to prove that he really is a believer by singing the Muslim call to prayer: failure to do so would mean certain death. It is only by virtue of being his 'hybrid' father's son that he survives:

[i]n my best voice I began the call to prayer. A hush descended on the crowd as my voice went from a childish soprano to a cracked and smoky alto and then back again. The cracks teased some with memories of loves lost and dreams turned rancid. To others it was a caress that burned. Finally, unable to stand it any longer, a man screamed: "Stop! Somebody tell him to stop!" (97)

The "cracks" in My Luck's voice are reminders that the boy is singing from a space that is inherently hybrid: the space of the child who is becoming a man. And these "cracks" in someone's being, Abani suggests, allow a glimpse into a common humanity of loves, dreams and caresses. My Luck's 'broken' singing has therefore the implicit power to indict the madness of the horrific bloodbath that is going on – so much so that the boy is asked to stop with an anguished scream.

Abani's complex representation of the relationship between My Luck and his father recalls that hybridity, "the *in-between* space [...] that carries the burden of a culture" (Bhabha H.K. *Location* 38), is often a space of sorrow. Postcolonial thought has rightly acknowledged, and praised, the resistant and creative potential

of the hybrid subjectivity. However, on many occasions it has done so at the risk of minimising, or even forgetting, the suffering that hybridity can be conducive to. Abani suggests that hybridity can be, and indeed most of the times is, a painful condition. And this is not only due to the fact that, like the intertwining of ethical light and darkness, it forces one to the constant, and difficult, re-negotiation of one's identity. Hybridity is also feared, despised, excluded, killed, and often with impunity, for being a threat to the maintenance of a supposedly ordered society. However, it is also through the narration of My Luck's survival and the celebration of his father's smile in death – along with the recognition that people like him are always hated "because their kindness makes us recognize the shits we are" (110) – that Abani forcefully highlights the potential strength inherent in human becoming and hybridity.

2.3. Between the local and the global: failed incorporations

Neither Abani nor Iweala ever mention the name of the country in which their post-national novellas take place, although the setting of *Song for Night*, as seen above, is clearly a Nigerian one and Iweala has undoubtedly drawn much inspiration from his cultural and familial heritage in the definition of the unnamed country of his text.²⁵ The abstraction from the specifics of a univocally recognisable

²⁵ While certain commentators have argued that the author "offers the best Biafran war novel to date by raising the war above the specifics of the historical setting [...] and implicitly comparing it to wars that have passed and that are ongoing" (Hawley 22), others have on the contrary remarked that *Beasts of No Nation* is not "a novel about Biafra that speaks implicitly about other wars; it is a novel about African wars in the 80s and 90s that speaks implicitly about Biafra" (Hodges 7). While the latter interpretation is perhaps the most convincing, still the very fact that such a debate has arisen testifies to the malleability of a post-national text that is purportedly written as to be adaptable to different contexts because of its historical indefiniteness.

conflict, which is at its extreme in Iweala's fictional "no nation," is ostensibly meant to transcend the local while encompassing it at the same time, and hence to underscore the global relevance of the issues addressed.²⁶

The two novellas, however, have been criticised for being conducive to what critic Eleni Coundouriotis has termed "arrested historicization." A characteristic they share with many human rights narratives tackling the question of child soldiering in Africa, "arrested historicization" determines "a narrowing down of the historical scope of a long-standing convention in African literature, the war novel" (192). Indeed, Coundouriotis contends, works such as *Beasts of No Nation* and *Song for Night* propose an abstracted figure of the child soldier that, "cast against a background of the 'dark continent' revisited," has been problematically "commodified as the new authenticity out of Africa" (203). Anthropologist David Rosen has made the related argument that "recent novels of war and, especially, novels of children at war in contemporary conflicts completely remove war from the world of politics" ("The Child Soldier in Literature" 124). Child soldier narratives would thus endorse an image of Africa as a prelogical locus – one that Hegel famously described as "the land of childhood, which lying beyond the day of self-conscious history, is enveloped in the dark mantle of Night" (*The Philosophy of History*, 109). For these reasons, the texts can be potentially perceived as perpetuating the colonial trope of Africa as an ahistorical "heart of darkness" inhabited by less-than-human beings, or by beings whose humanity, albeit recognised, remains nonetheless 'other' – "ugly," as Conrad's Marlow (in)famously put it (63). The

²⁶ For a recent ethnographic study of the memory of the Nigerian Civil War, and of the role played by children as combatants, spies and messengers in particular within the Biafran army, see Uchendu, esp. 400-407.

preoccupations manifested in commentaries such as those just rehearsed do indeed point out one of the major weaknesses of Iweala's work, which lends itself to simplistic interpretations because of its overtly didactic aims. Abani's feat, on the contrary, lies in the fact that since he "insists on literary and historical specificity as a condition for meaning, even when he places historical materiality out of his character's reach" (Schultheis, "Global Specters" 25), the tensions between the local and the global that come to the surface in his work do not allow a reductionist reading of his depiction of Africa as ontologically childish – that is, apolitical and ahistorical.

Beasts of No Nation has been often criticised for its ahistorical abstractedness. David Rosen, for example, has observed that the "universal 'everyman' quality" that this text shares with a number of child soldier narratives, albeit ostensibly serving notions of the "greater good – ending children's involvement in war" (125), has the effect of

stripping the story of any social and cultural context. The story unfolds both nowhere and everywhere. There is no history and no meaning to anything that is going on. Strongly paralleling the humanitarian understanding of war, it portrays people simply dying for nothing. (Rosen, "The Child Soldier in Literature" 119)

The apolitical stance adopted by Iweala in the novella is determined primarily by the characterisation of his protagonist as a boy who conforms in many respects to the humanitarian trope of the victimised non-agent. Agu, particularly as a consequence of being an extremely young combatant, has a very limited understanding of the reasons which led to the outbreak of the war – an ignorance that contributes to the portrayal of his conscription as an essentially violent imposition. Iweala's abstracting intentions, however, transcend characterisation, as confirmed

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by the fact that he does not allow any explanatory passage to find its way into the narrative either through dialogue or other narrative devices. It is also for this reason that the fictional war of *Beasts of No Nation* does indeed run the risk of endorsing the Western conception of postcolonial wars as inherently devoid of meaning, as phenomena that, like the behaviour of those "beasts" who fight them, are irrational.

The perception of the similarity between Iweala's representation of Africa and colonialist discourses has no doubt been enhanced also by the author's employment of the rhetoric of animalisation commented upon above. The use of animal metaphors can indeed recall colonial epistemologies, which, as Frantz Fanon famously remarked in his seminal *The Wretched of the Earth*, had the aim to strip the colonised of their humanity. As I have attempted to show above, however, in Iweala's book bestiality is not presented as the ontological characteristic of a black man who must be enlightened by means of a Western civilising mission, but is rather a tropological strategy meant to shed perturbing light on the consequences of statelessness, and of the ensuing human rights deprivation, on human behaviour. It is therefore no coincidence that the disquieting savagery of the human in war situations is emphatically pitted against the harmonious familial and communal context of pre-war society. The continuous alternations, in the narration of Agu's story of war, between passages where humanity becomes feral and moments of ordered, if abstracted, social existence, remind us that the condition of indistinction between man and beast in which the abandoned man finds himself should be, like the metamorphosis of man into a werewolf, temporary, *exceptional* (107).

Still, it is undoubted that these nuances have often been missed by Western reviewers and readers, many of whom, even in otherwise perceptive pieces, have

hailed Iweala's text as a brilliant journey into the late modern African "heart of darkness" (see for example Maslin, "Conscripted"). Parallels such as these, implicitly likening *Beasts of No Nation* to the conradian novella whose "racism" was severely critiqued by Chinua Achebe ("Image"), hint at the fact that the provocative use of the imagery of animality as employed in *Beasts* is not inscribed within the economy of the text with sufficient clarity. In other words, Iweala's didactic choices in terms of characterisation and narrative style have in the end produced a text that lends itself to over-simplified misreadings which confirm that, in Western circuits, the African continent is still imagined, and marketed, along lines defined by a (neo-)colonial aesthetics postulating the West's own inevitable righteousness within the "savage-victim-savior" paradigm that functions as a subtext for much human rights discourse (Mutua).

While Iweala problematically prevents the emergence of ideological justifications to the horrors of the civil conflict he portrays, Abani, more subtly, claims their remoteness and ultimate irrelevance in the face of human pain: "the price of coming this far," My Luck reflects, "has been too much. [...] [T]here has been nothing but blood since the night my mother died" (93), since the anti-Igbo riots that claimed her life.

It has been three years of a senseless war, an *though the reasons for it are clear*, and though we will continue to fight until we are ordered to stop – and probably for a while after that – *none of us can remember the hate that led us here*. We are simply fighting to survive the war. (19, emphasis added)

In *Song for Night*, Abani does not erase the historicity of the events he fictionalises, but rather reinvents contexts that are historically and socially recognisable, even as historical accuracy is certainly not his greatest concern. Coundouriotis is thus right

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when she states that the lack of historical specifics in the novella suggests "the kind of flattening out of time that occurs in memory where the past is part of the present consciousness" (195). Contrary to her view, however, I would not interpret Abani's choice as delegitimising the novella's historicity *tout court*. In other words, it seems to me that the fact that "there are references to Lexus cars" does not constitute sufficient evidence to claim that "it *cannot* be Biafra in 1967" (Coundouriotis 195, emphasis added). *Song for Night*, I believe, remains an (admittedly loose) artistic reinvention of a historical event – even as there is no doubt that, by matching its fictionalisation with a preoccupation for other phenomena which have not been exclusively Nigerian, such as child soldiering and inter-ethnic strife, the writer invites to its transcendence.

The interpretation of My Luck's war is further expanded as a consequence of its double nature as an experience that is both physical and metaphysical, becoming the hyperbolic representation of an existential condition where the humanity of the child, a human being *in fieri*, is put to the test. Indeed, alongside explicitly referencing the ethnic and religious complexities that contributed to the outbreak of the Nigerian Civil War, *Song for Night* is the story of a soul at war who finally manages to lay down his weapons following the remembrance of those "gentle, soft, almost invisible acts of compassion" (Abani, "Chris Abani") and love that, even while fighting, he was capable of doing and receiving. In other words, while Abani's war does retain a historical and social dimension that I would not be as ready as Coundouriotis to dismiss, the author focuses primarily on the ultimate ways in which our (in)humanity can be contested, or confirmed, while insisting on the difficulty of classifying certain behaviours within normative discourses based on the attribution of responsibility and guilt. Abani's song, thus,

"resonates both locally and globally" (Schultheis, "Global Specters" 41), both historically and allegorically, both physically and metaphysically.

Given these considerations, it appears that the metaphorical night that engulfs My Luck at the outbreak of the hostilities should not be confused with that "one long night of savagery" that Chinua Achebe sees in colonialist discourses on Africa ("Novelist" 45). On the contrary, it is a darkness that may, and must, be relived and released in order to move on (104). It is one of those many moral nights that befall a fragile humanity that will nonetheless be given the chance to find its way back to light – however ambiguously. It is for this reason that My Luck's night is still "full of stars" (79), of tiny dots of light that, like beacons, will help him retrieve the path he has lost.

*

Beasts of No Nation ends as Agu and his platoon desert and start an exhausting march back "home" (153). The last section of the book, however, does not envision the restoration of 'normality' for Agu, but is set instead in a rehabilitation centre, where the former child soldier is undergoing treatment. Alexandra Schultheis has argued that Iweala's novella ultimately conforms to the *Bildungsroman* narrative structure that, as Joseph Slaughter has shown, underlies human rights law, since the child soldier has apparently moved beyond the limbo of war to proceed towards "physical and psychological recovery and social reintegration" (CRC, Art. 39; see Schultheis, "Global Specters" 40). Agu is indeed presented as having begun to reassert his agency, also in the form of narrative authority. Yet, it must not be ignored that the ending does not provide any reassurance as to the effectiveness of the rehabilitation process, let alone of the reintegration of the child-soldier in a post-war (either national, or global) community. Agu has moved from one

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limbo to another, and is now caught in a certainly more pleasant, but still suspended, condition. The boy's suspended *Bildung* seems to derive also from the fact that the therapist Amy, the "white woman from America" with whom the Western reader presumably identifies, is "like small girl" (175), a dubious agent who remains speechless, with "water [...] just shining in her eye" (177) while Agu is telling her his experiences. This ironic image is in clear contrast with the humanitarian self-representation of the rational West as the saviour of an infantilised South and seems to undermine, without however going so far as rejecting it in full, the conception of therapy as the optimal (Western) way to recovery for former child soldiers. I would argue therefore that such lack of aesthetic closure, which has been noted elsewhere (Krishnan, "Biafra"), at least partially problematises the interpretation of an otherwise apparently linear ending. In his last words, Agu does not negate his having been "some sort of beast or devil" (176). At the same time however, he reclaims the normal beauty of his pre-war existence: "[F]ine. I am all of this thing," he says, in a declaration of responsibility which, once and for all, reverses his wartime non-agency. "I am all of this thing, but I am also having a mother once, and she is loving me" (177, emphasis added). It seems to me that this positive assertion, far from "secur[ing] Agu's innocence as a child" (Schultheis, "Global Specters" 40), reinstates his ambivalent nature, eliciting an undoubted empathic response while at the same time underscoring the suffering that has been produced by his actions.

Readers of Abani's novella will understand only on the very last page that, as they suspected, the author has offered them a "ghost story" (Schultheis, "Global Specters" 28) in place of a *Bildungsroman*. Schultheis's remarks are once again useful here: as the critic has observed, by confirming that the protagonist has lost his

life in the mine explosion with which the narration began, the ending shows that Abani "writes out of the failure of the public sphere" (Schultheis, "Global Specters" 25), and therefore

refutes the implication that the bildungsroman can secure a viable future for a (former) child soldier in either national or global literary terms. This clears a space for other narratives and negotiations of modern subjectivity that might acknowledge if not embrace the ethical injunctions of that subject's ghosts. (Schultheis, "Global Specters" 36)

Even more explicitly than Iweala's post-national novella, *Song for Night* does not simply depict the conflict between (non-)citizens and (non-)states. More problematically, the state is no longer there, it is no longer presented as a site for the promotion of human rights, as a site where the full development of one's personality can occur. The difficult (Iweala), or unimaginable (Abani), incorporation of the represented subject into a regime of citizenship and rights uncovers the limits of human rights within the context of sovereignty. In other words, it recalls the well-known fact that human rights are "not yet the rights of humanity in general" but rather "the rights of incorporated citizens – the rights of persons acting in their corporate capacity *as state*" (Slaughter, *Human Rights, Inc.* 89). And when the state is simply not there, or where it functions as a human rights abuser rather than as a human rights protector, human rights become an outright impossibility.

What is more, by positing the young character clearly beyond the sphere of legal accountability, Abani confirms that his central preoccupation remains that of assessing the moral implications of his character's enlightenment and progressive 're-humanisation' in death. The fact that My Luck's spiritual search is one that does not aspire to the benevolence of a forgiving God, being rather an attempt to look for grace that is grounded in a more humanistic sense of compassion, sug-

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gests that the writer is sceptical of those grand narratives that endeavour to acquire moral certainty through concepts of guilt, punishment or forgiveness. The novella thus puts to the test the reader's capability for mercy with a beautifully unsettling force.

PART TWO THE RULE

3.

Black Holes and the Empty Throne of the Sovereign: Stories of Nigerian Prisons

As Malawian poet Jack Mapanje writes in the introduction to his edited collection of African prison writing, *Gathering Seaweed*,¹ the “defiant recasting of African history through the eyes of some of its finest hostages” (xiii) has been one of the most fascinating, and ethically compelling, consequences arising from the countless accounts of prison experiences by African intellectuals since the 1950s. Not only do these texts provide an indictment of the brutality of colonial and post-colonial regimes of violence predicated upon disregard for the value of human life – both in Africa and elsewhere, but they also constitute “an indelible record of the origins, growth and maturity of the struggle for the restitution of human dignity and integrity, justice and peace on the African continent” (xiv). It is for this reason that Mapanje vehemently rejects “the subtle neocolonial view that the publication of African prison writing fabricates yet another negative image of the continent” (xiii).

Following Mapanje’s lead, this chapter aims at investigating how Chris Abani (*Kalakuta Republic*, 2000), Helon Habila (*Waiting for an Angel*, 2002) and

¹ The phrase “gathering seaweed” is drawn from an episode Nelson Mandela recounts in his memoir *Long Walk to Freedom*, excerpts of which are collected in Mapanje’s edited volume (194-202).

Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie (“Cell One,” 2007) have approached the theme of state violence through their portrayals of indefinite detention in Nigerian prisons. It argues that the Nigerian cell is presented in the examined texts as an extrajudicial locus embodying the concept of the Agambenian ‘camp.’ I shall also attempt to show that the prison, functioning as a metonymy for the postcolony itself, figuratively indicates the generalised condition of permanent exception in which Nigeria, and in particular the Nigeria of the military, was caught. We are thus slowly moving into a literary space where the exception has manifestly become the rule, and the country is cast in an apparently never-ending war-like condition of state-sanctioned terror.

The works that will be studied here do not only recall, through their portrayals of experiences of detention, the cruelty of the Nigerian dictatorships of the 1980s and 90s, recreating the oppressive atmosphere in which Nigerians were forced to live. They also serve as testimonies to the different, at times ambiguous, strategies of resistance to dehumanisation that ostensibly helpless victims of sovereign decision can, and indeed do, adopt while also complicating the rigid divide between victim and perpetrator that the Agambenian paradigm often seems to imply. However, it is essential to point out at the very outset of this chapter that while Abani’s poetry collection is considered to be largely autobiographical and can thus be viewed as an addition to the vast body of prison writing that Mapanje comments on,² Habila’s and Adichie’s texts are fictional reinventions of the phe-

² The author’s accounts of his imprisonments are, however, at the centre of great controversy. Many commentators, basing their claims on the lack of archival evidence regarding Abani’s periods of detention, and on Abani’s own apparent inconsistencies in recounting his experiences during interviews and public talks, have contended that the author has constructed a fictitious public persona, the details of his biography being embellished at best, at worst invented. While it is not within the scope of this chapter to address the doubts that have been raised on the truthfulness of Abani’s autobiographical works and

nomenon of indefinite detention, where the prison cell emerges as a powerful literary symbol signifying, and interrogating the legitimacy of, a state that claims infinite rights for itself and denies all rights to its (non-)citizens. Albeit different in terms of genre (see Section 3.2), the three works will be taken into consideration together, as more productive objects of analysis than other recent fictional and non-fictional texts that similarly explore the question of incarceration in Nigeria.³ This choice has not only been determined by their aesthetic quality, but also, and importantly, by the fact that they exhibit comparable representations of the human held captive in inhuman conditions.

3.1. The (post)colonial carceral

Historians have often pointed out that it was during the short rule of dictator Muhammadu Buhari (1984-1985) that the foundations for the increasing despotism of military governance of the 1980s and 1990s were laid. After the proscription of political parties and the suspension of certain sections of the 1979 Constitution in 1984, a number of severe decrees followed that limited the liberties of citizens while at the same time heightening the repressive powers of the head of state, the army, and the police. As Egosa E. Osaghae has written, a “particularly monstrous” decree,

accounts, I refer to some Web sources that can be of help in order to understand the terms of the debate: see in particular Ikheloa et al. and Emetulu.

³ Sefi Atta’s *Everything Good Will Come* (2005) and Kachi A. Ozumba’s *The Shadow of a Smile* (2009) are two of the most interesting representatives of contemporary fictional texts that more or less expressly tackle the topic of detention in Nigeria. Recent autobiographical prison writing, instead, include Christine Anyanwu’s *The Days of Terror* (2002), Kunle Ajibade’s *Jailed for Life* (2003) and Ogaga Ifowodo’s “A Room of my Own” (2002).

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which remained the major instrument of state repression in the later regimes of Babangida and Abacha, was the State Security (Detention of Persons) Decree of 1984 which authorised the chief of staff at supreme headquarters to detain for up to three months (renewable), without trial, anyone deemed to be a risk to state security or to have contributed to the country's economic crisis. [...] The wide-ranging powers given to the National Security Organization (NSO) to hunt for, detain and deal with enemies of the regime, even within the armed forces, combined with this decree to unleash a reign of terror.](*Crippled Giant* 179-180)

The press, which had been relatively free up till then, was not exempted from restrictions, either: with the infamous Public Officers (Protection Against False Accusations) Decree no. 4 of 1984, the regime “authorised the arrest, detention and trial of journalists and the closure of any medium making ‘any false statement’ or rumour embarrassing to public officers or calculated to subject them to ridicule or disrepute” (Osaghae 180). In the first period of his rule, Ibrahim Babangida cultivated a populist image of his governance as informed by freedom of thought and expression, also through the – albeit “cosmetic” (Osaghae 196) – repeal of Decree no. 4. However, he was soon to assume an extremely despotic posture, comparable to that of his predecessor. The tragic death of the editor of the magazine *Newswatch*, Dele Giwa, who was killed by a letter bomb in 1987,⁴ is in this sense symptomatic of the attempt to gag the press that was carried out in the later years of the Babangida era.⁵ During the Abacha days, as is well known, dissent continued to be harshly suppressed, while the Nigerian society experienced increased militarisation. It thus comes as no surprise that the silencing of intellectuals and artists emerges as an almost archetypical motif in the literature that recreates the

⁴ This episode is recounted in Habila's *Waiting* (196-197), which is however set in the Abacha years.

⁵ As Toyin Falola and Matthew M. Heaton, among others, have noticed, “[t]he timing of his death, just days after an interrogation by government operatives, led many to believe the Babangida regime may have been responsible” (*History* 224).

authoritarian ‘relapse’ which followed the short-lived Second Republic.

In the light of these considerations, life in jail as portrayed by Abani, Habila and Adichie predictably resembles a vivid nightmare. Indeed, far from having the aim of disciplining docile bodies through the regulative, ordered carceral institution famously theorised by Michel Foucault, the Nigerian prisons described by the above-mentioned authors constitute exemplary sites for the unrestrained exercise of an absolute form of sovereign power. In his seminal *Discipline and Punish*, Foucault traced the development of the penal system in Western Europe from a highly spectacular demonstration of unrestrained violence to an internalised form of control based on perpetual surveillance. However, as many commentators have observed, Foucault’s text omits to consider how “the very governments that began to frown on torture and public execution within Europe’s borders continued to use such tactics systematically in colonies throughout the world, well into Foucault’s lifetime” (Graham 230).

Human rights scholars and activists concur in noticing that, among the reasons explaining the appalling human rights abuses suffered by prisoners in post-colonial Africa,⁶ it is essential to recall the permanence of the colonial idea of penitentiary confinement as having coercive, rather than reformatory, aims. Indeed,

⁶ In Stephen Peté’s words, “[c]rumbling infrastructure and chronic overcrowding, political oppression and economic collapse, the continued use of corporal and capital punishment, long delays in awaiting trial, a lack of separate facilities for juveniles, the activities of prison gangs, the ravages of HIV/AIDS, and rampant corruption have all exacted a terrible toll on the human rights of the prisoners in post-colonial Africa” (Peté “Brief History” 52). All these issues are given due attention in Jeremy Sarkin’s edited volume *Human Rights in African Prisons*. For “a social context perspective of the origin and development of Nigeria’s Criminal justice system,” see Otu. For a recent account of the still critical living conditions in Nigerian prisons, see also the 2008 Amnesty International document “Nigeria: Prisoners’ Rights Systematically Flouted.”

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[f]rom the time that the colonial powers introduced and disseminated this alien form of punishment across the length and breadth of the African continent, it was inextricably bound up with aims and ideals that had far more to do with the subjugation of the indigenous population and the maintenance of white sovereignty than with the reform and reintegration of the offender. [...] This social control function continued into the post-colonial period, with political dictators making full use of the coercive traditions embodied within these institutions. (Peté, “Brief History” 60)

And in the works examined here, the penitentiary is evocative of the pre-modern dark, overcrowded dungeon rather than of Jeremy Bentham’s panoptical architecture – a characteristic that confirms that the colonial conception of the carceral institution has survived well into postcolonial times. If it is true that “[a] society’s human rights record is mirrored in the state of human rights protection in its prisons” (Sarkin 2), then there is no doubt that the Nigeria portrayed in recent prison literature is a country that has a long way to go in terms of realising and respecting the rights of its citizens.

Discourses on exceptionalism, the carceral and processes of dehumanisation of detainees have acquired renewed importance, particularly in American Studies, in the wake of the US “war on terror” that followed the 9/11 terrorist attacks, putting notorious detention centres such as Guantánamo and Abu Ghraib to the forefront of contemporary debates regarding the policies of the Bush and, more recently, the Obama administration. A number of the critiques of rights deprivation in the “global war prisons” (Gregory) – spaces inhabited by persons who, in Judith Butler’s words, cannot be considered “subjects in any legal or normative sense” (*Precarious* xvi) – have drawn on Agamben’s political philosophy in an attempt to define the supposedly anachronistic nature of this new, terrifying penitentiary regime. Critic Caleb Smith, however, commenting on recent studies of

Guantánamo Bay detention camp, has argued that the emphasis they place on the “unprecedented” violence against, and desubjectivation of, the detainees held there, risks “normalizing all that came before,” tempting us to wrongly assume that a ‘pure’ Foucauldian disciplinary regime was, “until quite recently, the actual order of things” (244). The phenomenon of “detention without subjects,” he objects, has in fact a long history, the legal fiction of “civil death” constituting one of the main premises on which the nineteenth-century US carceral system was founded. In what he calls the “*poetics of the penitentiary* – the images and tropes that give meaning to the violence of detention – enlightened sentimentality is bound up with the violent and ghostly nightmares of the gothic” (248), as the prisoner has to undergo a ritualised death as the inevitable premise for the resurrection of a reformed, redeemed subject.⁷

Caleb Smith’s disquieting observations are useful insofar as they evidence the need to recognise how the allegedly ‘normal’ western modernity has been informed by so-called ‘exceptional’ practices much more often than generally acknowledged. But what most clearly distinguishes the legal “civil death” Smith writes about from the dehumanisation of the person subjected to violent forms of indefinite detention, be it in Guantánamo or elsewhere, lies in the fact that such a dehumanising detention holds no ‘corrective’ objective. The postcolonial prisons of the texts studied here, for example, are presented as essentially necropolitical spaces of punishment and interrogation: there, reformation of the prisoner is not

⁷ Such a ritualised death includes a number of different but mutually reinforcing practices: “[t]he prisoner is severed from the social world in which his old identity was grounded; he loses his name and is called by a number; his clothes are confiscated and replaced with a uniform; his hair is cut and shaved – through ‘a series of abasements, degradations, humiliations, and profanations of self’” (Goffman 14 qtd. in Smith 248).

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even contemplated, and survival becomes, as it were, almost accidental. In this sense, the postcolonial jail is evocative of Agamben's discussion of the 'camp' as the space that is opened when suspension of the rule of law is no longer exceptional. In other words, these detention islands are not simply reformatory sites whose functioning is regulated by prison law, which "only constitutes a particular sphere of penal law and is not outside the normal order" (*Homo Sacer* 20) – albeit, as Caleb Smith *contra* Agamben warns us, this does not necessarily mean that their workings are entirely incomparable. Still, it is undeniable that the Nigerian prison is here presented as an *extra-juridical* locus. Beyond its walls and barbed wire, the traditional power of the sovereign over the existence of its subjects is carried to such extremes that the detainees are reduced to a form of 'bare life': "the object of a pure de facto rule of a detention that is indefinite not only in the temporal sense but in its very nature as well, since it is entirely removed from the law and from judicial oversight"⁸ (*State of Exception* 3-4). These prisoners can be killed without committing homicide. They can be disposed of without leaving traces, as "the fact that atrocities may or may not be committed does not depend on the law but rather on the civility and ethical sense of the police that act temporarily as sovereign" (*Means Without End* 42). No 'resurrection' is in sight for their victims.

These Nigerian cells, therefore, are not panoptical sites of surveillance "in-duc[ing] in the inmate a state of conscious and permanent visibility that assures the automatic functioning of power" (Foucault, *Discipline and Punish* 201). On the contrary, they are 'black holes' which threaten to swallow the poor – those who cannot bribe – and the troublesome – those who speak up. They are spaces where

⁸ In this passage, Agamben is referring to the Guantánamo detainees.

all the regime's *personae non gratae* can simply be made to disappear. The moral, and political, relevance of the texts discussed here then becomes evident if we consider that, by giving visibility to hidden, spectral lives that are suspended between life and death, they reassert their essential humanity, thus reassessing the paradigms of what Judith Butler has called the "grievability" of human life (*Precarious Lives* 2004), while importantly exposing the mechanisms of biopolitical power. As will be noticed, moreover, the postcolonial prison as depicted by the authors under consideration functions as a metonymy for Nigeria, and particularly for the country during military rule, which is thereby presented as a site of permanent exception.

In this context, it is however essential to remember that postcolonial African prison writing, be it autobiographical or fictional, manages to complicate the very possibility of thinking the oppositional differentiation between postcolonial 'normality' and postcolonial 'exception' by suggesting that the postcolony, founded on the colonial regime of exception, is inherently, inevitably, steeped in the abnormal. In this regard, the continuity between colonial and postcolonial rule has often been emphasised on the part of postcolonial writers by evidencing how "African leaders seem to have copied only the brutality, corrupt practices and selfish individualism from their colonial masters" (Mapanje xiv). This paradox, Chris Dunton has remarked, is nowhere more clearly revealed than in a passage from Ngũgĩ Wa Thiong'o's prison memoir, *Detained: A Writer's Prison Diary*, where the writer recalls having scornfully posed "the following challenge to a prison warden: "The British jailed an innocent Kenyatta. Thus Kenyatta learnt to jail innocent Kenyans"" (Ngũgĩ 4 qtd. in Dunton, "Chris Anyanwu" 113).

The 'derivative' relationship between colonialism/imperialism and the vio-

lence of the postcolonial military regime is made evident also in the texts by Abani and Habila studied here. The years of the dictatorships of Generals Ibrahim Babangida and Sani Abacha, which constitute the historical background for the two works, emerge therefore as exemplary manifestations of the prerogatives that men of power in the (post)colony have, not only to suspend, but also to interpret and apply differentially (that is, *unjustly*), the law – a characteristic that is presented as painfully embedded in the postcolonial state via colonial rule.

3.2. Bodies in chains: the grotesque, the angelical, the spectral

Notwithstanding their common thematic preoccupations, the texts examined here are very different from one another, particularly in terms of style and genre. *Kalakuta Republic* (2000) is a poetry collection authored by Chris Abani, and is inspired by the writer's experiences as a political prisoner in Nigeria during the rule of dictator Ibrahim Babangida. Its title, *Kalakuta Republic*, refers to the Lagos residence of Afro-beat star and activist Fela Anikulapo-Kuti, a fortified commune which was given its name in 1975, when the iconoclastic musician declared it a Republic, independent from the Nigerian state (Veal 2000: 142-3). The denomination was intended as an ironical reference to Alagbon Close, one of the many police cells Fela inhabited in Lagos, which was called "the Kalakuta Republic" by the convicts, possibly drawing from a Swahili word that means 'rascal' (Collins 72).⁹ Abani recounts that he met the artist, a "regular [n]icknamed 'Customer'" (27), during his first stay in prison, and the title of his collection, besides paying a literary trib-

⁹ As Fela reasoned, "if rascality is going to get us what we want we will use that name, because we are dealing with corrupt people so we have to deal rascally with them" (qtd. in Collins 72).⁹

ute to the late Fela, affirms the urgency to deride the vanity of the sovereign by proclaiming autonomy from it, while at the same time more implicitly evoking the enclosed self-sufficiency of the prison cell. As the author writes in “Rasa,” a poem dedicated to Fela Kuti himself, ‘Kalakuta Republic’ is a name that has the power

to honour the death
of conscience,

to ridicule them, those despots
swollen by their putrescence. (27)

The poems collected here constitute an intimate reflection on the ultimate essence of the human in inhuman conditions, and are tinged with touches of dark irony that bitterly disclose the baseness of those who participate in this absolutist sovereign project of human annihilation.

Helon Habila’s novel *Waiting for an Angel* is based on vaguely autobiographical details as well, as its central character, Lomba, is a columnist and aspiring poet who writes for a Lagos newspaper – like Habila, who in the late 1990s moved to Lagos to work as a journalist (Habila “Everything Follows”).¹⁰ However, differently from Habila, who emigrated to the UK and now resides in the US, the fictional Lomba never leaves Nigeria, and is jailed on a false charge of organising an anti-government demonstration. *Waiting* does not revolve around the sole figure of the Nigerian intellectual, though: originally appearing “in somewhat different form” (Publisher’s Note) as a short-story collection in 2000, the novel still retains

¹⁰ Commenting on the autobiographical aspects of *Waiting*, Habila stated in a 2003 interview: “I created this character who is a journalist like me, and an aspiring writer like me – young like me [...]. The novel is set during the Abacha years, but I wasn’t a journalist during the Abacha years. So all those things he went through I imagined. [...] But that is the way I would have behaved if I had been there, I think” (Habila “Everything Follows”).

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a loose narrative structure, and is in fact a choral narration recounting the lives of some of Lomba's friends and acquaintances – people who live in the poor, chaotic, vibrant city of Lagos. The only section set in a prison cell is the first, which won the Caine Prize for African Writing in 2001 with the title "Love Poems" and is told partly in diary form by Lomba himself, partly through the third-person narrative voice of a biographer whose identity remains unknown.

Finally, the short story "Cell One," by Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie, first published in *The New Yorker* in 2007, draws onto the writer's teenage memories and is set in the university campus of Nsukka, where Adichie used to live in the 1990s (Adichie "An Interview"). "Cell One" imagines the story of a privileged family forced to come to terms with the iron fist of contemptuous state officials: Nnamabia, a spoiled, charming boy, has been mistakenly arrested and is detained for being part of a "cult," a criminal confraternity.¹¹ The short story was included in the 2009 collection *The Thing Around Your Neck*, where it occupies a prominent opening position. The author explained in a recent interview that the process of completing this narrative was particularly difficult, as it reached its definitive form only four years after its first draft (Adichie "An Interview"). It is therefore no surprise that Adichie's approach to the topic of detention is hesitant, more 'reluctant than her colleagues'. The writer's choice to rely on a first-person narrator who is not the prisoner himself, but the prisoner's younger sister, is telling in this respect, as it allows her a certain degree of narrative distancing from her subject matter. The relative brevity and immediacy that these works share could thus be interpret-

¹¹ For a recent account tracing the development of the phenomenon of cultism in Nigerian universities from the peaceful confraternities of the early 1950s to the increasingly violent cults founded from the 1970s onwards, see Ellis, "Campus 'Cults' in Nigeria."

ed as a formal correlative to the sense of confinement that is conveyed by the content. Put differently, these short stories and narrative poems, like the prisons they encapsulate, are *cellular*, fragmented, limited, but dense, intense, *full* – full of bodies, lives, and stories – stories of survival, and stories of death.

One of the aspects that makes the reading of these texts, and of prison literature more generally, especially challenging is indeed the pervasiveness of deadly violence, and, even more, the description of the debasing consequences of such violence on the bodies and souls of both prisoners and state officials. The imprisoned self is often reduced here to its bodily dimension, to a grotesque, entangled mass of body parts, of offshoots and cavities that swallow and eject. In Bakhtinian fashion, these depictions are predicated on a logic that “ignores the closed, smooth, and impenetrable surface of the body and retains only its excrescences (sprouts, buds) and orifices, only that which leads beyond the body’s limited space or into the body’s depths” (*Rabelais* 318). Lomba, for example, illustrates the conditions of debasement to which he is forced as follows:

What is left here is nothing but a mass of protruding bones, unkempt hair and tearful eyes; an asshole for shitting and farting, and a penis that in the mornings grows turgid in vain. This leftover self, this sea-bleached wreck panting on the iron-filing sand of the shores of this penal island is nothing but hot air, and hair, and ears cocked, hopeful. (*Habila* 23-24)

The notion of the “penal island” alluded to in this passage evokes the finiteness and alleged self-sufficiency of the ‘Prison Republic’ mentioned above, highlighting the isolation of a space which is so disconnected from the rest of the world that it perversely functions on its own, preventing those who inhabit it from establishing communication with the outside.

Chimamanda Adichie’s elegant, polished prose indulges less than *Habila*’s on

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grotesque imagery. Still, her narrator too provides a description of the progressive brutalisation of her handsome brother, the self-confident Nnamabia. During the first visits his family pays after his incarceration, the boy does not seem perturbed by what is happening to him in jail, as he awaits his parents' questions with his usual self-confidence, like "an *entertainer* about to perform" (Adichie 10, emphasis added). The decay of his body, however, starts slowly to become perceptible, at first affecting only his skin. Some days after his arrest, the narrator's attention is captured by the sight of her brother's forehead, which is covered in bumps "tipped with pus the colour of cream" (13). She is annoyed to realise that Nnamabia's tone is, however, still irritatingly "histrionic" (13), even while describing the debasing conditions in which he is forced to live: "I had to shit in a waterproof bag today, standing up. The toilet was too full. They flush it only on Saturdays" (13). Nnamabia's attitude will appear to become more subdued only with the arrival in his cell of an old man who has been arrested in place of his son. The boy sorrowfully recounts how one day

the policemen had splashed detergent water on the floor and walls of the cell [...] and [...] the old man, who could not afford water, who had not bathed in a week, had hurried into the cell and yanked his shirt off and rubbed his frail back against the detergent-wet floor. The policemen started to laugh when they saw him do this and they asked him to take all his clothes off and parade in the corridor outside the cell, and as they did they laughed louder and asked whether his son the thief knew that papa's penis was so shriveled. (16)

It is the *spectacle* of the senseless ridiculing of a helpless, innocent human being who is reduced to a grotesque shadow of his previous self that will, in the end, change the demeanour of this *theatrical*, "wordly" boy (16), redeeming him in his sister's eyes.¹² Needless to say, Adichie's descriptions are less explicitly grotesque

¹² The language so far employed by Nnamabia for lying, for what his sister calls his "the-

than Habila's. However, the excerpt reported above shows that she too resorts to the visualisation of graphic details to comment on the violence that is perpetrated at the hands of omnipotent prison officials. She thereby emphasises the gratuity of a humiliating process that exemplifies Achille Mbembe's notion of colonial and postcolonial *commandement* as a "circular" phenomenon (*Postcolony* 32): a demonstration of power for power's sake.

It is worth noticing that Adichie's choices in terms of characterisation of her fictional convict sets her short story apart from the other two texts analysed in this chapter. Nnamabia is not a political activist, he has not been imprisoned for his writing. Quite the contrary, he is one of those young boys who, like the narrator – and like the writer herself – grew up in an affluent, cosmopolitan environment, "watching Sesame Street, reading Enid Blyton, eating cornflakes for breakfast, attending the university staff primary school in smartly polished brown sandals" (5). Paradoxically, however, Nnamabia and his friends contribute to heightening the climate of fear and insecurity that can be so clearly perceived on a wider national scale: they break into their neighbours' houses, they become part of the above-mentioned violent confraternities. However, even as Nnamabia's detention (which, it is revealed, is unwarranted) was not determined by immediately political reasons, the story of his imprisonment soon assumes a clear political connotation. Indeed, even this spoiled boy cannot keep silent in the face of the unreasonable indecency of the prison system he comes to know. But speaking one's mind is an

atrical" performances (4), was English: when, for example, he staged a burglary at his parents' house after stealing and selling his mother's jewellery, he spoke "with dramatic, wounded eyes [...], using unnecessary words like 'terrible pain' and 'violate,' as he always did when he was defending himself" (4). But when he recounts the episode of the old man that has been just reported, the narrator notices that her brother's "*Igbo* was even-toned, his voice neither raising nor falling" (15, emphasis added).

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extremely dangerous action in times of tyranny, and Nnamabia is first taken to the dreaded “Cell One” of the title, and then transferred to “another site,” an abandoned-looking compound which the narrator describes as a place “like where they kept people who would later disappear” (21). When he is finally released, his innocence confirmed, the boy is still apparently “unchanged” (19). A closer look at him, however, reveals that his arms are covered in “soft-looking welts,” while “dried blood [is] caked around his nose” (20). His explanation of the facts is surprisingly succinct, almost understated:

“Yesterday the policemen asked the old man if he wanted a free bucket of water. He said yes. So they told him to take his clothes off and parade in the corridor. [...] I shouted at the policeman. I said the old man was innocent and ill and if they kept him here they would never find his son because he did not even know where his son was. They said I should shut up immediately or they would take me to Cell One. I didn’t care. I didn’t shut up. So they pulled me out and beat me and took me to Cell One.” (20)

The verbal economy of this passage, in clear contrast with the boy’s previous verbosity, is the final proof of his change of attitude: there is no more room for ‘acting,’ it seems, when one becomes aware that one’s right to life is firmly in the hands of a despotic sovereign.

If Adichie refrains from employing bluntly grotesque imagery in “Cell One,” Chris Abani’s use of the grotesque in *Kalakuta Republic* is instead extremely pervasive. Its variety is best illustrated by resorting to a selected set of examples drawn from some representative poems in the collection. One of the most striking ways in which Abani handles grotesque realism contributes to the vivid portrayal of what may be termed the ‘intimacy’ of torture, and ultimately of the carceral, showing the close, inevitable contiguity and interconnectedness of the bodies of victim and perpetrator. As for example at the beginning of “Casual Banter”:

Sergeant Adamu Barkin Zawa
rammed the barrel

of a rifle – Lee Enfield – up my rectum
maintaining casual banter;

‘How is your mother? How is she
finding our lovely country?’ interrupted only
by the blood spraying from my backside,

baptising his heavily scarified face,
empty ancient mask. (53)

At other times, grotesque realism identifies instead a survival strategy. This is the case of “Paper Doll,” the poem about the imprisoned transvestite who sells himself for ten cigarettes because, as he says, “idle hands is the devil’s workshop” (47):

Christiana we call him,
the *caricature* who wears
prison shorts torn into a skirt and stains
himself with plant dye. (47, emphasis added)

The nickname “Christiana,” while playing humorously on the transvestite’s moral self-justification, has of course salvific echoes. Grotesque imagery is a signifier of survival also in the darkly ironical “Killing Time,” where the uncontrolled bodily reaction that follows a random execution means survival: “I know I am alive / because / terror drips down my legs” (40).

The reduction of the human being in the hold of biopolitical power to what Bakhtin would call the “bodily lower stratum” is far from being carnivalesque, triumphant “gay matter” here. True, Abani, employing yet another grotesque image, insists that “[h]umour here swells, filling our nostrils. / Percolating senses” – but he then adds that “[l]aughter is the same as crying, / only there are no tears” (84).

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Indeed, while dark irony and sarcasm feature prominently in these texts, joyous, relieving laughter is very rare – if present at all. And yet, grotesque realism still retains some of the ambivalent regenerative power that Bakhtin detects in the medieval and Renaissance grotesque: the most explicit example can be found in Abani's "The Box," a poem that recounts a form of torture consisting in locking the victim in a coffin-like "wooden frame with skirt of sheet metal" (42). The poem ends as someone,

[...] too impatient
to reach the hole in the floor
stands arms akimbo
splattering my face with urine.

'Thank you, thank you ... ' I mumble
as the hot ammonia stings me

into life. (44)

The grotesque appearance of these bodies in chains indicates that they, like Bakhtin's bodies, are open, non-finite, and thus continuously becoming. They are vulnerable of course, but also resistant; invaded, violated, but also expanding, protruding, moving forward; suffering "tiny daily deaths" (Abani 111), but being constantly reborn from their own ashes. Put differently, it is as if they were seeking, also through grotesque 'expansion,' to move beyond the boundaries of the metaphorical penal 'island,' of the insular camp to which they are confined. It is in this context that it becomes clear that amputations are metaphors for the painful impossibility, or incapacity, to do this. Abani's prison mates are indeed often maimed, at times at the hands of guards and torturers, at others, even more disturbingly, by themselves – the description of self-inflicted mutilations being evidence of the very anti-heroic, and very human, inability of the convict to cope

with his circumstances. This is the case of “Passion Fruit,” a poem about homosexual desire which Abani concludes by writing that

[s]ome, unable to stomach
the truth that all love is light
amputate their own penes [*sic*], laughing insanely
as they bleed to a stump. (33)

Or, similarly, of the man portrayed in “Eden,” who, in an alliterative gesture, “drops a heavy / *concrete block crunching toes to mush*” (45, emphases added), in order to eschew a graveyard shift.

When the human being is continuously becoming, in a condition of living death in which opposites become unstable and tend to overlap, death does not necessarily signify the defeat of the self. This is what Abani suggests in “Job”:

Here death is courted. Welcomed.
Not in defeat. Or cowardice,
but as a statement
of our

Discontent
with this state of barbarism we
live
Under

the shade of a tree
executions are mercifully shielded
from the harsh sun. (38-39)

Death, therefore, may turn out to be an ambiguous means of resistance, a means through which the prisoner reasserts ownership of a life that the sovereign has appropriated and deprived of meaning. It is therefore no coincidence that the “Angel” of Habila’s title, an angel that is awaited almost impatiently, is “the Angel of Death” (37). Its anticipated appearance is narrated in the second chapter, which

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begins with a premonitory “[t]oday is the last day of my life” (37). Here, the angel assumes the form of a soldier, an epitome of sovereign power in the postcolony under military rule, and Habila’s unnamed character, even after realising that the man is a harbinger of inevitable death, will purposely provoke his enraged reaction by refusing to obey his peremptory order to leave the semi-empty bar, as there is a curfew on:

‘It is not six yet,’ I reply, glancing at the clock. The soldiers look surprised at my bold response; they whisper together, then the short one stands up and swaggers to my table. [...]

But when I turn it is not a soldier standing there. It is an angel. It opens its enormous wings and closes them again in a clapping motion. The air from the wings lifts me up and carries me out through the door. I land with a splash on the wet street. I am bleeding from the chest. I feel life draining out of me – through the haze I make out a huge bird shape flying out of the bar and ascending with the sound of a thousand wings. Then it is gone. (43-44)

In contexts such as this, readiness to face death testifies the (non-)citizens’ indisposition to be subdued, to renounce rights that should be universally recognised but that are *de facto* withdrawn from them, as the suspension of constitutional protection inevitably excludes them from the franchise of citizenship.

Death, Habila says, “hangs around [...] like a mist” (37) in the streets of the Lagos of the 1990s, where killings follow one another, looming like so many angels. These works show that chaos and unrestrained violence are not only characteristic of the enclosed space of the penitentiary, but permeate the entire state, threatening even the most protected sites. Adichie’s narrator, from her upper-middle-class perspective, ironically highlights how even “on our serene Nsukka campus,” the “season of thefts” (5) is followed by the “season of cults” (7). The cyclical regularity of seasonal time is thus substituted by periodical peaks of violence, in an escalation leading to the brutal murders of cult members, after fights

that soon turn into blood feuds, into “cult wars” proper (7). As the young narrator comments, “[i]t was so abnormal that it quickly became normal” (8).¹³ Thus, like the prison, the Nigerian postcolony is characterised by the normalisation of the abnormal, the perpetuation of the exception.¹⁴ The metonymical relationship between the Nigerian cell and the Nigerian postcolony is suggested in Adichie’s short story when a still unshaken Nnamabia begins the account of his first days in prison with words evidently meant for effect:

“If we ran Nigeria like this cell,” he said, “we would have no problems in this country. Things are so organized. Our cell has a chief called General Abacha and he has a second in command.¹⁵ Once you come in, you have to give them some money. If you don’t, you’re in trouble.” [...] He bit into a fried drumstick and switched to English. “General Abacha was impressed with how I hid my money. I’ve made myself amenable to him. I praise him all the time.” (10-11)

The irony, of course, lies in the fact that Nigeria *is* indeed run like the cell: a militarised, corrupt, highly hierarchical state where the citizens’ survival is strictly dependant on two factors: having the money to bribe and being willing to incessantly praise men whose power must never be questioned.¹⁶

¹³ The Nigerian ‘war-scape’ Adichie delineates in this short story is portrayed as meaningless for a number of reasons: first of all, it is partly caused by privileged boys who have no apparent reason to fight and kill; moreover, the government’s response to the ‘cult emergency’ proves equally absurd, with random arrests and the proclamation of a curfew establishing that “everyone had to be indoors after 9 p.m.” – even while the shooting that occasioned it had happened “in sparkling daylight” (9).

¹⁴ For an analysis of the diffusion of the carceral in *Waiting* as engendering a state of exception, see Erritouni (149).

¹⁵ In Nigerian prisons, the ‘chief’ of a cell – the inmate who has been there the longest – often assumes the fictitious name of an important political personality, generally a member of the army.

¹⁶ In this respect, it is telling that the narrator notices how, after her brother’s arrest, her parents’ behaviour towards the police at checkpoints changed, if only subtly: “My father no longer delivered a monologue, as soon as we were waved on, on how illiterate and corrupt the police were. [...] My mother did not mumble, they are symptoms of a larger malaise. Instead my parents remained silent. It was as if refusing to criticize the police as usual would somehow make Nnamabia’s freedom imminent” (13).

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Habila, for his part, makes the parallel between the prison and the state even more explicit in his Afterword: in the Nigeria of dictator Abacha, he writes, “[e]very day came with new limitations, new prisons” (224). It is hence worth remembering that the original title of Habila’s short story collection was *Prison Stories* – a plural that extended the idea of carceral constraint to the chapters that, unlike the first, are not set in an actual cell. Morgan Street in Lagos, which is the setting for many other chapters, is itself a site of reduced liberties. Tellingly rechristened “Poverty Street,” it is a “paradigmatic locale” (113) where people do not simply *live*, but rather already and always *sur-vive*, in the form of a bare life that is “the surplus body (indeed, the surplus life/ *la sur-vie*) of Man” (Margaroni 30). The greatness of the ordinary men and women *sur-viving* in Poverty Street, then, lies in their small acts of mutual care, in their capacity to love, dream, and crack up at bleak jokes in a state of exception where they are continuously “exposed to death” (Agamben, *Homo* 88) – a death that may be the product of sovereign decision, as is the case for political prisoners, or may more banally derive from the legal abandonment of subjects who are forever negated constitutional protection.

In a recent essay on Habila’s novel, critic Ali Erritouni draws on Herbert Marcuse’s definition of death as “a token of unfreedom, of defeat” (236 qtd. in Erritouni 154) to contend that in *Waiting for an Angel* “safeguarding one’s life in the face of brutality is [...] a triumphal act of resistance” (154). While this is generally true, I would argue that Erritouni’s study constitutes a partial reading of death as intended by Habila. Indeed, as has been shown above, on some (admittedly few) occasions death is presented as inescapable, and is faced with courage, waited for, even actively sought. It seems to me that by ignoring the ambivalence Habila attributes to the concept of death, Erritouni underestimates the pervasive presence

of death *in* life – a pervasiveness that is so evident that the opposites become the same, the dividing line between the two being blurred by the violence that is the originary prerogative of sovereign power. The Lagosians of Habila’s work, in sum, do not simply shun death. More subtly, they are capable of living *in* death, of “delegat[ing] death while simultaneously and already experiencing death at the very heart of [their] own existence[s]” (Mbembe, *Postcolony* 201). How then, Achille Mbembe asks,

does one live when the time to die has passed, when it is even forbidden to be alive, in what might be called an experience of living the “wrong way round”? How, in such circumstances, does one experience not only the everyday but the *hic et nunc* when, every day, one has both to expect anything and to live in expectation of something that has not yet been realized, is delaying being realized, is constantly unaccomplished and elusive? [...] In other words, how is it possible to live while going to death, while being somehow already dead? (201)

The answer to this apparent impossibility, Mbembe argues, lies in being “*several in a single body*,” not only proceeding to a “constant enlargement of the limits of one’s identity,” but also “experienc[ing] the possibility or actuality of several types of being” (202). This image captures Lomba’s unknown biographer’s supposition that the journalist, while in prison, must have learnt to survive “in tiny atoms, piecemeal, a day at a time” (32). These phrases, for their part, asserting the fragmented multiplicity of the surviving identity, reflect Bakhtin’s theorisations of the real grotesque, which

seeks to grasp in its imagery the very act of becoming and growth, the eternal incomplete unfinished nature of being. Its images present simultaneously the two poles of becoming: that which is receding and dying, and that which is being born; they show two bodies in one, the budding and the division of the living cell. At the summit of grotesque and folklore realism, as in the death of one-cell organisms, no dead body remains. (That is, when the single cell divides into two other organisms, it dies in a sense but also reproduces; there is no departure of life into death.) (*Rabelais* 52)

That is why human mortality, as Abani puts it in his Author's Note, is "truly ephemeral" (9) – in a formulation that leaves some hope as to the possibility to resist the reduction to the most extreme forms of bare life even in the biopolitical sites that most clearly approximate the Agambenian camp.

*

The combined presence of life and death sheds light also on the importance assumed in these works, and in particular in Abani and Habila's texts, by the angelical and spectral dimensions. The contrastive connotations that are attributed to angels and ghosts in *Kalakuta Republic* and in *Waiting* confirm the argument carried out so far that life and death, freedom and chains, are inherently polysemous phenomena for these authors. In a 2005 essay on Chris Abani's novel *GraceLand* and Helon Habila's *Waiting*, critic Chielozona Eze has somehow hastily conjectured that "[a]lthough not explicitly stated, there is sufficient indication that Liberty is the angel referred to in the novel title" (102). This interpretation is based on a reading of the passages concluding the section recounting Lomba's detention, where the narrator explains that there is no available record of the journalist after he was transferred from his cell first to Ibadan, and then to another penitentiary in a small desert town. "But *somehow*," the narrating voice continues, "it is hard to *imagine* that Lomba died." It is instead "*probable*" that he was amongst those political prisoners who were released with the transition to democracy (32, emphases added).

This might have been how it happened: Lomba was seated in a dingy cell in Gashuwa, his eyes closed, his mind soaring above the glass-studded prison walls, mingling with the stars and the rain in elemental union of freedom; then the door clanked open, and when he opened his eyes Liberty was standing over him, smiling kindly, extending an arm.

And Liberty said softly, 'Come. It is time to go.'

And they left, arm in arm. (32-33, emphasis added)¹⁷

Contrary to Eze's reading, I would contend that the passage above is utterly ambiguous, as Lomba's survival and liberation are presented as hopeful, but dubious, fantasies, conveyed as they are through a lexicon that clearly denotes uncertainty. Moreover, the nature of the metaphorical "Liberty" that Lomba finally meets is left purposely unspecified – it might even be interpreted as corresponding with his death, the end of all suffering. There are numerous angelical presences in Habila's text, and the Angel of Liberty as defined by Eze may, of course, very well be one of them. However, I would suggest that an examination of Habila's narratological choices, which are extremely nuanced in a novel that resorts to a number of narrative modes in each of its chapters, would somehow complicate Eze's analysis. In this regard, it seems to me that it is telling that while the encounter with the Angel of Death is told in the first person, the Angel of Liberty that frees Lomba of unjust pain is beautifully imagined by the journalist's biographer. It is also for this reason that Eze's reading of *Waiting for an Angel* as an "unapologetically hopeful narrative" (101) is, I believe, disputable.

This is substantiated by an account of the many expectant fantasies of happiness that Habila recounts in the book. The journalist Lomba, for example, has "waited" for the beautiful Alice for a long time (99). The woman, however, marries a man she certainly does not love, but who can and does provide for her mother, paying the expensive fees of the first-class hospital where she is dying of cancer. But Lomba is not the only character who is waiting. "Brother" is waiting

¹⁷ Tellingly, Eze does not report the sentence with which I begin this quotation, which is, to my mind, essential to grasp the ambivalence of the episode recounted.

as well. A popular personality in the neighbourhood thanks to the heroic story which, in five different versions, recounts how he lost his leg to a soldier's bullet during the post-June 12 riots,¹⁸ he now sits in his shed, wooden leg and all, looking out "at the fighting women and the refuse heaps and the passing mongrel dogs" (126) and dreaming to become rich and throw a farewell party for Poverty. He imagines "inviting the Governor, hiring the seats, buying the food and drink, and, of course, the trip to Jamaica to buy A-grade marijuana" (128). One day, however, upset by the graffiti of Nancy, who has written the phrase "Poor Man's Paradise" on the wall of Madame Godwill's restaurant, he confronts her. By way of response, she upturns a dish of "mucilaginous" (134) soup on his head. Kela, the narrator of this passage, reacts to the grotesque, heart-breaking image of Brother with embarrassment,

haunted by the infinitely sad expression on his face just before he left the restaurant: the theme of sadness emblazoned on every inch of his skin, every wrinkle, every hair on his face – it was so impossibly perfect it looked inhuman, like a tragic mask. (135)

Nancy, the waitress, is as well expecting someone: the man she calls "my man," the father of her three-year-old son, who promised to come back but has disappeared since the day she became pregnant. When she flees from Lagos, Kela tries to visualise different pictures of her, imagining her in Port Harcourt

with the tattered letter from Her Man, with the streets directions to his house. I pictured her seated by the roadside on a bench, with Mark in her lap, tired of searching and looking into every face that passed, hoping to see Her Man. No. This picture was too dismal. I didn't want Nancy ever to be in such a situation. So one

¹⁸ The *de facto* annulment of the June 12, 1993 presidential elections, which should have led to the restoration of civilian rule in the country, brought about great unrest, particularly in the south western part of Nigeria, birthplace of the Yoruba businessman M.K.O. Abiola, who is generally regarded as the presumed winner.

of the passers-bys would pause after passing, he'd look back. 'Nancy, is it you?' It was Her Man. She hadn't recognized him because he had grown a beard, and he was taller, and . . . The dogs howled me to sleep. (156)

The episodes just sketched confirm that there is undoubted hope in *Waiting for an Angel* and they emphasise that the characters' wishful reveries, at times met with gentle irony, are never derided by the author. Still, it must be registered that these Lagosians' fantasies keep being grounded by reality, while their occasional decisions to react to tyranny lead even more sadly to their imprisonment, death, unhappiness – as shown by the disastrous outcome of the anti-government peaceful march that Joshua, the teacher, is asked to lead. Nigeria is a country at war with itself, where normality is but a dream: as Joshua muses,

'In a normal country there wouldn't be a need for revolutions; there wouldn't be a Poverty Street; well, not like ours, anyway. People like me would be able to teach in peace, live in peace and. . .' he turned to [Kela] and smiled, 'and maybe fall in love and marry and have kids and die old.' (159-160)

Similarly to Habila's, Abani's work, too, is punctuated by appearances of angels and ghosts, ambivalent symbols signifying the continuity between life, death, and their respective worlds. Violent state officials are presented as seraphs, the highest-ranking celestial beings within the Christian angelic hierarchy, who encircle the throne of God praising His majesty. "Killing Time," for example, a poem that resonates with biblical imagery and lexicon, narrates how winged guards, suspicious Good Shepherds, "herd" the sacrificial lambs of an imminent execution, the redness of violence staining feathers that should remain immaculate:

Killing time. 12. Anointed.
Blindfolded. Herded by seraphs
wings tinged rusty by innocent blood. (40)

3. *Black Holes and the Empty Throne of the Sovereign*

The darkly satirical imagery of this poem, coupled with the disturbing incongruence between its elevated style and harrowing content, calls to mind Agamben's admonition about the questionable ethical appropriateness of "covering with sacrificial veils" the indiscriminate killings of men and women who, reduced to "bare life," are in fact exterminated as 'lice,' as Hitler notoriously said of the Jews (*Homo* 114). It is thus telling that these Angels of Death have in fact lost their original, etymological role as heralds of a superior entity in Habila's and Abani's texts. On the contrary, they are presented as essentially autonomous, as their actions are not motivated by any ideological, let alone moral, agenda, but are entirely self-referential. In keeping with the angelical metaphor, it could be maintained that the throne around which they sing is empty, devoid of meaning – it might certainly be occupied by the figure of the dictator, but he himself is a simulacrum that has no message to deliver, apart perhaps from his will to maintain his place at the centre of this postcolonial universe. But the prison is also inhabited by other angels, "the few, the chosen" (*Kalakuta* 73) who have lost their lives because of sovereign violence and who "stalk" the prisoners in sleep. The poet's sleep, for its part, is one that often is at one and mingles with reality, as suggested by the chiasmic construction in "Mantra": "I dream myself awake, // dreaming myself asleep" (88).

The ghostly dimension, unsurprisingly, is also very much present in the collection, assuming great relevance in the last poems, where the poet is released from jail and flies to London in search of salvation and recovery. In "Jacob's Ladder," which closes the third section of the collection, signalling the end of his last long-term incarceration, the poetical voice describes his first feelings of uncertain liberty:

[...] you are afraid
to proceed more than a few

steps from the gate. Convinced you
will be shot in the back,

or that people will recoil from you
knowing *you carry the stench*

of death on your now paler skin. (97, emphasis added)

Abani suggests that spectral invisibility is not only limited to the enclosed space of the prison, but becomes instead the potentially all-encompassing condition of the human in a liquid modernity of mutual indifference. Hence, the third point of the list-like poem titled “Things to Do in London When You Are Dead” reads: “Stand in the centre of Oxford Circus and scream. No matter. No one will see you” (106).

It is thus evident that the question of the visibility of the ghost as figuratively representing of the human deprived of her rights emerges as a central preoccupation in the works analysed so far. These texts contribute to the difficult task of ‘cracking’ the prison wall, so as to allow the establishment of communication between worlds that are kept separate, while reasserting the humanity of the ghostly humans, the *homines sacri*, who live at the mercy of sovereign decision. Moreover, they indicate that there are other small acts that are able to compel ‘outsiders’ to recognise what happens beyond the wall. Abani, for example, mentions the power of Fela’s saxophone, whose notes “wove / themselves into a terror that carried // on the wind, disturbing evil’s sleep” (27). Habila, for his part, emphasises the force of the love poems that Lomba is asked to write for the superintendent’s fiancée – poems where the journalist encodes an S.O.S. message that the woman promptly

deciphers. (It is thus deeply ironical that his jailer considers them “harmless” [16].) Adichie sees change, and redemption, in the courage of her narrator’s spoiled, “charming brother” (21) who finally rebels against the arrogance of the sovereign at the risk of his own life. Art, love, and acts of resistance such as this are means through which reciprocal sight, and recognition, can occur between those who live on the two sides of the wall. And the interstitial spaces thus created, by showing what happens within the penal island – or, at least, by “imagin[ing]” it, as the more reticent Adichie does (21) – operate an epistemological reversal that relocates knowledge in the (global) public sphere, thus spurring ethical reflection on the value of the human and on the abuses of power in contemporary sites of chaos.

3.3. Voices of jailers and prisoners

In one of the most beautiful passages of his prison memoir, Wole Soyinka has reflected on how the humiliating sight of his chained ankles constituted a painful epiphanic moment – the contradiction inherent in the idea of a chained human being allowing him to formulate a ‘negative’ definition of humanity:

I defined myself as a being for whom the chains are *not*; as, finally, a human being. In so far as one may say that the human essence does at times possess a tangible quality, I may say that I tasted and felt this essence within the contradiction of that moment. It was nothing new; vicariously, by ideology or racial memory, this contradiction may be felt, is felt, with vivid sufficiency to make passionate revolutionaries of the most cosseted life. Abstract, intellectual fetters are rejected just as passionately. But in the experience of the physical thing the individual does not stand alone, most especially a black man. I had felt it, it seemed to me, hundreds of years before. (40)

This understanding of freedom as an essential characteristic of the human is here presented as grounded in what Soyinka calls “racial memory”: a traumatic memory

that speaks of slavery and imperialism and that, centuries after, resurfaces – in fact, keeps resurfacing – at the view of chains that deny the convict’s humanity. If such a memory is inevitably collective, and racial, rather than individual, Soyinka suggests, a similarly collective scope has the proud rejection of those “fetters” – concrete, but also abstract – that (post)colonial regimes of violence like the one that demanded his incarceration impose on their silenced subjects.

The actual and metaphorical enchainment to which the writer is subjected in times of tyranny, and the collective dimension that the resistant response to such cruelty must assume, are tropes of fundamental importance in much prison literature. In particular, Barbara Harlow has noticed, these aspects acquire almost archetypal relevance in the prison memoirs of political detainees, of those detainees who “did not simply ‘discover’ their writing selves while in prison, but were often incarcerated because they wrote” (*Resistance Literature* 120). These same themes are effectively fictionalised in Habila’s *Waiting*. In particular through the narration of the life of journalist and aspiring writer Lomba, the novel is indeed interspersed with images signifying the brutality which frustrates, debases, or violently impedes the efforts of the intellectual: scattered papers covered in muddy footprints of soldiers’ boots (71); the figure of the novelist in perpetual struggle with the writing of a narrative that is destined to remain incomplete (106);¹⁹ the burning of *The Dial*’s headquarters, the newspaper where Lomba works (199-200); or the equally symbolic death of Dele Giwa, the above-mentioned editor of *Newsweek* who was

¹⁹ In a 2012 essay, critic Sule Egya has pointedly observed that the metafictional trope of the unwritten novel signifies in texts such as Habila’s *Waiting* and Maik Nwosu’s *Invisible Chapters* “the spatiotemporal absence of textuality” in the interregnum of the military dictators of the 1980s and 1990s, signalling “the inability of the novelist, as representative of artists and critics more generally, to engage in his craft in a turbulent season of survival” (“Idiom of Text” 110).

killed during the Babangida years (196-197).

As pointed out in passing at the end of the previous section, writing, the ultimate reason for Lomba's incarceration, turns into a means of resistance while he is in prison. There, the journalist re-appropriates the expressive power he had been deprived of, and punished for, when the superintendent gives him paper and pencil commanding him to write love poems he will 'borrow' in order to charm his poetry-loving Janice. The woman, however, is not easily fooled: she notices the repetition of the words "save my soul, a prisoner" in some of the pieces his fiancé has given her and asks to meet the real author. Lomba, notwithstanding the exceptional circumstances under which he is forced to write, manages to turn a constrained act into a creative cry for help, manifesting the artist's superiority in the manipulation of the wor(l)d. The author here provides a fictional version of Barbara Harlow's pointed observations regarding the resistant potential of the act of writing in prison. The writing prisoner, she argues, is a remarkably dangerous figure for the establishment, as s/he appropriates that "power of writing" which, as Foucault has remarked, is supposed to remain firmly in the hands of prison authorities: "a system of intense registration and of documentary accumulation" (*Discipline and Punish* 189), which "functions as a procedure of objectification and subjection" of the detainee (192).²⁰ The "power of writing" held by the writing prisoner, on the contrary, "is one which seeks to alter the relationships of power

²⁰ It is worth pointing out, however, that in *Waiting* the portrayal of the establishment's "power of writing" departs slightly from Foucault's theorisations, as Lomba's biographer keeps pointing out the lack of archival information regarding Lomba after the last episode he recounts in his diary. This contributes to the depiction of imprisonment in Nigeria as a phenomenon that is not inscribed within the juridical order. In this context, the official "power of writing" is rather reduced to the "power of preventing the prisoner's writing."

which are maintained by coercive, authoritarian systems of state control and domination” (Harlow 133). In this sense, Lomba’s love poems are simultaneously subversive and derisive of a superintendent who acts in what he calls “my prison” (8) as an omnipotent petty tyrant would in his feud.

Still, Habila does not present writing as an easily successful way of contesting the violence of the postcolonial state. In *Waiting*, the artist’s imagination, despite its liberating potential, is not presented as a sufficient force to regain actual freedom. On the contrary, it is exactly because of Lomba’s writing abilities that the warder does not give his name to those Amnesty International representatives who visited the prison in the attempt to pressure the government towards the release of political detainees in the country.²¹ As he tells Janice, pathetically justifying his choice, “I didn’t. Couldn’t. You know . . . I thought he was comfortable. And, he was writing the poems, for you . . .” (31). Lomba’s reaction is not marked by rage, but rather by utter contempt that spurs him to denunciate coolly the baseness of this man of power, who, he ponders, is “just Man. Man in his basic, rudimentary state, easily moved by powerful emotions like love, lust, anger, greed and fear, but totally dumb to the finer, acquired emotions like pity, mercy, humour and justice” (31). However, it is this “rudimentary” breed of humanity which survives in the Nigeria of the militaries, while the poet’s fate remains unknown. Lomba’s biographer writes that “[t]here’s no record of how far the superintendent went to help him” following Janice’s dignified request to either find a solution to Lomba’s predicament or forget her forever. Still, he adds,

²¹ During the human rights crisis of the 1990s, the non-governmental organisation kept urging the Nigerian government to release prisoners of conscience, while also publishing informative documents detailing governmental suppression of dissent and the human rights abuses suffered by detainees in the country.

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there was very little to be done for a political detainee – especially since, about a week after that meeting, a coup was attempted against the military leader, General Sani Abacha [...]. There was an immediate crackdown on all pro-democracy activists, and the prisons all over the country swelled with political detainees. (31-32)

History, it seems, is forever repeating itself, in a circular motion that leaves little room for tangential flights.

I would argue, however, that the disillusioned recognition of the limits of the artist's power of writing does not mean that Habila *tout court* "rejects the public function of intellectuals [...] as the nerve-center of [their] society," as Ali Erritouni has suggested in his piece on the author's postmodern stance in *Waiting* (157). While it is true that the narrative gives great prominence to the role of ordinary people in articulating utopian fantasies of the common good, still the intellectual's work is seen as a force that can give a collective dimension to forms of dissent that are no less important, or right, for being often unsuccessful, or even conducive to suffering and death.²² Similarly to Soyinka, Habila resorts to racial memory in order to emphasise the importance of the right to speak, and of the act of speaking the truth, in configuring a struggle which resists the negation of subjecthood suffered by (certain sectors of) humankind in the exception. Indeed, overcoming his initial reluctance, Lomba will consent to Joshua's request to cover the demonstration he is organising after a trip to the Badagry slave dungeon,

²² The importance of artists and intellectuals is emphasised also in his two other major works, the novels *Measuring Time*, which will be studied in the next chapter, and *Oil on Water*, set in the region of the Niger Delta. Habila's interest in the role played by these categories does not mean that he depicts its representatives as homogeneously heroic. On the contrary, in *Waiting* the author levels scathing attacks against the self-congratulatory hollowness of putative 'artists' who even advise Lomba, while he and James are being pursued by the police, to "try and get arrested – that's the quickest way to make it as a poet. You'll have no problem with visas after that, you might even get an international award" (218).

where he is taken by *The Dial's* editor, James Fiki. James's didactic words evidence the aforementioned continuity between imperial and postcolonial incarceration in order to emphasise how exercising one's freedom of speech is a duty, a potential way out of terror and enslavement.

'It was in the ships that the mouth-locks were used, so that [the slaves] couldn't console each other and rally their spirits and thereby revolt. To further discourage communication, no two persons of the same language were kept together: Mandingo was chained to Yoruba, Wolof was chained to Obo, Bini was chained to Hausa. You see, every oppressor knows that wherever one word is joined to another to form a sentence, there'll be a revolt. That is our work, the media: to refuse to be silenced, to encourage legitimate criticism wherever we find it.' (196)²³

Still, as Erritouni notices, Habila (and this time, differently from Soyinka) registers the failure of revolutionary activism in recounting how Joshua's demonstration, which was meant to be peaceful, was actually crushed in blood. The question regarding the possibility of finding a way, as individuals, to subvert a tyrannical regime that has infinite power to administer death is thus purposely left open in the text.²⁴ On the fateful day, Brother, Lomba and Mao, the revolutionary leader, disappear; other die – like Hagar, the prostitute Joshua is in love with; the latter's fate is uncertain as well: his young, imaginative student, the narrator Kela,

²³ At the beginning of the novel, the reader was told in passing that Lomba had been to Badagry years before, but "halfway through the tour [he and his two friends] wandered off, depressed by the guide's mournful and vivid descriptions of how the chains and mouth locks had been used on the slaves" (37). Lomba was thus very well aware of the history of slavery, but it is only as a mature man, after realising the connection it has with his present, that he is finally shaken into awareness of its implications, of the enormity of it: "James's lesson is direct and effective, like a blow to the stomach" (196).

²⁴ This undecidability as to the actual possibility of resistance is most clearly confirmed after Kela's aunt warns him to not let the brutes of the establishment know he is intelligent, otherwise he will get killed: "Don't you know that lightning only strikes the tallest tree?" (183), she cautions. Reflecting on this, Kela will recall one of Joshua's teachings: "that some day I too would have to stand up for something. But did that mean I'd be pulled down when I stood up? I toyed for the question for hours, but I was unable to solve it" (184).

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pictures him “standing on some shore in America” (184), because, as he says to the two men who interrogate him about his mentor’s whereabouts, “that is where people go to when they can’t live in their own country” (182). The chapter on the Poverty Street march, however, closes on a hopeful note: “[a]fter all,” Kela writes, “the world isn’t as big and impossible as we have been taught to believe” (184). Still this ending is one that, once again, does not envisage the incorporation of the citizen as a human rights bearer in the Nigeria of Abacha, but which rather imagines the happiness of the human rights bearer as dependent on a freedom to move that is in fact increasingly restricted for the ‘non-citizens’ of the world. And yet, the small acts of resilience of those who stay put, point to the need to move on, notwithstanding the painful memories of the past. During the curfew declared after the demonstration, Madame Godwill, Kela’s aunt, refuses to open her restaurant for some policemen after cryptically reminding them of their mortality: “I thought you people didn’t need food and water like the rest of us” (179). She then cleans her house, removing layers of age-old dust and thereby ending her apparently infinite mourning period for her husband, who died during the civil war.

In *Kalakuta Republic*, Abani does at times do a similar job in reconnecting the disjointed histories of colonialism/imperialism and postcolonial oppression. Critic Kwame Dawes has rightly noticed that the author tends to refrain from grand discourses on ideologies, concentrating instead on “the raw and simple vocation of the artist searching out words” (18). Still, the very few occasions in which the poetic voice does indeed assume a polemical tone in highlighting the humiliations suffered at the hands of colonial and state officials by colonial and postcolonial subjects alike acquire prominence, to my mind, precisely because of their occasional, and revelatory, nature. For example, in “Concrete Memories,” a poem de-

scribing an interrogation room, the poet's gaze lingers on a

[r]usty
cold
barrel of Winchester
bolt-action Mark IV rifle;
retired right
arm of imperialism.
Enema. Rammed
up rectum, repeatedly;
twirling cocktail
swizzle-stick.
Extremely effective, they say
at dislodging caked-in conspiracies. (35)

The connection with colonialism is similarly evidenced in "Job," where the eponymous prisoner, "[o]lder than any of us / remembers / this prison run by British soldiers" (38). The rifle (or rather, its emasculating barrel), as well as the prison building itself, are presented as threatening weapons, older than the postcolonial state itself: they represent sovereign force and confinement, the "right / hand[s]" of the colonial enterprise which have survived into postcolonial times – "rusty," but still in use; "retired," but functionally unchanged. In the two lines that close the poem after the disconcerting image of the twirling rifle likened to a swizzle-stick, the incidental "they say" makes clear that the poetic voice does not subscribe to 'their' opinion that the ultimate aim of torture is indeed to "dislodge [presumed] caked-in conspiracies" (35). The phrase therefore protests against the obscenity of an operation which, as Elaine Scarry has famously shown, has in fact not the purpose "to elicit information but visibly to deconstruct the prisoner's voice" (20). And indeed, it is "they," who "say," while the tortured man remains speechless.

And yet, one of the main feats of Abani's work lies in its nuanced portrayal

of the men who are, as Scarry would say, at the two “end[s] of the weapon” (59): the vulnerable, those who feel pain, and the invulnerable, those who produce and administer it. Indeed, the collection complicates any simplistic depiction of the relationship between jailers and prisoners as an inevitably antagonistic one. ‘Horizontal’ support and empathy amongst prisoners sharing a similar condition is not to be taken for granted either.²⁵ In other words, the poet suggests that recognition of common vulnerability can cut across status lines, as the occasional lack of solidarity among inmates finds a contrapuntal echo in the depiction of prison guards who manage, want, to be humane. Referring to Scarry’s paradigm, it could be stated that the process of converting the prisoner’s pain into insignia of the regime’s power through its objectification in the form of weapons and wounds is not always completed, or carried out effectively. When this happens, however, the inefficient official, the official who for some reason does not manage to become a spokesperson of the regime by carrying out the task of silencing the imprisoned, and his guilt, is bound to meet some form of punishment.

Such a punishment, the poet suggests, can be either self-inflicted or inflicted by others. The first is for example the case of the figure of Sergeant Adamu, who has been mentioned in the previous section of this chapter. A pitiless torturer, he is portrayed in a fatal moment of doubt while sitting under the mango tree that grows in the execution yard. His breath is “heavy with local gin [...] / to scare demons, guilt, into lonely / dark corners” (53).

Haunted by screams,

²⁵ See for example the poems “Oyinbo Pepper” (28), “Tequila Sunrise” (36) and “An English Gentleman” (50).

John James dying shamelessly,²⁶

he sits under the moon howling, torn apart.
Compassion cups my hands through the bars
to try and console,

or is it kill,
this man.

Sergeant Adamu, decorated murderer of Biafra,
specialising in women, children.

We find him leashed to the execution tree
by leather army-issue belt,
smelling faintly

of mangoes. (53-54)

“[T]his man” who howls at the moon is another werewolf unable to couple two apparently incompatible dimensions of his being, that of the man who feels compassion and guilt and that of the ‘beast’ who tortures and kills. Through window bars that keep victim and perpetrator forever separate, the prisoner’s capability for mercy is tested as his cupped hands attempt to reach out and touch a creature who, however obnoxious, remains nonetheless a “man.” But an answer to the ethical conundrum regarding the possibility of the poet’s forgiveness is ultimately not provided, as his hands might be consoling, but also ready to strangle the drunken official. Yet if Abani leaves the question open, Sergeant Adamu on the contrary seems more resolute as he decides to hang himself, *leashing* the ‘beast’ in him to the execution tree with that same leather belt that, ironically, is confiscated to all inmates once they enter prison. The sarcastic epitaph that follows recalls the dubi-

²⁶ The poet recounts how this fourteen-year-old inmate was tortured to death in “Ode to Joy” (62-63), the poem that has attracted perhaps the most virulent criticism on the part of Abani’s detractors for what is deemed to be an implausible, and excessively graphic, portrayal (see note 2).

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ous heroism of Sergeant Adamu's deeds during the Nigerian Civil War – he is, oxymoronicly, a “decorated murderer” – and adds a further layer to the complexity of the poem by juxtaposing recent and less recent moments of violence in the history of postcolonial Nigeria. The war, in this sense, becomes the emblem of a violence that seems to be constitutively embedded, and endlessly perpetuated, in the postcolonial state, and that finds different articulations as time goes by. What is more, the fact that a man whom Abani uncompromisingly defines a ruthless “murderer” has in fact received official recognition and praise for his brutality hints at the conflicting interpretations that the phenomenon of the civil war has historically elicited.

While the collection is replete with the narration of cruel acts of torture, the poet also gives recognition to those merciful officials who do not comply with the demands of the establishment they should epitomise. This is the case of Lt Emile Elejegba, a man who let the poet re-write the ‘power script’ that Foucault has so convincingly analysed by asking him to do some “paper-work” and leaving the room, “[a]fter cautioning me not to read / under any circumstances the copy of / *Anna Karenina* on his desk” (58-59). The reader is told that Lt Elejegba's career in the army, rather unsurprisingly, has been far from distinguished: unlike Sergeant Adamu, he was posted to the Kiri-Kiri prison after being “*demoted*, as / punishment for his refusal to // lead a troop into Ogoniland to / murder fellow compatriots” (58, emphases added). The poem “Passover” recounts how the man is transferred (yet again) to another penitentiary for, indeed, “*fraternising* with the prisoners” (76, emphasis added): the recognition of shared humanity has no place, must have no place, in the exception of the dictator's prison – as it must have no place in the oil-rich Ogoniland of the rebels. Before leaving, however, Elejegba

visits the poet.

Wrinkling his nose against the
 smell
and trying hard not to cry,

he handed me a slim worn
 volume
with the picture of a smiling white girl
 on its cover. *The Diary of Anne Frank*.

‘This might help,’ he said gently.
 ‘I hear
Nelson Mandela read it on Robbens [*sic*] Island.’ (76)

Once again, commonality amongst human beings is symbolically confirmed through the shared experience of writing – and reading. In this context, the reference to the diary the Jewish girl wrote while hiding from Nazi persecution, and to the fact that another illustrious prisoner read it while in detention, makes it clear that the Nigerian prison can really be interpreted as a ‘camp’: it is one of those many sites of extra-judicial violence that, in different guises and reaching different levels of atrocity, have punctuated our late modernity. The works that have been discussed here, however, remind us of the fact that violence can be resisted, even if by means of ambiguous, small, or apparently self-defeating acts. And if this is not enough to subvert the hideous regime, still it can be a way to cheat the death it is founded on, manipulating its meanings and functions – attempting to be happy, struggling to maintain human dignity, even when sur-viving.

4.

The Kingdom of the Father

*And my traveling companions
Are ghosts and empty sockets
I'm looking at ghosts and empties
But I've reason to believe
We all will be received
In Graceland*

—Paul Simon, “Graceland”

The texts discussed so far testify to the highly combative nature of human existence in the postcolony, a locus where power is acquired, maintained and resisted through actions that obey a logic of reciprocal enmity. War and warlike relationships among individuals are not only defining traits of the works studied in the first part of this dissertation, which depict “nations-in-(de)formation” and “no nations” caught in civil wars – moments in which competing sovereignties engage in “hostile confrontations of forces, [...] acts of destruction involving human losses on battlefields” (Mbembe, “On Politics” 299). More generally, it has been noticed that also the Nigeria of the imprisoning dictators, selected textual representations of which have been examined in Chapter Three, is presented as steeped in a condition of normal abnormality, of silencing killings and intimidating curfews. Similarly, postcolonial Nigeria as portrayed in the works which will be discussed in this chapter, some of which are set in part during the short-lived Second Republic of

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1979-1983, emerges as an exceptional site where the Foucauldian insight into the nature of politics as “the continuation of war by other means” (*Society* 15) acquires almost self-evident visibility. In the lectures he delivered at the Collège de France in 1976, Foucault indeed suggested the need to invert Carl von Clausewitz’s well-known formulation,¹ proposing an analytical approach meant to emphasise the latent violence of the struggle for political hegemony that follows the establishment of a certain relationship of force “in and through war at a given historical moment” (*Society* 15). According to this hypothesis, “the role of political power is perpetually to use a sort of silent war to reinscribe that relationship of force, and to reinscribe it in institutions, economic inequalities, language, and even the bodies of individuals” by means of a series of practices and disciplines (*Society* 16). Even within this “civil peace,” adds Foucault, employing a phrase that interestingly echoes the title of one of Chinua Achebe’s post-civil-war short stories, “clashes over or with power [...] must be interpreted as a continuation of war” (16).

This conception of politics as war, Achille Mbembe has effectively demonstrated, becomes apparent in those necropolitical contexts where sovereignty becomes the systematic power to consign to death (“Necropolitics”). Postcolonial power as necropolitics, however, cannot always be aligned with the Foucauldian idea of a “silent,” if ruthless, conflict. On the contrary, Mbembe has magisterially unveiled the spectacular, obscene, lecherous, carnivorous aspects of the manifestation of sovereignty in Africa (*Postcolony*), while also pointing out how the phenom-

¹ In his *On War*, Clausewitz famously argued that “[w]ar is a mere continuation of policy by other means. [...] War is not merely a political act, but also a truly political instrument, a continuation of political commerce, a carrying out of the same by other means” (qtd. in Foucault, *Society* 21).

ena of the “*dispersion of state power and the diffraction of society*” have been conducive to a series of economic – but also social and cultural – practices that are informal in character and have amplified the aforementioned socio-political imaginary, in which the “central signifier is war, that is to say, the capacity to take away the life of the enemy” (“On Politics” 310-311).

The works under consideration in this chapter are novels where the violence and abandonment suffered by the postcolonial subject in the warlike atmosphere of post-Civil-War Nigeria is both explicitly thematised and conveyed through an allegorical fictionalisation that more or less loosely reproduces the workings of postcolonial power within the context of the patriarchal Nigerian family.² This is done in particular through the representation of the hostile, but at times ambivalent, relationships between abusive or uncaring sovereign fathers and their ‘subjects’ – their sons and daughters. Adichie’s *Purple Hibiscus* (2003), Abani’s *GraceLand* (2004), and Habila’s *Measuring Time* (2007) can be defined as (equivocal) *Bildungsromane*, as they imagine the coming-of-age of young figures who attempt, with different degrees of success, to find their place and voice in relation to a familial and societal context of severe limitations. Interestingly, in the three texts the protagonists’ *Bildung* is in some ways connected with, if not enabled by, the death

² The homology between the figure of the sovereign and that of the father is one of the founding, and most ancient, axioms of Western political thought. One of its most famous theorisations can be found in Thomas Hobbes’s *De Cive*: as Hobbes writes, “Children are subject to Fathers no less than slaves to Masters and citizens to the commonwealth” (107). The father/children coupling is only one of the numerous pairings structuring a configuration that is “both systematic and hierarchical: at the summit is the sovereign (master, king, husband, father [...]), and below, subjected to his service, the slave, the beast, the woman, the child” (Derrida, *Beast* 55-56). As Foucault, amongst others, has noticed, the sovereign’s right to decide over the life and death of his subjects can be seen as deriving “from the ancient *patria potestas* that granted the father of the Roman family the right to ‘dispose’ of the life of his children and his slaves; just as he had given them life, so he could take it away” (Foucault, *Sexuality* 135).

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of an oppressive paternal figure. Kambili, Elvis and Mamo, the three main characters, act from within, and endeavour to enfranchise themselves from, a dysfunctional nuclear family where the patriarch assumes traits mirroring those of the omnipotent Nigerian sovereign.

This chapter's focus on the relationships within the nuclear family might appear to accept uncritically the normality of what is in fact a Judeo-Christian norm that has been imposed on African societies during colonial times. What John Comaroff has termed the "sanctification" of the nuclear family, "with its engendered division of labor, the distinction between public and private domains, and other familiar signs and practices of a rising capitalist order" (666) was indeed one of the central tenets of the Christian missionary activities in colonial Africa. The authors under consideration write of a postcolonial context in which the Western idea of the nuclear, patriarchal family as the organising social principle has no doubt altered traditional family patterns. Therefore, the accent they put on the father/children relations must be inscribed within an epistemological framework that has in part incorporated and naturalised this model. All the same, and interestingly, the description of the highly dystopian nuclear family is often coupled with a negotiation of the harmonising role played by members of the kin group, and in particular by female relatives, in protecting the children abused by the violent paterfamilias. As will be noticed below, this is for example the case of Mamo and LaMamo's aunt Marina, or of their uncle Iliya, who act as surrogate parents for Habila's twins; Elvis's grandmother, along with his aunt Felicia, similarly represent vigilant sources of stability in Abani's *GraceLand*; Aunty Ifeoma becomes a role model for the coming-of-age children of Adichie's text.

The novels might be interpreted as registering how the colonial introduction

of a nuclear family system to the detriment of traditional conceptions of family order and solidarity has contributed to the fragmentation of the postcolonial society: Elvis's world will crumble once and for all after his relocation with his widowed father in Lagos, when the last bonds with his kin group are severed. Again, Adichie's description of a nuclear household that is characterised by unspeakable violence is in line with her indictment of the patriarch Eugene's fundamentalist rejection of his own Igbo culture, and of his "heathen" relatives. In Habila's text, the nuclear family emerges as the main (dis)ordering principle as well: as will be noticed below, there is no functional nuclear family in the fictional world of *Measuring Time*. And yet, the authors do not simplistically retreat into an idealised past, contrasting it with a present whose dystopian character is assumed to derive solely from the colonial imposition of alien norms. On the contrary, the kin group is on occasions presented as the source of oppression as well: it is telling, for example, that the worst acts of abuse to which Abani's Elvis is subjected are not perpetrated at the hands of his father, but of an uncle.³

The obliteration of the feminine principle within the nuclear family is one of the common traits exhibited by the three novels, where mothers are presented as only partially capable to restrain the violence of the sovereign fathers. Following the lead of Igbo scholar Nkiru Uwechia Nzegwu, in the Igbo novels of Abani and Adichie the disempowerment of women characters may be read as a consequence of the alteration of family practices following the colonial transposition of a hier-

³ In this context, it is essential to remember that "[l]inguistically, the terms 'sister,' 'brother,' 'aunt,' 'uncle,' 'niece,' 'nephew,' and 'cousin,' as well as the relational family separation they defined, did not exist in Igbo language and society" prior to colonial times (Nzegwu 32). In the Igbo language, the same term, *mma*, classifies the father, the father's brother, and the mother's brother.

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archical ethos privileging the dominance of a “sovereign patriarch” in a previously non-patriarchal society (57).⁴ What is undoubted is that in the works under examination there appears to be little or no contrapuntal maternal restraint to the fathers’ (often hyper-masculine) violence, or to their painful indifference: while Mamo’s mother loses her life in the act of giving birth to her twin sons, Beatrice, Elvis’s mother, dies of breast cancer when her son is still a little boy. Kambili’s mother – interestingly, another ‘Beatrice’ – is for her part a silent, battered woman, whose free will is apparently annulled in the presence of the god-like figure of the patriarch Eugene – at least until she starts poisoning his tea. These absent, disempowered, or only potentially insurgent mothers are thus prevented from, or incapable of, protecting their children from a violence that appears to be endemic in the modern phallocratic Nigerian family – and state.

While it is tempting, and of course legitimate, to read these tales of (as will be seen, dubious) liberation in allegorical terms, still it must be recognised that the narratives present the reader with essential gaps and fissures that emphatically prevent the total assimilation, or conflation, of the private with the public. By means of different strategies, the authors underscore that their fictions cannot be read exclusively as wholly representative allegories of the postcolonial state. In this chapter, thus, I will not only investigate their depiction of the synecdochical family *as* state, but also the entangled, and not necessarily consensual, relationships *between* the familial *and* the public, between the sovereign father and the sovereign state. When the parallels between the socio-political formations of the

⁴ I am not aware of any extensive study on the development of family relationships among the Tangale of north-eastern Nigeria, the ethnic group which has presumably constituted the major source of inspiration for the Keti community in Habila’s novel (see note 20).

family and the state, at first sight specular, clash against one another, the allegory short-circuits: the reader's attention is thus drawn to the more intimate aspects of the characters' lives, and the political, at least temporarily, fades from view – or is rather temporarily moved into the background. These reproductions of familial relationships are thus to be read as what may be called a purposely 'loose,' or 'imperfect,' parable of the postcolonial state, and do not conform *in toto* to Fredric Jameson's "national allegory" claim, which (in)famously posited that

[t]hird-world texts, even those which are seemingly private and invested with a properly libidinal dynamic – necessarily project a political dimension in the form of a national allegory: *the story of the private individual destiny is always an allegory of the embattled situation of the public third-world culture and society.* (69)

As will be noticed below, indeed, even Adichie's *Purple Hibiscus*, the novel that is perhaps more clearly invested with allegorical resonance,⁵ resists the reduction of the conflicts represented as entirely, and exclusively, metaphorical.⁶

To sum up, it may certainly be argued that there exist (some forms of) allegorical implications in the portrayal of the highly complex, and generally antagonistic, intergenerational relationships in the texts under consideration here. It is similarly admissible to contend that the uncertain *Bildung* these children achieve mirrors the condition of the citizen/subject in the postcolonial state, the absence

⁵ A number critics have more or less explicitly recognised the text's allegorical implications (see for example Hewett, Hron, Stobie). Others however, such as J. Roger Kurtz, resist tropological interpretations and claim that Kambili "is less a metaphor for the nation than she is an autonomous being in whom the prevailing social and political tensions and contradictions of the day manifest themselves" (Kurtz 37; see also Kearney 142).

⁶ As Joseph Slaughter has pointed out, Jameson's claim was partly determined by the fact that the *Bildungsroman* genre has generally been read by Western critics "through the lens of the allegory, [...] [and] the 'first meagre shelf of "Third World Classics" that Jameson proposed to read as national allegories 'consisted almost exclusively of bildungsromane'" (113-114, quoting Jameson "On Literary and Cultural Import-Substitution" 172).

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of a functional family lamenting the failed promise of the creation of a functional public sphere and of an inclusive regime of rights. At the same time, one must of course be wary of inscribing these narratives solely within a “national allegory” scheme – an approach that is ultimately reductionist in that it may diminish the thought-provoking beauty of the individual stories of suffering, hate and love that the authors offer.

The representation of conflict in these novels, however, is not only limited to the Foucauldian idea of politics as war continued by other means. On the contrary, in *GraceLand* and in *Measuring Time* some of the wars that have plagued the Nigerian state, but also the African continent as a whole, find their way into the narrative as well, identifying exemplary moments in which the aforementioned hostile character of postcolonial power confrontations is dramatised on actual battlegrounds. In both works, the presence of the Nigerian Civil War as a painful memory that cannot be erased or exorcised suggests that the most traumatic episode of communal strife in the country’s history remains unresolved. Embodied in figures such as Mamo’s uncle Haruna, the soldier who had never returned from the front and had been mistakenly considered dead, or Elvis’s cousin Innocent, the soldier who did return, but then disappeared again in mysterious circumstances and is now best forgotten, the spectre of the Nigerian Civil War asks to be properly addressed. Either in the form of a silent presence (Haruna), or in the form of a silencing absence (Innocent), the spectre haunts the main characters’ contemporaneity – a contemporaneity of guilt and things unsaid. In this sense, the texts underscore the confrontational nature of Nigerian society, where, to paraphrase Saro-Wiwa’s famous description of Sozaboy’s predicament, the coming-of-age protagonists live, move, and – again, if for different reasons – have *not* their

being. The Civil War as a *revenant*, by highlighting the continuities between the historical phenomena of the war, the post-war military rule and the brief, pseudo-democratic Second Republic, present unrestrained violence as an ever-present threat in postcolonial Nigeria. The texts thus describe a country that is always on the brink of degenerating into open hostility and war, and where human life, once again, loses much of its supposedly inalienable, intrinsic value. Habila's *Measuring Time*, moreover, extends such preoccupation at the transnational level by presenting the reader with some of the sites of destruction and massacre that tore apart other African countries in the 1980s. This question is brought to light in the text through the letters that the protagonist receives from his twin brother, LaMamo, the increasingly disillusioned boy who became a mercenary soldier on a romantic quest for liberty and fame.

The intertwining of past and contemporary moments of local and continental armed struggle with the narration of everyday life in a Nigeria that is either under military rule or temporarily in the hands of a civilian administration configures the political in the country as a war-scape that severely puts to the tests the protagonists' ideals and resilience. The three novels thus fictionalise these children's attempts to find their place in the crumbling kingdom of the father – while also, in the case of *GraceLand*, recognising the impossibility, for the protagonist at least, of (re)constructing a meaningful existence in the country of birth. Both (re)construction and flight, however, are chances whose success is not taken for granted, as hope for the redemption that might lie ahead is tinged with the ambivalence of undecidability. As will be seen indeed, *Purple Hibiscus*, *GraceLand* and *Measuring Time* are *Bildungsromane* where “the sovereign, undivided human personality remains a vanishing (plot) point beyond the frame of the text” (Slaughter, *Human*

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Rights Inc. 215): “a ‘not yet,’ a ‘what is coming,’ which – always – separates hope from utopia” (Mbembe, *Postcolony* 206).

4.1. “Hate thy father”

“*HATE THY FATHER, MAKE HIM PAY*” is the first commandment recorded in Mamo’s imaginary diary, “the contents of which only his twin brother could fathom” (24). It was to the most intimate recesses of his mind that Habila’s protagonist, Mamo, a meditative boy suffering from sickle-cell anaemia and thus often bedridden and “measuring time,” entrusted his dreams of survival and revenge. The “seed of hatred” (19) for their father had been planted in the twins’ hearts when, at three, they discovered that Iliya, the gentle man they had been in the care of since their birth, was not their biological father, but an uncle. Their self-centred father, Lamang, had indeed abandoned Mamo and LaMamo after his wife’s death, reappearing some years later only to shatter his children’s illusion of happiness. Lamang, whose fame as “the King of Women” (15) the teenage twins would read as a proof of the disinterest and maltreatment to which their deceased mother Tabita and themselves were subjected, became thus their number one enemy on the very day in which they learnt of his existence.

Differently from Mamo, *Purple Hibiscus*’s heroine, Kambili, does not re-write the Decalogue imagining reversed commandments mandating filial hatred. Even as she and her brother Jaja are punished severely and often beaten for the slightest failure to meet their father’s expectations, the girl does not quite hate him. On the contrary, her feelings amount to an ambivalent mixture of terror and proud admiration for a figure who is similarly Janus-faced. The nuanced portrayal of a very

complex father/daughter(/son) relationship constitutes undoubtedly one of the most remarkable feats of Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie's highly praised debut novel. Since its 2003 publication, *Purple Hibiscus* has indeed attracted great public and critical appraisal (see Tunca, *The Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie Website*). Set in a dictatorial Nigeria that the author has defined as a meld of the Babangida and Abacha juntas (Adichie and Ondaatje), *Purple Hibiscus* is a first-person tale where teenage Kambili recounts retrospectively her first falling in love and her discovered liberty from an oppressive family context where, alongside Jaja and her mother Beatrice, she used to live in the shade of the towering, menacing paterfamilias Eugene.

The relationship between the protagonist of Abani's *GraceLand*, Elvis, and his father Sunday is very nuanced as well. As will be seen below, Sunday is a man whose violence towards his only son seems to constitute a reaction to the many failures of his life, *in primis* to his inability to come to terms with his wife's death. Similarly to Kambili, however, Elvis does not simply, or not only, hate his father. He is no doubt terrified by him during his childhood, terrified by his frequent surges of anger. And he is relieved by his death. At the same time, he seems to be continuously seeking, without quite succeeding, to establish some form of communication, an affective bond with him.

The confrontational relationships between these sovereign fathers and their 'subjects' could not be more varied, and complex. What they all have in common, however, is that they speak of the painful frustration of an all too human desire for happiness and protection.

*

An almost archetypal Fanonian white-masked black man who "conceives of European culture as a means of stripping himself of his race" (*Black Skin* 174), Kam-

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bili's father, Eugene, rejects all that is "native" (4) to the point of neurosis. A Christian fundamentalist, he has repudiated his own "heathen" father and exhibits great anxiety for the sinful (black) body, which must be continuously covered, controlled and mortified, also through violently punitive practices. He speaks only English in public, his diction becoming unnaturally British-accented when conversing with white people, and reverts to Igbo only in his many moments of private, uncontrollable rage. Eugene requires his children to achieve excellence, and imposes on them a tight schedule, whose "meticulously drawn lines" (23) separate "study from siesta, siesta from family time, family time from eating, eating from prayer, prayer from sleep" (24). The majestic Enugu mansion of the Achike family, a compound whose high walls are "topped by coiled electric wires" (9) and whose doors cannot be locked – as it is the father-jailer who keeps the keys – becomes a suffocating Foucauldian penitentiary.⁷ Notwithstanding its elegant décor, the house has as its main aim that of producing docile, terrorised Catholic bodies in perpetual fear of physical and psychological punishment and hellfire.

But the most disquieting aspects of Eugene's character are known only within the walled compound. On the outside, Kambili's father is praised as a God-fearing man. He is an honest, affluent entrepreneur in the food industry. What is more, he is the liberal owner of the *Standard*, the only newspaper that still speaks out for freedom in a country of military terror – his personal commitment on behalf of human rights protection and free speech having even won him an *Amnesty World* award. He gives huge donations to charity, and his life is

⁷ Adichie's description of such "palatial homes" ruled by a "proverbial oppressive Gothic patriarch" is seen by critic Lily G.N. Mabura as one of the traits allowing a postcolonial Gothic reading of a text that, she argues, encompasses "a larger palette of [...] Gothic stock features" (205-206).

considered an exemplum of Christian perfection – so much so that Father Benedict, during his sermons, refers to “the pope, Papa, and Jesus – in that order” (4). In short, even as his sister Ifeoma suspects that people tell him “only what he wants to hear” (96), so as to become legitimate recipients of his ‘for-Christians-only’ generosity, he nevertheless remains one of the most respected and admired men of his community.

The liberal promoter of a free public sphere, Eugene tyrannically imposes consent in the privacy of his house, where he beats his ‘subjects’ to unconsciousness for the slightest form of presumed disobedience. He asserts his sovereignty within his private kingdom exactly like the dictatorial regimes he publicly – and indeed courageously – opposes: through violence. As critic Cheryl Stobie has remarked,

[v]arious systems that reinforce patriarchal power work in concert in this portrayal of the sovereign male individual who attains a quasi-divine status: Catholicism that (like many other religions) privileges masculine authority, the Western model of the self-made man and the specifically Nigerian embodiment of the Big Man. [...]

In *Purple Hibiscus* Adichie illustrates the links between the institutions of the family, the church, education and the state by showing the pernicious effects of absolutist patriarchal control in each. (424-428)

The hiatus between Eugene’s two apparently incompatible personae, the public and the private, finds textual unity by means of Adichie’s careful manipulation of the polysemous concept of fatherhood. By blending together the manifold connotations that the idea of the paternal can assume – in particular, the strictly biological one, the religious and the political – the author creates a fictional demi-God whose omnipotence with respect to the lives of his subjects mirrors that of the dictator in the political arena. Images of the Christian God, of the Nigerian patriarch and of the postcolonial tyrant are evidently superimposed in moments

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where Eugene, supposedly on God's behalf, punishes H/his children for resisting H/his will. For example, when threateningly reproaching Kambili for coming second in her class, he tells her that "[b]ecause *God* has given you much, he expects much from you." However, he then adds: "I didn't have a *father* who sent me to the best schools" (47, emphases added). As Eugene moves from the religious to the biological in identifying the source of the "gifts" he mentions, he conflates the idea of an omnipotent Christian God with himself – the father who, differently from his own "pagan" one, has materially given his children the chance to attend the most prestigious educational institutions in Nigeria. Jaja and Kambili, petrified by terror and silenced to the point of appearing "abnormal" (141), are thus the nervous output of the violence of the sovereign F/father.

It is in this context that the sharing of food in the Achike household assumes a clear Eucharistic value, becoming a ritual moment of familial thanksgiving and validation of Eugene's power. During their meals together, Kambili, Jaja and Beatrice are always asked to taste – and, inevitably, to praise – the new product samples coming from Eugene's factories. Food is thus associated with fear (Highfield 48), and the imposition to eat becomes yet another form of violence perpetrated by the sovereign paterfamilias on his subjects (cf. Stobie 424). In this context, it is no wonder that the oft-quoted incipit of the novel, where the narrator, with a nod to Achebe, writes that "[t]hings started to fall apart at home when [...] Jaja did not go to communion" (3), signals how the disruption of the kingdom of the F/father was first manifested by a refusal to eat, to receive the host. The significance of Jaja's gesture clearly extends the boundaries of the religious as it is followed, at lunch, by the boy's silence on the new juice the family tastes (13). When Jaja explains that he did not go to communion because "the *wafers* gives me

bad breath” (6, emphasis added), his choice to call the host ‘wafer,’ and not ‘host,’ against his father’s orders, is another sign of his rebellion. As Kambili says, “Papa insisted we call it the host because ‘host’ came close to capturing the essence, the sacredness, of Christ’s body. ‘Wafer’ was too secular, *wafer was what one of Papa’s factories made*” (6, emphasis added). This lexical distinction does not only show, as Anthony Chennells has rightly written, that “Eugene’s God can never manifest itself in the ordinary, or more precisely the Nigerian ordinary” (18). It also highlights, once again, the parallel between Eugene and God the Father, while Jaja’s act is reconfigured as a form of resistance that protests his father’s self-elevation to a quasi-divine figure: Jaja refuses to eat both the (Father’s) ‘host’ and the (father’s) ‘wafer.’

The scene just described is reported in the short section, titled “Breaking God: Palm Sunday,” that begins the text. Jaja’s erstwhile unthinkable rebellion, however, couldn’t have been possible without Nsukka, without the life “Before Palm Sunday” that is told in the section that follows. Kambili explains that

Nsukka started it all; Auntie Ifeoma’s little garden next to the verandah of her flat in Nsukka began to lift the silence. Jaja’s defiance seemed to me now like Auntie Ifeoma’s experimental purple hibiscus: rare, fragrant with the undertones of freedom, a different kind of freedom from the one the crowds waving green leaves chanted at Government Square after the coup. A freedom to be, to do. (16)

It is indeed their visits to Auntie Ifeoma’s place that enable Kambili and Jaja to recognise and voice the violence they have been subjected to since their birth. An independent woman who is raising her three children on her own after her husband’s death, Ifeoma is a lecturer at the University. Her essential house, whose rough cement floors, Kambili recalls, “did not let my feet glide over them the way the smooth marble floors back home did” (116), resonates with the

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laughter and the witty arguments of an intellectually stimulating environment. It is in Nsukka that Kambili falls in love for the first time with young Father Adami, and it is in Nsukka that she slowly begins to open up to her cousin Amaka, her first friend. In Nsukka she learns to prepare the *orab* leaves, and in Nsukka she laughs for the first time. While in Nsukka, Kambili realises her alienation from her extended family, from a culture she feels excluded from, and she begins to reclaim it.

The twins' first stay at their aunt's place is interrupted by an unexpected phone call: Eugene, enraged after discovering that his children have been living under the same roof as their "heathen" grandfather, now seriously ill, wants them to go back home. "Aunty Ifeoma shook her head as if the way Papa felt was just a minor eccentricity," and she adds that Eugene has managed to get his editor, Ade Coker, out of prison (181). Kambili, however, "hardly hear[s]" this second comment, as she knows what is bound to happen when she and Jaja get back home: "My head was filling up quickly with blood or water or sweat." And in fact, by way of punishment, Eugene will pour boiling water on his children's feet: "This is what you do when you walk into sin. You burn your feet" (194), he tells Kambili. Imagining this dramatic phone call and Kambili's panic, which downplays her father's pro-democracy commitment, Adichie once again skilfully juxtaposes Eugene's two selves, drawing however the reader's attention decidedly towards the private sphere.

Yet, the author's choice not to portray Eugene simply as a stereotypical violent patriarch prevents the suffocating household from completely overlapping with the dictatorial regime it might be said to represent. This means not only that Adichie refuses to reduce her story to a simple allegory of postcolonial des-

potism – one where the figurative deprives the private of all meaning. It also means that she opens a space of possibility and resistance even from within imperfect, to say the least, contexts such as that of the Achike family.⁸ As Brenda Cooper has noticed, red, the colour of the hibiscus that blossoms in the garden of Eugene’s Enugu compound and that is thus symbolically associated with him, is certainly a signifier of violence, but holds also a positive, resistant connotation: it is not coincidental that the government agents who tried to bribe the incorruptible Eugene with a truckful of dollars yanked at the hibiscus after being asked to leave (9, 200). In other words, if the purple of the experimental hibiscus flowering in Aunty Ifeoma’s garden signifies Kambili and Jaja’s discovery of a “freedom to be, to do” (16) they had not even dreamt of thus far, still Adichie insists on the importance of individual freedom in the private sphere *alongside* the political freedom that the Government Square demonstrators are demanding. She insists, Cooper writes, “on the necessity of red as well as purple” (126).⁹

In conjunction with the increasingly brutal military clampdown on the Nigerian public sphere, Eugene’s physical and mental health begins to deteriorate. He is portrayed as he drinks unusual amounts of water at dinner (201, 258, 262), while Kambili watches him, “wondering if his hands were really shaking or if [she] was imagining it” (202). After Ade Coker is murdered by a letter bomb,¹⁰

⁸ In a much-quoted interview with Wale Adebani, Adichie has remarked that “Kambili’s father, for all of his fundamentalism, at least has a sense of social consciousness that is expansive and proactive and useful, so while his character may be seen as a critique of fundamentalism, the God-fearing public in Nigeria can learn a bit from him as well” (“Nigerian Identity”).

⁹ Recognising some of the intertextual references that this symbolism invite to notice, Cooper adds that Adichie insists on the necessity of “Ngũgĩ wa Thiongo’s petals of red, along with Alice Walker’s purple fields” (126). On the womanist aspects of *Purple Hibiscus*, cf. note 15.

¹⁰ Ade Coker’s death is certainly another fictional recreation of Dele Giwa’s 1986 murder.

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his physical and mental breakdown become increasingly perceptible:

there was a slowness in his movements, as though his legs were too heavy to lift, his hands too heavy to swing. [...] But he prayed a lot more, and some nights when I woke up to pee, I heard him shouting from the balcony overlooking the front yard (208).

As the narrative progresses, the reader discovers that his wife at this stage had presumably started to poison his tea, “his quintessential British passion” (Strehle “Decolonized Home” 110).¹¹ The slowness in Eugene’s movements and his unquenchable thirst assume a new meaning in the light of this disclosure, becoming a potential allusion to Beatrice’s rebellion – one that, paradoxically, combines with Eugene’s anxiety for his defeats against the oppressive regime in consuming his once strong body. The body he has so mortified is giving Eugene signals he cannot read as he becomes weaker and, like the Nnamabia of “Cell One,” he starts suffering from a skin rash which appears almost repulsive to Kambili: the pimples “covered the whole of his face, even his eyelids. His face looked swollen, oily, discolored. I had intended to hug him and have him kiss my forehead, but instead I stood there and stared at his face” (252). Eugene’s increasingly grotesque appearance signals therefore his failure both in the context of the family and in that of the state. It signals the disempowerment that preludes, but also already encompasses, death. And Eugene will indeed be found “lying dead on his

¹¹ Beatrice’s symbolic choice to kill Eugene by poisoning, of all things, his tea, is however problematical, as Jaja and Kambili are often asked by Eugene to drink from his cup, sharing what he calls “a love sip” of his “always too hot,” tongue-burning tea (8). In fact, Kambili’s reaction when she learns of the poison is one of shocked disbelief: “My voice was loud. I was almost screaming. *‘Why in his tea?’*” (290, emphasis added). In Beatrice’s act one might even hear a distant echo of Toni Morrison’s *Beloved*, the stunningly beautiful narration of a mother reclaiming her agency by refusing to consign her children to slavery. Read thus, this might be an imperfect articulation of what Paul Gilroy has called the “turn towards death as a release from terror and bondage” (*The Black Atlantic* 63).

desk” (286) a short time afterwards – a death that sanctions the collapse of the private kingdom of a presumably “immortal” father (287), but also puts an end to Eugene’s pro-democracy efforts.

By strategically centring the short-circuiting of her allegory on the very pivotal aspect regarding the violent denial of the subject’s right to speak up – something which makes Eugene both a human rights activist and a human rights abuser – Adichie draws attention to the (Western liberal) normative distinction between public and private sphere that lies at the basis of the construction of the modern state. In particular, she emphasises the potential dangers deriving from the exclusion of domestic and family matters from the public sphere and hence from the realm of human rights protection. This is a preoccupation Adichie shares with those feminist thinkers who have emphasised how the two spheres have been traditionally “accorded asymmetrical value: greater significance is attached to the public, male world than to the private, female one” (Charlesworth, Chinkin and Wright 626), in a dichotomy that leaves the private world uncontrolled and thus potentially at the mercy of unrestrained patriarchal dominance. The different importance attributed to the two ends of the public/private divide becomes evident, for example, when one considers how “[t]he right to freedom from torture and other forms of cruel, inhuman or degrading treatment is generally accepted as a paradigmatic civil and political right” (Charlesworth, Chinkin and Wright 627)¹² –

¹² And indeed, torture is defined in the UN “Convention Against Torture and Other Cruel, Inhuman or Degrading Treatment or Punishment” as “any act by which severe pain or suffering, whether physical or mental, is intentionally inflicted on a person for such purposes as obtaining from *him* or a third person information or a confession, punishing *him* for an act *he* or a third person has committed or is suspected of having committed, or intimidating or coercing *him* or a third person, or for any reason based on discrimination of any kind, *when such pain or suffering is inflicted by or at the instigation of or with the consent or acquiescence of a public official or other person acting in an official capacity*” (Art. 1, emphasis added).

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while, as Adichie shows, degrading violence against the individual is not only a means of state-sanctioned terror, but also, and very often, behind the closed doors of a private house.

Adichie's emphasis on the mutual necessity of freedom and human rights protection *both* in the public *and* the private sphere is confirmed in the last section, titled "A Different Silence – The Present," which is set when Kambili and her mother get news of Jaja's imminent release from prison. The boy has indeed been in jail for thirty-one months after falsely confessing the murder of his father in order to prevent Beatrice's conviction. However, the "new hope" and "peace" that Kambili and her mother have felt lately have not (only) been enabled by the end of the private regime of terror: the other *conditio sine qua non* was the end of the dictatorship. Indeed, it was only after the Head of State "died atop a prostitute, foaming at the mouth and jerking" (296-297)¹³ that pro-democracy groups began to insist on the need to re-open Eugene's file in order to investigate the old regime's alleged implications in his death. Jaja's name is finally on the list of those "prisoners of conscience"¹⁴ who will be released soon by the interim civilian government, and Kambili and Beatrice's hope becomes "concrete for the first time" (297).

Kambili thus "can talk about the future now" (306). However, notwithstand-

¹³ This description echoes the rumours about the Viagra-induced death of General Sani Abacha in 1998.

¹⁴ As defined in Peter Benenson's 1961 article "The Forgotten Prisoners," a prisoner of conscience is "[a]ny person who is physically restrained (by imprisonment or otherwise) from expressing (in any form of words or symbols) any opinion which he honestly holds and which does not advocate or condone personal violence." It is thus evident that Jaja can not quite be considered one: as will be noticed below, even as his imprisonment is unjust, the reasons for his release are therefore wrong as well – something that points out the maladministration of justice in the country.

ing the hopeful note on which Adichie's last chapter closes, this ending is (once again) a transitory, 'liminal' and centrifugal one: Ifeoma and her children have emigrated to the US; Father Amadi has been sent to Germany; Beatrice has suffered from a nervous breakdown and is perhaps only now starting to recover. Even more problematically, gentle Jaja appears to have been irremediably changed by guilt, by the fear of having done too little to protect his mother and sister, and by his prison experience. "Those shoulders that bloomed in Nsukka, that grew wide and capable [143, 154], have sagged" (300), and the once expressive eyes which communicated when words could not be spoken "have hardened a little every month he has spent here" (305). Now, Kambili says, "they look like the bark of a palm tree, unyielding," so that she even wonders "if we ever really had an *asusu anya*, a language of the eyes, or if I imagined it all" (305). Liberated from the oppressive father, Jaja's encounter with state violence has led to the arrested development of the budding womanist brand of masculinity Kambili saw in her brother's broadening shoulders while he was carefully tending his aunt's garden. The "sensitive" boy who "loves beautiful flowers" and was supposed to become "a role model for the future" (Cooper 127) has perhaps been deprived of the possibility of playing such a role.¹⁵ In other words, as Susan Strehle has remarked, even

¹⁵ As Cooper has rightly noticed, it is essential that "the purple hibiscus is Jaja's rather than Kambili's passion, in a novel which focuses on the growth of Kambili's ability to develop a voice as a woman oppressed by her father." It is also for this reason that the colour purple of Adichie's title can be read as a nod to Alice Walker's Pulitzer prize-winning novel, calling the need for a womanist stance that "recognises the mutual suffering that black men and women together have endured, be it at the hands of the slavers or the colonisers" (127).

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as “the corrupt head of state and the father interpellated by the West are gone,¹⁶ and Kambili plans to plant purple hibiscus after Jaja is released,” it seems that “the flowering of Nigeria [and of his sons and daughters] is deferred to another day” (“Decolonized Home” 125).

Purple Hibiscus holds undoubted emancipatory connotations as a narrative that confirms, with its very existence, the newly found voice of a young woman who was previously silenced by violence and fear. However, silence still hangs over Kambili’s fragmented family. It certainly is “a different kind of silence, one that lets [Kambili] breathe” (305), but it is also one that problematically emphasises how the happiness mother and daughter can now imagine is essentially private, deriving from privilege, and cannot be extended to describe the future of the country as a whole.

There is so much that Mama and I do not talk about. We do not talk about the huge checks we have written, for bribes to judges and policemen and prison guards. We do not talk about how much money we have, even after half of Papa’s estate went to St. Agnes and to the fostering of missions in the church. (297)

Even after the end of the dictatorship, Nigeria is portrayed as a country the encounter with which can be resolved only in the form of a pseudo-citizenship distributed along economic lines. In other words, in the uneven confrontation with the state, hope remains the privilege of those who can buy it – so much so that, ironically, even the restoration of poetic justice that *Purple Hibiscus* tentatively proposes would not have occurred without Eugene’s money. Kambili places her arm around Beatrice’s shoulders and, she writes, for the first time in years her

¹⁶ Strehle is here recurring to Althusser’s notion of the “‘interpellated’ subject, one hailed or called by the *Logos* and, with his obedient response, one who inscribes that Western Word in every aspect of his being – and then interpellates his family as well” (108).

mother “leans toward [her] and smiles” (307). This beautiful recreation of a minimal tie between Kambili and a woman who had previously “moved away” from Jaja as he attempted to include her in a familial embrace (291) seems to point to the recreation of a functional family in the future. Whether the state will follow, the novel does not say.

*

It is telling that the incipit of *Measuring Time*, Helon Habila’s second novel, is devoted to the description of the figure of Mamo and LaMamo’s father, the King of Women. Even as the development of the relationship between Lamang and his sons constitutes only one of the manifold narrative threads that the author weaves together in the text,¹⁷ the prominence it acquires because of its opening position marks it as one of the central ones – and no doubt one of the most narratively convincing in a text that in some respects is not entirely successful.¹⁸ In the first pages of *Measuring Time* the reader understands that this *King of Women’s* “desire for majesty” (Mbembe, *Postcolony* 110) and success was hallowed in the popular songs and folktales of his native Keti way before his decision to pursue a political career in the democratic Nigeria of the early 1980s.¹⁹ Young

¹⁷ For a thematic analysis of the novel, see Anyokwu.

¹⁸ At times the author seems at pains to draw together the many narrative threads that compose the text, so that the structure becomes on occasions hesitant and there are some inconsistencies (for example, one of LaMamo’s letters, dated 1990, wishes Mamo a happy 25th birthday, while LaMamo’s headstone marks 1963 as the twins’ year of birth). Occasional redundancy and an often problematic representation of women characters are, to my mind, other unconvincing characteristics of a novel that has, however, some very successful aspects – the depiction of the character of Lamang being one of them.

¹⁹ Differently from much contemporary Nigerian literature, the novel has a rural setting. *Measuring Time* thus partakes of a long-standing tradition of Nigerian village fiction, but also expands the genre by focusing on the Northern part of the country, a “still relatively unexplored territory in English-medium Nigerian fiction” (Adesanmi and Dunton, “Introduction” viii).

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Lamang, “the handsome ravisher” (15), was indeed remembered as a rich, ambitious and self-confident man who did not even glance at his sons after the tragic death of his unloved wife in childbirth, and who did not attend what turned out to be her “lonely” funeral:

most people assumed he was too heartbroken to come, but some, those who still hummed the song about the King of Women, said he might have been with his lover Saraya, and couldn’t be bothered. (18)

It is particularly because of the indifference of an absent father, who gives them everything “*except [his] love*” (68), that the twins dream of leaving their village and becoming soldiers. They will be heroes: men whose fame, Mamo reasons, is anyway the only antidote to being forgotten after his probable early death. But while the healthy LaMamo manages to flee the paternal house and becomes indeed a mercenary, a bout of fever forces Mamo, his alter ego, to stay put.

In the solitary years that follow, Mamo becomes a keen, detached observer of the reality that surrounds him. After coming across Reverend Drinkwater’s *A Brief History of the People of Keti*, he starts developing the project to write a counter-text, a “‘biographical history’ of [the] nation” (180)²⁰: juxtaposing “the stor[ies] of ordinary people, farmers, workers, housewives,” his work is meant to produce “a single overarching story” (195) that, however humble, must not be forgotten. Mamo’s grand project begins to take (a somewhat different) shape as the novel draws to a close. There, he decides that each of the fifteen-to-twenty chapters of

²⁰ As Habila explains in his Acknowledgements, the passages from fictional Reverend Drinkwater’s book that are reported in *Measuring Time* are in fact quotations from Reverend John Stevenson Hall’s *Religion, Myth and Magic in Tangale* – a recently published text on Habila’s ethnic group, the Tangale of north-eastern Nigeria, where Hall worked between 1917 and 1933. The Northern village of Keti can thus be seen as a fictional recreation of Habila’s native Kaltungo.

his book “*Lives and Times*” (14), which the narrator often mentions in retrospect as the narrative progresses, will cover the life of an individual who, in some way or another, has affected him (358). And once again, Lamang’s is the first name Mamo notes down on his chapter list: because, even after spending almost his entire life in his house, “he still didn’t know who his father was, or what had driven him and others like him” (358) to satisfy their ambition of political success.²¹

Measuring Time, recording Mamo’s life – and, inevitably, his endeavours to reconstruct the story of his family and village – becomes thus the fictionalised biography of a biographer.²² Giving voice to its main character’s intellectual preoccupations, the novel is primarily a meditation, at times perhaps exceedingly didactic, on the meanings and practices of historiography and/vs. biographic writing. Habila adopts a metafictional perspective to reflect on the possibilities and potential of the ex-centric “artistic project of revisionism” (Anyokwu 21) he is carrying out. The author thus invites to read the familial, the local and the national as they reciprocally illuminate and mirror one another, in a synecdochical chain where the tiny details of ordinary life are determined by, but also shed light on, the wider local and national history.

In a context in which the familial and the local are so evidently invested

²¹ This unbridgeable fracture between Mamo and Lamang is confirmed in *Measuring Time* both at the level of the plot and at the narratological level. The reader is never given an insight into Lamang’s mind by a third-person narrator who tends to cling to Mamo as the main focaliser. Lamang, for his part, never feels the need to explain to anybody, and certainly not to his son, the reasons behind the controversial choices he has taken in his eventful life. He therefore remains an essentially inscrutable character – both to Mamo and to a reader who can rely only on Mamo’s own interpretation of the events he recounts.

²² As has been noticed in the previous chapter, Habila’s interest for biographical writing emerges also in his *Writing for an Angel*. The author himself, like Mamo, began his writing career with the biography of a local Mai, *Mai Kaltungo*.

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with wider national resonances, an assessment of the confrontational dynamics that take place within the family assumes central importance, in that it might illustrate the notion of the political as represented in the novel. It thus becomes interesting to notice that the main reason explaining the twins' resentment for Lamang, one that develops into a desire to harm him (24), is primarily induced by his unwillingness, or perhaps incapacity, to (re)create a functional family unit after Tabita's death. Lamang is presented as an archetypal uncaring father: he has failed to give his sons protection and love, as his role would imply, and has thus prevented them from living a normal childhood. The depiction of the hostility between the twins and Lamang, beside "examin[ing] the age-old theme of generational conflict" (Anyokwu 6), can thus be viewed as more widely pointing to the dysfunctional character of the postcolonial state-society compact. Just as the derisive, disinterested paterfamilias fails to raise his own children in an environment where they enjoy his protection and care, so Nigerian citizens are *de facto* excluded from the state they are part of.

There are virtually no happy families in the world of *Measuring Time*. The generous Zara, Mamo's beloved girlfriend, used to be severely beaten by her philandering army husband, and after she decided to leave him, her unsympathetic mother let him take away their baby from her while she was at the market (124). The story of Marina, Mamo's aunt and surrogate mother, is similarly the story of a "failed life":

her abusive husband who had infected her with gonorrhoea, and who, when she couldn't give birth, had married a younger woman to whom she had to defer, turning her into a maid in her own

*house. Cleaning, cooking, farming, and there were also the nightly beatings. (22)*²³

Again, uncle Iliya's son Asabar, an alcoholic braggart, is asked to leave his father's house after getting a young woman pregnant and refusing to marry her (183). Even as there are manifestations of support coming from relatives outside the nuclear family, so that Iliya and Marina try to fill the void left in the twins' lives by Lamang and Tabita respectively,²⁴ still there is no doubt that Mamo's "biographical history" of Keti as a microcosm of the nation must have recorded much suffering and conflict. Antagonistic family relationships emerge therefore as a symbol of the country's socio-political disorder – a question that, as will be seen below, is also explicitly thematised in the narration of Lamang's disastrous political career.

The stories of shattered families just recalled emphasise the fact that that Habila's generational conflicts are never simplistically resolved in favour of the younger generation: on the contrary, both parents and children seem to have something to learn from one another, in a dialogue between tradition and innovation that rejects a linear, developmental conception of time. The "children of the postcolony,"²⁵ entrusted with the responsibility to construct a new world or-

²³ This passage, an excerpt from Mamo's biography of his mother, is in italics in the text (20).

²⁴ As noticed above, this reminds the reader of the importance of the kin group in a number of African cultures and can also be viewed as placing hope in those highly moral individuals who struggle to maintain some form of order within a fragmented society notwithstanding the many centrifugal forces that tend to disrupt it. Still, there is no doubt that the nuclear family is presented as the basic social (dis)organising principle within the fictional community of *Measuring Time*.

²⁵ This phrase is meant as a (non-literary) echo of Djiboutian writer Abdourahman Waberi's formulation regarding the Francophone writing produced in Africa by authors born after independence. Mamo and LaMamo were indeed born three years after their country's independence, in 1963 (363).

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der, seem to fail – exactly like their parents: Asabar, in this sense, is of course a case in point, but the same can be said of the twins, if for different reasons. LaMamo, after spending his entire life on the battlefield fighting for various liberation armed groups, returns to the highly idealised ‘home’ he wrote about in all his letters only to be killed while leading an insurrection against the local Mai. He nobly claims that he is fighting for his future wife and child (349), but history crushes his dream of creating a ‘home’ free of tyranny for the new family he is willing to start: Bintou, his fiancée, will have to raise their child on her own. Mamo and Zara’s relationship has been interrupted as well, and even though the novel ends as Mamo is going to her place, the narrative is left suspended and the reader wondering whether they will indeed manage to overcome their old grudges, whether Zara will recover from the severe depression she is suffering, whether she will be able to rebel from her mother’s control.

Measuring Time thus manipulates the conventions of the idealistic *Bildungsroman* as “the traditional conclusive event of social, civil, and self-integration is perpetually postponed” (Slaughter, *Human Rights, Inc.* 215) – at times to the point of becoming an impossibility. It is thus relevant that none of the new generation’s family stories end in a marriage – something that would of course sanction the restoration of social order and the individual’s incorporation within such order. As Franco Moretti has famously remarked explaining why the traditional *Bildungsroman* recurrently, and almost necessarily, ended in marriage,

from the late eighteenth century on, marriage becomes the model for a new type of social contract: one no longer sealed by forces located outside of the individual (such as status), but founded on a sense of ‘individual obligation.’ [...] It is not only the foundation of the family that is at stake, but the ‘pact’ between the individual and the world, that reciprocal ‘consent’ which finds in the double ‘I do’ of the wedding ritual an unsurpassed symbolic condensation. (22)

But unions, reconciliations and (re)births, forever expected, do not find their way into the text: Habila imagines no perfect marriage “as a metaphor for the social contract” (22), and even Bintou’s pregnancy remains, as it were, ‘suspended.’ Similarly, although the narrator tells the reader that Mamo will complete his book in the years that follow,²⁶ “in the narrative proper this never occurs; the biography he is hired to write for the Mai is never written and the story of Ketu is never told” (Krishnan, “Biafra” 191). It is also for this lack of an ending fictionalising some form of restoration of a harmonious familial context that the novel can be seen as pointing to the lack of inclusiveness to which the Nigerian (non-)citizens are subjected in their being simultaneously included and excluded from a dysfunctional, divided country that is emphatically not an “imagined community,” as Benedict Anderson would say. The realisation of the characters’ dreams, the completion of their *Bildung* and thus their incorporation as right-and-duty bearing units within the state remain so uncertain as to prevent their narrativisation.

In this context, the figure of Lamang emerges as the most emblematic of the failed promise of democratic, inclusive participation that should have been granted with the end of colonial – and later, democratic – rule. As noticed above, this does not only derive from the tropological implications of his role as an uncaring father, but also from his disastrous career as a politician during the Second Republic. In 1982, against his brother’s advice, Lamang indeed abandons a highly lucrative business as a cattle merchant in order to run for the general elections that will take place the following year (84). Habila thus fictionalises the 1983 electoral campaign and the elections that followed, which were massively

²⁶ At least on two occasions, the narrator also reproduces excerpts from Mamo’s work (20-22, 135-136).

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rigged and would lead, in a few months' time, to the coup d'état that ushered in the Buhari regime. There is no ideological commitment at the basis of the political confrontation depicted in *Measuring Time*: the dissimilarities between the two competing political factions, the fictional "Victory Party" and "New Victory Party," amount to a slightly different denomination that ironically suggests a common desire for political power, for "victory." Desire for power and lack of ideological commitment characterises also Lamang's own behaviour: he leaves the Victory Party twice, first after being stolen the idea around which his successful electoral campaign had been centred (135-137), and then (and this time, he threatens, for good) after being denied a decent post within the party's ranks. He then accepts the New Victory Party's delegates' offer and contests the elections as their chairman (181).

The brief democratic interlude of the Second Republic is evidently presented as a Foucauldian war by other means in a country where struggle for political authority keeps on being organised as a competition in which force is never abandoned as a regulatory medium. It is Asabar who becomes an epitome of this when, as a leader of the VP (/NVP) youth wing, he takes to dressing "in a camouflage combat jacket and trousers and thick army boots" (113), becoming "an instant general" whose "own personal army" (183) fights against the party's "enemies" (182). On the election day Asabar, alongside some fellow thugs, is shot by the police during a failed, dope-induced attempt to ambush the election officials carrying the ballots boxes that would sanction the victory of the VP. While Asabar remains paralysed, Lamang is jailed for election rigging and is released a week later, looking small and bruised (211).

It is from this day that Mamo watches Lamang "gradually lose his swag-

ger.” Deserted (yet again) by friends and fellow party members in a state of mobile political alliances, he is portrayed as he pathetically waits for a welcoming delegation from the NVP headquarters, “pretending to be reading or listening to the radio” (212). Lamang’s failure prompts the author to a more careful exploration of his character. His double “abandonment” (212) and political delusions are an ironic nemesis by means of which this figure of paternal disinterest metamorphoses from a potential allegory of abandoning sovereignty and political corruption to a more psychologically complex, if still for the most part inscrutable, one: that of an unsuccessful old man who suffers and pays for the many mistakes he has committed in his life. The stroke that hits him is the last straw signifying the decline of the ‘Lamang era’: this once vain “ravisher” now often “falls asleep in his chair, his head hanging toward his chest, a trickle of saliva making a thin line down his chin” (214). And yet, even as Mamo and his father begin to “tentatively open up to each other” (215) in apparent reconciliation, their relationship is bound to turn sour again with the spiteful confession of old lies. It is in such a context that, in a moment of vengeance, Mamo gives to his father the letters he had received from his brother over the years and had never shown to him:

“All this while . . .” Lamang whispered hoarsely.

How does it feel? Mamo wanted to scream. He wanted to reach out and grab his father’s heart and break it into bits.

Lamang quietly retired for the night. (220)

The following day, aunt Marina discovers that Lamang has died in his sleep, his arms folded over his chest: “[o]n the table beside the lamp were LaMamo’s letters, and on top of them were his father’s reading glasses” (220). Perhaps reading

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LaMamo's letters has really broken Lamang's heart, satisfying Mamo's desire for a death he has dreamed of his entire life but had never the courage to seek actively. At this stage, however, hardly can this death be read symbolically as an emancipatory one: Lamang is no longer the self-centred King of Women, a metaphor for the abandoning sovereign – or for a Freudian primal father. As the allegory crumbles, there remains simply a man defeated by time. The conflict between father and son is therefore left essentially unresolved: even as a biographer, Mamo is presented as he immortalises the worst moments of Lamang's life "in the starkest words possible" – as if attempting, the narrator muses, to exact some form of vengeance upon him even after his death (135). And yet, Mamo's book is no longer written in order to get immortality through fame. It rather becomes an attempt to make sense of the disjointed times that have been lived, endeavouring to produce some form of unity through aesthetic systematisation.

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The texts examined thus far, as has been seen, prevent the achievement of a sense of narrative closure: Mamo's book project is only incipient when the novel draws to a close, and in the conclusion of Adichie's text the release of Jaja is said to be imminent but is in fact never fictionalised. The fate of the sixteen-year-old protagonist of Chris Abani's novel *GraceLand*, Elvis Oke, is similarly left uncertain in a much-commented ending that leaves the narrative, as it were, "suspended" in a quintessentially liminal locus.²⁷ Sitting in a waiting lounge at Murtala Muhammed

²⁷ Critic Sarah K. Harrison has recently written a pointed essay on Abani's "formal and thematic elaboration of the 'suspension' leitmotif" (95) in *GraceLand* as metaphorically suggesting the protagonist's incomplete *Bildung* and the instability of the postcolonial nation-state.

International Airport, Elvis is ready to leave Lagos for good and board a plane to the US on his friend Redemption's forged passport. In this yet unrealised attempt to leave a metropolitan slum where he cannot aspire to a "full and happy"²⁸ life for a country where his survival is admittedly far from obvious (318), Elvis's flight is configured as a voyage between (either certain, or potential) camps – a transnational search for human rights whose success is in doubt. What is more, the in-between "non-place"²⁹ of the airport in which the conclusion is staged is a threatening site of violence too, as it participates of the "blind, unreasoning power" (306) Elvis has come to know all too well without promising certain release from it. "[S]oldiers, armed for battle, [crawl] everywhere like an ant infestation" (319), asking travellers to inspect their passports, "even though [they] ha[ve] no legal right to do this," and forcing them to move from one seat to the other for no reason but alleged suspiciousness.

Primarily set in the Lagos shantytown of Maroko in 1983, but also moving backwards in time to the rural Afikpo of the 1970s-early 1980s, Abani's *GraceLand* tells the story of teenage Elvis, a boy who struggles to survive through increasingly ethically problematic means in the "half slum, half paradise" (7) context of the informal settlement after his relocation there with his father. Sunday Oke, a former district education inspector, has proved unable to cope with his wife Beatrice's death from breast cancer in the mid-1970s. In the flashback chapters that alternate with the main narrative line in the first part of the book, it emerges that what must have been for some time a harmonious family is increasingly fractured as Sunday

²⁸ Abani's formulation recalls the often mentioned teleology of the "free and full development" of the individual's personality expressed in many human rights documents.

²⁹ George Benko has defined the "non-place" as a site "devoid of the symbolic expressions of identity, relations and history" (23).

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resorts to violence in an attempt to reassert his role as the head of a household that is falling apart. Elvis's female relatives function, at least in some measure, as comforting, centripetal centres of order: Oye, Elvis's Scottish-accented grandmother, who manages "to hold a circle of sanity" in Sunday's compound (176); Felicia, the aunt whose reproaches, Oye tells her grandson, are "trying to make you forget tha' you lost your mother so young" (172); and even Efua, the young cousin who consoles Elvis in times of common distress – although, Elvis later muses, he should have been the one taking care of her (315).

As Elvis, Efua and her older brother Godfrey are however soon to experiment, these women's efforts are insufficient to grant the family's children protection from the abuses of the sovereign fathers – Sunday and, even more evidently, his brother Joseph. In this context, the fact that both of them are widowed is relevant, as their violence finds little or no maternal contrapuntal restraint: as has been remarked above, this narrative choice configures a patriarchal society where the obliteration of the feminine is one of the major causes of the social disorder in which the country is steeped.³⁰ Indeed, the maternal deaths in the text can be read as textual correlatives for the disenfranchisement and invisibility suffered by women in modern Igbo society – a condition that, as has been noticed by scholars such as Ifi Amadiume and Nkiri Iwechia Nzegwu, has its origins in the colonial imposition of patriarchal, Judeo-Christian gender norms in a culture where gender

³⁰ While the figure of Oye, Beatrice's mother, has clearly the function of restraining Sunday's excesses, Joseph's (way more brutal) violence remains unchecked in the narrative. The question regarding the crumbling of the family following the death of the mother is addressed directly in the novel when Beatrice, already severely ill, asks Oye whether she thinks "dere is something strange with Joseph and Efua's relationship? Since his wife has died he hasn't been right. Why do all de wives die young in dis family?" Her reflections remain however unanswered as Oye, asking "Which question do you want me to answer, lass?" (38), recognises only implicitly the enormity of the issues she is being faced with.

attitudes had previously been more flexible than is now generally acknowledged.³¹ This process does of course recall Pierre Bourdieu's observations regarding the structures of masculine domination, which are "*the product of an incessant (and therefore historical) labour of reproduction*, to which singular agents (including men, with weapons such as physical violence and symbolic violence) and institutions – families, the church, the educational system, the state – contribute" (34). In the context of the narrative, the fathers' efforts to maintain a presumed social 'order' that reasserts a patriarchal ideology are increasingly presented as deplorable, in that they sustain a culture of violence that is presented as one of the major causes for the dysfunctional character of the state itself. For example, a declaredly masculine (219) sense of honour for a paternal name that "is associated with failure" (188) but must nonetheless remain untainted at any cost becomes the reason for having Godfrey, the unrespectable son and troublemaker, killed by the distant cousin Innocent. The many quotidian manifestations of hyper-masculine brutality the reader is confronted with might thus be viewed as reflecting a tenet of modern Igbo patriarchy. Such manifestations, moreover, are certainly amplified through a defensive mechanism meant to compensate for the relative erosion of the paterfamilias' authority in a society where the father often can no longer exercise the power to provide and, even more importantly, there occurs the ascendance of a culture of militarism. The latter, "rest[ing] on an ethic of masculinity that assigns a large place to the violent and public expression of acts of virility," prompts an intensification of the brutal assertion of masculine power also in the domestic

³¹ For example, Amadiume remarks, they could purchase wives and achieve certain forms of political empowerment as male daughters or female husbands (*Male Daughters*). For an excellent summary of the recent debates regarding the effacement of the feminine following the advent of colonialism in Igboland, see Krishnan, "Mami Wata."

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sphere, in order to counter the threat of feminisation and disorder perceived by a father who is comparatively delegitimised as a social and political agent (cf. Mbembe, “On Politics” 326-328; cf. Ouma).

It is in the light of these comments that the portrayal of the first vicious beating Elvis receives can be examined. The episode takes place one year after Beatrice’s death, when Elvis, in an attempt to catch his distraught father’s attention, runs to meet him, proud of his appearance after Felicia and some friends of hers have jokingly plaited his hair and put some lipstick on him.

Sunday stopped and squinted as Elvis approached, face changing in slow degrees from amusement to shock and finally to rage.

Elvis ran straight into the first blow, which nearly took his head clean off. [...] Too shocked to react, still out of breath from his sprint, Elvis gulped for air as his father choked him. Suddenly, Oye towered beside them. Sunday glanced at the steel of her eyes and dropped Elvis like a rag. [...]

“No son of mine is going to grow up as a homosexual! Do you hear me?!” he shouted at [Felicia]. (61-62)

The scene later assumes quasi-farcical tones as Oye, believing Sunday is threatening her with a razor, “pincer[s] her fingers into a vise around his scrotum” – attacking his *male* body only to discover that he simply wanted to shave Elvis’s head. Tension is finally relieved as the boy relaxes into his father’s careful grip, the pull of the razor soothing him “like the rough lick of a cat’s tongue” (63).

“Stupid child, make sure you don’t fall asleep,” his father said gently. “For your own good,” he continued under his breath. “I’m only doing this for your own good. It’s not easy to be a man. Dese are trying times. Not easy.” (63)

Narrative tension is instead never released in a passage, set some time afterwards, that recounts Sunday’s reaction when Elvis tells him that Efua has been raped by her father Joseph, in an act suggesting, through the violation of an essential taboo,

the absolute disintegration of any form of familial and social harmony and the moral bankruptcy that goes hand in hand with it. On hearing Elvis's words, Sunday menaces his son pointing at his temple his old service revolver – an obvious metaphor for phallic domination which, differently from the razor in the scene commented on above, is here meant to be employed as a proper weapon. The petrified Elvis, accused of being a “stinking liar,” will be able to leave the room only after the disturbing description of his incontinent terror (145).

Sunday's unwillingness to acknowledge the need to check and restrain the excesses of his brother, the 'sovereign' male adult, over his 'subject' Efu, emerges in the novel as a self-defeating stance that will lead to furthering the collapse of the family itself. Elvis will be indeed subjected as well to his uncle's abuse (196-199), in a scene that is of course in clear contrast with Sunday's anxieties about homosexuality. When in Maroko, years later, Elvis reveals to his father that he too was raped by Joseph, Sunday's wordless reaction implicitly marks the recognition of his failure as a paterfamilias – a recognition that, however, does not prompt a reconciliation that is by now presented as unattainable:

Sunday stared at Elvis, mouth open, searching for the possibility of a lie. But there was none. The sound, when it came from him, was nothing Elvis recognized. It was a howl. All animal, all death. It propelled Elvis off the veranda. This was not the comfort he wanted, needed. He could deal with all his father's anger, but not this. [...] As he walked, he realized, the only way out of this life was Redemption. (189)

The fact that the awareness of common pain prompts an infuriate, animal reaction that separates rather than unites signals the impossibility for the author to find what, in an interview with Amanda Aycock, he has called “the language that allows [...] tenderness amongst men.” Even as *GraceLand* configures a constant at-

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tempt to bridge the gap of silence that keeps father and son apart, looking for “a way that masculinity can be obtained through tenderness, rather than through [...] violence” (9), such an aesthetic and ethical reinscription of the masculine, one Elvis himself painfully strives for, is destined not to succeed in the space of the narrative.

Similarly to the scenes of violation analysed in Chapter Two, Elvis’s rape has the effect of problematising any straightforward divide between the ethical opposites of innocence and guilt: Elvis, whose reaction to the sight of his cousin’s rape was a problematic mixture of “hatred,” “revulsion” and “lust” (64-65), becomes a victim of the very same violence that had been a problematic source of pleasure. By fictionalising the victimisation of a (potential) victimiser – or rather, of a character who is aware he has somehow been complicit in the abuse perpetrated against his cousin – the novel explores the ambivalent agency of individuals who are simultaneously victims and (potential) agents of bodily exploitation. *GraceLand* also investigates how similar patterns of disenfranchisement and conniving exploitation are configured at the larger scale of the state, particularly through the encounters between the protagonist and the Colonel, an epitome of Lagosian military omnipotence. The latter, who has almost had Elvis killed for bumping into him in a crowded nightclub, and who, towards the end of the narrative, will supervise Elvis’s torture following his participation in a pro-democracy performance, is also at the head of the illegal network Elvis himself was part of up till some time before – even as he, differently from his subaltern, is not aware of this. Heads of State and family heads, thus, do not *recognise* their subjects, they do not recognise them as persons entitled to the protection that should derive from their inclusion in the city, or in the family itself. Yet they keep reasserting their owner-

ship of them, reclaiming their power over their lives. In this context, Abani presents therefore the masculine subject as both complicit with and a victim of masculine domination (cf. Bourdieu 69), in the private as well as in the public sphere. This is not only true of Elvis, who is painfully aware of this apparent paradox and keeps interrogating its disturbing ethical implications – implications he cannot accommodate with (65, 311). Sunday, too, occupies such an undecidable ethical position, as his encounters with a sovereign violence he opposes, but reproduces and excuses as a paterfamilias to the point of self-destruction, will result in political failure and, later, in an ambivalent death.

As was the case in *Measuring Time* and *Purple Hibiscus*, in *GraceLand* too the crumbling of private harmony reflects the democratic fiasco of the Nigerian state – a parallel that is made explicit through the narration of Sunday's political debacle when, persuaded by some fellow Afikpo villagers, he resigns his job and runs for the National Assembly elections.³² Differently from Lamang's, Sunday's commitment does not seem to be motivated only by personal ambition. Instead, his grassroots campaign configures a dissensual reaction against a system where economic power, and brutality, either determine or impose political credibility by force – an attitude that will characterise also his more successful, but ultimately suicidal, leadership during the resistance to the 1983 Maroko eviction.³³ Sunday retrieves some

³² Albeit taking place in 1981 in the novel, the first general elections after the military stepped down from power were held in 1979. Abani thus conflates the 1979 and the 1983 elections in a single event. Moreover, since the Second Republic in the text is said to last only a few months (204), it becomes clear that even if set in 1983, when the country was still, at least nominally, democratic, *GraceLand* is meant to fictionalise the years of military rule that followed. For a concise analysis of the political events of the Second Republic, see Osaghae, ch. 4.

³³ The slum was evicted in 1982, in 1983 and, finally, in 1990, with the forced ejection of 300,000 people. For a discussion of the causes and consequences of the policies of forced

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of “his fire, some direction” (216) after his candidacy, and democratic hope even spurs the ephemeral establishment of a minimal family bond as he begins to spend time with Elvis, “even if it was to ask questions about what he had read” in the newspaper (176). Sunday’s defeat in favour of Chief Okonkwo, however, signals the unfeasibility of his project of a ‘non-warring’ politics. Future voters are in fact only momentarily scared by the trucks and helicopters that the parties Sunday opposes use during their campaigns, even as they tellingly remind them of the reality of the civil war they experienced not so long before (178). Realising that the helicopters and trucks are loaded with the gifts and coins with which their votes will be bought, the villagers choose to ignore the implicit threat of a form of politics that is presented, both aesthetically and factually, as a war-like activity, and grant their support to the highest bidder. Political participation is thereby reconfigured as a lucrative, uncontrollable game that leaves behind not human beings, but fragmented bodies, “dust-teared eyes, torn clothes and an arena swept clean by scabbling fingers” (178). In this contest, Sunday’s inevitable failure sanctions, once and for all, his family’s disruption: his impossible aspiration to citizenship rights as a sovereign individual is indeed reflected in his ultimate incapability to keep together his private kingdom, as he decides to leave Afikpo and move to Lagos with his son. As Oye says, “[n]ot every hoose is a hame” (101): and Sunday’s non-homely houses, first in Afikpo and then in Maroko, are presented as dystopian sites of corrupted relations, whose actual and metaphorical foundations become increasingly shaky with the relocation in the Lagos swamp, where shacks are often “made of sheets and corrugated iron roofing and plastic held together by

eviction in the country that concentrates in particular on the infamous 1990 demolition of Maroko, see Agbola and Jinadu.

hope” (4). By means of a tropology of instability and decay, the Maroko shanty becomes thus a symbol of relationships that cannot be reconstructed, while of course hinting at the precarious living conditions in the slums of a city whose “supernova growth” (Davis 8) was not accompanied by the development of adequate infrastructural and sanitary facilities.³⁴

As Ashley Dawson has observed, the slum Elvis and Sunday inhabit – one that the author often refers to as a “ghetto” (7 *passim*) – has the excremental contours of a “surplus city” inhabited by “the violently evacuated waste products of today’s world economy. There is no official scenario for the reincorporation of this surplus humanity” (“Surplus City” 21).³⁵ And indeed in *GraceLand*, human beings are Baumanian “wasted lives,” preferably hidden from view,³⁶ and often reduced to “merchandise” (230) within a globalised informal economy whose practices, as Elvis’s progressive katabasis into the city’s underworld shows, are often criminal in character.³⁷ Elvis is soon forced to abandon his unprofitable dream of eking out a living as an impersonator of his namesake, the King of Memphis his

³⁴ In the 1980s, Lagos grew “twice as fast as the Nigerian population, while its urban economy was in deep recession” (Davis 14). Inhabited by 300,000 people in 1950, according to one estimate Lagos might reach 23 million inhabitants by 2013 (5-6).

³⁵ The idea of “surplus humanity” is drawn from Mike Davis’s *Planet of Slums*, a sociological account of the living conditions in the slums of the Global South. See in particular Chapter 6.

³⁶ In this respect, Davis writes that “[i]n the urban Third World, poor people dread high-profile international events – conferences, dignitary visits, sporting events, beauty contests, and international festivals – that prompt authorities to launch crusades to clean up the city: slum-dwellers know that they are the ‘dirt’ or ‘blight’ that their governments prefer the world not to see” (104).

³⁷ The commodification to which the human is subjected when cast outside the boundaries of humanity is one of the themes that will be analysed in the following chapter, through a reading of works such as Abani’s novella *Becoming Abigail*, Chika Unigwe’s novel *On Black Sisters’ Street*, and Sefi Atta’s *Swallow*.

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mother loved.³⁸ After being offered chocolate for one of his performances by a “Gargantuan” American tourist sunbathing in Bar Beach (12-13), the boy will accept his friend Redemption’s offers for occupations whose exploitative character, in a climactic succession, becomes increasingly evident. He first works as a gigolo, and then starts wrapping cocaine in condoms that will be smuggled to the US by drug mules (110), comforted at the idea, of course not quite exact, that “no one died for it” (115). Redemption, perhaps unawares, finally involves him in a highly profitable business that turns out to be nothing less than organ trafficking. But Elvis has not got what it takes to become an “original area boy” like his friend (55), and finds himself heaving at the edge of the road when, opening a cooler to look for refreshments, he is confronted with the gory sight of human heads, hearts and livers. The drugged children they were escorting, Redemption advances after their escape, were probably bound to be transported abroad, where their organs, freshly harvested, would be sold to “rich white people so dey can save their children or wife or demselves. [...] Dis world,” he adds, “operate different way for different people” (242): an insider’s comment on those exclusionary global practices that construct the human differentially, producing, to paraphrase Judith Butler, bodies that don’t matter, human beings who are excluded from humanity itself and are thus declared expendable – or, rather, ‘purchasable’ in the form of spare body parts.

But such a right to consign to death with impunity is an operation that is no longer – if it ever was – the biopolitical prerogative of sovereign power. On the

³⁸ This was an activity that allowed him, by manipulating and queering the Presley aesthetic, “to circumvent the constraints of heteronormativity” that so painfully prevent Elvis from negotiating freely his own sexuality (Omelsky 89).

contrary, the Lagos of the Colonel is a site where biopower is diffracted at all levels of society into manifestations of violence where private and public interests are often inextricable, in “a confusion between power and fact, between public affairs and private government” (Mbembe, “At the Edge” 260) that establishes a mobile hierarchy of unexpected connivances. This process, as noticed in Chapter One, had been clearly visible even in a number of first-wave texts on the Nigerian Civil War. Fictionalising the biopolitical activity *par excellence*, the works examined in that context might have been expected to describe primarily ‘orthodox’ biopolitical relationships between a sovereign power and subjects called to arms for its existence. On the contrary, they often showed how both sovereign and non-sovereign actors, Ken Saro-Wiwa’s “bellymen,” employed their power in order to satisfy their own personal interests. This phenomenon acquires evidence also in *GraceLand*, a text where state power, still pronounced and recognisable, is accompanied by multiple non-state forms of necropower – all of which contribute to the portrayal of a society involved in a *de facto*, if informal, war with itself.

The Maroko forced eviction, when the slum is razed to the ground in a chaos of detritus and bulldozed bodies, constitutes a paradigmatic manifestation of absolute military sovereignty, sheer force of fire and sword. Dubbed “Operation Clean the Nation” and defined in the newspapers as “a simultaneous attack on de centers of poverty and crime,” the clearance of this “pus-ridden eyesore on de face of de nation’s capital” (247) is of course not meant to address the chronic reasons for the poverty and crime that the shantytown is indeed rife with. It will rather, as Sunday says, “cover it all under one pile of rubbish,” thus creating the perfect, cemeterial foundations for a “beachside millionaire’s paradise” (248).³⁹

³⁹ This stark image of wealth resting, physically, on death, reflects of course a tenet of

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The distance from the ordered society of affluent Lagos and the Maroko dumping site is no longer large enough, and “the poisonous effluvia of social decomposition” (Bauman 78) arising from it have reached areas they were not supposed to. The wasted lives inhabiting it is thus compelled to move farther away, to one of the many other slums that punctuate the metropolis. This “eyesore” must be, and indeed is, erased from the map. Redemption was thus quite optimistic the night when, looking from Maroko at the adjacent well-off area of Ikoyi, he expressed his love for a city that mocked the rich: “Because though they hate us, de rich still have to look at us. Try as they might, we don’t go away” (137). History, in fact, proved him wrong.

Yet, Abani evokes the justness of demanding citizenship rights even from within a site that is excluded from the polis and is reclaimed only to be destroyed. The Maroko residents’ first attempt to prevent the bulldozing of their homes under Sunday’s leadership does nothing but delay with burning barricades the inevitable, apocalyptic defeat that will follow. But when bulldozers and policemen return, Sunday refuses to leave his house. While he is waiting for death on his veranda, narrative realism is interrupted as he realises he is in the company of Beatrice’s ghost and of a leopard – the totem of his forefathers, which has joined him in this time of need and attempts to convince him to either leave or, at least, “die like a man.” Once, the leopard explains, “people were close to their totems, who infused them with their own special attributes, both physical and metaphysical. Lycanthropy was not unusual in those days when the ancient laws were kept” (287). Even as Sunday chases the two spirits away, in his last breath he does in-

capitalism – one which Bauman has condensed writing that “[f]or something to be created, something else must be consigned to waste” (21).

deed metamorphose into his totem animal, exacting a vengeance against state terror even as his human body is shot and crushed by the bulldozer:

Sunday sprang with a roar at the 'dozer. The policeman let off a shout and shot, and Sunday fell in a slump before the 'dozer, its metal threads cracking his chest like a timber box as it went straight into the wall of his home. Sunday roared, leapt out of his body and charged at the back of the policeman, his paw delivering a fatal blow to the back of the policeman's head. With a rasping cough, Sunday disappeared into the night. (287)

This magical realist scene does not only, as one commentator has rightly written, constitute a moment “of redemption for Sunday by the forces of the natural world of his forefathers in an otherwise bleak scenario of state-sanctioned urban destruction and violence” (Dannenberg 47). Portraying a predatory response to the equally predatory terror of the state, whose (partial) defeat is sanctioned through the metamorphic animalisation of a man whose right to be human has in fact been questioned, it also aims at restoring “the ancient laws,” an ironic form of poetic justice. This (literally) animal reaction may thus be viewed as a postcolonial, neo-Fanonian recreation of the inevitably violent nature of the subaltern's response to dehumanising oppression – a response whereby the formerly oppressed reclaim their agency, history and, through them, their dignity and self-respect.

However, one cannot but notice that the beauty of Sunday's rebellion retains evident connotations of undecidability. This is not only due to the obvious fact that the slum, like Sunday's house, are in the end razed to the ground. What even more clearly undermines the emancipatory potential of Sunday's act is that it remains unintelligible to the other characters in the novel. If justice can be imagined in the slums of the global South, it is one that narratively seems to demand a magical realist mode. But the “transgressive and subversive qualities”

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(Bowers 63) that critics have generally recognised as inherent in the genre are here dramatically diminished in that Sunday is the only character in the novel who participates in the magical realist world the author conjures up. This episode is one after which there does not remain “a dead man, and a free man,” as Jean-Paul Sartre famously wrote commenting on Fanon’s discussion of anti-colonial violence (22). On the contrary, there remain two human corpses and a leopard that has survived by reconnecting with the wisdom of the ancestors. However, when Elvis returns to destroyed Maroko, he cannot figure out what happened to the policeman, whose body inexplicably looks as if it has been “mauled by some large predator,” while the alleged death of the father provokes nothing but uneasy “relief” (305). Although the protagonist is now able to “read the city, seeing signs not normally visible” (306), Sunday’s survival in the form of his totem animal is forever effaced, hidden even from his son’s perceptive gaze.

If the Maroko clearance represents a manifestation of violence as sovereign prerogative, still the Lagos of *GraceLand* is a city where the state is often absent, its necropower privatised. The diffraction and privatisation of certain sovereign rights are ironically suggested through the reference to a ritual that one of Elvis’s mentors, Caesar Augustus Anyanwu, known as “the *King* of the Beggars,” likes to perform. Sitting dangerously “on the pedestrian path of the freeway bridge, legs dangling over [the slum of] Bridge City below,” the King loves to look down “at his subjects, his domain” (116) – at a place that is described later in the novel as one where “the only thing to look forward to was surviving the evening and making it through the night” (309). This is, of course, hardly a “domain” to be proud of: and as the text makes clear, pseudo-sovereign, destitute areas such as Bridge City and the many other slums that compose the city are in fact zones of excep-

tion. The implications of the abandonment to which their inhabitants are subjected are exemplified in an emblematic passage recounting the administration of street justice, when a man called Jeremiah, an alleged thief, is stoned by a mob and then baptised in petrol, while a bunch of policemen watch the scene “with bored expressions” (227).

Jeremiah was spinning around in a circle like a broken sprocket, pleading with each face, repeating his name over and over. Instead of loosening the edge of tension by humanizing him, the mantra of his name, with every circle he spun, seemed to wind the threat of violence tighter, drawing the crowd closer in. [...]

“I beg, Peter. You know I no be tief. I beg.”

Peter calmly reached into his pocket and pulled out a cigarette lighter. He flicked it on and stepped back from Jeremiah, dropping the lighter on the tire neck-lace. (225-227)

This scene, which the narrator beautifully describes as “comically biblical, yet purely animal” (225), ends as the man is set ablaze, consigned to death by the crowd of the dispossessed. Such an “animal” rage constitutes another reminder of the problematic interpretation of bare life as coterminous with passive victimhood. As seen in the previous chapters, presuming that the individuals who are denied their rights are necessarily non-agents does not only prevent the recognition of a capacity for violence that is far from erased with disenfranchisement, but also undervalues the resilience that some of them exhibit, their active search for love and happiness. These latter aspects are fictionalised in Abani’s last section, which is set exactly in Bridge City, where Elvis has become a caretaker for younger beggar children and where, in spite of the astonishing urban decay, people – or, at least, some of them – are still capable of compassion and love. Elvis’s inability to accommodate to slum life, to find a place within its complex, shifting hierarchy, is however confirmed once and for all, as he

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falls severely ill and, in an incongruent reversal of roles, is attended by the twelve-year-old girl, Blessing, he should be protecting. Following Redemption's offer, Elvis thus accepts his fake passport, coming to terms with the simple, but painful, truth that he is not bound to survive in his own country.

The open ending of the novel is one that, deliberately ambiguous, problematizes the possibility of upward social mobility even as it presents it as an option. It is by no means certain that the US, portrayed ambivalently in the text as a country where dreams may come true (25-26), as the racist place of lynching (319), and as a threatening, but simultaneously fascinating, symbol of global capitalism and exploitation, will grant Elvis, finally "reborn in Redemption" (Krishnan, "Beyond Tradition" 102), the full and happy life he has not attained in Nigeria.⁴⁰ What is more, the novel, while remarking the impossible incorporation of the individual in the Nigerian state, does not offer easy solutions to the impasse that such an exclusion seems to produce in terms of human rights protection. Indeed, contrary to Sarah K. Harrison, I would argue that *GraceLand* does not conform *in toto* to what Joseph Slaughter, drawing from Jacques Rancière, has termed "dissensual" *Bildungsroman*. Rancière, analysing how French women were able to make public claims for inclusion into a regime of rights after the Revolution, has written that, although disenfranchised, they "could demonstrate that they were deprived of the rights they had, thanks to the Declaration of Rights. And they could demonstrate, through their public action, that they had the rights that the constitution denied to them, that they could enact those rights." They could thereby "put together a rela-

⁴⁰ Many commentators agree in noticing the ambivalence of an ending that, even as offering chances of survival to the protagonist, decidedly resists aesthetic closure (Harrison; Krishnan "Beyond Tradition"; Dannenberg). For opposite readings, see Adéèkó and Andrade.

tion of inclusion and a relation of exclusion,” acting dissensually “as subjects that did not have the rights that they had and had the rights that they had not” (304). Similarly, Slaughter argues, the postcolonial *Bildungsroman* is often dissensual in character, as it “insists upon the abstract legitimacy of human rights principles and expands the effective compass of their universality” (182). However, even as *GraceLand* certainly laments the frustration of incorporation of the individual in the Nigerian state, it does not explicitly narrativise a rearticulation of the category of the universal. In other words, Elvis’s positioning at the end of the novel does not quite attempt such a rearticulation through the “performative contradiction” that occurs when “one who is excluded from the universal, and yet belongs to it nevertheless, speaks from a split situation of being at once authorized and deauthorized,” reclaiming a right to effective inclusion (Butler, “Universality” 48-50). In fact, Elvis’s flight circumvents, rather than challenges, the protagonist’s disenfranchisement – and it does so through illegality, through a Nigerian passport with a fake American Visa stamped on it. The fact that Elvis’s only hope rests on illegality, on an attempt at mimicking inclusion rather than demanding it, on an act that does not expose the limits of the existing norm but rather aims to assimilate to it, constitutes a bleak commentary on the current limits of International Human Rights Law in a world where freedom of movement is increasingly limited, or precluded *tout court*, to a large portion of humanity that is thereby condemned to death. This conclusion thus structurally emphasises how the protagonist has to renounce political dissensus in order to survive, even as it implicitly highlights the necessity to come to terms with the paradoxes of a regime that is founded on exclusion.

Notwithstanding these problematic aspects regarding the reasons and means

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through which movement becomes possible in the novel, the author does nevertheless invite to read Elvis's journey as a potential source of grace. This does not so much derive from what his destination might have in store for him, but from the very possibility of transit, of transformation, that Elvis has been offered following an unexpected act of (illegal) generosity. Similarly to those criminals of old Oye told him about, who were buried standing up, a flowering stake driven through their heads, Elvis's rebirth, ambiguous as it certainly is, has given him "a chance to be useful, to feed fruit-bearing trees" (21) in the life that might follow.

4.2. *Revenant*: the Nigerian Civil War between past and present

In novels that present post-war Nigeria as steeped in a condition of perpetual exception, it is highly significant that the memory of the most traumatic moment of declared emergency in the country's history keeps resurfacing, its threatening presence looming over those who have outlived it. Passing references to the Nigerian Civil War can be found virtually in all contemporary Nigerian literature and, as seen in the first chapter, in the last decade the conflict has also been increasingly thematised in both fiction and non-fiction texts. In *GraceLand* and *Measuring Time*, narratives set in a post-war Nigeria that, as had been predicted in a number of first-wave works, is struggling to survive the peace, war, and the Biafran conflict in particular, is a powerful leitmotif, which finds its way into the text through strategies that deserve careful analysis. In this context, seemingly minor episodes achieve great symbolic prominence and require to talk about the war, addressing the divisiveness and political turmoil that have not abated since 1970, and reclaiming an awareness of the culture of excess still dangerously inscribed in Nigeria's

contemporaneity. I am referring to the narrative threads regarding the lives of two emblematic characters, Mamo's uncle Haruna and Elvis's cousin Innocent. Former child soldiers, their unexpected return or disturbing disappearance, years after the end of the war, in different guises reproduce the silencing governmental policies that have consigned the event to oblivion, while also suggesting that the carnage of the late 1960s is but one, if certainly emblematic, manifestation of a more general continuum of violence that has blurred the distinction between war and peace.

It is 1977 when Mamo, recovering from his latest bout of fever on Lamang's veranda, sees an unknown man approaching.

The man looked wild, his hair was knotty and thick, his beard and moustache joined at the sides of the mouth to form a circle. His clothes were tattered and looked as if he had been living in them for a long time. His lips, protruding from the hair-fringed O, were badly chapped and they bled when he spoke. (43-44)

Presuming he is a beggar, Mamo rummages in his pocket, looking for a coin. But the unknown man identifies himself, pronouncing some of the very few words he articulates during his stay at Lamang's place, before hanging himself to the flame tree some months afterwards. He is Lamang's younger brother, Haruna, who had left Keti ten years earlier, as a sixteen-year-old, to join the federal forces, and had been considered deceased since. Mamo offers him a bowl of water, and the man drinks, shaking, leaving "a spot of blood on the rim" (44). "It was," the twin later reflects, "like a dead man returning to life" (45). In the days that follow, the past is "re-created" (49) by Haruna's relatives and former comrades, and Haruna, often simply called "Soja," is feted like a hero – so much so that the twins decide they will pursue a career as soldiers as well, the only way, they

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muse, to have their deeds forever engraved in the memories of their fellow villagers. While the others talk, however, Haruna remains silent, an enigmatic presence whose voice is only heard on the nights when bits of memory come back to him: “then all night he’d pace up and down in his room, talking loudly as if there was another person in the room with him, and then finally there would be silence” (53).

It is 1980 when Abani’s Innocent, another former child soldier who had enrolled in the Biafran army’s Boys’ Brigade as a thirteen-year-old but who, differently from Haruna, had come back after the end of the war, calls Elvis in the dead of night, a tortured look on his face, asking for some food (209). Elvis’s cousin Godfrey, the troublemaker, has disappeared some time before – on the same day in which Elvis “thought he saw Innocent looking in the bushes outside. He looked unkempt, and even from a distance it was easy to see the blood on his clothes. Just then his father’s car nosed out of the gate, and Innocent vanished” (174). Godfrey’s murder, as the reader at this point is aware of, had in fact been commissioned to Innocent by Sunday and Joseph, an honour killing meant to preserve the family’s supposed good name. Innocent, sitting in Elvis’s kitchen, is now shooting “terrified looks” around the room and after a while, with a sigh, he says: “I used to be a soldier in de Biafran war” (209) – an (of course, only apparent) narrative *non sequitur* that is conducive to a third-person flashback recounting an episode of Innocent’s soldier life. As the narrative returns to the present and Elvis attempts to inquire about his cousin Godfrey’s fate, the former soldier “dashe[s] out of the kitchen into the rain and darkness.” Elvis, “[p]etrified, [...] stared into the nothingness in the corner of the room that had spooked Innocent” (215). From this day, no one in Afikpo will see Innocent again.

Although it is undeniable that Haruna and Innocent are two very different figures, their life trajectories essentially opposite (as the former is centripetal, the latter centrifugal), the two incidents sketched here are no doubt comparable. This is not only due to the fact that they similarly occasion the recollection of war experiences – which enables the entry of the civil war theme within the boundaries of texts set in its aftermath. What is more, it is possible to discern how, both in Habila's and Abani's descriptions, the two characters, human beings in flesh and blood, tend to assume ghostly traits: while the former has returned from the world of the dead, the latter keeps appearing and disappearing, leaving an inexplicable, disturbing void of things unsaid. In Abani's passage, moreover, there is another unmistakable spectral presence: that of Godfrey, the murdered cousin, a 'real' ghost who seems to be after Innocent himself. By means of such a multifaceted tropology of spectrality, the authors "dramatis[e] the presence of an absence" (Del Villano 2). And indeed, the ghostly, in these passages, signifies a double absence, a double silence: not only does it suggest the lack of negotiation, in Nigerian contemporary political discourse, on the causes and implications of a conflict that haunts the country; it also suggests that the unresolved nature of the war itself speaks volumes about the tense socio-political climate portrayed in the novels – a signification that, as will be seen below, becomes apparent in Abani's text. And indeed, "haunting," writes sociologist Avery Gordon,

is one way in which abusive systems of power make themselves known and their impacts felt in everyday life, especially when they are supposedly over and done with [...] or when their oppressive nature is denied [...]. [I]t is an animated state in which a repressed or unresolved social violence is making itself known, sometimes very directly, sometimes more obliquely. (xvi)

Innocent and Haruna, alongside Godfrey, are thus ghostly figures (or ghosts

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proper) whose representation asks to come to terms with another, all-encompassing spectre – that of a pervasive culture of war that has been concealed but is in fact “very much alive and present” (Gordon xvi).

The character of Innocent, a ghost-like survivor who is haunted by his recent victim and is thus both “Innocent” and guilty, without being either, highlights the complex, entangled responsibilities of the individual who acts on sovereign orders.⁴¹ Hence, in Abani’s text the war most clearly emerges as a reminder of the disastrous consequences deriving from the excesses of sovereign violence, both in its private and public manifestations. The flashback passage, set in front of a Catholic church in which Biafran civilians have just been burned to death by enemy forces, evokes a sacrificial aura through which the war is juxtaposed to the killing of Godfrey – the event that has triggered the remembrance itself – highlighting the analogies between the two events. Scenes of human destruction on an earth that refuses to soak up more blood; the image of young Innocent playing the harmonica and recalling a Catholic hymn on the “soul-cleansing blood of the Lamb” (211); the reference to the quasi-cannibalistic consumption of monkey’s flesh on the part of his comrades; and finally, the Eucharistic passage where hungry Innocent, drinking the altar wine and eating the hosts, is almost killed in the process (“The bastards had booby-trapped the altar”) – all these aspects contribute to conveying a pervasive sense of human sacrifice, desecration and annihilation in a world where “[t]here is only one God [...]: the gun. One religion: genocide” (211). If Innocent is almost sacrificed on the altar of the Father(land), reciting the *Agnus Dei* and smiling at the line which asks God to grant peace to his

⁴¹ As many critics have noticed, the majority of the characters’ names in *GraceLand* are evocative, often ambivalently, of the function of the character him/herself.

children, Godfrey, whose name means exactly ‘peace of God,’ is ironically murdered by Innocent on the altar of patriarchal honour. God the Father has not granted peace to his children, and Innocent, who has survived the war, is now terrified, almost paradoxically so, torn by guilt for the horrendous crime he has been asked to commit – a crime, however, he has also been paid for.

The narrative positioning of the flashback structurally adds another semantic layer to the concept of war in *GraceLand*: occasioned by Godfrey’s death, Innocent’s remembrance is indeed followed by a passage recounting Sunday’s reaction to his defeat at elections that, as seen above, are presented in the text as a war-like confrontation. In a drunken stupor, Sunday tells his late wife’s ghost (another ghost Elvis cannot see): “I know I lost. Dat is the consequence of war, Beatrice. Someone wins, anoder loses. But as long as de fight was with honor, both warriors can rest peacefully” (219). A comment that might, in another context, be read in metaphorical terms, assumes here literal meaning, while the three events that are referred to in the chapter emerge as different, but essentially comparable, forms of war, signs of “lingering trouble” (Gordon xix). The spectral and pseudo-spectral apparitions and disappearances that these two novels portray, thus, bear the ghost of a perpetual war that must be addressed: for “no ethics, no politics, whether revolutionary or not, seems possible and thinkable and just that does not recognize in its principle the respect for those others who are no longer or for those others who are not yet there, presently living, whether they are already dead or not yet born” (Derrida, *Specters* xviii). And the spectre of war, of this violent past that is not quite over, is one that not only threatens to produce more unjust deaths, other ghosts like Godfrey, but that more generally forces human beings to live in the shade of death, constantly at its mercy, zombified: because the disap-

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pearances it enjoins, the silences it compels, have the effect of “transgress[ing] the distinction between the living and the dead” (Gordon 126): everyone is a potential ghost-like human being, invisible bare life.⁴²

However, as implied by Haruna’s traumatised silence, as well as by the silence surrounding Godfrey’s and Innocent’s disappearances, it is not easy to exorcise these ghosts, these hungry and thirsty ghosts, by talking to them, by talking of them, out of a concern for the justice to come, as requested by Derrida’s ethical injunction. Still, through the representation of silence itself, the two authors draw attention to the unsaid, to a state-sanctioned erasure of what everybody can guess, and make the silence deafening – so much so that characters who have not found an answer on the part of the ghosts look for responses elsewhere, either by interpellating directly the sovereign father, as is the case in *GraceLand*, or through the work of the imagination.

This is what happens in *Measuring Time* when Mamo, some years after Haruna’s suicide, attempts to fill the representational lacuna that is Haruna’s life by fantasising on an (im)possible articulation of it. Taking as a point of departure the only piece of information he has managed to wring out of his uncle, namely, that he had travelled with a friend named Chris (54), he imagines his uncle’s peregrinations in the African continent with Biafran hero Christopher Okigbo, the poet-

⁴² Avery Gordon’s comment is taken from her illuminating analysis of the ghostly dynamics of Argentinian state terror. As she writes, “[t]he *desaparecido* always bears the ghost of the state whose very power is the defining force of the field of disappearance. The torture, the agony, the terror, the difficult-to-put-into-words experience of being disappeared: the disappeared sustain and convey the traces of the state’s power to determine the meaning of life and death” – at the point that the distinction between the *desaparecido* who literally returns and the *desaparecido* who returns in the form of an apparition is *de facto* erased (127): “[d]isappearance transgresses the distinction between the living and the dead” (126).

soldier who died in military action in 1967. In Mamo's mind, Haruna and Okigbo thus become two deserters, willing to survive after a terrible explosion that has left only the two of them, former foes, alive on the battlefield:

Mali, Guinea, Congo, Botswana, Senegal, Morocco, Kenya, they kept going. On the way they passed other wars, other kinds of peace. They witnessed births and weddings and festivals and deaths and burials. Then, exactly ten years after they had begun, Haruna told Chris, "My friend, the time has come for me to stop. I am home." (102)

The brief passage conjuring this imaginary world constitutes a variation of what narratologist Gerald Prince has termed "the disnarrated" – a category that, he writes, "covers all the events that *do not* happen but, nonetheless, are referred to (in a negative or hypothetical mode) by the narrative text," either at the level of the story, as in this case, or at the level of discourse (299). Mamo's daydreaming must not be seen as a self-defeating retreat into impossibility, but rather as attempt to draw attention to dramatic historical events that have been considered best forgotten. It is the utopian projection of imaginary past unity, forged with a contemporary sensibility that feels the need to conceive of commonality and solidarity between two representatives of historically opposite factions. The myth of Okigbo, who proudly pledged and lost his life for an ideal, is thus here deconstructed in a move that suggests the ultimate futility of national ideals that are bearers of death. The disnarrated acquires, moreover, subversive overtones as it takes the place of the closely linked category of "the unnarratable, or nonnarratable," which Prince defines as

that which, *according to a given narrative*, cannot be narrated or is not worth narrating either because it transgresses a law (social, authorial, generic, formal) or because it defies the powers of a particular narrator (or those of any narrator) or because it falls below the so-called threshold of narratability (it is not sufficiently unusual or

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problematic). (297)

In this context, Mamo's flight of fancy is one that not only envisions what should have been, and what should be in the future, but that also defies the silence imposed on what happened and has been declared unnarratable.

As suggested in the excerpt above, the recollection of the Nigerian Civil War in *Measuring Time* is also accompanied by the acknowledgment of the "other wars, other kinds of peace" that occur in the rest of Africa. Such a transnational imaginary of conflict is conveyed in particular through the letters Mamo receives from his twin brother, who, naively fascinated by his uncle's (non-)story, fled his father's household at sixteen to become a mercenary in a rebel group near the Chad border. After training in Libya, and fighting on the side of the Tuaregs in Mali and in the ranks of a rebel group in Liberia, LaMamo joins Médecins sans Frontières with his girlfriend Bintou until the day when, as the war has become too heavy a burden (231), he flees to neighbouring Guinea (232). Similarly to Haruna, he returns to Keti after an absence of more than ten years. The dystopian reality he faces, however, counters his childhood memories of a halcyon village that could be a safe haven where to lay down his weapons after a decade spent on the battlefield. Keti, half-burned after the eruption of bloody religious riots, resonates with gunshots: "the police, keeping the peace" (330). When, the day after his arrival, the people rise in revolt against the Mai and his corrupt counsellor, the Waziri, the still idealistic LaMamo leads the crowd marching towards the palace and is shot and killed by the putative 'peace-keepers.' His fight for liberty abroad, thus, ironically comes to an abrupt end when he gets back to the "home" he used to recall in his nostalgic times of quietness around the continent (81, 108, 168, 233).

In these novels, which speak of the suffering and tragic futility of dying for honour, or for an abstract ideal, it is no longer possible to identify winning and losing sides. No one can really “rest peacefully” after the battle, as Sunday declares: because this is a battle that perpetuates itself forever. The representatives of private sovereignty have nothing to gain from the culture of violence they contribute to intensifying: Eugene, Lamang, Sunday, the three fathers this chapter has considered, are vanquished. The representatives of manipulative political power – the dictator of *Purple Hibiscus*, the Waziri of Ketu in *Measuring Time*, and the Colonel in *GraceLand* – are vanquished as well, often dying grotesque deaths after causing much pain. But little seems to change in the Nigeria of the novels after their deaths: the wars depicted in these texts are wars that, for the time being at least, have no real victors.

PART THREE CAMPS ON THE MOVE

5.

Trafficking Citizenship

Dreams of escape, and actual escapes from inhospitable homes, have emerged as a common motif in the novels taken into consideration in the previous chapters, where the postcolonial citizen/subject's desires for freedom and self-fulfilment are perceived as unrealisable in a state that does not always grant the most essential forms of rights protection – beginning with the right to life and to not be subjected to cruel, inhuman, or degrading treatment. Even as formally at peace, the post-colony in these texts is described as having the traits of a necropolitical war-scape where the value of the human is often diminished to the point of being rendered all but imperceptible. And while some of the characters decide, or have no choice but, to stay put, either conniving with or resisting the extralegal practices engendered in the perpetual exception, others actively look for mobility, in an attempt, on occasions naïve, to better their condition and actualise their aspirations.¹

This chapter discusses three texts recounting the lives of women who, either victims or accomplices of illegal practices, do not resign themselves to their declared superfluity within the biopolitical hierarchies produced in the context of 'war-scapes' of unending emergency, but rather attempt to achieve upward social and ontological mobility within them. The works under examination might thus

¹ For an essay concentrating on the textual turn to the US in Helon Habila's *Waiting for an Angel*, Chimamanda Adichie's *Purple Hibiscus*, and Chris Abani's *Graceland*, see Adéèkó.

be considered loose variants of what Dave Gunning has recently termed “narratives of illegality” (141).² The notion of illegality assumes in this context different articulations and different degrees of ethical and legal decidability, as the narrators concentrate at times on the depiction of the ‘victim’ side of the exploitative relation, other times on presumed perpetrators, while on occasions decidedly blurring the distinction between the two. The dehumanising violence to which the eponymous protagonist of Chris Abani’s novella *Becoming Abigail* is subjected on the part of a male relative who wants to turn her into a sex slave; the fraudulent entry into Belgium of the women in Chika Unigwe’s *On Black Sisters Street* and their activity as sex workers in the bars of Antwerp; the possibility of making (not so) ‘easy’ money by becoming drug mules, on which the characters of Sefi Atta’s novel *Swallow* ruminates – all these narratives, however dissimilar, offer comparable configurations of the illegal. By imagining, illuminating and reinventing the human that lies beyond statistical data on trafficking and smuggling, notoriously difficult to secure, and beyond sensationalistic media report, the works invite to reconsider the very meanings of moral unacceptability and of illegality as a signifier.

The texts compassionately recount stories of combative women – women who fight for their dignity, women who might be at the mercy of other people’s heinous greed, but who are also for their part resourceful, looking for a completeness that, for disparate reasons, they do not find in Nigeria. If these characters can be considered *mulieres sacrae*, still they are certainly not apathetic, submissive, or resigned – non-agents bereft of all choice. Even as the authors show how their bod-

² I define them ‘loose’ in that Gunning’s phrase, albeit not strictly defined, is employed in his essay to refer to texts portraying the ethical dilemmas faced by the asylum seeker in Great Britain (Manzu Islam’s *Burrow*, Caryl Phillips’s *A Distant Shore* and Abdulrazak Gurnah’s *By the Sea*).

ies are sold, animalised, reduced to commodities or to valueless containers for more valuable objects, they also point out that some of them wilfully choose submerged occupations in an attempt to flee debasing poverty, frustrating job markets, violent families, disastrous love stories. The reasons for unhappiness just listed are evidently not solely ascribable to the dysfunctional character of the state. All the same, taken together they outline the fragmentation of the narrative of the inclusive nation-state by figuring the nation as a non-community, a divided locus of exclusions and impossibilities. Indeed, the texts exemplify the “anti-nation[al]” trend that Pius Adesanmi has detected in much contemporary African literary production, which exhibits a “[d]isavowal of any idea of African citizenship anchored in a nation-space with useable pasts and identitarian national narratives,” as the integrity and credibility of national identity myths and metanarratives subside as a consequence of the evident crisis of the postcolonial state and of global centrifugal forces (Adesanmi “Power Narratives”).

The “unimagining” of the nation that works such as the ones under consideration here record and simultaneously enact takes place in the “*anti-citizenship*” framework of a Nigerian state that, exhibiting a “diminished ability [...] to ensure social security,” has been on the whole incapable to process demands of inclusion into a regime of rights (Adebanwi, “Citizenship” 43). And in this context, characterised by the generalised absence of a state-society compact, women, Wale Adebanwi explains, experience citizenship differently from their male counterparts, as they often are the disadvantaged object of gender-based discriminatory practices rooted in a number of religious, cultural and legal norms – *in primis*, in a Constitution which is “gender-insensitive, even in its language,” and sanctions and

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maintains gender-based invisibilities (41).³ Abani, Unigwe and Atta's works are tributes to women who resist different forms of invisibility and who counter, through ambivalent means, the double jeopardy to which they are subjected – a condition that Adebaniwi, echoing sociologist Nira Yuval-Davis, calls their living on a “‘marginal matrix of citizenship’ resulting in ‘both formal and informal discrimination’” (41). The gendered perspective adopted by these writers to recount the struggles for happiness of women who resist their double disenfranchisement by constituting themselves as social and political agents provides a reformulation of that “women’s war” that, as noticed in Chapter 1, was the focus of those first-wave Nigerian Civil War works that narrated women’s efforts to survive the emergency.

Elleke Boehmer, in an insightful essay on the counter-discursive strategies of representation of self and body in postcolonial nationalist literature, has written that “where a national narrative begins to fragment, so does the iconography of the body” (Boehmer, “Transfiguring” 274). Narratives of illegality such as the stories of trafficking and smuggling under scrutiny in this chapter reproduce the vast fissures and unbridgeable gaps that have opened in the (unfinished) fiction of the nation-state by representing the closely linked commodification to which the expendable human being is subjected when, abandoned by the sovereign, s/he can be reduced to a disjointed entanglement of (self-)sellable body parts. Through narrative, however, the writers considered here gather the (body) parts together, giving visibility to the otherwise submerged human being who lives, loves and suffers

³ For example, Adebaniwi notices, “[w]hile a foreign woman who marries a Nigerian man can become a Nigerian by marriage, a foreign man that marries a Nigerian woman cannot become a Nigerian by marriage” (41).

within/beyond the body (parts). In so doing, they problematise notions of inevitable victimhood, recalling that life, more often than not, exceeds the boundaries of the law and of the fictions that are employed to codify it, and that most forms of reductionism, even if well-intentioned, are ultimately counter-productive – especially for the very ‘victims’ they are meant to protect. The human truths that are not encompassed in legal narratives find recognition but not resolution in these texts, which acknowledge their own limits by avoiding to offer facile responses to the complex questions they pose. Still, their very ‘incompleteness’ asks for a discursive reinscription of the meanings of, and of the relationships between, the political, the subject and the body, confirming the need for constant reflection on a notion, that of the human itself, whose defective, inherently incomplete definition must be the source of a future-oriented ethics.

As will be seen below, some of these works tell stories of trafficked people, of “camps on the move,” of movements between camps. Others tell stories of wilful migrants, who ask to be smuggled and who, albeit confined to a condition of abandonment and invisibility regardless of their physical location, reinvent themselves, their own identities, in a quest for a better future – a future which, at times, they manage to construct against all odds. Taken together, these narratives emphasise the limits and deficiencies of human rights within the context of sovereignty, where the stateless and the *sans-papiers* remain, in Arendt’s formulation, subjects whose ‘right to have rights’ is decidedly in doubt. What is more, they suggest that it is from figures such as the ones they portray, who are at the limits of the ethical and political categories, that the path for the recasting of a paradigm of rights must begin. Whether a potential solution of the current impasse lies in the capability of the excluded to claim “citizenship as justice, [...] forc[ing] open the

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gates of the city,” as Engin F. Isin has beautifully put it (“Citizenship in Flux” 372, 383), or whether the texts nod towards the notoriously enigmatic Agambenian post-sovereign, post-biopolitical world, where human beings will become a “form-of-life” – a life that “can never be separated from its form, a life in which it is never possible to isolate something such as naked life” (*Means without End* 3-4) – is left unclear. But the importance of these works lies in the fact that, as Annalisa Oboe has written commenting on the potential of postcolonial studies in a world of obstinate injustice, their analysis allows to “trace the contours of emerging subjectivities and possible worlds” (Oboe “In transit” 383, my translation). They thereby configure transient, but not fleeting, “poetics and politics of the future” (385) – which, as Oboe reminds us, remains one the most compelling aspects of postcolonial literature and thought.

5.1. Human trafficking, human smuggling: movement and agency

Fourteen-year-old Abigail “had felt caught in the sheath of men’s plans” (Abani, *Becoming Abigail* 75) when she was forced to follow Peter, her cousin Mary’s husband, to London. In the previous years, other young family members had been “lucky” enough to be taken there (62), lured by promises of a better education and a higher standard of living before – or so Peter said – ungratefully running away with improbable “bad crowds” (66).

From the time her father and Peter had decided that she needed to come to London. There had been the trip to Lagos in the *long lean body* of a bus. Then the flight in the *cigar belly* of the plane, and now, hurtling through the *bowels* of London in the subway, headed for Peter and Mary’s. (75, emphases added)

This highly evocative excerpt is taken from the beginning of one of the flashbacks, “Then”-captioned chapters that compose Abani’s fragmented narrative, alternating with “Now” sections where Abigail, sitting by the Cleopatra’s Needle on the Thames Embankment, retrospectively reflects on the many failures of her short lifetime, imagining “she could see the ghosts of those who had also ended it here” (26). In the passage reported above, migration is configured through a metaphoric of ingestion that, beside emphasising Abigail’s powerlessness in the face of her male relatives’ will, preludes to her future excretion as waste in London. And indeed, as Abigail is swallowed in a spiral of non-choice, buses, planes and the London tube, elongated loci of oppression, become symbols of the phallographic economy of violence to which she will soon be subjected, experimenting it in one of its most debasing forms after resisting Peter’s attempt to force her into prostitution. In this context, means of transportation, as Pietro Deandrea has written in a recent essay on the artistic representation of the phenomenon of present-day slavery, emerge as part and parcel of the “concentrationary archipelago” (“Contemporary Slavery” 170 *passim*) that makes up the landscape of late modern exceptionalism: a “concentrationary system that has been atomised, vaporised into a myriad of ever-changing, ever-shifting sites, thus embodying the features of trans-national capitalist modernity” (177). Deandrea’s comments, for their part, relate to Nick Vaughan-Williams’s discussion of the Agambenian space of sovereign exception as “generalised and diffused,” a “‘generalised border’ where exceptional measures, practices and characteristics formerly associated with borders between states in the conventional sense become routinised and dispersed throughout global juridical-political space” (108).

As the narrative draws to a close, Abigail wonders whether “maybe some of

us are just here to feed others” (117). And indeed Abigail, always taken, always appropriated, has become aware of being considered nothing more than an object of consumption in the night when Peter, “feral breathing and almost soundless smirk” (87), burst into her room with the man who should have been her first ‘customer.’ She then managed to resist the assault and, as Peter tried to slap her, she bit his hand, drawing blood. The description of the punishment that Peter inflicts on her is possibly one of the most graphic scenes of violence in the entire corpus studied in this dissertation, as the animality that, as has been seen, constitutes a tropological *trait d’union* running through a relevant number of the texts I have analysed is here literalised in a horrific punitive nemesis. Abigail, who bit “like a dog” (89), is indeed handcuffed and chained to the kennel in the backyard, turned into a beast, spat and peed over, given rancid water and rotting leftovers she has to eat “without hands” (91), beaten, repeatedly raped by furious Peter. She soon seems to have no more strength to counter such a degrading treatment – at least until the day in which the layer of dirt covering her skin threatens to efface the scars she has carved on herself. Tracing these lines and dots has been for Abigail an attempt to map out her own identity, so as to “see herself” (45) while at the same time “creat[ing] memory” of her late mother – a mother whose name, appearance and combative nature Abigail, “this Abigail” (44 *passim*), has inherited. The incumbent haunting of Abigail’s mother is indeed one of the main themes explored in the “Then” chapters of the novella: the woman, who lost her life in childbirth, left her daughter with a sense of guilt for a death she feels responsible for, and with the contrasting feeling of frustrating invisibility in the eyes of a father who, albeit gentle, cannot overcome the grief for his loss and either does not

see his daughter or disturbingly assimilates her to his late wife.⁴

But when the process of animalisation gets to the point that Abigail can hardly see the skin she has so carefully engraved, she attacks Peter “*exactly as if she were a dog*” (Deandrea, “Unravelling Unpersons” 678, emphasis added) – a gory liberation through which Abani conceives of a possibility of rebellion even from within the dehumanised space into which his character has been forced:

Fifteen days, passing in the silence of snow.
 And she no longer fought when Peter mounted her.
 Wrote his shame and anger in her. Until. The slime of it threatened to obliterate
 the tattoos that made her.
 Abigail. [...]
 One night.
 Unable to stand it anymore, she screamed. Invoking the spirit of Abigail.
 And with her teeth tore off Peter’s penis. (95–97)

The angel, Mary, who used to warm and comfort chained Abigail in her husband’s absence, unlocks her handcuffs. Abigail is free. And yet, the narrator continues, “[t]hough the streets were crowded, only a few people noticed this gorgon with bloody mouth and hands, and the grisly prize she held up like a torch as she ran” (99).

The invisibility that pained Abigail during her life in Nigeria is thus an oppressive cloak that thickens in Europe, not only because of the inhospitable indifference that the hyperbolic passage just quoted conveys, but also, and importantly, because of her condition as a *sans-papiers*, which threatens to plunge her even more deeply into the abyss of the unseen. If, at home, Abigail “was more a ghost than

⁴ As Ashley Dawson has noticed, the relationship between Abigail and her father is on occasions presented as “something dead and rotting” (20, cf. also 67): “Abigail’s father has had a psychological breakdown as his daughter reaches adolescence, and he must grapple with the potentially incestuous endgame of his ghoulish desire for his dead wife” (“Cargo Culture” 184).

her mother [...], moving with the quality of light breathing through a house in which the only footprints in the dust were those of her dead mother” (44), her ‘disincorporation’ – the fragmentation of her subjectivity and her virtual non-existence as a person before the law – is completed when the social workers who deal with her case discover that there is no record of her presence in the country.

Even the name she gave, Abigail Tansi, drew a blank. It was like she didn’t exist. And she didn’t, because Peter had used a fake passport and a forged visa to bring her into the country and she was registered everywhere under that fake name, a name she had forgotten.

She was a ghost. (110)

Abigail’s patient, painful work of scarification does therefore not cease after she is very ambiguously ‘rescued’ by the British social system: if, as Francesca Giommi has argued, the ever-present motif of self-mutilation in Abani’s fiction point to the characters’ need “for self-punishment and sin-expiation,” while also “stress[ing] the[ir] corporeality, to escape the ghost-like existence and social marginalization to which most of them are condemned” (“Negotiating Freedom” 168), there is indeed no reason for Abigail to interrupt her quest for a readable inscription of her story on the surface of her own body.

Abigail’s misfortunes as described thus far conform to the definition of trafficking provided in the so-called “Trafficking Protocol,” the legal instrument adopted by the UN General Assembly in Palermo, Italy, in November 2000 that established, after heated debate, an internationally agreed, if much criticised, definition of the phenomenon.⁵ It must be remembered that the Trafficking Protocol, alongside the two other additional Protocols supplementing the UN Convention

⁵ The “Protocol to Prevent, Suppress and Punish Trafficking in Persons Especially Women and Children,” entered into force on December 25, 2003.

against Transnational Organised Crime and dealing respectively with Smuggling of Migrants and Trafficking in Firearms,⁶ is decidedly not a human rights instrument, in that it has the purpose of promoting international cooperation in the fight against organised crime. Indeed, legal scholar Anne Gallagher has pointed out that the failure of the Palermo Protocols to include mandatory protections for trafficked and smuggled persons “provides a strong indication that, for many governments, trafficking and smuggling are issues of crime and border control, not human rights” (“Trafficking, Smuggling and Human Rights” 12). It is thus the state security imperative that has determined the increased relevance of the issues of trafficking and smuggling in the international policy agenda, particularly after the fall of the Berlin wall and the global war on terrorism – events which have spurred the tightening of immigration controls in Western countries whose ‘porous’ borders are perceived as exceedingly vulnerable to migratory ‘invasions.’ The definition of trafficking in persons, as per Art. 3 of the Palermo Protocol, consists of three elements: first of all, trafficking is considered an *action*, “the recruitment, transportation, transfer, harbouring or receipt of persons”; the Protocol then defines the *means* through which this action is carried out, namely “the threat or use of force or other forms of coercion, of abduction, of fraud, of deception, of the abuse of power or of a position of vulnerability or of the giving or receiving of payments or benefits to achieve the consent of a person having control over an-

⁶ The “Protocol against the Smuggling of Migrants by Land, Sea and Air,” adopted alongside the Trafficking Protocol in Palermo, entered into force on December 25, 2003. The “Protocol against the Illicit Manufacturing of and Trafficking in Firearms, Their Parts and Components and Ammunition” was adopted on May, 31 2001 and entered into force on July, 3 2005.

other person”⁷; finally, it specifies that the action must occur “for the *purpose* of exploitation,” which “shall include, at a minimum, the exploitation of the prostitution of others or other forms of sexual exploitation, forced labour or services, slavery or practices similar to slavery, servitude or the removal of organs.”

No doubt transported to the UK “for the purpose of exploitation,” Abigail has been deceived as to her destiny there, and terribly abused with the purpose of being rendered completely subservient. She thus seemingly conforms *in toto* to the very restrictive fiction of the victim of trafficking. Still, it is essential that Abani does not relegate his character to the stereotype of the virginal, naïve girl “suitable for public sympathy [...] because of her youth and innocence” who has historically been the linchpin of the accounts on trafficking provided by human rights and religious groups, as well as “neo-abolitionist” feminists (Doezema 34). This mythic discourse, Jo Doezema has shown, reinforces and is reinforced by “fears and anxieties about women’s sexuality and independence, and of ‘foreigners’ and migrants” (39), and it is problematic in that it authorises a sanitised, paternalistic and *disempowered* view of the trafficked woman as absolutely helpless. Not only does such an iconography constitute a reinscription of the missionary/colonial palimpsest of the Other who must be saved; as will emerge most clearly in the analysis of Chika Unigwe’s *On Black Sisters’ Street*, it also downplays the importance of what Saskia Sassen has termed the “feminisation of survival” (“Women’s Burden” 506), referring to the increasing presence of women in a variety of licit and illicit cross-border circuits that rely mainly on women labour, “counter-geographies of globalization” whose visibility is compromised because of their gendered nature (523-

⁷ In the case of children being trafficked, “the requirements relating to means are waived” (Gallagher, “Human Rights and the New UN Protocols” 987).

524).

The analysis of Abigail's figure that follows concurs with Ashley Dawson's comments as to the strategies employed by Abani to challenge "facile readings of his protagonist as an uncomplicated victim" through the love narrative that dominates the second part of the novella. This is the case even as I do not subscribe to his definition of this narrative thread as an "otherwise perplexing" one ("Cargo Culture" 188). In fact, I believe it is crucial that Abani's short-circuiting strategy centres exactly on the depiction of the confident sexuality of a sex trafficking victim as an essential aspect enabling the "becoming" of the title – a development, a growing up, that is thwarted because of its (presumed?) legal and moral unacceptability. Derek, the gentle British man Abigail falls in love with, the only man who has ever seen her, is introduced relatively early in the narrative, but his identity is revealed only after the description of their making love in Derek's living room while his wife is peacefully sleeping upstairs: Derek, "this man-child who was her social worker" (54).

Abigail was giving. For the first time, she wasn't taken. And she wept for her joy and for the loss of Derek's wife upstairs dreaming the dreams of love amidst all that floral wallpaper [...]. Abigail, this Abigail, only this Abigail, always this Abigail, *felt herself becoming*, even in this moment of taking. (52, emphasis added)

But, as Dawson has written, "where Abigail sees an awakening of identity and self-assertion, the state sees only victimization" (189): Abigail's protests, her denials, her letters remain unheard when the man is fired and charged with sexual abuse of a minor, while she is placed once again in state custody.

Ironically, Abigail's case can be perceived as an example of a state complying exemplarily with the non-mandatory provisions of the Trafficking Protocol as to

the protection to the victim of trafficking in persons: her “physical, psychological and social recovery” is allegedly ensured through “[c]ounseling” and “[m]edical, psychological and material assistance” (Art. 6, Par. 3); her “special needs” as a child are taken into consideration (Art 6, Par. 4); her “physical safety” within the country is provided (Art. 6, Par. 5). However, all this amounts, in Abigail’s eyes, to the disempowering disregard of her own will, a silencing violence, the ultimate attempt to erase her subjectivity. In this context, it is evident that this human rights failure cannot be ascribed, strictly speaking, to Abigail’s lack of protection as a non-citizen, even as the text, as seen above, does indeed comment on her invisibility as an undocumented subject. Rather, the novella more generally exposes some of the contradictions which are inherent in the human rights project and undermine the ethical validity of the most well-meaning intentions, beginning with “the drive from the unflinching belief that human beings and the political societies they construct can be governed by a higher morality” (Mutua 202). Indeed, whereas Abigail’s ‘right to have rights’ – as a human being and a child, and emphatically not as a citizen – appears to be granted, its actualisation assumes the form of a unilateral, paternalistic imposition that does not meet with her desires as a human being who is becoming a woman. The state that should be safeguarding her recovery is in fact thwarting her *Bildung*, foreclosing that “free and full development of [her] personality” that has so often been mentioned in this dissertation. In other words, insofar as Abigail’s choice as to the means through which her becoming is to be achieved does not conform to given norms, it remains unacceptable: it can only be a misguided action deriving from her incapacity of discernment, both as a traumatised human being and as a child whose rationality is by definition in doubt (Bhabha, “What Sort of Human”).

They said they were doing this to protect her. That she didn't know what choice was. But she did. She who had been taken and taken and taken. And now the one time she took for herself, the one time she had choice in the matter, it was taken away. (117)

As suggested above, the novella thus also criticises another aspect of human rights discourse by recounting how Abigail must remain confined to the role of the necessarily passive 'victim,' who can receive protection only *provided that she remains such*, resigning her agency, becoming the docile recipient of the benevolent intentions of self-appointed 'saviours': as Makau Mutua reminds us, indeed, "[w]ithout victim, there is no savage or savior, and the entire human rights enterprise collapses" (Mutua 227). In this context, Abigail is therefore literally turned into an *object* of intervention who "cannot engage in the realm of the political" (Anderson and Adrijasevic 143), in a move that paradoxically perpetuates the reification process that her trafficking had magnified. Abigail's story, thus intended, seemingly confirms Agamben's criticism of human rights as a discourse which, resting on a conception of the victim of abuse as a form of bare life, risks maintaining "a secret solidarity with the very powers [it] ought to fight" (Agamben, *Homo* 133).

Abigail, whose right hook is "not inconsiderable," will hit the social worker who tells her that she must not worry, for "that monster [Derek] is going away for a long time." This, however, is not enough of a sacrifice for her loss: as Abani writes, the Igbo teach that "[t]he sacrifice is always commensurate to the thing wished for. Sometimes a lizard will do, sometimes a goat, or a dog, sometimes a cow or a buffalo. Sometimes, a human being" (118). Abigail's agency is thus once and for all reinstated only with her decision to commit suicide, the ultimate form

of sacrifice, the full measure of her love, an attempt “to save him” (122). This ending, however, is ambivalent, and by precluding once and for all the protagonist’s becoming, it undermines any possibility of uncomplicated exultation at Abigail’s final assertive stance – even as “second chances are a fact of life for the Igbo” – even “for the dead” (107).⁸

Albeit exposing the limits of human rights theory and practice, Abani’s work acknowledges the inherent complexity of the ethical interpretation of a story like Abigail’s. So, while the novella protests the non-inclusionary discussions about the love relationship between Abigail and Derek, to which the protagonist is exposed “as if she were a mere ghost,” still it seems to me that it does not deny the importance of the interrogations regarding the “*limits* of desire[,] [t]he *edges* beyond which love must not cross” (79, emphases added). What is more, although Abigail cannot understand how people could call “this thing between Derek and her wrong” (79), she nevertheless admits that it is difficult for the hunter to “tell a vegetarian lion from the rest,” and does not lay the blame on others for what has happened to her (118).

The reference to the search for the “limits of desire” just mentioned is in fact part of a wider interest that is manifested in *Becoming Abigail* as to the aesthetics and politics of the interstitial. The text suggests the need to find a way out of the comforting, but illusory, division of the world into Manichean opposites which cannot depict with accuracy the complexities of human life. Through the constant allusion to the metaphor of the map, Abani acknowledges the all too

⁸ Ashley Dawson has made the related argument that Abigail’s “acts of scarification certainly qualify any facile celebration of her agency” and goes as far as asking whether we, as readers, are to believe “the narrator’s characterization of this traumatized young woman’s motivations” (189).

human need to exercise some form of “dominion over things” (71), but at the same time he cautions that such a dominion, when not a violent imposition *tout court*, is at least often deceitful. *Becoming Abigail* is full of lines. In Greenwich, Derek and Abigail walk on the colonial line that divides time and space, creating worlds apart. The “taut rope” from which Abigail’s father is found hanging secures the distinction between life and death (113). This is also the case of the cable of the electric blanket, an umbilical cord through which Mary gives Abigail new life while she is chained to the doghouse (92) – and of the chain itself, a cipher of Abigail’s animalisation. The lines that Abigail, “the cartographer of dreams[,] [o]f ghosts” (72), draws on her skin are an attempt to discern between memory and invention, self and other, while the “limits of desire” declared by the law endeavour to define the distinction between love and abuse, innocence and guilt.

But lines, markers, borders, are not enough to understand who Abigail is: because “[a] line is a lie. Who can tell what it will open onto?” (113). In this context, the mantra “mind the gap,” the first words Abigail hears when, hesitating, she gets off the underground train in London on her arrival there (78), constitutes not only a “slogan for the interstitial theme of the novel,” as one reviewer has put it (Weaver), but rather becomes an ethical injunction to look *into* the line, into the gap, recognising its fullness, recognising the lives of those human beings who, like Abigail, are “trapped forever” between opposites (50), between here and there, past and present, identity and alterity, humanity and animality, life and death. The novella is thus a not only a meditation on the ‘third space’ of the unseen, but also, to paraphrase Edward Said, an invitation to read the archives of human rights discourse contrapuntally, listening to the to the silences they produce, with a simultaneous awareness both of what is said out loud “and of those other histories

against which (and together with which) the dominating discourse acts” (51).

Becoming Abigail thereby demands that new geographies of the human, and of the world, be developed, by constructing alternative border imaginaries which challenge the arbitrariness of moral opposites as well as traditional cartography and modern geopolitical imaginaries. Accepting this ethical challenge might thus help us to recognise the diffuse “biopolitical border” (Vaughan-Williams) along which the right to life of many human beings is today decided, thereby *seeing* those men and women, like Abigail, who have no place within the political, but are rather excluded through their own inclusion. In this context, the Agambenian rejection of a straightforward inside/outside topology through his theorisation of the exception as inclusive exclusion and his focus on the production of zones of indistinction, notwithstanding the sometimes obscure and unsatisfactory aspects that have been spelled out in the course of this dissertation, proves compelling in that it “not only has implications for the way we consider the production of subjectivities in world politics. It also has significant ramifications for the way we might reconceptualise the limits of sovereign power and develop alternative border imaginaries” (Vaughan-Williams 107-108).

Looking into gaps is of course not easy, as it unhinges common assumptions as to their apparent emptiness. In this context, the work of the imagination is crucial to give voice to the unsaid, form to the unrepresentable. The writer’s playing with words which have the power to reconstruct a life that has been declared unworthy of being lived, feelings that have been declared unnarratable, might produce a fragmented fiction, as is the case in *Becoming Abigail*. This narrative, however, has the same function as the little blisters Abigail produces stinging her skin with an incandescent needle after making love with Derek. The writer’s words,

like the blisters, are points that must be connected, and that, *only if read alongside the gaps, the apparent void that surrounds them*, let the human being, like a work of art, “emerg[e] in pointillism[,] [...] in parts of a whole” (53) – if only one cares to watch.

*

If the figure of Abigail, notwithstanding her resistance, can be easily constructed as coinciding with that of the hapless trafficking victim on the part of the social workers who deal with her case, it is because she unquestionably occupies the exploitative pole in the continuum of violence, abuse and powerlessness along which the different life experiences of migrants can be positioned (Anderson and Andrijašević; O’Connell-Davidson “New Slaverys, Old Binaries”).⁹ Within the economy of the discourse on trafficking, the line dividing ‘deserving’ innocents and illegal migrants is indeed drawn by recognising as members of the first category only those (few) ‘genuine’ victims who, like Abigail, are injured and enslaved and, depoliticised, qualify as objects of protection provided that they remain outside of the political (Anderson and Andrijašević 143). While smuggling is considered a facilitation of voluntary immigration that violates existing immigration laws, trafficking, as seen above, by definition implies that the trafficked person is either deceived or forced into situations in which s/he is consequently exploited. However, as the discussion of Chika Unigwe’s novel will disclose, it is often the case that the degree of decidability in the definition of an undocumented migrant’s positioning within the above-mentioned spectrum of violence and exploitation is unclear, so

⁹ In the context of the debate on trafficking for sexual exploitation, Anderson and Andrijašević further argue that the experiences of all workers, both in legal and in illegal contexts, can be more generally aligned to such a continuum.

that distinctions between victimhood and agency, constraint and freedom, and therefore human trafficking and human smuggling, become fuzzy. In this context, those men and women who do not conform to the figure of the ‘pure’ victim become “‘abjects,’ excluded, dangerous or risky others,” relegated to the underworld of the illegal also as a consequence of state security practices, such as restrictive residency and employment regulations, which provide fertile ground for enhancing their vulnerability to exploitative labour relations (Aradau).

The sex workers depicted in *On Black Sisters’ Street* are a case in point, since their precariousness in terms of rights protection is attributable to an intertwined set of reasons: not only are they bonded labourers, subject to the payment of the migration debt they have incurred; they are also irregular, and hence deportable, residents, who are employed in one of the most highly unregulated sectors within the sex industry, that of prostitution, doing a job which is often not even considered as such. Even as it is difficult to determine with certainty the degree of exploitation and constraint to which Unigwe’s characters are exposed, as most of them have deliberately sought to migrate to Europe, aware of what their occupation would be, there is no doubt that they are granted only limited freedoms: they are strictly controlled and their fake passports are confiscated by their Madam; they are under constant economic pressure, asked to pay for their expenses in Antwerp, which add to the monthly sum they must transfer to the Lagos-based pimp, Dele, who arranged their trip to Europe.¹⁰ Moreover, what Dele euphemistically calls the “unpleasantness” (42) that may derive from the failure to comply

¹⁰ The novel is very accurate in reproducing the complex dynamics of Nigerian third-party controlled prostitution in Europe. For an informed study of the interrelated phenomena of migration, human smuggling and trafficking from Nigeria to Europe, see Carling, “Migration, Human Smuggling and Trafficking.”

with this pact becomes an all too palpable reality in the case of Sisi, whose skull is smashed by Dele's right-hand-man after she decides to leave the prostitution circuit before extinguishing her 30,000 euro debt.¹¹ Still, the women of the Zwartzusterstraat do not perceive themselves as victims and, albeit on occasions pondering the possibility of reporting their Madam and pimp to the police, they refrain from seeking official protection even in the most difficult circumstances. Irregular migrants, they indeed are very well aware that, as Rutvica Andrijasevic has bluntly put it, "if third parties controlling [their] labour were not denying them labour mobility or access to the basic social rights, the state would" (*Migration, Agency and Citizenship* 3).¹²

This introduction to some of the themes explored in Unigwe's novel is meant to emphasise the degree to which the text reflects the complex interrelation among the discourses on human trafficking, human smuggling, state security, migration and prostitution – the definition of which in the last decades has been the source of considerable debate amongst scholars, policymakers and human rights

¹¹ Third-party controlled prostitution is often indicted by anti-trafficking campaigners and human rights activists as a slavery-like form of debt bondage. The latter has been defined by Kevin Bales as occurring when "a person pledges him or herself against a loan of money, but the length and nature of the service is undefined, and the labour does not diminish the original debt" (463). However, Unigwe, in accordance with recent studies on third-party controlled prostitution, disputes the assumption that debt lasts for an indefinite period of time (cf. Andrijasevic 72). Some scholars have also argued against the appropriation of categories of a discourse of slavery to describe modern forms of (exploitative) labour relations, pointing out that, by concentrating on the criminal role played by an exploitative 'slaveholder,' such a reading dangerously obliterates the role of the host country in producing and maintaining the conditions enabling the exploitative practices themselves. See in particular O'Connell Davidson, "Will the Real Sex Slave Please Stand Up."

¹² Indeed, Anne Gallagher reminds us that "[i]n contrast to the Trafficking Protocol, states parties to the Migrant Smuggling Protocol [are not] required to consider the possibility of permitting victims to remain in their territories temporarily or permanently" (Gallagher, "Human Rights and the New UN Protocols" 997).

activists.¹³ As will be noticed below, indeed, the women's different stories, alongside their different, and on occasions shifting, perceptions of their respective collocation within the aforementioned continuum of exploitation, point out the unfeasibility of the static notion of the self that is presupposed by the very distinction between victimhood and agency around which the dominant discursive and legal regimes of sex trafficking are organised (Andrijasevic 95).

'Zwartzusterstraat' (Black Sister's Street)¹⁴ is the location chosen by the author for the house that Sisi, Efe, Ama and Joyce share in Antwerp, Belgium, where they arrived after leaving Lagos with the 'help' of Dele. Elleke Boehmer and Sarah De Mul have observed that Unigwe's choice in terms of setting is significant in that it alludes to the Catholic history of the port-city of Antwerp through the reference to the Roman Catholic order of the Black Sisters, while at the same time suggesting the "possibilities of black diasporic womanhood and community formation – 'black sisterhood' – in Europe" (2). What is more, Boehmer and Mul recall, it was on the Zwartzusterstraat that, on May, 9 2006, there occurred the murder of Malian nanny Oulemata Niangadou, and of her two-year-old Belgian charge, shot for racist motivations by 18-year-old Hans Van Themsche. The event is explicitly referenced (111) in a novel which thematically

¹³ Although the definition of trafficking provided in the Palermo Protocol is not restricted to sex trafficking, research and policy discussion on trafficking has generally revolved around the question of sex work – one of the main topics around which the debates during the drafting of the Protocol itself revolved (Gallagher, "Human Rights and the New UN Protocols").

¹⁴ The original name of the street in Antwerp is 'Zwartzusterstraat,' in the plural, but it has been modified by the author into the singular 'Zwartzusterstraat' (Tunca, "Redressing"). Unigwe first published a Dutch version of the text, which appeared in 2007 with the title *Fata Morgana*. The latter was however based on an English language manuscript that has been in part revised for the publication of the 2009 English version under discussion here.

problematizes any optimistic notion of multiculturalism, and which, as indicated by the title of the initial chapter, tellingly imagines Sisi's murder taking place only a few days after Oulemata Niangadou's death.

The text, indeed, (literally) opens on "12 May 2006" (1). Sisi, the character around whose absence the whole narrative revolves, is introduced in the first page as she thinks that the world is "exactly as it should be. No more and, definitely, no less. She had the love of a good man. A house. And her own money – still new and fresh and the healthiest shade of green" (1). After meeting Belgian Luc, who has become her lover and has convinced her to leave the house on the *Zwartzusterstraat*, Sisi, in between pangs of guilt for abandoning her friends without a word, is savouring her newly-found freedom – a freedom that is now tangible, as the five hundred euros she was supposed to transfer to Dele have become her own property, allowing her to relish the possibility of entering expensive shops she had never thought of venturing into before.

She pondered how easy it was to spend five hundred euros. How many things one could get with it. How happiness could sometimes be bought. Whoever said that money couldn't buy happiness had never experienced the relief that came from having money to spend on whatever you wanted. (285-286)

Ironically, however, Sisi's first day of liberty is also the day of her death, a day which sanctions the impossibility for her to reincarnate again as Chisom – her real name – after discarding the identity she forged for her European life in the red-light district of Antwerp. The news of Sisi's death envelop the house on the *Zwartzusterstraat* with the uneasy silence of women who are reminded of their own mortality (39), confronted with their vulnerability in a country where, hyper-visible and clandestine at the same time, they cannot rely on anybody but each

other.¹⁵ While trying to reconstruct their ‘sister’s’ dreams and aspirations,¹⁶ they however realise that they know nothing of her, that they have never shared their “different memories” (40) of the past. Sisi’s murder thus prompts Efe, Ama and Joyce to open up to each other, recounting their lives prior to their encounter with Dele. This is indeed the single event around which their stories converge, constituting the *trait d’union* between women who are today sitting next to each other, on the same sofa, in a room painted an improbable red. The novel, thus, moves backwards and forwards in time, illuminating the women’s present of incredulity and fear with flashbacks that speak of abuse, necessity, unhappiness, abandonment, ambition, and war. The omniscient narrator reconstructs for the reader also another story, one that would otherwise be destined to remain untold: that of Sisi, or rather Chisom, the woman who left Lagos after graduating in Finance and Business Administration and remaining jobless thereafter, “watching with anger as life laughed at the grandiosity of her dreams” (23).

Sisi, the only daughter of a couple who have put all their hopes of social mobility on a girl whose bright future has been prophesied during her naming ceremony (246), does not have the right connections to find a job in Lagos. Years after her graduation, she feels stuck in a city that, in line with the representation of Nigeria emerged in Chapter Three, is like a prison, a site of frustrating stagnation (30). She is in love, but love is no longer enough: Peter is a gentle, bright, patient man, who is however unacceptably resigned to “muddle through” (46), to drag on a life looking forward to better times. Had she taken a nursing degree, she reflects,

¹⁵ Even as Efe, Ama and Joyce initially believe that Sisi’s murder is racially motivated, they will later presumably realise its real causes – the novel ends as Luc knocks at the women’s door to get news of disappeared Sisi.

¹⁶ ‘Sisi’ means ‘sister’ in Shona (44).

she would at least have made a potential wife for those Nigerian emigrants who got back home during the Christmas holidays, their wallets full of foreign currency, to scout for wives: “They said it was easier for nurses to get a job abroad” (29). Dele proves an answer to her ambition, to her dreams of mobility, his proposal constituting an escape route from “the sitting room with the pap-coloured walls. A shared toilet with a cistern that never contained water [...]. Her father folded into himself [...]. Her mother’s vacant eyes” (43).

Efe, for her part, meets Dele after replying to an advertisement he has placed for a job as a cleaning woman. A third job means more money for her son, the fruit of a relationship with her forty-five year old sugar daddy, Titus, who made her discover sex at sixteen in exchange for money with which she could buy some of the things she most desired: “the jeans with the glorious metallic V and the handbags that went with all colours and the high-heeled shoes that were so glamorous they could have belonged to the governor’s wife” (57).¹⁷ With Titus’s money, Efe could also contribute to the upraising of her younger siblings, ignored by an alcoholic father devastated by the death of his wife after a long illness.¹⁸ But Titus conveniently disappeared after getting news of Efe’s pregnancy, and when Dele, who has proved the most generous of her employers, offers her the chance to go to abroad, she has no doubts: “Nobody wanted to stay back unless they had pots of money to survive the country. People like Titus and Dele” (82).

¹⁷ Jørgen Carling has written that “[s]exuality in Nigeria will often include relationships that border on what would be perceived as prostitution by many Europeans,” so that, for example, it is “common for single women [...] to have sexual relationships with older men (so-called *sugar daddies*) who will give them gifts and money” (“Migration, Human Smuggling and Trafficking” 18).

¹⁸ Interestingly, the motif of the absent mother that emerged in the analysis of the texts discussed in Chapter Four, is central also to Abani’s *Becoming Abigail* and to a number of narrative threads in Chika Unigwe’s novel.

5. *Trafficking Citizenship*

Ama left her home town, Enugu, the day after being violently insulted by her abusive stepfather for failing the examination that would allow her entry in the university of her choice. The man, Brother Cyril, was a Christian fundamentalist who had begun to rape her in the night of her eighth birthday, stopping only when she started her period. Asked to leave, she thus lets herself out of a household in which her subservient mother, “in a deliberate state of blindness” (133), defers to Brother Cyril in all respects, and joins Mama Eko, her mother’s foul-mouthed, generous cousin, in Lagos, where she starts working in her canteen. Albeit grateful for this opportunity to start anew, she however soon gets impatient with the monotonous routine of her Lagosian life. And it is then that one of Mama Eko’s richest costumers, Dele, asks her whether she would like to work in the streets of Europe. When Dele tells her he will “sample” her before her departure (168), self-assured Ama provokes his orgasm even “before he had a chance to remove her skirt.” Her thoughts are “already on a new life far from here [...]. And once she was a big woman, people would respect her, even Brother Cyril” (169).

I have dwelt rather at length on these summaries of Sisi’s, Efe’s and Ama’s experiences in order to let emerge the variety characterising these voluntary migratory projects, alongside the constitutive factors they have in common – first of all, their stemming out of a context where corruption, sexism and oppressive patriarchal structures constitute almost inescapable economic and social fetters. The economic rationale, no doubt the most relevant, is in this context accompanied by familial and affective motivations, all of which must be considered to engage the complexity of the characters’ choices. What is more, if money is treated in quasi-fetishistic terms by the women, who comment on its colour, crispness, and smell (1, 50, 65), it is essential that Unigwe does not recount her characters’ turning to

prostitution because of reasons of sheer survival – which, of course, is a way of resisting victimisation, thereby reinstating the characters’ agency. Migration and prostitution in the novel rather respond to the need to see a prophecy of success come true, to the desire to offer a comfortable life to a beloved son, to the hope that is placed in emancipatory wealth.¹⁹ The ambitions of these fighting women, who do not want to resign to poverty, are recounted with compassion in a narrative that presents a social and emotional war-scape which is decidedly connotated in gender terms. Unigwe invites abstention from moral judgement for characters who, living in a site characterised by gender inequality, a site of death and sovereign abandonment (98, 214), a place in which their existences as women are devalued to the point that they can make sense only in relation to a (preferably wealthy) male counterpart, legitimately decide to “make the most of the trump card that God has wedged in between their legs” (26).

Joyce’s story, however, is markedly different from the others’ and complicates this already nuanced representation. The passport Dele has forged for her reads: “Joyce Jacobs. Nationality: Nigerian. Place of birth: Benin City” (232). But Joyce is not Nigerian. And she is not even Joyce. Alek – this is her real name – was indeed born in (fictional) Daru, in southern Sudan, forced to leave her village after witnessing the killing of all of her family members and being gang raped by a group of Janjaweed militias. The fifteen-year-old girl joins an unending line of ref-

¹⁹ I thus do not quite agree with Daria Tunca’s argument that the narrator presents the characters “as both innocent victims of, and willing participants in, societies which promote the idea that happiness can be acquired only through material wealth” (“Redressing”). Even as Unigwe points out that their choices might be conducive to painful, dangerous outcomes, both in affective and in security terms, it seems to me that she presents their desires of material wealth as legitimate and rather highlights the structural and gender inequalities that, both in Nigeria and in Belgium, prevent them from acquiring social mobility through legal practices and means.

5. *Trafficking Citizenship*

ugees and reaches a UN camp, “a collection of sad stories” (194) where, unexpectedly, she falls in love with Nigerian soldier Polycarp, whom she follows to Lagos. But, as said above, she is not Nigerian. Even more, she is not Igbo, like Polycarp. It is for this reason that the union between the two is resisted by the traditionalist family of the man. Perhaps really believing that she will have another opportunity to start afresh, Polycarp thus arranges her trip abroad, where, Joyce is told, she will work as a nanny. Her ambiguous ‘benefactor’ will pay her debt in the years that follow, while the young woman, albeit forced to remain on the *Zwartzusterstraat*, will be able to keep all her earnings for herself, treated by Madam with special care.

The evident multivocality of the text is no doubt meant to counter any form of essentialised depiction of the phenomena of trafficking, smuggling and migration, while also confirming Julia O’Connell Davidson’s statement that the presumably indubitable differences among them are in fact “not fundamental, but constructed through reference to the imagined line between ‘freedom’ and ‘restriction’ and to political judgements about what count as ‘appropriate’ and ‘inappropriate’ forms of exploitation and force” (“New Slaveries, Old Binaries” 245). On the whole, however, the representation of sex work in the text tends to suggest that the phenomenon is often best read in dialogue with processes of (active) economic migrancy rather than with a concept of (inevitably passive) trafficking: indeed, Unigwe does not embrace the fiction of the pure victim for any of her characters – not even for Joyce, who will prove strong and resilient notwithstanding her predicament and very young age.

Unigwe’s depiction of prostitution appears therefore to be hardly compatible with Kathleen Barry’s definition of it as “the most extreme and most crystallized

form of all sexual exploitation.” Barry, one of the most authoritative spokespersons of the so-called ‘feminist abolitionist’ analytical trend within the prostitution debate,²⁰ adds that “sexual exploitation is a political condition, the foundation of women’s subordination and the base from which discrimination against women is constructed and enhanced” (11). For abolitionist feminists, Carol Wolkowitz has remarked, prostitution is thus necessarily a form of violence that cannot but reinstate patriarchal codes, producing “a body-self that has been so injured that it cannot recognise its true interests” (126). Such a view, Wolkowitz adds, is problematical not only in that it depicts sex workers as bereft of voice, incapable of assessing or explaining their interests, but also because it “seriously underestimate[s] the relative rewards of prostitution as an active choice, whatever the cost” (127). And indeed, hardly can this reading provide the lenses for interpreting, for example, the above-mentioned passage in which unscrupulous, independent Ama manipulates Dele’s sexist will to “sample” her before her departure: even as she has been imploring him to let her go to Europe, she provokes his orgasm without letting him experience a full intercourse.²¹

The book, however, does not fully conform to the so-called ‘sex workers’ rights’ perspective either, one which, viewing the body “as a form of property, a legitimate object of trade that the subject is, or should be, free to use as she (or

²⁰ For an assessment of the feminist debates on trafficking and prostitution, see Lobasz, “Beyond Border Security” and O’Connell-Davidson, “The Rights and Wrongs of Prostitution.”

²¹ It is however evident that the women exhibit different degrees of independence and different capabilities to manipulate the dynamics of patriarchal codes to their advantage. Efe, for example, seems to appropriate sexist codes of conduct when she refers to her pregnancy as a proof of her being “*damaged goods*” (75) and is ready to resign love in favour of a dependant relationship with a wealthy man – if this means having more chances of upward social mobility.

he) wishes” (Wolkowitz 128), counters the abolitionist viewpoint advocating instead the decriminalisation and normalisation of prostitution. In its strictest formulation, this approach posits the essential separation between body and self by arguing that what is sold in prostitution is in fact not the woman’s body, but always and only a service. Chica Unigwe’s women, however, are often torn apart by anxieties about the commodification of their bodies, by the fear that their selves might be fragmented, appropriated and violated in the process. These doubts are voiced in particular through Sisi, who, for example, uncomfortably feels “like a slab of meat at the local abattoir” when Madam looks her up and down and tells her that she *belongs* to her (182).²² Similarly Joyce, leaving Lagos, feels “like a cargo with a tag: Destination Unknown” (233). The pervasive tropology of consumption and reification employed by Unigwe in the novel does indeed resonate, as Daria Tunca has observed (“Redressing”), with the rhetoric of slavery that is often employed on the part of anti-trafficking campaigners – a connection that is reinforced when the reader is confronted with the flash-forward image of Efe, her debt repayed, becoming a Madam herself and buying her first two nameless women during an auction (277-278).

However, I would argue that the ambivalent, oscillating depiction of the characters’ subjectivities does not consign the idea of their labour to an unprob-

²² A powerful connection between the prostitute (dead) body and food is also made by Joyce when, after Sisi’s death, she looks at the jollof rice her late friend had cooked some time before, adding cubes of green pepper and three fried snails “curled up, looking like ears.” It is still good, she establishes, and she suddenly finds herself thinking about her friend’s decaying body, just before wondering how long it took for her family members to rot after being massacred. This macabre train of thought emphasises the similarity between these equally violent deaths, inducing reflection on the power dynamics that allocate low degrees of grievability to lives that, for different reasons, are declared unworthy of being lived (288).

lematised discourse of prostitution as trafficking, as a form of modern-day slavery. On the contrary, not only do the women often recall that their current conditions derive from a well-informed choice (114, 270); they also describe prostitution as an honest job that must be handled with professionalism (211, 242); what is more, they point out how their bodies are indeed admired and bought, but only “temporarily” (245). At the same time however, they are haunted by terrible nightmares (1), forced to become people with “forgotten pasts” (237) who “try not to think about happiness” (114) but rather concentrate exclusively on the money they are making. The author gently evidences the painful consequences of a demanding profession on her characters’ selves, and the different, at times contrasting, subject positions that she has them adopt highlight the arbitrariness of the ‘victim’ vs. ‘willing sex worker’ dichotomy along which debates on prostitution have generally developed. Such an ambivalent depiction shows that, as Rutvica Andrijasevic has put it describing her field work among Eastern European sex workers in Italy, migrant women tend to exceed such a dichotomy, rather asserting “subjectivities that are currently not claimable for undocumented migrant women in third party controlled prostitution” (Andrijasevic 113). They thereby inhabit a third space of (non-)citizenship which, once again, invites the reformulation of given categories of inclusion and exclusion of the non-citizen in the modern nation-state.

In this context, it is important that the novel highlights the paradoxical complicity between the two differently coercive systems of controlled prostitution and of the sovereign state in creating and enhancing the characters’ vulnerability as undocumented migrants. It is because of such a double disenfranchisement that, for example, Sisi’s desires for geographical, social, and affective mobility can be viewed as being resolved in a horizontal movement between camps, between

conditions of exclusion that she does not quite manage to circumvent. Mutually reinforcing exclusionary dynamics emerge with evidence in the telling episode which recounts how Madam, upon Sisi's arrival in Antwerp, has her apply for asylum at the Ministry of Foreign Affairs. Even as the motivations for this request remain emphatically unexplained in the novel,²³ attracting the reader's attention to an event whose unspoken rationale is repeatedly questioned (119, 182), what is undoubted, and disturbingly so, is that Madam does not perceive the potential granting of refugee status to her "new girls" (182) as hindering by any means her control over them. In Sisi's case, the tearful story about a horrific Liberian past of genocide that she is asked to make up ("The more macabre the story the better," Madam says, "White people enjoy sob stories" [121]) does not persuade the immigration officer in charge of her application. After its rejection, Sisi's vulnerability has increased exponentially, as the unpleasant "welcoming ritual" (176) she has undergone has enabled the biopolitical inscription of her body as that of a *persona non grata* in a state from whose citizenry she is once and for all excluded: her fingerprints have been taken, along with pictures of herself, and she is requested to leave the country in three days (175). In other words, as Madam tells her, Sisi now "do[es] not exist. Not here. [...] Now you belong to me" (182). Such an officially sanctioned deportability will of course become one of the reasons why Sisi does not report Madam when naively surrendering to Luc's insistent, and short-sighted, pleas to quit her job.²⁴

²³ Madam's request is presumably due to the advantages that would derive for her if Sisi were granted the possibility to reside legally in a country where prostitution is legal.

²⁴ Her decision to remain silent derives also from her awareness that reporting Madam would mean implicate the other women (274), presumably causing their deportation. It is for this same reason that Efe, Ama and Joyce will not go to the police after Sisi's death,

The novel thus invites the reader to consider the multiple causes of undocumented migrants' vulnerability in an age that, as Jørgen Carling has written, is "characterised by involuntary immobility as much as by large migration flows" (Carling 5). Illegal migration, a consequence "of the enormous difference between the number of people who wish (or are forced) to migrate and the legal opportunities for them to do so" (Gallagher, "Trafficking, Smuggling and Human Rights" 12) emerges in the text, as it did in *GraceLand*, as one of the very few chances of mobility for those who feel they cannot live happily in a dysfunctional country where their rights are negated, their expectations derided. But while some of them return, their newly acquired economic power allowing them to realise their dreams – be it Ama's boutique or Joyce's school (279) – others, like Sisi, will die on foreign land, their fights ended in tragedy. Daria Tunca has interestingly written that Sisi's death in Antwerp is reminiscent of the figure of the 'unknown soldier,' "an association which was initially to be reinforced by the title of the book, since both *Where Poppies Blow* and *Between the Crosses* were considered at some point" ("Redressing").²⁵ If the women's battles are accorded, through narration, the importance, dignity and complexity they are often denied, the question remains, then, of finding a way for people like them to survive their wars without risking Sisi's fate.

even as they ruminate on the possibility for some time: they are "human beings," after all (289), and they might even get asylum: as Joyce puts it, "Madam has no right to our bodies, and neither does Dele." However, they are also aware that "Madam has the police in her pocket" (290) and in the end will decide against reporting her.

²⁵ Both are extracts from Canadian John McCrae's "In Flanders Fields," a poem which lends voices to the soldiers who lost their lives on Flemish land during the First World War.

5.2. Swallowing illegality

Tolani started swallowing some time in the mid-1980s.²⁶ It is Lagosian life, she will reflect when recounting her story, that made her flatmate and colleague Rose and herself tough enough to accept the risks involved in becoming body packers, ingesting cocaine-filled pellets wrapped in latex.²⁷ The narrator of Sefi Atta's novel *Swallow* remembers how she was persuaded that the one thousand five hundred dollars they would receive for their first delivery – one year's salary – was a high enough amount to risk one's life: after all, as Rose told her with her usual scorn, one “can die going to work by bus *in this place*” (205, emphasis added).

Almost confirming Rose's provocative claim, the book opens with the description of the two central characters' latest “brush with death” (7), when the bus they are travelling on almost overturns after swerving dangerously in order to spare a slow pedestrian crossing the expressway.²⁸ On that day, Rose will also be

²⁶ The narrator's numerous references to the on-going “War against Indiscipline” (WAI) presumably set Sefi Atta's book during General Muhammadu Buhari's regime (1984–1985), when this ultimately unsuccessful reform program was enacted. WAI, which was not cancelled but certainly deemphasised during Babangida's rule (Stock 19), was meant to instil in the Nigerian population “a sense of work ethics, patriotism, nationalism, anti-corruption, patience (waiting in lines for goods and services was a major component of one phase of the WAI), timeliness,” while also – importantly for the theme of this section – stressing “the importance of urban and environmental sanitation” with the establishment of so-called sanitation days. The reform has generally been criticised for its cosmetic nature, “which tended to conceal the deeper social ills of the country, such as widespread poverty and a lack of basic services, beneath a veneer of orderliness” (Falola and Heaton 214), and expanded the already large powers of the police.

²⁷ The phrase ‘body packing’ refers to the illicit transportation of drugs through internal concealment. Body packers are also called ‘swallowers’ or ‘internal carriers.’ See Traub, Hoffman and Nelson. For an essay on the central role played since the 1960s by West African countries, and in particular by Nigeria, in the international drug trade, see Ellis.

²⁸ Road accidents have claimed the lives of two characters in the novel, Tolani's father and her colleague Godwin's fiancée. The image of the unsafe, potholed expressway, often interrupted by military checkpoints, is a topos in Nigerian literature. Suffice it to recall, for example, the obsession with highway robbery thematised in Cyprian Ekwensi's *Survive the Peace* and Femi Osofisan's play *Once Upon Four Robbers*. More recent examples include

fired from the Federal Community Bank where she and Tolani work: she has publicly slapped her corrupt, slimy, pot-bellied employer, Mr Salako, after calling him “a bloody bastard” for reasons that, albeit imaginable, will remain implicit in the narrative (17).²⁹ Even as at this point there is only “a month’s difference from her and a beggar” (53), Rose’s troubles do not start on the day she loses her job: “Bad things had happened to Rose before. She had handled them by arguing, defending herself, drinking beer, or eating a bowl of pepper soup” (71). This time, instead, her predicament is resolved with the unexpected generosity of dodgy OC, an obscure character who turns out to be a middleman in a drug trafficking organisation. And Rose’s troubles start with OC: with a present, with the pair of brown loafers he buys for her in Tajudeen Market (69). The relationship between OC and Rose will indeed be conducive to her recruitment as a drug courier, and, in a short while, to her death on the plane that should have taken her to Great Britain, when one of the balloons in her stomach bursts open (246).

Some weeks after Rose is fired, Tolani’s world is falling apart as well. The chaos of a dysfunctional state where people die “unnecessary deaths, avoidable deaths, ridiculous deaths. African deaths” (183) has now added to her temporary suspension from her job for not submitting to the sexual advances of the very same Mr Salako, “Mr Snake of a Salako” (83), who has sacked her friend. What is more, she has lent all her savings to her boyfriend, Sanwo, for a business project that has ended in a scam, and the ensuing economic insecurity has revived long

the car crash that kills most of Bola’s family in Helon Habila’s *Waiting for an Angel*, or Chris Abani’s numerous references, in his *GraceLand*, to the death of pedestrians who are run over while crossing Lagosian expressways.

²⁹ Even as the reader is told that Salako called her “a nobody” (229), the narrator’s suspicion that Rose might have been a girlfriend of his is neither confirmed nor denied in the narrative.

forgotten, nagging anxieties regarding the identity of her biological father. Personal dilemmas, contingent misfortunes and structural, class- and, even more importantly, gender-based inequalities, contributing to a feeling of impending catastrophe, see Tolani reconsidering Rose's proposal to join her in her trafficking trip abroad – an option that was unthinkable only a few days before, when she had uncompromisingly refused, shocked at her friend's shamelessness (138-139). Now, however, "the prospect of misfortune was more than enough threat, and it was around us, killing people, turning them into prostitutes, making them sick, hungry, crazy" (205-206).

The narrator refuses to provide "more stories of bad fortune" in order to explain her and Rose's choice (205): "if anyone claimed that they smuggled drugs because they were poor, they were lying. Poor people begged" (206). Similarly to the authors considered above, Atta indeed avoids portraying her characters through lenses that would produce a tearful victim story and rather describes with remarkable humour, and with a gentle touch that was perhaps missing in her angrier debut novel, *Everything Good Will Come*,³⁰ the intertwined lives of ironic narrator Tolani, and aggressive, sardonic Afro-pessimist Rose. Tolani and Rose are women whose irreconcilable characters conceal a similar refusal to resign passively to the excremental economy that surrounds them. On the contrary, they choose to connive with it in the ambivalent and, Atta suggests, ultimately self-defeating, at-

³⁰ *Everything Good Will Come* is an ambitious *Bildungsroman* that recounts the life of Enitan, a woman frustratingly caught in the restrictive norms of Nigerian patriarchy, and covers a time period of almost thirty years. Commenting on its writing, the author has said, perhaps overstating the matter, that the novel "reads like an angry rant in parts": "I was in my early thirties when I wrote [it]. I was very frustrated about what I was seeing in the Nigerian community in America and what I had witnessed growing up in Lagos. I just needed to vent. [...] I'm in my early forties now and I don't feel the same way. Aging has helped and perhaps writing the novel helped too" (Azuah, Atta and Unigwe 112).

tempt to turn it to their own advantage. Not (yet) “poor and disenfranchised,” but rather “broke and struggling” (Atta, “I Write”), Tolani and Rose will ultimately take opposite paths in their personal fights against economic distress. None of them is presented as successful, and only one of them will survive her choice.

Achille Mbembe has famously argued that state power in the postcolony predicates what he terms an “aesthetics of vulgarity,” most clearly evident in the grotesque body of the autocrat: open and obscene, with its gaping mouth, bloated belly and perpetually erected phallus, the autocrat’s body is the symbol of an excessive sovereignty that claims the right to an unlimited appropriation and squandering of resources – either in the form of food, money, or women. If, as he rightly points out, “defecation, copulation, pomp, and extravagance are classical ingredients in the production of power, and there is nothing specifically African about this” (108-109), yet it is undoubted that in a context characterised by extreme scarcity, as is the case in postcolonial Africa, metaphors of ingestion and excretion acquire particularly evident representational force and visibility.

In a 1995 article, concentrating on an analysis of the American colonisation of the Philippines, Warwick Anderson has argued that colonial systems of control often established an excremental hierarchy through the instrumental construction of the body of the colonised as a supposedly unsanitary one which must be disciplined by means of the imposition of an official order (“Excremental Colonialism”). As Anderson has observed in a recent essay on the refashioning of the abject in relation to the decolonised state and globalisation, Mbembe’s examination of the aesthetics of state power in the African postcolony registers however a process that emphatically counters the ‘civilising’ path tracing the destiny of the colonised subject “from abject embodiment to constipated republican subjectivity.” As

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Anderson puts it, Mbembe has indeed shown that “many postcolonial African leaders were never inclined to follow any such path” (“Crap on the Map” 171), so that “the low qualities once attributed to natives, disqualifying them from citizenship, can now function at least intermittently as part of the managerial repertoire of postcolonial states” (172). Such an ambivalence confirms what Joshua D. Esty, in his study of scatological imagery in the fiction of postcolonial disillusionment, has called the “dangerous mobility of the excremental signifier” (30), which becomes in Mbembe’s analysis a symbol of power which is simultaneously disgusting and fascinating.

As has been often noticed in the previous chapters, the works studied in this dissertation are replete with images of repulsive Big Men: from Ken Saro Wiwa’s “bellymen” to Eddie Iroh’s Chima Duke, from Uzodinma Iweala’s Commandant to Chika Unigwe’s Dele and Titus, the repugnant appearance of these fat, sweaty, lecherous embodiments of (not necessarily sovereign) power is often the source of satirical portrayals indicting them as corrupt, ‘ingurgitating’ contributors to the failure of the postcolonial state. In Sefi Atta’s novel, such an iconography is employed in the description of aforementioned Mr Salawo, the two main characters’ employer, who is derisively called “Mr Biggs” by irreverent Rose. In fact, “[h]e was not that big,” Tolani points out, “only around his stomach; consequently, his trousers were buckled high – almost up to his chest – or below his waist” (17). Salawo, albeit evidently not a sovereign actor, nor a figure acting on sovereign orders, nevertheless occupies a privileged position within the excremental hierarchy where a minority, including him, eats and excretes, while the rest is surrounded by waste to the point of risking annihilation – or rather, as will be seen below, drowning. The man, in this sense, is another epitome of those diffused, metamor-

phic forms of postcolonial (pseudo-)sovereignty that, though informal practices, acquire the power to administer death at the expenses of those whose lives he declares valueless: “He said that if I lost my job, I would be lucky to find myself living in a gutter” (229).

If Tolani and Rose have been excluded from the male-dominated (dis)order of their workplace for not complying with the requests of a foul-smelling petty tyrant, they are also more generally part of the lower social strata of the metropolis, composed by individuals who seem to have little or no possibility of upward social mobility and are rather in the perpetual danger of being consigned once and for all to a state of denigrated waste. Evacuated by-products of a postcolonial state devoid of citizens, their economic disempowerment sanctions their abandonment in a sea of refuse – a sea that is not only symbolic, but that also reflects the material conditions in urban areas such as the “ghetto” where Tolani and Rose live (155). There, the often-mentioned imposition of a monthly ‘sanitation day,’ proclaimed within the context of the Fifth Phase of Buhari’s War Against Indiscipline (the so-called ‘War Against Filth’), is portrayed as having little positive impact on the environmental cleanliness of public spaces.³¹

As Tolani herself admits, women like Rose and herself do not occupy the lowest rung of the Nigerian biopolitical pyramid. Still, they teeter on the fine edge that divides their own, relatively bearable, condition, from that of the beggar, aware that they might easily cross the line into poverty. And this, in a state that

³¹ The lack of success of the WAI Fifth Phase, called the War Against Filth, was due, amongst other reasons, to the unfair emphasis it placed on individual responsibility and culpability for environmental pollution, which failed to address “the long-standing failure of the Nigerian state to provide adequate infrastructure to enable people to maintain a healthy environment” (Stock 25).

provides limited or no social welfare – be it Nigeria or the United States, as the author has warningly pointed out (Atta and Anya) – can easily mean homelessness, utter destitution, even death.³² It can mean being turned, literally, into rubbish. It is indeed relevant to remember that during the War Against Filth many local governments took the opportunity to pursue interests that were not quite tied to sanitation priorities, for example through the demolition of illegal structures such as unauthorised street-side markets, roadside kiosks and squatters' dwellings (Stock 28).³³ The Fifth Phase, Robert Stock writes, brought also “renewed, if fleeting, calls to rid urban environments of beggars and mental patients,” who were transferred to supposed rehabilitation centres which were often nothing more than detention camps (28). In many respects, therefore, the 1985 sanitation campaigns seemed to be dictated by a bourgeois agenda “that had more to do with the cosmetic appearance of cities than the protection of health” (29). In such a context, thus, the characters' fears about the consequences of being reduced once and for all to nothing more than “filth” do certainly not seem to be unjustified, nor are they merely symbolic.

Such an anxiety is nowhere as clearly conveyed in the text as in the detailed narration of the episode in which nine-year-old Ayo, one of Tolani's neighbours,

³² Commenting for example on the state of the government-funded hospital where her neighbour, matronly Mrs. Durojaiye, works as a midwife, Tolani bluntly says that she would never set foot on it: “If I were dying, I would rather die at home” (62).

³³ Even as such demolitions may of course have been, at least on occasions, due to environmental sanitation reasons, Robert Stock remarks that “as a rule, questions about the legality of structures took precedence over whether such buildings represented a tangible threat to public health.” As for the measures taken against street traders, their objectives included “revenue generation accomplished by sending as many traders as possible into controlled markets, the improvement of the general appearance of the urban landscape and of traffic flow, and the encouragement of moving ‘back to the land’ to produce food-stuffs” (28).

is thought to have drowned in the septic tank upon which he has often been seen playing: “The septic tank had sucked Ayo in, Mama Chidi said.”

The crowd in our backyard were other tenants. They were gathered around the septic tank, carrying kerosene and battery lanterns. When I saw them I became conscious of an awful stench, like a sewer. It was the waste in our tank. The cement surface had a huge hole. Mama Chidi’s husband was dipping a long stick into it and seemed to be stirring the contents. [...]

“We need a longer stick,” someone said. [...]

The smell grew stronger. More people filled our backyard as news of the drowning spread on our street. If the body were brought out, it would be a spectacle for them. I turned away from the crowd and walked out of the compound. (98-100)

Mrs. Durojaiye, a divorced mother of three, is one of the many fearless women whose toil Atta celebrates in the novel. A muscular, unsmiling matron who “beat her children like no other mother” (64), she has fought her gambling husband, who lost all their money, and is now participating in an anti-government strike which turns into a proper war when the police intervene with whips and bullets,³⁴ leaving lifeless bodies around the hospital premises (134). “She was so tough,” Tolani reflects, that “the government would be a small foe for her” (64). And yet, the news of her son’s death is too much, even for her, and her reaction is recounted in a disturbing mourning scene after which shocked Tolani, imperfect moral centre of the novel, begins to wander on the streets around the compound, refusing to take part in the wailing of the obnoxious “grief mongers” who encircle the desperate mother (104).

It is on a dark side road that Tolani discovers that Ayo has not died. The boy has run away from home after breaking the surface of the septic tank on

³⁴ The animalisation implied by the recurrent use of whips on the part of the police is made explicit in the text when Tolani comments on the horsewhipping of disorderly crowds waiting for buses: “They had always done that, but the government’s War Against Indiscipline gave them a legitimate reason. Now, they could say it was part of their duties to ensure the public behaved in an orderly fashion. They treated us like cattle” (21).

which he was jumping, terrified at the idea of the vicious beating that would no doubt follow. Tolani spots him “crouched behind a rusty oil drum, by a small rubbish dump. [...] He rubbed his eyes as if he’d been crying.” He is hardly distinguishable from the debris that surrounds him: as Tolani says, “no one but me could see the thin legs tucked behind [the drum]. I reached the legs and knelt by the boy. [...] He smelled of human waste and orange peels. I rocked him” (102). If Ayo has survived the septic tank and to his surprise even his mother’s far from infuriated reaction, still the crack on the cement surface remains open: Mrs. Durojaiye has no money to fix it. Therefore, the nauseous effluvia emanating from it pervade all the apartments in the compound. The tenants are forced to smell the stench of their own waste in a city whose sewerage system, similarly to what happens in a number of urbanised areas in the Global South, is nearly non-existent (Gandy), and the foul odours become a metaphor for the economic disempowerment and quasi-excremental conditions of the people inhabiting the decaying building.

It is in the light of these considerations that Sanwo’s apparently disproportionate reaction to Ayo’s incident must be interpreted. When the man visits Tolani, some time after the event, he is indeed profoundly upset by the news, and so nauseated by the smell that, he tells her rather hyperbolically, he “can’t even stand to swallow [his] own spit”: “You won’t see me around here for a long time,” he warns (108). Sanwo works for his rich uncle and, albeit ambitious, he does not seem destined to succeed as a businessman: very much to the disappointment of Tolani, who is attempting to push him into marrying her, he is too generous with his sisters and parents; he is not “ruthless enough to be a Lagos hustler and [...] too fair to cheat” (36). Broken Sanwo cannot afford to marry her, and he cannot

afford to pay a rent. For these reasons, he is still living in the boys' quarters of his uncle's house, on Victoria Island, fantasising on his spare time about independent business projects. What is particularly relevant for the purposes of my analysis of this character is that Sanwo, in the boys' quarters, has to share a shower and a latrine with his uncle's driver and cook. And he is obsessed with their cleanliness.

Sanwo complained about the habits of the other two, how they left soap remnants on the shower floor, messed up the latrine and never cleaned it. I'd seen worse latrines and showers. Their shower wall was at least whitish, sort of, and the floor was scrubbed with disinfectant. [...] He said the walls ought to be repainted and the latrine replaced with a proper toilet. He complained and complained, used his own money to buy a light blue paint for the walls; he drew a cleaning roster and made rules, like no peeing on latrine floor, no throwing cigarette butts, no dumping rubbish, no burning of leaves, no hanging of laundry, except in the designated area of the premises. The rules went on for about two pages and he made the other men sign them. (154)

Such a detailed description cannot be read simply as confirming the man's fussy tastes in terms of excremental decorum. On the contrary, Sanwo seems to relate the precariousness of his socioeconomic status to an idea of uncontrolled excrementality. In line with critic Delores B. Phillips's observations regarding the scatological aspects of Chris Abani's *GraceLand*, it appears indeed that in *Swallow* "[b]athrooms and toilets trope the powerlessness and impotence characters feel in their own country, and become a metaphor for the (in)ability to endure the 'crap' they see taking place around them" (116). In this context, Sanwo's will to impose a discipline in the use of the shower and the latrine constitutes an attempt to create a new excremental order, contesting the assimilation of the lower classes, of which he himself is part notwithstanding his diploma in business and administration, to ordure. In other words, it reflects yet another dream of economic, but also ontological, upward mobility. The stench invading Tolani's flat, instead, is an un-

pleasant, unbearable reminder not only of the country's inequity, but also of the immobility that frustrates his ambition to challenge his own abject condition – or at least to put it under erasure.

It is not surprising that Rose's wordy endeavours to convince Tolani to become a drug courier rely on the reiteration of scatological imagery: "You sit in a compound stinking of shit. You walk down a street stinking of gutters. You're on a bus full of stinking people" (139). Before giving her the chance to complete her next sentence, about "a man like Salako with his stinking...", Tolani interrupts her friend and bluntly refuses her offer. She is outraged and afraid. What is more, as she has previously said referring to the smell in her flat, "the longer I was around it, the more I got used to it" (111). If at this point Tolani thus seems ready to accept her life as it is, stench and all, weeks later, on the brink of bankruptcy, her change of attitude marks her resolution to manipulate the excremental economy which rests on, and simultaneously produces, a biopolitical hierarchy founded on a wasted humanity. For Tolani and Rose, being paid for swallowing drugs and excreting them in another country means attempting to achieve upward mobility within the aforementioned hierarchy. In this context, money is not only tropologically "re-odorised," its nature as "polished waste" disclosed, as Esty has argued in relation to the satirical portrayal of the comprador class in Ayi Kwei Armah's *The Beautiful Ones Are Not Yet Born* (33). In *Swallow*, money is, literally, faecal matter. In other words, by thematising the phenomenon of drug smuggling through the practice of body packing in the context of a novel where she makes pervasive use of scatological motifs highlighting the disempowerment of her characters, Atta exposes the vulgarity of the wealth produced within the context of illegal markets such as that of drug trafficking, while also bearing witness to the human debase-

ment and exploitation on which they rest. Africa thus emerges as a site of global dumping as well as of global expendability, a site where the profitable extraction of raw materials, of organs, of bodies is enabled and made particularly lucrative as a consequence of the superfluity of (part of) its population. As seen in *GraceLand*, and confirmed in the texts discussed in this chapter, the trash heap of the post-colony provides indeed almost infinite resources in terms of disposable humanity capable to satisfy the demand of the global North – be it in terms of cheap labour, cheap sex, life-saving body parts, or cocaine. The characters' choices to participate in these economies of abjection, aware of occupying the lowest rungs within the power hierarchies they engender, can be legal or illegal, more or less free, more or less understandable. What is undoubted, and what these novels highlight, is that theirs are choices that deeply jeopardise their security and that can even put their own humanity in question.

The challenges facing Tolani when, practicing for her new job, she attempts to swallow her first, garri-filled balloon, are however tougher than expected.

I'd been vomiting all morning. I had to leave the flat to clear my head. My mouth tasted of palm oil. I couldn't swallow my condom; it was the size of my thumb and as hard as a bone. What used to be my throat was now a pipe, my intestines were a drain, and my stomach had become an empty portmanteau. [...]

[The condom] wouldn't go past the back of my tongue, and I still vomited. I vomited when I tried to swallow, vomited after I'd spat up. I kept heaving. I finally lay on my mattress, exhausted, and watched the water stains of the ceiling. My tears ran down my ears and blocked them. (211-212)

As the digestive system of this wannabe body packer is metaphorically juxtaposed, albeit imperfectly, to a sewer, her objectification and debasement are denounced by pointing out that the economic empowerment that might derive from her connivance with excremental illegality does not in fact question the declared superflui-

ty of her own existence within its structures.³⁵ And it is of course telling that Tolani, in the end, will never manage to swallow her pellet. Her reluctance derives initially from her inability to knock down the “invisible wall covering [her] throat” (212). After attending a service in her colleague’s Godwin ‘born-again’ church and listening to a sermon exalting the sanctity of monetary wealth, her decision becomes final: no God of money will ever prompt her to do this.

Joshua D. Esty has remarked that excrement, as suggested both in psychoanalytical and anthropological theory, “marks the fuzzy boundary between inside and outside, between the self and the not-self.” The depiction of “shit-figures” such as Rose and Tolani has thus the potential to complicate moral binaries, tending as it does “towards complex models of systemic guilt” (Esty 34). It is therefore not by chance that Atta, even while highlighting her characters’ vulnerability, also draws attention to their corruptibility. The novel seems indeed to move between different, contrasting tendencies: on the one hand, it highlights the gender-based exclusions which contribute to Rose and Tolani’s choices, and gives voice to Tolani’s fascination for Rose’s fearlessness, even as it recognises its (self-)destructive implications; on the other, the possibility of seeking social mobility through illegality is not exempted from moral disapproval. While the narrative tends to maintain a certain degree of ethical undecidability in this respect, on occasions it resorts to quasi moralistic tones to describe the characters’ implication in the underworld of drug trafficking. When this occurs, Atta runs the risk of apparently resolving the complex ethical quandaries in which her characters find

³⁵ This is later confirmed when OC, commenting on Rose’s death, says that she was as “a bad investment, a liability” (249). Such a statement recalls Dele and Madam’s reactions to Sisi’s flight, and her punitive murder, in Unigwe’s *On Black Sisters’ Street*.

themselves in favour of an unproblematic indictment of greed as a feeling that compromises one's moral integrity. For example, on hearing the scathing attacks Mama Chidi levels against those drug mules she has read about in the newspapers – they are “pure evil” (247), Mama Chidi states, and after all, have they perhaps “suffered more than Mrs. Durojaiye?” (246) – Tolani feels “as worthless as spit”: “Morality was an easy friend to part with, yet so hard to avoid thereafter. It was hard to accept that I'd been a criminal” (247).

On the night before Tolani's planned visit to her mother, Arike, OC breaks into her flat to give her news of Rose's death and tell her to leave Lagos for a while. Ever since her life has turned to chaos, Tolani has begun to think of her mother, “the first person I knew” (190), as a moral reference point, the only person who can resolve her doubts about her father's identity and help her get through this difficult moment. Now, after Rose's death, it becomes all the more necessary for anguished Tolani to go to Makoku, the hometown she associates with her childhood, the hometown she has idealised as a site of order and peace. In the short second part of the novel, however, Tolani's sentimental view of Makoku is dramatically disabused: the town is not an ahistorical Utopia, but rather a place whose complexity counters any unproblematic nostalgia for a supposedly uncontaminated past – whatever this might mean. An albino has recently been kidnapped, his exceptional body probably used for juju rites; Peju, the nonsense daughter of a single mother who lives near Arike's compound, does not want to hear tales about speaking tortoises again – in fact, she has “never heard a tortoise speak” (267); and Arike sternly confronts her daughter's silence about the reasons that have brought her back home, and criticises her mistaken, arrogant assumptions about the presumed simplicity of her own life. Such a representation of

village life, coupled with the honest but non-sensationalistic depiction of the hardships of Lagosian existence, develops a distinctively balanced Nigerian “mode of self-writing,” to borrow from Mbembe’s well-known essay title. In *Swallow*, Atta registers both the failures of contemporary African politics and the exploitative global practices that engulf it, but is adamant about resisting apocalyptic imagery, often through irony; at the same time, the novel rejects nativist, exonerative constructions of African tradition and of its agents.

Swallow, as said above, is a novel of combative women. And the reproduction of the gender conflicts that make up the war-scape of the text acquires increased historical depth with Arike’s tale of her own life in the night in which the narrative ends. The reader has already come across Arike’s anecdotes – passages of different length that have been alternating with the main narrative line. Arike has told the story of her aunt, strong Iya Alaro, a master adire dyer who was thought to be a witch because she dared to resist the new Oba’s self-declared right to take his wives by force. The reader knows how Arike and her future husband met and knows how she managed to convince him to buy her beloved Vespa after they got married.³⁶ Arike’s memories speak of love and complicity, but also of suffering and malice. She remembers how she was abused because she failed to give a child to her husband. “As usual,” Tolani says, “she spoke with gaps, but the moment arrived when she said, ‘There is something you haven’t heard before’” (294).

³⁶ Nigerian novelist Jude Dibia has argued that the characters of Iya Alaro and Arike might be inspired by the figure of Funmilayo Ransome-Kuti, the much-grieved mother of Afrobeat icon Fela Anikulapo-Kuti. A women’s rights activist and political campaigner, Funmilayo Ransome-Kuti is remembered, amongst other things, as the first Nigerian woman to drive a car – a detail that indeed resonates with the fascinating Vespa episode recounted in the novel. Atta is married to Gboyega Ransome-Kuti, one of Funmilayo Ransome-Kuti’s grandsons.

Tolani, however, has by now learnt to come to terms with what she has always suspected, and does not need to hear it out loud – not anymore. She is aware that she's not the drummer's daughter, and that Arike had a relationship with some other man, perhaps with Tolani's uncle, Brother Tade, so that the drummer's sterility could go unnoticed. "She could have had more children. She could have exposed him. Instead, she enjoyed freedoms that other women envied, freedoms that belonged to her, and for what? The privilege of keeping his secret?" (293).

Tolani's doubts remain unvoiced: she interrupts her mother's tale, as it is now her turn to speak. The novel thus ends in circular fashion, inviting its own re-reading.³⁷ Arike, similarly to Tolani, is aware of what it means to compromise, to be forced to live with shame. Like her, she knows what it means not to be granted rights that should be yours simply because of your own humanity. Atta does not provide recipes for salvation – neither for the salvation of the postcolonial state, nor for the salvation of the older and younger women whose lives she has so sympathetically put down on paper. What she tells us through this circular ending is that these women's struggles are bound to, and must, continue. But, at least in Tolani and Arike's case, they will continue with the strength and mutual respect that come from dialogue and reconciliation.

³⁷ Atta has commented on what she has called the "round shape" of this book in an interview with Walter Collins (129).

Final Remarks

Paradoxes for the Future

Legal scholar Costas Douzinas has famously claimed that “the whole field of human rights is characterised by paradoxes and aporias” (21). This is confirmed *in primis* by the apparently unsolvable, macroscopic contradiction that lies at the very heart of human rights discourse: human rights, Douzinas writes, “are internally fissured: they are used as the defence of the individual against a state power built in the image of an individual with absolute rights” (20). As reformulated by critic Greg A. Mullins, Douzinas’ comment reads as a provocative question: “if human beings have universal and inalienable rights, why do human beings need to be protected from the state, and more pointedly, why must they be protected *by* the very state they are being protected *from*?” (121). Theoretically the natural entitlement of every human being for the sole reason of being human, human rights are thus still for the most part the positive rights of incorporated citizens. What is more, nation-states, the designated protectors of human rights, remain also the major human rights violators. Other much-discussed paradoxes regard the twin concepts of the human and of the universal, on which the definition of human rights rests, which have historically been constituted through systematic exclusions. Numerous scholars have further noticed that some of the worst human rights abuses have been carried out in the name of human rights themselves. Others have pointed out that the human rights project, with its Enlightenment roots, shares the teleol-

ogies of liberty and progress, alongside the rhetoric that accompanies them, with Western capitalist and imperialist epistemologies. As such, it often runs the risk of upholding, or reproducing, the very exploitative, de-humanising practices it seeks to eradicate, for example by predicating the necessary de-politicisation of the ‘victims’ it aims at protecting, who are reduced to mere recipients of Western benevolent intervention.

The list that has just been provided is by no means exhaustive, being rather meant to recall some of the conundrums that have arisen in the course of this dissertation. The texts I have examined, portraying the unequal encounters between the Nigerian sovereign and its subjects, have brought to the fore the many failures of human rights in the context of an undemocratic, or dysfunctional, state whose (non-)citizens become infrahuman objects of state violence, vulnerable, easily killable bodies that don’t matter. Many of their characters can be considered in this context embodiments of the aforementioned ‘core’ paradox of human rights: not recognised as right-bearing citizens, their naked humanity proves insufficient a reason to guarantee, in Arendt’s phrase, their ‘right to have rights.’

In human rights discourse, Joseph Slaughter explains, paradox can be defined as “the rhetorical form of self-contradiction that challenges received opinion and disturbs the hermeticism of tautological self-evidence to report that, despite appearances, man may not in all cases be man” (*Human Rights, Inc.* 12). Slaughter admits that it is not only useful, but on occasions necessary, to publicise human rights paradoxes, deploying the ‘politics of shame’ so as to protest their unfulfilled promises of egalitarianism. All the same, he continues, rather than simply seeking to expose the undoubted limits of human rights discourse, the fissures between human rights theory and practice, the violence often codified by the law, the critic

should ask, following Wendy Brown, how paradox might “gain political richness when it is understood as affirming the impossibility of justice in the present and as articulating the conditions and contours of justice in the future” (432). And indeed, if it is true that, as Douzinas has written, “human rights have ‘only paradoxes to offer,’”¹ it is also the case that, as he is quick to warn, their energy “comes from their aporetic nature” (21).

Such an emphasis on the emancipatory potential of paradox is bound to confirm the mutually illuminating relationship between human rights and literature: for the act of reading “requires to attend to the narrative and rhetorical structures that produce meaning via paradox, irony, ambiguity, ambivalence, and so forth” (Mullins 123). It is thus no coincidence that the works discussed in this dissertation are replete with disturbing contradictions that unhinge facile assumptions as to the boundaries of the human and the relationship between subjectivity and sovereignty. As has been noticed, they offer oxymoronic images of animalised, undignified, ghostly humans; they describe the postcolony as a place caught in a condition of perpetual exception, where the abnormal becomes normal and the human becomes bare life; they conjure up a world of indistinction that speaks of the limitations of clear-cut divisions; they depict ‘victims’ who do not want to be considered as such. By integrating different paradoxes in the fabric of the narrative, the authors often propose stories that are structurally open, forever unfinished, and that invite an agonistic, future-oriented reconfiguration of human rights and of the relationships between the individual and the state. Thus, if on the one

¹ The phrase is borrowed from Joanne Scott’s *Only Paradoxes to Offer: French Feminists and the Rights of Man*, where it is employed to describe the position of women in revolutionary France. Scott, in turn, cites Olympe de Gouges, the author of the 1791 “Declaration of the Rights of Woman and of the Female Citizen.”

hand they protest their protagonists' exclusion from an effective regime of rights and might not seem to suggest alternatives to the brutalisation they narrate, on the other they also fruitfully highlight the need to reimagine the foundational categories of human rights discourse, most evidently by recalling the ethical and political importance of resignifying and expanding the concepts of the universal and of the human.

In a recent essay on the necessity of re-articulating the idea of the universal in human rights discourse, Domna C. Stanton, while recalling the Spivakian warning as to “the difficulty of overcoming an imperialist ‘speaking for others,’” has observed that rejecting universalism in the name of the particular is for its part “neither easy nor necessarily emancipatory,” as confirmed for example by the abuse of the idea of the local as “an alibi for human rights violations perpetrated with dictatorial impunity” (67). In her contribution to the critical debate surrounding the question of universalism, Stanton tentatively introduces the notion of “‘the generalizable,’ in an attempt to delineate a process without end – a generalizabilization – for forging commonalities through a contest of meanings” without aspiring to achieve “a final product, a generalization” (76). Her essay thus outlines a bottom-up approach that counters the Enlightenment idea of top-down consensus, avoiding “unwarranted generalisations based on inferences,” and involving instead

a critical, vigilant comparativism focused on gauging what has been excluded or not spoken in the universal statements of [the human rights] regime, but also, concurrently, on any emergent generalizable issues and claims that need to be inscribed into human rights discourse, and thereby, expand and transform it. A process that must be open-ended, generalizabilization can produce provisional universalizing statements, propositions that must, of course, be subject to constant re-examination and revision over time to forge and to sustain intersubjective agreements. (Stanton 77-78)

The stories of exclusions fictionalised in the works studied here could be fruitfully related to Stanton's discussion. As noticed in the Introduction to this dissertation, they no doubt eschew any romanticised vision of the human experience as universal, showing how the grievability of human life varies depending on context. All the same, they emphatically assert the humanity of their not-quite-human characters, and thus point at the need to reformulate the universal, even as admitting that there exist local and global constraints that often prevent such an operation. Aware both of the potentialities and of the limits of literary representation, the authors never resolve the many, disquieting paradoxes they put forth. And yet, if the compelling ethical work they enjoin might frustrate the reader's need for a comforting closure, its 'generalisable' nature might indeed constitute an apt point of departure for the difficult, perennially on-going, and rewarding task of reimagining what it means to be human.

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