# Fictions of Youth: *Childness* in Selected West African Novels, 1991-2009

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For Daryl,
father, mentor, friend

# Abstract

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This thesis examines child figures in Anglophone West African novels by Ben Okri, Chris Abani, Uzodinma Iweala, Delia Jarrett-Macauley, Helen Oyeyemi, and Yaba Badoe. A "child" here is defined as a human person under age 18 and is referred to using the term *childness*, drawing from the work of children's literature scholar Peter Hollindale. The thesis begins by reviewing some of the ways literary scholars have discussed images of childness in West African novels to date, exploring common themes such as "Empire," "nationhood" and "identity." The next three chapters, then, seek to move beyond some of these established readings. Chapter 1 investigates Ben Okri's "Azaro" in *The Famished Road* (1991) as a means of exploring aspects of the artist's creative life. Okri's child figure, I propose, shares much in common with the "artist" from his earlier fictions, *Flowers and Shadows* (1980) and *The Landscapes Within* (1981). Chapter 2, similarly, considers the way in which child figures have a versatile function in Chris Abani's *Song for Night* (2007), Uzodinma Iweala's *Beasts of No Nation* (2005), and Delia Jarrett-Macauley's *Moses, Citizen and Me* (2005), propping up an implicit argument in favor of humanitarian intervention in civil war. Yet here the thesis also considers some of the downsides to children's instrumentalization: Jarrett-Macauley and Iweala depersonalize the child figure in their fictions, I argue. The child is drained of a convincing sense of an individuality and agency of his or her own.

Chapter 3 continues to explore the figure of the child as a complex and multivalent symbol. However, it finds that Helen Oyeyemi's *The Icarus Girl* (2005) and Yaba Badoe's *True Murder* (2009) do not disavow children's personhood, as Iweala and Jarrett-Macauley appear to do. Rather, the "otherness" of children, which is explored in their novels alongside the alterity of black persons, cultural minorities, and women, helps to draw attention to the agency of children. That is to say, Oyeyemi and Badoe show us children as subversive, contributing their own social meanings to the category of "youth," even whilst they are passively constructed or "othered" by adults in the novels. As an additional concern, the thesis also examines how authors have recourse to western conceptions of childness, not only to the traditions of their native countries, as we might as expect. The goal throughout is to highlight the child as a multifunctional figure, while also bringing attention to several specific ways in which African child figures function, including as a means of exploring human creativity, of arguing implicitly for more humanitarian involvement in African civil wars, and of establishing the full extent of the migrant's "outsiderness" in the space(s) of diaspora.

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# List of Abbreviations

| | |
|---|---|
| AG | *Astonishing the Gods* |
| BNN | *Beasts of No Nation* |
| IG | *The Icarus Girl* |
| FR | *The Famished Road* |
| FS | *Flowers and Shadows* |
| LW | *The Landscapes Within* |
| MCM | *Moses, Citizen and Me* |
| OH | *The Opposite House* |
| SN | *Song for Night* |
| TM | *True Murder* |
| WW | *White is for Witching* |

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# Introduction

## Childness and the West African Writer

The figure of the child plays a "nuanced and complex role" in "third-generation" Nigerian writing, Madelaine Hron argues (28). Meenakshi Bharat, concurring, suggests, "Children have featured in [postcolonial] fiction for a long time, but in critical discourse their role has not been sufficiently recognized" (3). Building on these perceptions, this thesis submits that the African child figure is a complicated and multivalent image, more so than scholars have generally assumed. In the chapters of my thesis, I analyze six key Anglophone West African novels: Ben Okri's *The Famished Road* (1991), Chris Abani's *Song for Night* (2007), Uzodinma Iweala's *Beasts of No Nation* (2005), Delia Jarrett-Macauley's *Moses, Citizen and Me* (2005), Helen Oyeyemi's *The Icarus Girl* (2005), and Yaba Badoe's *True Murder* (2009). These texts were all selected for their prioritization of the child figure, and, across the thesis, I grapple with their representations of childhood in order to gain clarity on the status of the child in West African fiction. The novels' first and last publication years, 1991 and 2009, mark the chronological cut-off points of the thesis.

As I go on to explore, African child figures do not only help authors contest colonialist rule or give form to the future of the newly "born" nation-state, which are common ways of reading the child figure in African and postcolonial fiction. They also, I suggest, serve as devices helping novelists examine the nature of the artist's creative life (Chapter 1), support an argument in favor of global humanitarian intervention in civil war (Chapter 2), and make clear the difficulties of being a black, bi-cultural woman in the West African diaspora (Chapter 3). The thesis might be understood in other words to complicate the attention paid by many scholars to the African or postcolonial child as a form of "national allegory," referencing the work of Fredric Jameson, whom I go on to

discuss. In particular, in his essay "Third-World Literature in the Era of Multinational Capitalism" (1986), Jameson sees all works of "third world" literature as "necessarily" encoding stories of nation-building or postcolonial statehood (69). While I also find these themes important and address them at key points throughout, I contest the determinism implied by Jameson's theory and bring attention to some of the other, distinctive ways in which African child figures function – ways that do not, as I explore, always relate to national or political themes.

Chapter 1, therefore, investigates the child as an image of creativity in Ben Okri's *The Famished Road*. More specifically, I see Okri as influenced not only by West African folklores, as many scholars have suggested, but also by the English Romantics and especially their theories of the "artist", whose impact on Okri's novel is particularly palpable in the child's unusual vision, as I explain. Chapter 2 is similarly interested in the cultural traditions activated by West African authors not only in how, and with what significance, child figures serve as metaphors. Abani's *Song for Night,* Iweala's *Beasts of No Nation,* and Delia Jarrett-Macauley's *Moses, Citizen and Me* all appeared as part of a wave of fictional and non-fictional narratives about African child soldiers that swept across Europe and America in the mid-2000s. In the chapter, I examine their works within the context of this hyper-competitive, global literary marketplace, and study Iweala's, Abani's, and Jarrett-Macauley's novels for how intersect with – and endorse – global humanitarian discourses. Chapter 3 relatedly examines how two diasporic novels by Helen Oyeyemi and Yaba Badoe mix Gothic tropes with African folklores in their narratives of childhood, considering also the way these authors employ children's perspectives to engage with alienating experiences of racial, cultural, and gender-based prejudice.

Throughout the chapters of the thesis, the concept of "childness" provides my heuristic or methodological lens. "Childness," as Peter Hollindale defines it, "is a composite made up of beliefs, values, and experiences [...] which collect and interact with each other to form ideal and empirical answers to the question 'What is a child'?" (76). Hollindale's "childness" is therefore used to highlight childhood as a social and cultural construction. "Childness" is "made" not "given," we might say. The "child" emerges as a product of social relations: "we are all implicated in the social construction of childhood, just as we are implicated in the construction of all social meanings," as Gabrielle Owen, likewise, observes (265-266). In what follows, I similarly address "childness" as a central term in order to make clear how authors variably shape, mould, or "invent" children in literary fiction. The construction of "childness" in several novels, or what traits authors ascribe to children, I suggest, is a critical element of how authors deploy child images, in part, as figurative devices, serving to prop up, clarify, support, or deepen apparent overriding themes, although childness is not always purely instrumental in these novels.[1] Badoe and Oyeyemi, in particular, seem interested in a peculiarly agentive or constructive childness for its own merit, as I explain.

Throughout the investigations of this thesis, I address two primary questions. Firstly, how do West African authors represent children, or what aspects of children's personality, speech, embodiment, and social standing do they underline and what others, relatedly, do they disavow? And secondly, how does this representation of childness, as we find it in several novels, connect up to major ideas, including the origins of human creativity (Okri); the necessity of protecting children from involvement with military

[1] With this definition of my core concept of "childness" in place, I will hereafter, across the thesis,

groups (Iweala, Abani, and Jarrett-Macauley); as well as the difficulties of being black, bi-cultural, female and young in the African diaspora (Oyeyemi and Badoe). My interest in childness, therefore, is how authors deploy children as conceptual tools or symbols. As a subsidiary matter of concern, the thesis also examines how images or social constructions of childness in the text may be culturally "mapped," or located either in relationship to West Africa, which is the authors' region of heritage or origin, and/or to the west, where many of them now make their homes.

To sketch the novelists' cosmopolitan as well as African backgrounds, Ben Okri now resides in London, after a childhood spent in Nigeria (Fraser xii-xvii). Chris Abani is also Nigerian by birth, although he now lives and teaches in the US (Tunca, "Christopher Abani"). Uzodinma Iweala is the son of Nigeria's former finance minister, Dr. Ngozi Okonjo-Iweala, and now lives and works in Washington, D.C. (Smith, "Young and Privileged"). Delia Jarrett-Macauley is the daughter of two Sierra Leonean immigrants to the UK, where she teaches at Warwick University ("Biography"). Among the most dislocated of the novelists I examine, the Nigerian-born Helen Oyeyemi has lived in a range of different countries, including Germany and the Czech Republic, although she grew up in Britain (Oyeyemi, "Once Upon a Life"). Yaba Badoe is the last novelist I discuss and was born and raised in Ghana. However, like Oyeyemi, she was also educated at Cambridge University and has worked for the BBC (Gyasi, "An Interview"). As is evident by this brief sketch of their biographies, all the authors come from elite backgrounds and move amongst a globally mobile middle-class. This then has significant implications for their representations of childness, which, as I go on to discuss, are drawn from both western and African cultural traditions; global life experiences give these authors access to diverse vantage points on youth.

My interest here in "mapping childness" in these writers' novels is motivated not only by a desire to better understand their works, especially how they think about and utilize the child figure. It is also prompted by a desire to engage in a critical dialogue with the overwhelming attention paid by scholars to local African traditions and cultures in their previous study of childhood as a theme. "African authors have consistently returned to childhood to find their personal as well as racial roots," Eldred Jones argues in his editorial article for *Childhood in African Literature,* analyzing works by Okri, Wole Soyinka, and Christopher Okigbo (1998) (7). Maxwell Okolie similarly suggests, examining a handful of Francophone West African authors, "African novelists, trapped between a disappearing familiar world and an invidiously pervading Westernism, sought refuge and psychological compensation in the evocation of their childhood" (Okolie 31). For Jones and Okolie, in other words, African novelists "return" to childhood in order to escape from western culture; they do not explicitly evoke western conceptions and images of the child in their works.

In its investigations, this thesis finds, however, that both western and African perspectives are activated in the Anglophone West African novels of childhood I explore. Indeed, the depth and complexity of the child figure as a symbol in West African writing is noteworthy: children in literature do not only recall West African writers' "home" or native cultures, as I go on to discuss. They are also constructed from diverse cultural materials, influences, and intertexts, including literary traditions and cultural conceptions common in the west. The next section of this chapter proceeds to give background on the child image, drawing out some of the peculiar ways in which children have been conceptualized in western vs. African cultures. It pays particular attention to notions of "innocence" and "leisure" as these are characteristic of many western childhoods but not

so much of childhood in Africa, where children are frequently informally and formally employed. For the purposes of this thesis a "child" is defined as a human person under age 18, which is the age-based definition of childhood employed in western countries (Montgomery 53). However, different cultures and regions will also relate to conceptions of childness in a variety of ways, as I explore.

The introduction then continues by providing an overview of the salient scholarly literature. In their study of the child figure in African writing, scholars have largely employed frameworks of the "colony" and the "nation-state," as already anticipated in the above. Bharat says, for instance, "The child answers the requirement [...] of constructing a plank from which the multifarious aspects of postcolonialism can be interpreted" (13). She has in mind especially how Caribbean, Indian, and African authors have employed child figures to raise a challenge to colonial rule. Other scholars, such as Jacqueline Bardolph, have argued for the child as a form of "national allegory," drawing on the work of Fredric Jameson. In "Third-World Literature in the Era of Multinational Capitalism" (1986), Jameson asserts, "All third-world texts are necessarily [...] *national allegories*" (69; emphasis in the original). By this he means that, in novels from Asia, Africa, and Latin America, seemingly private dramas actually, and by *necessity*, encode events of wider political significance. Bardolph, then, takes Jameson's theory and applies it to Okri's *The Famished Road*, Salman Rushdie's *Midnight's Children* (1981), and Nuruddin Farah's *Maps* (1986): "The three heroes embody a people's young identity; they represent the hopes of a new political entity [...]" (46). Bardolph in this way develops Jameson's idea that personal struggles echo the travails of the national body. Her article, like Jameson's, observes a collapse between the personal and the political in three "third world" texts and sees child figures as encoding the immaturity – and futurity – of the emergent nation-state.

Aijaz Ahmad, critiquing Jameson's theory, has helpfully observed that Jameson's "national allegory" is dangerously reductive when applied to *all* "third world literatures" (cf. "Jameson's Rhetoric of Otherness"). Ahmad specifically objects to Jameson's extensive use of the term "third world" and his attempt to use this as a basis for describing the entirety of Asian, Latin American, and African literatures, so eliding the cultural and historical particularities that distinguish individual regions and countries. I agree with Ahmad's criticisms and find Jameson's theory overly deterministic: how can we say that a text authored in Delhi, for instance, *must* function in precisely the same way as one composed in Abuja? Yet, while these are serious concerns, casting doubt on Jameson's theory, the notion that, in *certain* cases, African, Asian, and Indian authors have found it interesting to establish analogies between the "ordinary" child protagonist and the "development" of his or her community has often, in my view, produced persuasive readings of individual works. I do not, therefore, seek to displace such conventionally "postcolonial" readings. I do, however, aim to add to such readings by exploring some of the other, especially non-Afrocentric ways in which West African authors have used child figures in their novels.

The thesis might be understood in other words to offer an "alternative politics" focused on the child image. The phrase "alternative politics" is not intended to suggest that, in the investigations of the thesis, political frameworks are abandoned. To the contrary, across the thesis, I consider how authors use images of childhood to speak to explicitly political themes such as anti-colonial struggle and revolution (Chapter 1), global human rights discourses (Chapter 2), and discrimination against racial, cultural, gender and age-based minorities in western as well as African countries (Chapter 3). My goal, nonetheless, is to chart a departure from the Jameson-driven approaches that seem

especially prevalent in scholarship on children in African fiction, obscuring some of the other, equally fascinating ways in which African child figures can be read.

Alongside a move away from Afro-centric or nation-focused readings, the thesis also considers the implications of the symbolization of children for perceptions of their agency, especially in the second and third chapters. In the context of Jarrett-Macauley's and Iweala's texts, for instance, I question how the child's role as a trope might be understood to overshadow or efface his presence as a convincing character or separate personality within the narrative. This perspective is then counterbalanced in my third chapter, wherein I argue that Oyeyemi and Badoe conversely draw attention to the autonomous agency and personhood of children, especially to their role as social actors. Unpacking some of these ideas, the introduction goes on to offer a survey of childhood in several key works in modern Anglophone African fiction, also looking back at how children were depicted in early Francophone texts, where relevant. My objective here is to begin to explore some of the ways in which West African authors have represented children in their fiction, whilst also distinguishing these from the specific preoccupations of the six authors I examine. These include an interest in children's creativity (Okri), vulnerability (Iweala, Abani, Jarrett-Macauley) and agency (Oyeyemi and Badoe). The introduction concludes with an outline of the thesis.

## Childhood as a Social and Cultural Construction

This section explores a few of the many ways in which children have been conceptualized in western and African history, laying the ground for the investigations conducted in later chapters, wherein I locate the constructions of childness present in several Anglophone West African novels relative to cultural and geopolitical regions. Admittedly, these two categories, "Africa" and "western," are not always easy to untangle:

as is discussed, historically "western" ways of viewing children are now widely prevalent, especially amongst global middle-classes (in so far as Anglophone literature reflects the preoccupations of this class). Indeed, class is a central part of the following discussion, both of the individual authors themselves, who move in privileged circles and write for a literary elite, and of childhood as a historically and culturally contingent concept. Lower-income Africans, generally speaking, see children differently from many westerners, making fewer distinctions between childhood and adulthood, whilst middle- and upper-class Africans, as I explore, largely endorse the western view. The section begins by revisiting various ways in which children have been constructed in western history, starting with what historians see as the origins of the category of the "child" in the fifteenth-century and tracing key threads in the western history of childhood up to the present day. In this discussion, I am particularly am interested in colonial entanglements: how theories of the "child" emerged alongside constructions of the African native or "savage." The section then moves into a discussion of conceptions of childness in African countries, where these are seen often to exist in conflict with western conceptions of the child as "innocent," "dependent," and "vulnerable" – though, in other cases, these definitions converge.

In western countries such as Germany, France, and the United Kingdom, childness has been continually redefined and renegotiated, with marked changes in how children have been seen and treated across the centuries. In *Centuries of Childhood* (1960), cultural historian Philippe Ariés argues that "in medieval society the idea of childhood did not exist" (125). It is not that parents neglected their children, Ariés goes on to suggest; in other words, "the idea of childhood is not to be confused with affection for children" (125). Rather, according to Ariés, medieval society lacked the concept of a separate *nature* for

children, i.e. "that particular nature which distinguishes the child from adult" (125). Diana Gittins concurs. From the "fifteenth century onwards […]," Gittins argues, "there was increasing division in the way children were represented," and understood, by adults ("The Historical Construction of Childhood" 41). Adults prior to the fifteenth century, in other words, saw "children," as we call them now, simply as persons, indistinguishable from adults and to be treated identically.

Hugh Cunningham also begins his study, *Children and Childhood in Western Society* (1995), in the year 1500, and there seems general consensus among historians that the modern western conception of the "child" originated during the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries, although according to Cunningham, this remains a topic of scholarly debate (cf. Cunningham 13). Once childhood had been "invented" by adults, how did they invest it with particular meaning? According to Gittins, in the sixteenth century, attitudes toward children were strongly influenced by religion: "there was a revolution in child care and attitudes to children in Early Modern Europe […] with the rise of Puritanism," she claims (Gittins 41). According to Rex and Wendy Stainton Rogers, who also address this period, adults viewed children as "sullied by original sin," an idea that "drew upon Aristotelian notions overlaid with the Judeo-Christian 'Adam and Eve'" (27). Sixteenth-century adults in Europe and North America generally viewed children as innately "evil," flawed in fundamental ways, an idea that also, interestingly, finds purchase in some modern African societies. In the Democratic Republic of the Congo, for example, where Christian Pentecostalism mixes with local indigenous beliefs, thousands of children have been accused of malevolent witchcraft and ostracized by their communities (Cimpric "Accused of Witchcraft" 14).

As one might expect, in Europe and North America in the sixteenth century, as well as the DRC in the twenty-first, children who are innately evil or "sinful" are treated harshly by adults, who seek to correct their erring instincts and, thereby, bring about their individual or personal salvation. "[Puritans] waited anxiously for some sign that their children were being converted," John Sommerville writes, elaborating on this idea: "Thus it was that they became more concerned and more intrusive parents than we have met to this point" (90). In modern Africa, alongside banishment, child "witches" have been beaten, imprisoned and abused (Cimpric "Accused of Witchcraft" 39). Adults for centuries have used strict methods of punishment, even violence, to shape children's behavior. Following Puritanism, in the late seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, western notions of childness changed again (though inevitably statements such as this are guilty of overgeneralization). As Cunningham describes this development, "children cease[d] to be seen as the embodiment of souls in need of salvation," as they had largely been seen by the Puritans (188). Instead, they became "like the young of some domestic pet in need of habit training or like the seed which should be allowed to grow naturally" (Cunningham 188). As I go on to investigate, this shift in perspectives about children's nature notably occurred around the same time as western Europeans began to explore – and conquer – global regions. As children were increasingly conceptualized as in need of "habit training" at home, so also natives were constructed as in need of "civilizing" abroad.

John Locke (1632-1704) and Jean-Jacques Rousseau (1712-1778) are both major philosophers of this Enlightenment period and helped generate key ideas of "reason," "rationality," and "progress" that provided intellectual justification for European imperial

expansion,[2] as well as many influential notions regarding children. For Locke and Rousseau, children are not innately evil, as the Puritans had believed; rather, they appear naturally "pure" or empty. It is possible to observe an imperialist sub-text to this philosophy, as children are seen as akin to a far-off "virgin" land ripe for the adult's (read: colonizer's) cultivating. In *Imperial Leather: Race, Gender, and Sexuality in the Colonial Contest* (1995), Anne McClintock discusses how many European colonizers saw indigenous lands as "empty," waiting to be filled with "history, language, and reason" (30). This is similar to how both Locke and Rousseau thought of children. In *Some Thoughts Concerning Education* (1693), Locke for instance proposes the child's mind as a "tabula rasa," or "blank slate," awaiting inscription by adult experience and knowledge. His view of children is thus analogous to the colonial governor's *terra nullius* or unconquered territory; the child, like the foreign "native," requires the careful shepherding of the white, western, adult male.

Similarly, in *Emile* (1762), Rousseau's treatise on education, the French philosopher sees children as "pure" or innately amoral at birth: "Inflict no punishment on him, for he does not know what it is to be at fault […]" (*Emile* 92). For Rousseau, as for Locke, therefore, children are vacant upon arrival; they, like native peoples, have little prior understanding or knowledge. For Rousseau, unlike for Locke, however – and as a point of distinction between them – children do not need to be *taught* how to be good. They will develop naturally in this direction, so long as adults do not often interfere: "Regard all delays as advantages, to advance toward the end without losing anything is to gain a lot" (*Emile* 95). As Chapter 1 of this thesis discusses in greater depth, Rousseau was an important figure for the English Romantics, who similarly saw children as innately good or

[2] For more on the ideology of Empire and notions of "progress" within it, see Harald Fischer Tiné's and Michael Mann's *Colonialism and Civilizing Mission* (1-29).

"innocent" and desired them to remain children as long as possible (cf. Hendrick 36). In "Ode, Intimations of Immortality from Recollections of Early Childhood" (1807), William Wordsworth, the poet and co-author of *The Lyrical Ballads* (1798), declares, "Heaven lies about us in our infancy!," so drawing a comparison between an idyllic ethereal realm and the state of being a child (lines 67-69). Wordsworth's sentiment toward children is clearly nostalgic; he mourns their eventual loss of connection to spiritual "truths."

Wordsworth's *Lyrical Ballads,* co-authored with Samuel Taylor Coleridge, was published in 1798, that is to say, during the height of what Peter J. Kitson describes as the period of "New Imperialism," which coincided with the rise of Romanticism in Britain (13). Beneath Romantic ideas about childhood "innocence," too, run theories about the "irrationality" and "spirituality" of indigenous peoples. In *The Prelude,* his long autobiographical poem, Wordsworth compares his younger self to a "naked savage, born/ On Indian plains" (lines 297-298). The poet represents his childhood play – free and unrestrained – as analogous to the "wantonness" of "Indian savages" (299). Such passages recall Rousseau's description of children as akin to "natural men," or "noble savages," as this notion was understood by many of his contemporaries (Lovejoy 165). For both Wordsworth and Rousseau, in other words, children and indigenous peoples exist outside of civilization; they are free, therefore, of some of its restraining – and corrupting – influences. Though this theory to some extent idealizes children and "natives," it nevertheless carries insidious implications: if children, for all of their "purity" or even because of it, require western adult protection, then so, too, do the "wanton" indigenous peoples with whom children were so frequently compared.

In "Ode," his paean to childhood, Wordsworth also imagines that "Shades of the prison-house begin to close/ Upon the growing Boy" (lines 67-69). This is another

Rousseauian image, especially in the way that it envisions – and laments – the child as constrained, corrupted by adult influences. Near the start of *Emile*, Rousseau mourns the "imprisonment" of the child in society's customs: "At his birth he is sewed in swaddling clothes [...] So long as he keeps his human shape, he is enchained by our institutions" (42). Rousseau uses the image of an infant tightly and uncomfortably bound by cloths to critique the way eighteenth-century society sought to constrain children's bodies and minds. Cunningham elaborates, "[Rousseau] asserts the right of a child to be a child, and to be happy in it" (66). In his study, Cunningham then links this idea of children's "right" to remain children to a number of developments that took place in the eighteenth, nineteenth, and early twentieth centuries. Previous to the years between 1830 and 1920, he argues, state policies "had been drawn up with a concern either for the child's soul or for the future manpower needs of the state" (Cunningham 134). After Rousseau's treatise and its popular dissemination in the Romantic discourse of the late 1700s and early 1800s, however, these two aims were joined by a new concern: "to save children for the enjoyment of childhood" (Cunningham 134). An irony here, of course, is that few of the indigenous peoples who were infantilized and colonized using eighteenth-century notions of childhood were allowed to "develop" in the same way; children, apparently, were the only "innocents" worth preserving.

Notable events between the year of 1830 and 1920 that illustrate adults' deepening desire to recognize the "right" of children to be children – as well as to protect this right – include Britain's Factory Acts of the 1830s and 40s, which placed restrictions on the working hours of children. Crucially, these Factory Acts applied only to UK industries, and so a split opened up between how British lawmakers conceptualized British children and how they viewed African, Asian, and Caribbean children, who were seen as less worthy of

care. In seeking to keep children safe and "innocent," though only not nearly to the standards demanded by lawmakers today, the Factory Act of 1883 prohibited children under the age of 9 years from formal employment in textile manufacture. It also limited the working hours of children between the ages of 9 and 13 to eight hours per day (Henriques 10). These Factory Acts and the similar works of legislation that followed reflect a growing eagerness on the part of western adults to consider children fundamentally different to themselves and, moreover, possessed of special needs – although, again, non-British or foreign children were largely excluded. Education reforms also characterize this period of British society, and show childhood as increasingly separated off from adult life. By 1880, every neighborhood in England was legally required to have its own school, according to Cunningham (157). By 1920, compulsory schooling for children across Europe and North America was the norm (Cunningham 156-157.)

Across Europe and North America and into the twentieth and twenty-first centuries, Rousseau's model still prevails; children continue to be strongly distinguished from adults and considered in need of adult protection in many western countries as well as, increasingly, in Africa. *In Pricing the Priceless Child* (1985), Viviana Zelizer describes a situation developing across the twentieth century and into the twenty-first where American children were seen by their parents as more emotionally "priceless" and economically "useless." Zelizer's study looks in particular at the United States, though similar patterns of "sentimentalization" were common throughout the global west. "By the 1930s," Zelizer writes, "lower-class children had joined their middle-class counterparts in a new nonproductive world of childhood, a world in which the sanctity and emotional value of a child made child labor taboo" (6). In many western countries today, as well as in some African regions, children are required by their parents (as well as by the state) to attend

school. Terri Ochiagha, for instance, has published an illuminating account of several Nigerian novelists' experiences at Government College, Umuahia, thereby underscoring the value placed on education by the nation's middle-classes. When children are not attending school, parents may enroll them in after-school leisure activities or encourage them to play, thus reinforcing ideas of the essential non-productivity or sanctity of childhood.

School may be enjoyable for many children, yet it is a form of obligation; few parents allow their children to do simply as they please. Whilst many modern parents thereby strictly limit their children's freedom, enrolling them in school or regulating their leisure activities, at the same time, in this more recent period, adults around the world have also begun to recognize children's right to self-determination, not only to special care. In the 1950s and 60s, civil rights movements across Europe and North America fought for greater freedom and equal social treatment for blacks, women, and sexual minorities. In the 1960s and 70s, children found their advocates, too, in Daniel Farson and John Holt, leaders of the children's liberation movement and the authors of two polemics, *Birthrights* (1974) and *Escape from Childhood* (1974), respectively. Though Farson and Holt were adults, so, not members of the population they championed, they nevertheless argued that children were unduly restricted. According to David Archard, who adumbrates Farson's and Holt's writings, they claimed that "the modern separation of the child's and adult's world is an unwarranted and oppressive discrimination [...] and that children are entitled to the rights and privileges possessed by adults" (*Children: Rights and Childhood* 46-47). As a source of frustration for Farson and Holt, the children's liberation movement was, generally speaking, a failure. Most children today do not possess the same rights as adults to work, vote, or make sexual choices for themselves.

Nonetheless, according to Cunningham, by the end of the twentieth century, "in legal processes and in family disputes, adults try to elicit and respect the views of children in ways unimaginable at the century's beginning," thereby affording some measure of recognition to children's right of self-determination (189). A good example of this global shift toward eliciting children's views – and of the corresponding increase in adults' recognition of children's right to have an influence in matters affecting their own lives – is Article 12 of the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child (1989). The article stipulates, "States Parties [sic] shall assure to the child who is capable of forming his or her own views the right to express those views freely in all matters affecting the child […]" ("Convention on the Rights of the Child"). In other words, international lawmakers have to come to possess greater respect for children's viewpoints, a perspective I also endorse in my second chapter, arguing that three novels about African child soldiers excessively suppress children's voices, instead of magnifying them, as the Article promotes. The Convention is particularly notable for allowing children "the opportunity to be heard in any judicial and administrative proceedings" (ibid.), which was not always common legal practice (see Goodman, "Children's Testimony in Historical Perspective"). It thereby ensures that children have an opportunity to influence events with impact on their lives, something I, too, find valuable.

African conceptions of childness, like those in the west, are remarkably varied, though, as seen, they also exhibit patterns in common. The continent is home to fifty-four autonomous nation-states ("Members States") and, within these, thousands of individual ethnic groups, many of which have their own slightly divergent definition of what is a "child." For instance, in an article on "Recollections of Childhood Experiences During the Nigerian Civil War" (2007), Egodi Uchendu remarks upon the widespread use of "age

grades" in countries such as Nigeria and Kenya, where lifespan is not measured in individual years, as it is in Europe and North America, but in classes (402). A single "age grade" in Nigeria, in other words, may encompass individuals of numerous ages by a Euro-American counting system. Moreover, many societies in Africa measure the end of childhood by the achievement of life milestones, such as puberty or marriage, instead of by the arbitrary age of 18.

Uchendu further observes, "In Igboland [a region of Nigeria] the youth age range is wide and the word 'youth' can indicate either social position or specific lifestyle" (402). A person who is married might no longer count as a "youth," while someone who lives at home – despite being the exact same age in years – would. This significantly complicates the western definition of a "child," which puts emphatic emphasis on physical age. A "youth" in Igbo conceptions might therefore be someone of the age of thirty-five; calling someone aged thirty-five a "youth" would certainly seem strange to persons in many western countries. What this reveals, possibly, is the greater flexibility of African conceptions of childhood or, rather, the different contexts on which they rely. Not making age the determining factor, some African cultures privilege instead individual achievements and relative social standing.

In recent decades, anthropologists have opened a window onto several of Africa's diverse contexts of childness. For instance, in *The Underneath of Things: Violence, History, and the Everyday in Sierra Leone* (2001), Marian Ferme provides an illuminating account of childness as it is conceptualized by the Mende people of Liberia and Sierra Leone. Amongst the Mende, children, and especially twins, are seen as emissaries from another world: "I argue here that central to the social construction of infancy [...] is the perceived relationship of infants with the world of the spirits, which generates loyalties in conflict

with the world of the living" (198). The Yoruba in Nigeria, too, see certain children known as *abiku* as possessing special powers, such as the ability to commune with spirits and reenter life in a cycle of reincarnation (Mobolade 1973; McCabe 2002). The first chapter of the thesis explores the significance of such spirit-child traditions for Ben Okri's novel *The Famished Road* and the work's two sequels, *Songs of Enchantment* and *Infinite Riches*. Whilst the *abiku* myth is explicitly referenced throughout Okri's novels, as I go on to discuss, Okri's peculiar representation of the *abiku* image also departs in important ways from that found in traditional folklores, for instance, depicting an *abiku* "heaven" that is not dark and "occluded," as in the Yoruba folklores (McCabe 2002, 4), but rather filled with bright rainbows and magic "sprites" (FR 3-5). Okri's rendering of the *abiku*, too, noticeably overlaps with western traditions of childhood not only African ones, as I address. In particular, in Chapter 1, I go on to examine how western "spirit-child" traditions, such as those evoked by William Blake's childhood visions of angels, find resonance in Okri's child figure, alongside African ones. The final chapter of the thesis then returns to the *abiku* and examines how, in Oyeyemi's *The Icarus Girl*, the *abiku* is employed differently than it is in Okri's novel. While for Okri the abiku is a figure of hope and especially "vision," for Oyeyemi, as I explore, the abiku symbolizes darker themes of deviancy and errancy, thereby serving to underline the social marginality of her young, biracial protagonist, Jess.

Stepping now outside of the frame of ethnicity and viewing the continent through the lens of class, Deevia Bhana has explored how middle-class childness is constructed differently to lower-class childness in South Africa, particularly in conversations around HIV: "childhood innocence is constituted as white and middle-class through teacher attitudes and pedagogical practices" (adumbrated in Robinson 58). In other words,

according to Bhana, South African teachers view middle-class children as more innocent than lower-class children, especially in their knowledge of, and attitudes toward, sexuality. A similar contrast between lower-class and middle-class conceptions of childness also holds true in other places across the continent. This is particularly relevant to my present study since all of the authors examined come from middle-class backgrounds. They are therefore likely to look at children differently from many of their working-class compatriots, a fact that should invite caution in how we read their novels, especially when tempted to label them as representatively "African" writers, speaking for childhood across the continent. Middle-class families in Africa, according to scholars like Bhana, mostly reflect the dominant western conception of childness, for instance, by sending their children to school (Watkins 2015),[3] purchasing books and other specially designated objects for them (Khorana 1998; de Bruijn 2008), and generally endorsing the Rousseauian conception of a divide between adulthood and youth. Amongst lower-class African families, however, early life may vary little in definition and character from later years, as children are sent to work in factories, fields, or mines (Hilson 2010), and even head their own households, for instance, after the death of a parent from AIDS (Stainton Rogers 2009, 146).

Parenting practices also vary between western and African regions, as is explored in my third chapter, wherein I examine how Oyeyemi employs differences in disciplinary styles in *The Icarus Girl* to mark out the cultural discrepancies of the protagonist's, Jess's, parents. In *An Introduction to Childhood: Anthropological Perspectives on Children's Lives* (2009), Montgomery examines how, whilst the use of corporal punishment is becoming

[3] According to Kevin Watkins of the Brookings Institution, "Children from the richest 20 percent of households in Ghana average six more years in school than those from the poorest households" ("Too Little Access, Not Enough Learning").

less prevalent in the west, with firm bans on the practice in countries such as Sweden, forms of "spanking," "hitting," and "slapping" are still widely employed by parents in Latin America, Asia, and in certain African societies (158-166). Amongst the Beng, for example, parents spank their children if they begin walking too soon (Montgomery 161). The Mende people, meanwhile, employ physical punishment in order to teach "children their subordinate place in the social order" (Montgomery 161). In Oyeyemi's novel, Jess's Nigerian mother, Sarah, utilizes such strict forms of corporal punishment, while her British father, Daniel, is more lenient. As I go on to discuss, Oyeyemi employs this difference in disciplinary styles to highlight the cultural rift between Sarah and Daniel, which then places Jess in an uncomfortable position as she attempts to navigate her parents' cultural divide.

Indeed, the concept of childness in this thesis crucially allows me to place the selected texts in conversation with these different historical and cultural traditions, as is evident in example from Oyeyemi's novel. Further, the fact that many middle-class Nigerians and Sierra Leoneans may see childness in a similar way to Rousseau, that is to say as "vulnerable" and "innocent," comes into play in Chapter 2, wherein I argue that the prevailing message of Abani's, Iweala's and Jarrett-Macauley's novels is that the recruitment of children in conflicts in Sierra Leone, Liberia and across Sub-Saharan Africa is an undeniable evil, which should be brought to an end. In the mid to late 2000s, as I go on to discuss, novels and memoirs about African children fighting as soldiers such as Ishmael Beah's *A Long Way Gone* (2007) proliferated in international markets, helping to galvanize existing concern for such children which Abani's, Iweala's, and Jarrett-Macauley's novels also promote. Their texts might in other words at one level be read as a corroboration of Rousseau's urging, "Let childhood ripen in children" (*Emile* 95); do not

take it from them too soon. Interestingly, this emphasis on the vulnerability and innocence then puts these writers' work in tension with how children are seen in certain African contexts, where adults may make little differentiation between adulthood and childness, and in which underage combatants may be viewed as equally guilty to adults for their violent actions, as I explore.

In Ben Okri's writing, too, a specific vision of childness is referenced in the author's many allusions to the English Romantics, for whom, as we have seen, early life represents an ideal of innocence as well as creativity: "Every child is seen in important ways already as a creative genius," Judith Plotz writes, further explicating the Romantics' views (2001) (6). In other words, for writers like Wordsworth and Samuel Taylor Coleridge, children not only embody a moral ideal, linked to ideas of "heavenly" glory; they also serve as creative paragons, as I go on to address in Chapter 1. Wordsworth refers to the child as a "seer blest" in "Ode: Intimations of Immortality from Recollections of Early Childhood" (line 114). Arthur Schopenhauer, a major philosopher of the Romantic period, declares, "Every child is, to a certain extent, a genius, and every genius is, to a certain extent, a child" (qtd in Chamberlain 379). In associating his child figure, Azaro, with various images of the artist from his earlier work, as well as to the Romantic child figure directly, through peculiar similarities and allusions, Okri activates this complex historical tradition of childness within his novel, I suggest. This reading then helps to complicate existing scholarly perspectives on Okri's work, which, as I discuss, has often been read for its relationship to African cultures or traditions of childness alone.

By contrast, Oyeyemi and Badoe depart from the Rousseauian conception that appears dominant in Okri's as well as Abani's, Iweala's, and Jarrett-Macauley's works. Their texts arguably belong more to a later moment in African and African diasporic

writing, I submit, where adults begin to recognize children's right to self-determination and children's own views are more firmly taken into account. As Oyeyemi and Badoe both show, children often have little control over their own lives. They may be "othered" by adults or, even, neglected and abused. Nonetheless, Oyeyemi's and Badoe's novels also invite awareness of the strategies that children use to exercise personal agency and self-expression. Chapter 3 examines some of these strategies in detail, putting the two novelists' work into dialogue with more recent developments in childhood studies. As Martin Woodhead helpfully summarizes some of this latest research in sociology and child psychology, "Studies of social development have emphasized children's role as social actors and meaning-makers" (3). That is to say, contemporary researchers have come to understand children as construct*ive* beings, not merely passive within or construct*ed* by adult conceptions, an idea, I suggest, which is also explored in Badoe's and Oyeyemi's writing.

## Critical Survey

This section of my chapter continues on to provide an overview of some of the relevant scholarship on the child figure in literary studies, analyzing significant works with particular impact on the present study and discussing how they inform the later chapters. The section begins by addressing how several scholars in the broader field of English literary studies have discussed the child figure. Since the 1980s and 90s, scholars examining children's literature in particular have raised especially pertinent questions about how adults are invested in certain constructions of childness; my own study has been informed by the work of Jacqueline Rose and Perry Nodelman, who both see the child as an adult fantasy or invention, as I go on to explain. The section then narrows down to a discussion of child figures in the study of "postcolonial" and African writing in

particular. For a definition of "postcolonial" literature, I look to Elleke Boehmer's *Colonial and Postcolonial Literatures: Migrant Metaphors* (2005): "Rather than simply being the writing which 'came after' empire," Boehmer submits, "*postcolonial* literature is generally defined as that which critically or subversively scrutinizes the colonial relationship" (3; emphasis in the original). In other words, Boehmer sees postcolonial literature as engaged in a subversive dialogue with colonial power relations. It should come as no surprise, therefore, that child figures in works that have been labeled "postcolonial" by scholars have often been read as a means of contesting colonialist rule, as I go on to explore.

"African writing," which is here defined as any piece of literature by a writer of African heritage or origin that looks in depth at life on the continent does not by definition "critically […] scrutinize[e] the colonial relationship," to quote from Boehmer, although that has still been a preoccupation for several novelists (see, for instance, Chapters 5 and 6 in Boehmer's *Colonial and Postcolonial Literatures* and Chapter 7 in *Stories of Women*). Nonetheless, in the study of African writing, scholars have also often read child figures as symbolizing political themes, for instance, relating to national identity, as will be discussed. The section reviews some of these scholarly perspectives, especially Clare Barker's reading of the disabled child figure as a metaphor for the African nation "crippled" by colonialism, as well as Madeline Hron's meditation on the child as a figure of "hybridity," exploring several valences of the African child figure in relation to them.

Beverley Lyon Clark observes in her study *Kiddie Lit* (2003), "critics have been slow to take children's literature seriously and treat it canonically" (2). Ernest Emenyonu agrees, "Some critics and scholars tend to see the genre as something quite trivial, nothing to reckon with […]" (1). In the latter decades of the twentieth century, however, the study

of children's literature has veritably flourished, contributing much to the critical literature, including several works of relevance to this present study. Jacqueline Rose's *The Case of Peter Pan; Or, The Impossibility of Children's Literature* (1984) provides a case in point. One of the scholars who first proved the value of children's literature as an object of academic research (see Rudd and Pavlik, "The (Im)possibility of Children's Fiction"), Rose takes aim in her study at the very edifice supporting children's literature, namely, the idea of a happy, listening child, to whom the children's book is addressed, declaring it "impossible": "[…] if children's fiction builds an image of the child inside the book, it does so in order to secure the child […] who does not come so easily within its grasp" (Rose 1-2). For Rose, in other words, the "child" to whom the adult narrator speaks is not an actual person whose thoughts and feelings can be inferred from the author's address, as several scholars previously had asserted. Rather, he or she is a mere "fiction," a construction that primarily exists in the mind of the (often adult) author. Definite parallels can therefore be discerned between how Rose understands the "child" as a "fantasy" in literature and Edward Said's remarks about the "invention" of the "native" in colonialist texts, as I go on to discuss.

For Rose, furthermore, since this fiction of the child inheres in the mind of the author and not in the world, it is likely to be informed by author's wishes and biases. Hence, according to Rose, we should approach the "child" we find in children's books with some caution: it is a fantasy, after all, not an accurate representation of reality, although the "child" we find depicted in children's books is of course likely to reflect adults' shared attitudes about children, or the customs common to a particular place and time. To put it another way, Rose emphasizes precisely what this thesis refers to as childness, or the fact that childhood is a social construction, not a "naturally" occurring fact. Authors do not

write children's books knowing real children, Rose suggests, although of course actual children may still enjoy what they write. Rather, adults write so-called "children's" books with an *idea* of what a "child" is. *The Case of Peter Pan* is important not only as a sophisticated critical study which applied some of the latest techniques in Lacanian psychoanalysis learnt by Rose at the Sorbonne (Rudd and Pavlik 224); it is also significant as an analysis of the child figure not merely as a symbol, embodying different ideas such as sin and innocence, but more robustly, as a conceptual tool, a site of investment for adults, on which their individual ideologies and fantasies rely.

In continuing to unpack this idea, Rose examines how Barrie's *Peter Pan* is invested in an idea of the "eternal child" as something capable of "concealing the fractures that trouble us all: concern over a lack of coherent subjectivity, over the instabilities of language, and ultimately existence itself," as David Rudd adumbrates Rose's work ("Theorising and Theories" (30). That is to say, Rose sees a particular image of the child as present in Barrie's, as well as Rousseau's and Alan Garner's writing, which satisfies adults' fantasies about the state of the world and its possibilities. She is perhaps most clear about this when commenting on Garner's oeuvre in which, to quote from Rose, "the child is constantly set up as the site of a lost truth and/or moment in history, which it can therefore *be used to retrieve* " (43; emphasis added). A passage from one of Garner's novels serves to explicate this reading. In *The Weirdstone of Brisingamen* (1960), the two central child characters, Colin and Susan, follow a dwarf, Fenodyree, down a "hidden" path deep into a disused mine (42-43). The "hidden" depths, in Rose's interpretation, suggest an ancient world, a simpler one. The children thus appear natural denizens of a more "pure" time, connecting the work's adult readers (and author) to a lost, if also greatly desired moment in history.

Albeit in a different way, this idea of adults' "investment" in the "child," or childness as an object of adult cathexis, is important in my own work as well. For instance, in Ben Okri, the child figure does not merely embody or encode aspects of the creative life, it is also an idea Okri *uses*, in works of fiction and essays, to represent for himself and others the unusual gifts of the artist – his or her unique vision and resilience in the face of personal trials. In a way, the child helps Okri think through or *prove* what it is to be a creative person: "The artist should never lose the spirit of play [...] Playfulness lightens all endeavours. It humanizes them and brings them within the realm of childhood," he writes in the essay "Newton's Child," so connecting traits of the artist and child (22). The second chapter of the thesis, too, examines how the innocence and vulnerability of the child figure becomes an important site of investment for three West African authors as they implicitly build a case in favor of humanitarian intervention in civil war. The chapter particularly examines the child as an image of "truthfulness" in Chris Abani's *Song for Night*. Truth is not just a notion associated with the child figure in Abani's novel, I suggest; it is an image of the child the novel invests in and requires in order to answer its own dilemmas regarding authority and credibility. As I perceive it, the child soldier novel is a particularly anxious genre, eager to be taken as a form of believable "witness" by its readers, as I go on to discuss.

Chapter 3, likewise, considers how child figures, represented as "marginalized," help two diasporic writers, Oyeyemi and Badoe, in painting a larger picture of what I call the social "outside," or a state of being excluded from the majority community; images of childness, I suggest, help to prop up, buttress or clarify an overall idea of abjection in their works. As mentioned above, there is a dual project arching across all three of my chapters. Firstly, I ask, "how is childness constructed in these novels, or how is it thought of or

represented?" This question is related to the theme of "mapping," or locating childness relative to different cultural traditions; it aims to uncover these novels' implicit assumptions and ideals concerning the child figure. However, secondly, and as a complement to this initial question, I also inquire, "How do authors use or instrumentalize childness or child figures in their writings?" Here I am inspired by Rose's pioneering investigations, her inquiry not only into *how* childness is constructed in works of literary fiction, and for *whom*, considering crucial questions of audience and circulation, but also *why* adults represent children in particular ways: to what ends or purposes do writers put child characters and images of childness in their writing?

In the 1990s and 2000s, several critical works illuminated just how deeply Rose's insights had penetrated critical discourse. In 1992, for example, James Kincaid examined constructions of the "child" in Victorian children's literature. That is to say, in his analysis Kincaid does not look for the child "outside" the book, whom the text addresses. Rather, like Rose, he looks "within," to the texts' own encrypted meaning. According to Kincaid, Victorians largely constructed childness as an object of innocence and purity, a conception, as we have seen, with distinctively imperialist overtones, rationalizing the subjugation of similarly "childlike" peoples. This idea of children's "innocence," Kincaid further explores, became a source of erotic, if not also exotic, allure for adults. "By insisting so loudly on the innocence, purity and asexuality of the child," Kincaid argues, linking the Victorians' attitudes to the present day, "we have created a subversive echo: experience, corruption, eroticism" (4). In other words, the naïve, unsullied child invites to mind its opposite: a child dominated, violated, and defiled by adult desires.

In *The Hidden Adult* (2008), Perry Nodelman, too, is interested in how adults construct childness in children's books, drawing on Rose's theory: "But whatever children

actually are, there can be no question that it is adult ideas about childhood that shape the literature and provide it with its characteristic features" (148). So, Nodelman, alongside Kincaid, sets aside the notion of an actual "child" beyond the text and which the text addresses. He, like Rose, focuses instead on how adults imagine children in literature and what ideas lie behind such images. Nodelman takes a unique approach to the question of children's social and textual construction in his study. Namely, he puts several works of western children's literature into direct conversation with Edward Said's study of *Orientalism* (1978), asking whether the ways in which adults construct children in twenty-first century children's books are similar to how European imperialist writers and ethnographers constructed the "Orient" in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. Nodelman is quick to note the limits of such an inquiry: "the parallels between Orientalist thinking and adult conceptions of childhood are inexact" (164). There is no singular construction of the "child" in modern children's books, just as there was never a homogenous framing of the "Oriental" in colonialist discourse: both are rife with contradictions. Nevertheless, in *The Hidden Adult* and a related article, "The Other: Orientalism, Colonialism, and Children's Literature" (1992), Nodelman discovers several, highly suggestive parallels. Firstly, both children and "Orientals" are constructed by "outsiders." That is to say, in modern children's books and works of eighteenth-century ethnography, "Orientals" and "children" do not "speak" for themselves; adults and westerners speak for them (*The Hidden Adult* 164).

Secondly and relatedly, both discourses are self-reinforcing: "What the Orientalist does [according to Said] […] is to confirm the Orient in his readers' eyes; he neither tries nor wants to unsettle already firm convictions […]. Neither do most children's writers […] in aspects of childhood" (*The Hidden Adult* 165). In other words, colonialist ethnographers

operated from a shared set of assumptions and conventions, which they then unquestioningly affirmed in their writings about near eastern peoples. Similarly, in the discourse surrounding contemporary children's books, Nodelman observes a tendency to address child-readers who are the "children of shared adult wisdom," not of living fact (*The Hidden Adult* 165). That is to say, children's books inevitably participate in a tradition of writing about children, one with its own set of customs, conventions, and tropes. According to Nodelman, modern children's texts generally do not question this received tradition but uncritically replicate it. As a result, the "child" circulates as a stock image that may not – and often does not – line up with the traits of historical persons. The child, like the "Oriental," is a "fantasy" divorced from reality.

Among Nodelman's more valuable insights, one that points to a possible third parallel explored in his study, is the idea that both Occidental constructions of the Orient as well as adults' constructions of children emerge out of a desire for self-definition. In other words, the categories of the "adult" and of the "European" are both crafted by invoking a dialectic with a disdained "other": namely, "children" and "Orientals." In Britain in the late nineteenth century, this "other" invariably took the form of Eastern Europeans and other colonized persons, whose "reverse colonization," or return to the British "motherland," as Stephen D. Arata observes in his article on Bram Stoker's *Dracula* (1897), was both anxiously anticipated and greatly feared (623). As I go on to explore in my third chapter, which examines Gothic tropes in Oyeyemi's and Badoe's novels, British persons in the Victorian period lived in perpetual fear of invasion by "exotic" foreigners, a fear which not only helped to give rise to novels like Stoker's *Dracula* and its narrative of the "'civilized world' [...] on the point of being colonized by 'primitive forces'" (Arata 623). It also helped to reify "Britishness" and its association with a particular set of values

including "rationality," "civilization," and "robustness," or whatever was opposed to the presumed intellectual, moral, and physical "degeneracy" of the cultural "foreigner."

Relatedly, in the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, Occidental or western discourses relied on ideas of a sensual and degenerate near east, or "Orient," to "prove" the moral, intellectual, and cultural superiority of Europeans. "I define who I am myself as a European by seeing the Oriental as everything I am not," as Nodelman summarizes Said (167). That is to say, Said sees Europeans as inventing an idea of the "Orient" in order to assert an idea of their own alleged ascendancy: to contrast a weak, irrational, and feminized non-European "Other," with a strong, rational, and masculinized "west" (Said 65-67). Similarly, "Without a concept of a definable childhood," Nodelman argues, "adults could not think of themselves as such" (167). The "child" serves as an "other," according to Nodelman, whereby the modern adult, like the eighteenth-century European, is assured of his own supremacy: "adults can see themselves as rational, virtuous, mature and normal exactly because they have irrational, depraved (fallen), childlike, different children to compare themselves to" (167). To put it differently, adults construct a sense of themselves as "mature" and "powerful" precisely because they have "immature" and "vulnerable" children with whom to compare themselves. Again, it is possible to observe a striking similarly between how children are constructed in Nodelman's reading of modern children's books and how "natives" are constructed in the colonialist discourses analyzed by Said: both are seen as "irrational," "depraved" and "different," a parallel which Nodelman's analysis helps to bring to the fore.

Postcolonial scholars have observed analogous continuities between constructions of the "child" and Arab, Indian, and African persons. For instance, in *The Empire Writes Back* (1989), Bill Ashcroft, Gareth Griffiths, and Helen Tiffin note that "parent-child

metaphors underwrite nineteenth-century colonialist imperialism," as Jo-Ann Wallace adumbrates their scholarship in "De-Scribing the *Water Babies:* 'The Child' in Postcolonial Theory" (175). Sally Shuttleworth goes further, noting that children and colonized persons were explicitly equated in the Victorian mind. Namely, both were seen as representative of an "atavistic" human past, which the adult European male had subsequently "progressed" beyond (Shuttleworth 267-269).[4] Meanwhile, in an essay on mimicry, Homi Bhabha comments on "the ambivalence of a colonial discourse which, in Macauley's words, directs the colonizer to 'Be the father and the oppressor'" (qtd. in Wallace 176). Gustav Jahoda further chronicles the infantilization of African peoples in *Images of Savages* (1999). Jahoda remarks at length how colonized persons from a variety of regions, including Africa, were sometimes seen as innocent, but also overwhelmingly helpless and dependent – key traits of the western child, in Jahoda's view, that have remained "relatively constant" since Greco-Roman antiquity (9).

Wallace's project subtly differs from Nodelman's, as well from Jahoda's, Bhabha's, and Ashcroft et al's. Her goal is not to wield postcolonial theory as a metaphor for understanding childness. Rather, Wallace is interested in how frameworks of childness were essential for imperialist discourses and practices in the nineteenth century. In other words, she considers not only the infantilization of colonized peoples within colonialist discourse, but also that "'the child' is a *necessary precondition* of imperialism [...] that the West had to invent for itself 'the child' before it could think of a specifically colonialist imperialism" (176; original emphasis). Wallace's article is incisive and sheds light on the

[4] This is known as "recapitulation theory," or the idea that "ontogeny recapitulates phylogeny." Espoused by anthropologists such as Alexander Francis Chamberlain in his book *The Child: A Study in the Evolution of Man* (1900), it asserts that the individual growth of the child from infant to adult repeats or "recapitulates" the evolutionary development of the human race (Shuttleworth 4; 267-269).

way in which discourses of "childness," with their attending associations of "dependency," "immaturity," and "need," were intellectually enabling for imperialist practices, which framed natives as similarly vulnerable, or requiring British "protection." Taking another tack in her argument, Wallace also claims that children were constructed in the period of English imperialist expansion and in nineteenth-century children's texts like Charles Kingsley's *The Water Babies* (1862) as "raw, human capital": "the kind of human capital to be carefully husbanded and invested in settler colonies abroad" (180). In other words, she sees discourses of childness as useful not only to the ideology of Empire but also to its systems of rule. In the very notion of "children," and the rigid educational institutions that emerged to train them, Wallace argues, Britain acquired a useful resource for managing its foreign colonies: malleable children could be transformed into future colonial governors.

One thinks here, too, of Robert Baden-Powell (1857-1941). In his *Scouting for Boys* (1908), Baden-Powell teaches survivalist skills that will become useful to children in their later roles as colonizers and explorers: "Capt. Cook in Australia, Lord Clive in India [....] These are just a few names out of many hundred of scouts [...] who have [...] spread the good name and power of our country in all parts of the world" (Boehmer 14). For Baden-Powell, as for Kingsley, the child represents a "potential and futurity" and a "subjectivity and corporeality in need of discipline," in Wallace's words (173). Both traits, then, also apply to the "native," whom the child, once he has become a colonial administrator, will mould, instruct, and discipline in much the same way. "The intended middle-class, male child reader is clearly being prepared for *his* role in managing less fully evolved Others," Wallace remarks (180). Peter Hunt concurs. "It would not be too much to say that British juvenile fiction underpinned the very Empire," he states in *Children's Literature: An Anthology* (71). "Writers [...] did not merely reflect male childhoods," Hunt goes on to

suggest, "they perpetuated the image of the manly-Empire building English schoolboy" (71). In this way, books for children became a critical accessory to Empire; they helped the young English (male) reader both imagine his future role in founding and administering British colonies and prepare for it, by informing him of the kinds of skills he would need to survive in "wild," foreign lands.

Where postcolonial critics have not seen the child as an image of the "ultimate colony," to borrow Bharat's words, they have often read the child as an image of the post-colonial nation-state newly "born" after the end of colonial rule. In other words, child figures may be popular in fictional works from African, Asian, and Caribbean countries because these are themselves emergent societies. Boehmer, for instance, writes of Salman Rushdie's Indian novel *Midnight's Children*, "national history is played out in the life of a single protagonist [...]" (25). In both Rushdie's *Midnight's Children* and his novel *Shame* (1983), "the destinies of [the main characters] match, or at least march in step with, the fortunes of their nation; [...] state and self are equated" (Boehmer, *Stories of Women* 25). Through not strictly allegorical, Boehmer's reading sensitively registers the child as a national symbol. The growth of the child runs parallel to that of the nation-state such that personal and political narratives converge; private affairs in the one meaningfully reflect, and provide commentary upon, public events in the other.

Genre is an important consideration in the foregoing discussion. Many of the texts analyzed by Bharat and Boehmer are *Bildungsromane, or* coming-of-age stories. The Bildungsroman, according to Joseph Slaughter, generally imagines a protagonist maturing from childhood to adulthood and, in the process, moving from a position of relative isolation toward gradual incorporation into the public sphere. As Slaughter remarks, quoting from Georg Lukács, "In its ideal form, the bildungsroman narrates 'the

reconciliation of the problematic individual [...] with concrete social reality" (Slaughter, "Bildungsroman/Künstlerroman" 93; Lukács 132-133). Early German Bildungsromane, such as Goethe's *The Apprenticeship of Wilhelm Meister (*1795-96), plotted the personal development of a protagonist, or *Bildungsheld,* into a "well-rounded, productive member of society" (Slaughter, "Bildungsroman/Künstlerroman" 94). The growth of the child in the African, Asian, or Caribbean Bildungsroman, as well as the national body as a horizon of social belonging, might then be seen as establishing the crucial parallel between the "self" and "state" that allows Boehmer, for instance, to interpret the child figure in Rushdie's *Midnight's Children* as a metaphor for the Indian nation newly "born" at midnight on 15th August, 1947, like Saleem.

The novels examined in this thesis, by contrast, work with and against the expectations of the Bildungsroman genre; it is not so easy, therefore, to read their child-figures as straightforward symbols for the African nation. Chapter 1 frames Ben Okri's *The Famished Road* as a Künstlerroman. The Künstlerroman is admittedly a variant of the Bildungsroman; like the Bildungsroman, it measures the growth of an individual with respect to his community (Slaughter "Bildungsroman/Künstlerroman" 96) Yet the Künstlerroman specifically addresses the development of the artist – of the painter, writer, or poet who, in Okri's oeuvre, has special privileges and powers. The artist figure in Okri's work, as I go on to discuss, crucially appears not as incorporated within society but rather detached from it, fulfilling his role as a social observer. This representation extends to Okri's central child, who, as I explore, is a kind of prophet-image, not at the center of the national body, but slightly removed from it, bridging "higher" powers and human affairs. "The spirit-child is an unwilling adventurer into chaos and sunlight, into the dreams of the living and the dead," Azaro says of himself in a passage near the end of *The Famished Road*

(487). This passage, like many others highlights Azaro's exceptional existence, on the border between metaphysical realms.

As a result, Okri's Azaro only imperfectly functions as national metaphor in my reading. To be sure, Azaro is clearly associated with the post-colonial Nigerian nation-state, especially in passages that compare the "coming and going" of successive Nigerian governments overthrown by painful coups to his death and rebirth as an *abiku:* "Our country is an abiku country," Azaro's friend, Ade, declares, "Like the spirit-child, it keeps coming and going" (FR 478). As is later addressed, this statement establishes a strong parallel between Azaro and Nigeria, indeed offering the child as kind of metaphor for the nation-state. Yet Azaro is not the representative subject of the Bildungsroman; that is to say, he is not "enfolded" by his fellow villagers, made a fully "productive" member of their community, to draw upon Slaughter's phrasing. Instead, as is more fully addressed in the chapter, Azaro presents an itinerant, disobedient, and in many ways "resistant" figure throughout the trilogy. "I began to enjoy getting lost," Azaro says, drawing attention to his own stochastic wanderings (FR 144). His life unfolds largely outside of – if also in partial parallel to – the vicissitudes of the national body.

The novels about African child soldiers addressed in Chapter 2 similarly depart from the typical Bildungsroman form. Whereas the Bildungsroman plots the growth of the protagonist from childhood to adulthood, and from a condition of pure self-interestedness to a state of social harmony, these narratives are "end-stopped," we might say, drawing from Boehmer on "South African Fiction in Transition" (45). They all conclude with their central protagonists still as children. Admittedly, it might be that Iweala, Abani, and Jarrett-Macauley find it personally difficult to imagine militarized children as fully developed adults. In other words, it is easier for them to depict children in the on-going

process of being rehabilitated than to picture a life after militarization, when former child combatants (now adults) may find it difficult to reintegrate into their communities and face joblessness, stigma, and blame. Then again, the abrupt conclusions of their novels might also be interpreted as a kind of refusal, a protest against society as it is, not a failure of imagination regarding what might be. I go on to endorse this latter view, arguing that Abani's novel, especially, offers a tacit critique of governments that have woefully neglected to provide proper services for demobilized youth, as well as societies where damaging ethnic and political tensions persist.

Oyeyemi's and Badoe's novels, discussed in Chapter 3, are similarly what Slaughter has called "dissensual Bildungsroman." "The "dissensual Bildungsroman," in Slaughter's description, "holds onto the ideal of harmonious integration even as it narrates the unfulfillment of the promises of human rights and idealist *Bildung"* (*Human Rights, Inc.* 181). In other words, the dissensual Bildungsroman imagines the possibility of social belonging whilst also foregrounding the fissures and collective bigotries that make such integration, ultimately, difficult. Similar to the protagonists of Iweala's, Abani's, and Jarrett-Macauley's novels, Badoe's and Oyeyemi's heroines fail to find a foothold in their respective societies. On the one side, they overtly desire identification with the majority culture; they seem to think it possible and lament their differences from their more homogenous peers. "I don't want to be weird [...] and always thinking weird things and being scared," Jess despairs in Oyeyemi's work (*IG* 122), revealing a desire to blend in. Yet, on the other, their status as racial, cultural, gendered minorities means that, even whilst social integration remains in sight, as I explore, they are repeatedly denied it. Chapter 3 goes on to itemize the ways in which Oyeyemi's Jess and Badoe's Ajuba are excluded from

their communities, analyzing the various forms of racial, cultural, gendered, and age-based discrimination that, for them, prevent belonging.

This thesis, for the most part,, finds the child-as-nation framework compelling, and it is certainly a perception that informs Okri's construction of the child figure, as addressed in the above. Yet, as also made clear by the foregoing discussion, the thesis seeks, too, to look past or move beyond these approaches, especially where they have become dominant, crowding out other readings of the child figure that are not explicitly nation-focused, or which might relate to other themes. The author of the only other full-length study besides Bharat's to look at the child as a figure in postcolonial fiction, Clare Barker, also endorses the child-as-nation heuristic: "the trope of child development lends itself persuasively to narratives of nation-building and cultural transformation in postcolonial societies" (2). In *Postcolonial Fiction and Disability: Exceptional Children, Metaphor and Materiality* (2011), Barker looks in particular at the *disabled* child figure as a metaphor for the postcolonial nation. Her study addresses Okri's *The Famished Road*, Rushdie's *Midnight's Children*, as well as fictional works from Zimbabwe, New Zealand and Pakistan. The disabled child figure in these works, Barker argues, serves to iconize not only the growth or development of the nation, but also its "difference" and "supposed fragility": "the physically, cognitively or emotionally 'damaged' child acts as a straightforward symbol for the nation or culture emerging from a 'damaging' colonial experience" (3). Barker here stresses the debilitating consequences of colonialism for many "emerging" societies. The independent African, Asian, or Caribbean nation after colonial rule is characterized as "impaired," and Barker draws a line directly from the presumed dysfunction of the post-colonial nation – seen as "crippled" in how it governs, in its self-identity, as well as economically – to the disability of child figures in several works.

While the metaphor of "impairment" for formerly colonized societies is certainly apt, capturing the widespread destruction caused by imperial powers, Barker's work in my view equates two concepts, "fragility" and "disability," which are conceptually distinct (though related in some contexts). Would we wish to see Azaro's "fragility," as a part of his supposed "disability," for instance, or is it more convincingly a part of the way in which he appears as a child, upholding the western conception of children as dependent and vulnerable? Moreover, Barker gives a rather generalized definition of what it means to be disabled, and at certain points unhelpfully regards the child as bearing childness as a form of disability (pp. 11-12; 13-14; 20). However, Barker's study does shed fresh light on Okri's work, exploring, in particular, the novel's interest in questions of non-normativity. Barker observes that, to the villagers in Azaro's hometown, the child's "fits" and "hallucinations" as an *abiku*, a figure from West African folklore,[5] appear as a kind of madness:

> Even those who know Azaro well, and are cognizant of his abiku status, occasionally interrogate his sanity when he is interacting or communicating with embodied spirits. Madame Koto, for instance, shouts 'Azaro, are you mad?' [...] In similar scenes, a prostitute asks, 'What's wrong with you?' and 'Azaro, are you mad?' [...]

This is consistent with my own reading in Chapter 1, wherein I explore Azaro as a distinctively Romantic artist figure, seeing Okri's writing as influenced by a conception of human creativity that originated in Europe in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. The artist image from Okri's earlier fictional works is similarly "mad" or what we might wish to call "differently" abled: "His thoughts became too deep for him, and his dreams became more mysterious," Okri writes of the "pamphlet writer," Ajegunle Joe, in his short story, "The Dream-Vendor's August" (106). Ajegunle Joe is an iconic artist-image in Okri's oevure. Throughout the story, he behaves in a distinctively non-normative way, uttering prophecies on city buses and falling into trances. These idiosyncrasies are importantly

[5] I return to a more detailed discussion of the abiku later.

linked to his "visionary" abilities, his insight into the political chaos that mars Nigeria's physical and human landscapes.

The Romantic "poet" figure, too, is usefully, creatively, "unbalanced." The first chapter of this thesis further argues for Romanticism as an influence on Okri's writing and sees the Romantic poet figure and the artist from Okri's earlier work as the twin sources of inspiration for Okri's child characters, Azaro in particular. In *Poetic Madness and the Romantic Imagination* (1996), Frederick Burwick suggests that "madness" was a major trope of the Romantic period. The figure of the "mad rhapsodist [...] springs from the pages of [Samuel] Purchas's *Pilgrimage* to voyage down the sacred river Alph in Coleridge's 'Kubla Khan'" (28). In Wordsworth's poem, "The Mad Mother" (1798), the poet imagines a woman "rehears[ing] to her nursing infant the woes and suffering that have driven her mad" (Burwick 12). In "Resolution and Independence," he fears his own descent into "despondency and madness" (lines 49).[6] Hence, a reading of Azaro as possessed with a "non-normative psychiatric make-up," as Barker argues (168), helps to coordinate Okri's child image with this body of writing. It moreover offers a subtle critique of colonialism, unraveling the strict dichotomy between the "rational" and "irrational" that underpinned imperialist ideology. Whereas British imperialists saw "rationality" as a marker of their presumed superiority to native peoples, in Okri's writing, as is suggested by Ajegunle Joe's strange "prophesies," the seemingly "irrational" is in fact most valued.

Postcolonial critics who have usefully stepped outside of the dual frames of "colony" and "nation" when reading African child figures in literature include John Hawley,

[6] Other writers of the period, such as John Clare, actually suffered from mental illness (Clare died in the Northampton General Lunatic Asylum) while others again, such as Coleridge, sought an escape from the confining categories of reason that an idea of "madness" seemed to provide (cf. Burwick 4; 8-9). Romantic "madness" is clearly a major area of investigation, which this thesis however is not able to address in sufficient depth to do it justice.

Madelaine Hron, and Brenda Cooper. Each of these critics might be said to belong to a "post"-postcolonial moment in the history of the study of African literature, where not every valence of the child figure is traced back to the struggle between colonizer and colonized, on the one hand, and between the new nation and the lingering legacy of the former colonial ruler, on the other. Instead, much in the manner of this thesis, these critics situate child figures in relationship to events of other political or cultural significance. John Hawley, for instance, reads Uzodinma Iweala's novel within the context of the Biafran War, a civil conflict in Nigeria that took place between 1967 and 1970: "[…] Iweala has written a war novel that transcends the Biafran War and yet seems fully to embody it," Hawley argues, a statement which might also apply to Ken Saro-Wiwa's *Sozaboy* (1985), narrated by a young federalist fighter (22). Indeed, whilst linking Iweala's novel to the Nigerian conflict in particular, Hawley's article also sees Iweala's child figure, Agu, as representative for the underage combatants fighting in "Uganda, Burundi, Ivory Coast, the Democratic Republic of the Congo," and around the world (22).

Hawley's article is less a study of the child figure, however, as it is an investigation into how several novelists represent historical conflict. "Biafra, for the youngest Nigerian generation, is no longer merely a matter of dates of military campaigns and of pyrrhic victories," Hawley submits: "[I]t has instead taken on the status of the killing fields of Cambodia and Rwanda […]" (24). Young Nigerian writers, in other words, filter their parents' and grandparents' memories of the Biafran War through their own personal knowledge of contemporary African conflicts, as well as how these are portrayed in the media. To be sure, a significant amount of the scholarship on so-called African "child soldier" narratives has insufficiently theorized how children are deployed *as metaphors* in these works. In another article on "Troubling Humanitarian Consumption" (2013), Allison

Mackey, for instance, draws attention to how several child soldier narratives, in their representation of violence and of the "exotic" militarized child figure (100), either stigmatize or do not stigmatize African societies: "I consider how [….] these texts trouble the already troubled relationship between the spaces where child soldiers are being used and those where narratives about them are consumed" (100). Mackey's goal is partially related to mine in Chapter 2: she seeks, as I often do, to tease out the ways in which child soldier narratives influence, or might be inferred to influence, their global readers' perceptions of Africa as a continent.

All three of the novels I discuss in Chapter 2 were published by European or North American publishing houses, and it is indeed important, as I explore, to consider the tensions between how Africans persons are depicted in these works and how they see themselves. In analyzing the novels' representations of Africa, Mackey considers what she calls "relational structures of address," whereby several child soldier biographies and novels involve readers in "larger webs of responsibility" (108). To be sure, this has been a goal for several writers in the child soldier genre, and I take up similar considerations with reference to Dave Eggers's *What is the What* (2006), which stresses the difficulties faced by black persons in America, where the Sudanese protagonist, Valentino Achak Deng, arrives as a refugee, not only the economic and social problems that contribute to underage recruitment in African countries. In other words, Deng's work invites his (mostly) American readers to assume responsibility for the social problems in America, not only to feel pity for the victims of African conflicts. Though Mackey's article likewise discusses narratives as implicating readers "within unequal global cultural, social, and economic networks" (102), she unhelpfully leaves these networks largely un-specified. Does Mackey mean global capitalism? Modern warfare? Diplomatic relations? Her reader

remains uncertain.

What is possibly most puzzling about Mackey's article, further still, is the way in which it simply assumes child soldiering as a global problem, not thinking about how a particular *kind* of childness is deployed within the text and then reified as news stories, human rights reports, as well as novels repeat the same stock images and tropes. Mackey asserts, "Amid the generalized anxiety surrounding the predicament of youth in the twenty-first century [...] one would be hard-pressed to find a figure more troubling than that of the child soldier" (100). Mackey here acknowledges the "troubling" aspect of the child soldier, but she crucially does not question whether – and how – this "troubled" reputation is furnished. Moreover, to many western readers, African child soldiers have appeared not only deeply troubling but, relatedly, voyeuristically alluring. It is difficult otherwise to explain the popularity of books such as Ishmael Beah's child soldier memoir, *A Long Way Gone* (2007), which sold a record number of 62,000 copies over a three-week period when Starbucks promoted the work in 2007 (Bosman "Disturbing Memoir"), despite its bloody content. Not a few commentators remarked on Starbucks customers' strange desire to consume Beah's gore-filled memoir alongside their morning lattes (see, for instance, Bosman "Disturbing Memoir").

Eliding such concerns, in the passage quoted above, Mackey draws upon the Rousseauian conception of children as fundamentally different from adults; she immediately identifies the child soldier as a disturbing figure, and deplores the recruitment of under-18s by military groups in Africa as worthy of global concern. But what the critic does not consider, and what Chapter 2 of this thesis, by contrast, aims to make apparent, is the way in which child soldiering might be produced *as* a problem: for instance, in how several narratives emphasize physical suffering; in their use of first-

person address; and, even, in how they understand childness. David M. Rosen calls this a "politics of age": "By the *politics of age*, I mean the use of age categories to advance particular political and ideological positions" ("Child Soldiers" 296; emphasis in the original). Building on these insights, where African children are presented as vulnerable, innocent, and without local actors to help them, I suggest, studying Jarrett-Macauley's, Iweala's, and Abani's works, authors deploy a particular set of ideological constructs that align them with the west and especially with humanitarian discourses. Chapter 2 accordingly addresses such discourses in detail and sees the fictional child solider figure not as a witness speaking for the "*reality* of the African child depicted," as Mackey declares (100; emphasis added), but rather as a tool, casting the recruitment of children, and even children themselves, in a particular light.

Madelaine Hron, like Hawley and Mackey, also moves away from typical postcolonial approaches. Whereas past critics (and novelists) grappled mainly with the two categories of colony and nation, in *"Oran na-azu nwa:* The Figure of the Child in Third-Generation Nigerian Novels" (2008), Hron reads several fictional works within a third framework: the experience of the African diaspora. Hron apprehends "the space of childhood" as a "space of hybridity" (30). Children are "not yet" adults, she argues; childhood is a space of flux, on-going "negotiation" and "possibility" (29). This then provides a fitting metaphor for several "third generation" Nigerian novelists as they seek to map out their own complicated cultural positions in a global landscape: "The locus of enunciation of these writers also derives from an in-between space, oscillating 'inter' Nigeria and the West" (Hron 30). The Ghanaian-American novelist Taiye Selasi has similarly suggested the term "Afropolitan" to describe such writers, who are as comfortable in London and Houston as they are in Lagos or Accra ("Bye-Bye Babar"). I go

on to discuss in a moment how I see Badoe and Oyeyemi as in fact challenging valorizations of "hybridity"; their works in my view prioritize not the "possibilities" of diaspora, but rather the social and cultural alienation of the migrant. Yet, for Hron, childhood represents a space of on-going change and malleability: the child is someone who is neither at home in infancy nor yet a fully-grown adult. As such, it provides an apt vehicle for authors keen to explore the space of diaspora, wherein a subject might similarly feel herself not to be fully "Nigerian" nor western, but located socially and culturally somewhere "in-between," and, furthermore, empowered by a choice of multiple, intersecting identities.

In "Diaspora, Gender, and Identity: Twinning in Three Diasporic Novels" (2008), Brenda Cooper also reads several Anglophone West African childhood narratives for how they represent the space(s) of diaspora. Her article examines twin figures especially, investigating how these help authors of African heritage who "have grown up in Europe and North America" explore the ways in which "they occupy an ambiguous space of contested citizenship" (51). The twin has a kind of duality, we might say. It provides an apposite allegory for hyphenated identities; for the experience of feeling oneself to belong to two places at once, for instance, to both Ghana and Canada; for feeling oneself, in particular ways, to be both black and white.[7] The third chapter of this thesis builds in important ways upon both Hron and Cooper's approaches. To begin with, it similarly considers how Helen Oyeyemi's and Yaba Badoe's novels might be described as intercultural, drawing on both western and African literatures and cultures, especially in their representations of childness. In particular, I argue that Badoe and Oyeyemi relatedly utilize western Gothic metaphors, such as the haunted mansion, intermixing these with

[7] At least one of the novelists whose writing Cooper's article examines is mixed-race.

West African folklores, especially of the abiku, in their writing. In this way, the novelists appear products of (at least) two cultures.

However, my chapter also shifts the emphasis away from Cooper's and Hron's stress on cultural hybridity: it is not just an experience of being "in-between" that Chapter 3 sees as explored in two West African woman's novels. Rather, I understand Oyeyemi and Badoe as placing special emphasis on the experience of un-belonging: "in-between" can therefore be rewritten as "outside." These works, in other words, might be read as exilic narratives. "In between" Nigeria and Britain, the diasporic protagonist stands "outside" both spaces, in so far as these entities are constructed as mutually exclusive of one another, as they are for instance in Helen Oyeyemi's novel *The Icarus Girl* (2005), as I go on to discuss. In this way, the novelists might be read as revising Salman Rushdie's celebration of "hybridity [...] intermingling [...] and mongrelization" in his collection of essays, *Imaginary Homelands* (1991) (94). Rushdie riffs on social theorist Homi Bhabha, praising the way in which the dislocation of the migrant, that is to say, his or her encounter with different cultures, can bring about "new and unexpected combinations" (*Imaginary Homelands* 94). By contrast, in *The Icarus Girl,* Oyeyemi's, bicultural, mixed-race protagonist, Jess, has difficulty feeling a part of Nigerian culture as well as British society: "Stop looking to belong, half-and-half-child," her ghostly friend, TillyTilly, tells her (IG 250). Her experience is more one of pained alienation than joyous creation. Chapter 3 hence examines a condition of "otherness" as a main theme of Oyeyemi's and Badoe's work and advanced especially through the child figure, whose own "otherness," i.e. in respect of adults, helps to support or buttress the other ways in which the novels' mixed-race and bicultural protagonists figure as social, cultural, and racial "outsiders."

Hron's article at certain points digresses from its avowed desire to attend to the child figure as a "complex and nuanced" image (38). Instead, the article spends considerable time with what, as Hron implies, the African child "teaches" to the novels' global readership, implying that the child figure has itself a pedagogic role to play towards its international audiences. Scholars such as Sarah Brouillette (2007) have remarked on the way in which many "postcolonial" novels, including those by "third-generation" Nigerian writers, circulate in "privileged metropolitan markets that are often (though not exclusively) Anglo-American in location and orientation" (Brouillette 4). Hron, too, sees Americans in particular as the intended audience for several novels and ends with a discussion of the phrase, "It takes a village to raise a child," which was popularized by Hillary Rodham Clinton in 2000 (45). Hron reverses the meaning: "I think it would be fair to say that, in the case of the latest wave of Nigerian fiction, "*Nwa ndi na na-azu uwa*: it is the children who are educating the global village" (45). Nigerian authors, in Hron's understanding, employ child figures to bring subjects of perceived importance to their (often) Anglo-American readers' attention.

Hron looks in particular at how several novels, for instance, by Chimamanda Adichie and Chris Abani, instruct their readers on "topics of global concern": "Adichie's *Purple Hibiscus* examines gender violence and domestic abuse […] Abani's *Becoming Abigail* delves into the problems of illegal immigration and sex trafficking in the West" (44). Child soldier novels, too, such as those discussed in Chapter 2, educate their readers on the phenomenon of child recruitment in countries such as Uganda and Liberia, making sure that their readers are at least aware of, though not, as I go on to argue, fully acquainted with, the facts of child soldiering in Africa. That is to say, for Hron, the child provides a lens or platform, introducing topics of importance to the reader whilst also

domesticating them, ensuring that these topics are easy for the reader to understand: "it may be argued that western readers may be more easily initiated into the complexities of Nigerian culture or politics through a child's perspective" (29). In what follows, I propose to interrogate this assumption concerning the child as a teaching device, suggesting that it instrumentalizes and so reduces some of the complexity of the child figure. In other words, as I understand her argument, Hron's emphasis on the African child as a pedagogical tool detracts from recognition of the multi-valence of the metaphor.

## Childhood in African Writing: A Survey

In this thesis, I submit that children do not just provide a channel for introducing various topics to the reader's attention. Rather, the child character's "childness" is an active part of all these narratives, shaping the overall meaning of the text, while also being moulded by authors in particular ways. Most especially, I aim to return focus to the child as a rich and versatile metaphor utilized by African writers to highlight certain aspects of the artist, explore the nature of suffering during civil war, and to contemplate what it is like to exist in a space of the social "outside," in particular. This section goes on to provide a survey of the child figure in works of African writing. Of course, stories about childhood have been told and written in a number of African languages, including vernacular languages such as Swahili, Kikuyu, Xhosa, and Hausa. However, the survey to follow focuses primarily on Francophone and Anglophone narratives, as these are most directly relevant to my later chapters. Child figures are indeed present in literatures from across the African continent, although they seem especially prevalent in West African literatures. Nigeria, in particular, boasts a strong tradition of novel writing, as well as the largest population of any African country: 177.5 million in 2014 (World Bank). It, therefore, features prominently in the paragraphs to follow. The survey begins with a discussion of

childhood in African literature broadly and then narrows to an overview of recent Anglophone West African writing in particular.

Most surveys of the theme of childhood in African writing tend to begin with Camara Laye's iconic and influential *The Dark Child* (1953). Laye's autobiographical text, which was originally published in French in 1953 as *L'Enfant Noir,* opens on the protagonist's early childhood in French colonial Guinea. It then follows the young Laye from the shadowy corners of his father's blacksmith shop through to his French education in Conakry, the capital of Guinea, and preparation for future study in Paris. Mongo Beti, who addresses *L'Enfant Noir* in a 1954 article for *Présence Africaine*, argues that it presents a "stereotyped – and therefore false – image of Africa" (qtd. in Miller 123): "*L'Enfant Noir* wanted to make us believe in an idyllic Africa, but this was impossible, because the White man was absent from the scene" (qtd. in Miller 123). That is to say, in Beti's view, Laye presents a kind of idyll that could not possibly have co-existed with French colonial rule in Guinea in the 1950s. His novel depicts colonized Guinea as tranquil and lingers with the quaint rituals of "traditional" Malinke life; however, this picture crucially elides colonialism and its often-devastating effects on Malinke culture and society.

In "From a Common Backcloth: A Reassessment of the African Literary Image" (1963), Wole Soyinka similarly critiques Laye's novel for its "cultivated naiveté" achieved through the perspective of the child (7). As Christopher Miller elaborates, "It was as if there was something slightly dishonest and suspect about the whole project of *L'Enfant Noir*" (124); for many readers, the novel depicted colonized Guinea too positively. More recent decades, however, have seen a change in attitude toward Laye's autobiography: "African readers are now less likely to demand explicit politics and are more attuned to the symbolic politics of *L'Enfant Noir*," Miller continues, "[…] there is a greater willingness

to see *L'Enfant Noir* as a work of *sublimated,* rather than *repressed* politics" (124; emphasis in the original). To put it differently, modern readers seem more willing to acknowledge the indirect, subversive methods whereby Laye's novel destabilized colonial hierarchies, not only to remark upon its whitewashing of colonialism. So, for instance, in "Childhood in African Literature: A Literary Perspective" (1998), Maxwell Okolie reads the novel alongside several other early African childhood narratives as a subtle means of "writing back": "There, in the elysium of their ancestors, in the intimate details of their environment, activities and close relations, [Laye, et al] rediscovered the security and confidence that were gradually being eroded by the facts of colonization" (31). In other words, by looking back to childhood – and to the wealth of local rituals, customs, and figures that accompanied it – Laye and other writers found a way to access distinctively African identities. They located a set of cultural references able to provide a meaningful alternative to – as well as challenge – the French colonizers' alleged superiority.

Many early narratives about childhood by authors from African contexts were originally written in French and, similarly, employed the child figure to contest colonialist rule. A less controversial work than Laye's, but also an influential text, is Ferdinand Oyono's *Une Vie de Boy* (1956), which was translated into English under the title *Houseboy*. Set in Spanish colonial Guinea, despite its Francophone origins, *Houseboy* follows the young protagonist, Toundi, as he leaves his family and goes to live with Father Gilbert, a Catholic priest, and, then, with the "Commandant," a civil administrator of the Spanish colony. Cajetan N. Iheka reads Oyono's *Houseboy* as a meditation on the "colonial trauma" (33), once again seeing the child figure as symbolic. In Oyono's novel, the Commandant and his wife regularly abuse Toundi, who lives in their house as a domestic worker. He is appalled to see their callous disregard for the sanctity of human life. "Like

many other Africans at the time," Iheke writes, "Toundi is shocked to witness the violence, hypocrisy, and soulless attitude of the Europeans" ("Colo-mentality" 34). Toundi's youthful perspective makes the couple's violence all the more galling.

Early Anglophone writers also employed childness to engage with the events of colonization. Achebe's *Things Fall Apart* (1958) wields the figure of the child, in part, to index the rapid changes taking place in Nigeria around the time of European settlement. *Things Fall Apart* unfolds in a rural Nigerian village. While the protagonist, Okonkwo, and his father, Unoka, have been adherents to traditional Igbo[8] customs, Okonkwo's son, Nwoye, is an early convert to Christianity. Later in the novel, Nwoye even takes the Christian name "Isaac," seeming to abandon his Igbo identity. Another key child figure in the novel is Ikemefuna, Okonkwo's "adopted" son from a neighboring clan. Okonkwo eventually kills Ikemefuna during a ritual murder, so as not to be seen as weak by his fellow clansman. Okonkwo's killing of Ikemefuna, a child he loves, explores the limits of a type of masculinity centered around violence, yet it also, in my view, cements childhood in the novel as a means of symbolizing cultural disruption. Ikemefuna's death throws the family into turmoil, while the contrast between Okonkwo and his converted, biological son, "Isaac," leaves little doubt about Nigeria's future direction. Okonkwo will continue to age, receding into history, but Nwoye/Isaac will grow into his manhood, allowing Britain's colonial influence in Nigeria to mature alongside him.

While Achebe employs the child figure to give a sense of change across generations, especially around the time of British colonial influence in Nigeria, the Kenyan writer Ngugi wa Thiong'o utilizes childhood to depict some of the fear and anguish that attended British colonial rule. In his novel *Weep Not, Child* (1964), Ngugi describes events

[8] The Igbo are a major ethnic group in Nigeria.

around the Mau Mau Uprising in Kenya from 1952-1960. The Mau Mau Uprising was an anti-colonial insurgency that was brutally repressed by the British. By some estimates, during the eight years of fighting more than 20,000 Kenyans lost their lives.[9] In Ngugi's novel, the limited and fragile perspective of the child character, Njoroge, lends the events of the conflict special horror. Njoroge listens to his father and elder brothers plot attacks against the British, yet without much understanding: "The full force of the chaos that had come over the land was just beginning to be clear for him" (95). His marginal space on the edges of the family and public life means that the affairs of the Uprising hold particular mystique and terror for him: "His family was about to break and he was powerless to arrest the fall" (135). As this passage suggests, Njoroge witnesses the events of the Uprising but is unable to address them. His age and dependency upon his father and brothers puts him in a fraught and frustrating position, without the efficacy to impact affairs affecting his own life.

In several ways *Weep Not, Child* appears as a classic Bildungsroman, or coming-of-age story. In Susanne Howe's definition of this genre, the Bildungsroman generally involves an adolescent who "sets out on his way through the world, [...] makes many false starts in choosing his friends, his wife and his life work, and finally adjusts himself in some way to the demands of his time and environment" (4). *Weep Not, Child* makes important gestures in this direction. Early in the novel, Njoroge hopes to succeed at his studies, which he sees as a means of procuring independence and a professional vocation: "He knew that for him education would be the fulfillment of a wider and more significant vision [...]" (44). In another nod towards the Bildungsroman plot, he begins making friends with a young woman, Mwihaki, with whom he imagines a future life: "Mwihaki,

[9] See David Anderson's *Histories of the Hanged: The Dirty War in Kenya and the End of Empire* (2005), p. 4.

dear. I love you" (150). In this way, the novel begins to realize a *Bildung*-like vision of Njoroge as a "productive" member of society. With early academic and romantic successes, he is on a pathway toward eventual community belonging. His desired marriage to Mwihaki, the daughter of a prominent chief and landowner, seems especially likely to vault him to future wealth and power.

Njoroge's hopes for both personal and professional happiness are devastated, however, by the Mau Mau emergency, when he is forced to discontinue his education and find employment following the death of his father, Ngotho. As a further blow, Mwihaki's father, Jacobo, is killed by one of Njoroge's brothers, thereby destroying the couple's chances of marriage. As this suggests, *Weep Not, Child* might be described as an aborted Bildungsroman, drawing from but then subverting the usual expectations of the genre, similar to Oyeyemi's and Badoe's novels, as I introduced them in the above. The message of Ngugi's novel is clear. So long as Kenya remains under colonial rule, Njoroge will not be able to "adjust himself to the demands of his society and time," as Howe describes the Bildungsroman plot (ibid.). In other words, colonization does not allow for the "possibility of the individual and society achieving a mutually beneficial and fulfilling harmony," as Slaughter further traces the contours of the Bildung ("Bildungsroman/Künstlerroman" 93). Instead, it perverts or pollutes this relationship. *Weep Not, Child* ends with Njoroge on the verge of mental and physical collapse, about to take his own life (153). In *Weep Not, Child,* Ngugi employs the child and especially a sense of his stunted personal development to craft a grim portrait of colonized Kenya; the child's arrested growth might be understood to symbolize Kenya's inhibited flourishing as a direct result of British rule.

It is also through children's literature that childness or the child figure has also featured prominently in African and postcolonial writing. From the 1950s to the present,

African writers have published a number of notable narratives written not only about children, but also *for* them, in ways that are designed to inculcate a sense of cultural and national identity. For example, in 1966, Chinua Achebe published *Chike and the River* in order to provide more positive representations for his two children, Chinelo and Nwando. "Here [...] is a mean story hiding behind the glamorous covers of a children's book," Achebe declares, referring to a British book given to his two daughters by a family friend ("My Daughters" 70). The plot of the book is as follows: A white boy loses his kite. A "little black [boy]" discovers it an African jungle, yet to his embarrassment he does not know what to do with it and is so frightened by its appearance that he "utters a piercing cry and literally falls off the tree" ("My Daughters" 70). The story is obviously unflattering to the "little black boy," who appears both cognitively and physically inept. At first, he is bewildered by an object so banal (within the logic of the story) as a kite; then, he is unable to maintain his composure in the grip of fear and tumbles awkwardly from his perch.

By contrast, *Chike* places aspects of Nigeria and of Nigerian childhoods in a more positive light, telling the story of the eponymous, 11-year-old protagonist who successfully crosses the Niger River near Asaba and proceeds to bungle the plot of some thieves. "Chike became a hero. One big man in the crowd lifted him up and placed him on his shoulders. The others applauded. They said they had never seen such bravery from such a little boy" (*Chike* 64). F. Odun Balogun subsequently reads Achebe's novella as a lesson in "obedience, honesty, courage, and hard work" (437), thereby highlighting the way in which Achebe's story ascribes key virtues and competences to an African child figure. *Chike* not only imagines an African child who exhibits intelligence and aplomb as part of its project of "writing back" to Empire, it also, in my reading, seeks to reconnect the novella's child-readers to their own Nigerian culture and customs: "There was one proverb

which Chike's uncle was fond of saying: *It is bad that a man who has swum in the greater River Niger should be drowned in a small tributary"* (*Chike* 21; emphasis added).[10] Achebe sprinkles similar proverbs through out his novella, so ensuring that Nigerian children remain in touch with their cultural heritage. In the novel, Chike frequently recalls such sayings during his adventures and, furthermore, relies on them for guidance.

Ngugi, too, has authored a set of children's books that again clearly aim to educate young readers and to connect them to their cultural roots. In English, the titles translate as *Njamba Nene and the Flying Bus* (1986), *Njamba Nene's Pistol* (1986), and *Njamba Nene and the Cruel Chief* (1988). Like Ngugi's *Weep Not, Child,* these books also focus on events surrounding the Mau Mau Uprising. In my view, a more interesting feature than their particular details of plot, however, is the language of their first publication: Gikuyu. Admittedly, Ngugi has employed Gikuyu in his writing for both adults and children: it is not only to children that he seeks to prove the "dignity of the literature, culture, philosophy, and other treasures carried by African languages," as he writes in *Decolonising the Min*d ("Dedication"). However, in the light of *Chike's* interventions above, as well as given Ngugi's own argument about language as a vehicle of cultural transmission, Ngugi's children's stories might be understood, like Achebe's, to reconnect African children to their cultural heritage: "Language carries culture, and culture carries, particularly through orature and literature, the entire body of values by which we come to perceive ourselves and our place in the world" (*Decolonising* 16). This statement provides important context for Ngugi's "Njambe Nene" stories. In choosing Gikuyu as the language for his children's stories and not the tongue of the colonizer (i.e. English), Ngugi not only protests against

[10] Alongside *Chike and the River*, Achebe also authored several other stories for children: namely *How the Leopard Got His Claws* (1972), a picture book co-written with John Iroaganachi, and *The Flute (*1975*)* and *The Drum* (1978), two picture book adaptations of Igbo folktales.

an English-only education, he also provides a meaningful alternative to it, aiming to preserve a sense of Gikuyu culture in – and through – children and their reading.

In more recent decades, several novelists of what has come to be known as the "third generation" of African writing have also published books for, and especially about, children. As I will now explain, the term "Third Generation," which was first used by Pius Adesanmi and Chris Dunton to describe a set of relatively young Nigerian writers, has proven surprisingly controversial. In a 2013 article for *Research in African Literatures,* Hamish Dalley of Australian National University argues that the concept of a Nigerian "third generation" "fails to account for the complexity of the texts it classifies" ("The Idea of a 'Third Generation'" 16). Halley looks to two relatively recent Nigerian novels, Adaobi Tricia Nwaubani's *I Do Not Come to You By Chance* (2009) and Teju Cole's *Open City* (2011), and argues that they are "shaped around ambivalent spatio-temporal imaginaries that *exceed* the national-generational framework" (15). In other words, Halley claims these writers do not see themselves as part of either a nation or a generation ("The Idea of 'Third Generation'" 16; emphasis added); they are what we might even call post-national, without a particular sense of belonging to one polity over another. Yet, as I understand it, that is precisely Adesanmi and Dunton's argument: that Nigerian writing, indeed possibly recent African writing as a whole, is increasingly marked by themes of "nomadism, exile, displacement and deracination," which differentiate younger writers from older ones ("Nigeria's Third Generation Writing" 16). According to Adesanmi and Dunton, previous generations of African writers had a tendency to focus on themes such as the struggle for national freedom (i.e. for the "anticolonial" authors of the "first generation" born in the 1930s and 1940s), or on the new project of nation-building in the post-independence era

(i.e. for the "second generation" of African writers born just after independence, in the 1950s and 1960s), *not* on topics related to global migration.

Like Adesanmi and Dunton, I find the "third generation" framework useful, both as a means of mapping the African literary landscape and as way of pointing to the many similarities shared between West African novels published in recent decades, of which their prominent use of the child figure is but one – again, Adesanmi and Dunton point to a common interest in themes of "nomadism" and "displacement" (16). Speaking of the prevalence of the child figure in particular, Hron for instance notes that, "Since 2002, third-generation Nigerian writing has exploded in US and British publishing houses [...] Particularly striking in the recent wave of Nigerian fiction is the figure of the child or youth" (27). "West African," as in the terms of my title, is on the one hand a tightening heuristic: by confining my investigations to a single, albeit highly diverse and complex region, I aim to compare the representations of childness put forward by several novelists, as well as to consider how they depict the child figure in interestingly varied ways. At the same time, my title is also partially reflective of the fact that, in recent decades, many of the novels written about or featuring a child figure have been produced by authors from, and are set within, West Africa, by which I refer to the sixteen African states situated west of Chad and south of the Maghreb, including Benin, Burkina Faso, Cape Verde, Ivory Coast, Gambia, Ghana, Guinea, Guinea-Bissau, Liberia, Mali, Mauritania, Niger, Nigeria, Senegal, Sierra Leone, and Togo. Within these, my focus is specifically on the English-speaking countries of Sierra Leone, Ghana, and Nigeria.

In beginning to sketch out this body of Anglophone West African writing, though they are not explicitly addressed in this thesis, which concentrates on fictional works about childhood alone, Helene Cooper and Delia Jarrett-Macauley are the authors of two

memoirs set in Liberia and Sierra Leone, respectively. Cooper's memoir, *The House at Sugar Beach* (2008), nostalgically describes her childhood in Liberia as a member of the countries' ruling Congo class and inhabitant of a twenty-two-room mansion, while Aminatta Forna's *The Devil That Danced on the Water* (2002) is a beautifully written and more sophisticated work of personal reflection centered around the sudden disappearance of the author's father, Mohamed, during Forna's childhood in Sierra Leone. Later, as an adult, Forna learns that her father was arrested, tried, and finally executed by Sierra Leone's ruling party. Amidst the turmoil of independence, Mohamed, a British-educated doctor and rising political star, found himself on the wrong side of a ruthless political conspiracy. Forna eventually returns to Sierra Leone from England to interview the men responsible for her father's death. She discovers not the maniacal monsters she had expected, but instead old men broken by many years of political graft.

African child soldiers have proven an especially popular topic for Anglophone and Francophone West African writers alike in recent decades. From the Nigerian Civil War of 1967-1970, to the end of the Sierra Leonean Civil War in 2002, and with many events of political unrest on going, Africa has seen the outbreak of several conflicts in which combatants under the age of 18 have been employed. A cursory list of the West African writers who have in some ways responded to the use of under-18's in warfare includes Ishmael Beah, author of *A Long Way Gone* (2007), a memoir about Beah's experiences as an underage combatant in Sierra Leone; Dulue Mbachu, author of *War Games* (2005), a novel about a young man recruited during the Nigerian Civil War; Mariatu Kamara, who with co-author Susan McClelland tells a harrowing story of kidnap and rape in Sierra Leone in her memoir, *Bite of a Mango* (2008); as well as the authors of three child soldier novels studied in the second chapter, Chris Abani, Uzodinma Iweala, and Delia Jarrett-

Macauley, whose novels address Nigeria (Abani, Iweala) and Sierra Leone (Jarrett-Macauley). The list of authors in this "child soldier" genre also includes Francophone writers Ahmadou Kourouma, author of the bestselling *Allah N'Est Pas Obligé* (translated into English as *Allah is Not Obliged* in 2006), and Emmanuel Dongola whose novel *Johnny Chien Méchant* (translated into English as *Johnny Mad Dog* in 2005), was adapted into a film by Jean Stéphane Sauvair in 2008.

Additional works of third-generation West African fiction which place the figure of the child center-stage are Chris Abani's *Graceland* (2004), Sefi Atta's *Everything Good Will Come* (2005), Unoma Azuah's *Sky-High Flames* (2005), Helon Habila's *Measuring Time* (2007), and Chimamanda Adichie's *Purple Hibiscus* (2003) and *Half of a Yellow Sun* (2006).[11] Adichie's work deserves special mention, as it has attracted the attention of several critics and utilizes the child figure in interesting ways. Christopher Ouma, for instance, writes, "Through the child protagonist and her memories, [*Purple Hibiscus*] foregrounds ways in which childhood can be considered as a set of ideas in examining the underlying problem of identity" ("Childhood(s)" 49). The novel is an iconic example of a Bildungsroman: it follows the fifteen-year-old protagonist, Kambili, as she struggles to come to a sense of self under the rule of her tyrannical father, Eugene; explores budding feelings of sexual attraction for the priest, Father Amadi; and eventually leaves her father's household for her Aunty Ifeoma's in Nsukka, where she comes to feel more confident in her abilities. As with other Bildungsroman, the novel prioritizes Kambili's personal growth, chronicling her development into a self-assured adult, hopeful about her place in the community.

[11] Adichie has another novel, *Americanah* (2013), set primarily in the United States, as well as a collection of short stories entitled *That Thing Around Your Neck* (2009), which crosses back and forth between the US and Nigeria.

Turning towards the diaspora, a handful of works by West African-born novelists living abroad also prioritize childhood as a subject. Balanced between spaces in Africa (e.g. Nigeria, Ghana) and in the west (e.g. Britain, Canada), British-Nigerian writer Diana Evans's *26a* (2005), Canadian-Ghanaian novelist Esi Edugyan's *The Second Life of Samuel Tyne* (2004), and British-Nigerian writer Helen Oyeyemi's *The Icarus Girl* (2005) all in some way address what it is like to be black or bi-racial in a white majority country; their novels alternately reflect – and, as I will discuss, interrogate – the novelists' hyphenated identities. As another unifying feature of these works, the writers also explore the special bond between twins. Ghanaian novelist and filmmaker, Yaba Badoe's *True Murder* (2009), which is similarly dually located between the UK and Ghana, does not feature twins, but rather what may be called a twin-*like* pairing in the eleven-year-old, Ghanaian narrator, Ajuba, and her similar (albeit Caucasian) best friend, Polly.

To this list of diasporic, twin-prioritizing novels might be also be added Taiye Selasi's *Ghana Must Go* (2013), which sees the Savage family, including non-identical twins, Taiwo and Kehinde, reunited in Ghana after many years spent apart in Nigeria and the US. Selasi's novel is not one of the works addressed in this thesis, however; it recounts Taiwo's and Kehinde's childhoods only briefly and seems more concerned, instead, with exploring the tenuous bonds of kinship that knit the Savage family together. By contrast, the novels examined in this thesis linger with their protagonists in early life. In several cases, as was already highlighted, the novels' protagonists seem "fixed" as children, unable to mature into fully functioning adults. The authors of my study are, indeed, preoccupied with children's distinguishing gifts (Okri), vulnerabilities (Iweala, Abani, and Jarrett-Macauley), and abilities (Badoe, Oyeyemi), which makes their works, in my view, ripe for a detailed study of the African child figure, as I explore. The following section proceeds to

give an overview of the constituent chapters, paying special attention to the threads that bind them whilst also noting unique points of definition. For Okri, Abani, Iweala, Jarrett-Macauley, Oyeyemi, and Badoe, as I discuss, childhood not only provides a means of exploring broad themes of human creativity, suffering, and the struggle for identity; in addition, the authors probe, in contrasting and sometimes often overlapping ways, what it means to be a child.

## Chapter Outline

Chapter 1 opens with an examination of Ben Okri's oeuvre. Okri's well-known "spirit child" trilogy, beginning with *The Famished Road* (1991), was among the first West African works to bring the image of the abiku, or West African "spirit child" to western audiences. Okri laid down core conceptions of the child in West African writing against which later writers have reacted, as I go on to discuss, putting his work into conversation, in particular, with Oyeyemi's *The Icarus Girl.* Oyeyemi, I suggest, revises Okri's image of a generative, visionary abiku. Since *The Famished Road,* Okri has continued to write about childhood, for instance, in the second and third installments of his "spirit child" trilogy, *Songs of Enchantment* (1993) and *Infinite Riche*s (1998), as well as in his most recent set of essays, *A Time for New Dreams* (2011): "We need the voice that speaks to our joys, *our childhoods,* and to the Gordian knots of our private and national conditions" (*A Time for New Dreams* 3; emphasis added). Okri's meaning in this passage is unclear: he is not explicit about how such a "voice" might speak to "childhoods," nor about what relation childhood has to "private and national conditions," themselves rather abstract ideas. Perhaps he means to categorize childhood, along with "joys" and "national conditions," as among the most profound aspects of human experience? I find this reading persuasive, if

only for the frequency with which childhood, shrouded in a sense of mystery and allure, reappears in his work.

Later in the same collection, Okri praises the way children have of asking questions that drive to the heart of "what reality really is, what the world is and where it came from" ("On Childhood [1]" 9). Children, then, possess a unique way of perceiving the world for Okri and, especially, expansive insight. Childhood is "like a mature unlearning," Okri declares (ibid. 11). His novel, *The Famished Road*, as I go on to explore, therefore, employs the child figure to examine the nature and talents of the artist. I particularly see Okri's philosophy of the child as an innate or instinctive artist as influenced by the English Romantics, who similarly saw children as approaching the world in unique and unconventional ways (see Plotz, *Romanticism and the Vocation of Childhood,* Ch. 1). The chapter begins by looking at Okri's western intertexts, contesting scholarly readings that have mostly prioritized his relationship to African canons, as I go on to explain. In the chapter, I argue, in particular, that we should read Okri's child figure, Azaro, not only in relationship to the Yoruba myth of the abiku as, for instance, Douglas McCabe has argued, but also to British intertexts such as J.M. Barrie's *Peter Pan in Kensington Gardens* (1906), which, like Okri's novel, imagines children taking the form of birds.

I then explore how Okri's theory of the creative life draws from the Romantics', setting his work alongside Percy Shelley's, William Wordsworth's, and William Blake's in particular. More specifically, I argue that Azaro possesses the Romantic artist/poet figure's exceptional "vision" and connection to so-called "higher" realms; sensitivity toward the suffering of others; as well as hyper-resilience in the face of personal trials. The chapter further examines the overlaps between Okri's ecological preoccupations and Wordsworth's, examining how a child's perspective in Okri's novel is used to expose the

"slow violence," to borrow Robert Nixon's phrase, done to Nigeria's natural habitats by colonial-era administrators. Wordsworth, too, protested the destruction of natural environments, especially in his poems on the planned development of a railway through the Lake District, as I go on to discuss. In addition, the chapter critically analyzes Okri's representations of childhood and poverty. I suggest that Okri idealizes both, omitting representations of children who do not possess "magical" or exceptional talents, as Azaro does, while also putting his characters' suffering on display. Azaro's sympathy for others' suffering in *The Famished Road,* in other words, I argue, seldom leads to practical change. The novel renders extreme poverty as an "aesthetic effec[t]," in Matthew Green's words (24), and does not substantially engage with how such poverty might be ameliorated, a further aspect of Okri's writing that is explored.

The second chapter, too, reflects upon the child figure as a versatile trope used to support particular themes. It also, as in the previous chapter, sees the child figure as excessively, even dangerously idealized and highlights a potentially problematic consequence of children's symbolization. In particular, the chapter considers how three writers within the African child soldier narrative genre, Iweala, Abani, and Jarrett-Macauley, lean on notions of children's presumed "truth," "innocence," "vulnerability" and fragile embodiment to construct what I see as an implicit message in favor of humanitarian intervention. My method in this chapter is contrapuntal: I set the three novels alongside human rights discourses to draw out their similarities in representing African atrocities as well as children, arguing that Iweala's, Abani's, and Jarrett-Macauley's novels can be read in a limited sense as "human rights" texts, seeking the end of conflict. Through their foregrounded imagery of wounded child-bodies, especially, the novels in my view stir concern for, and ultimately encourage action to save, militarized under-18s.

At times, however, particularly within Jarrett-Macauley's novel *Moses, Citizen, and Me* (2005), the child becomes a *mere* tool in the novel, I suggest, not an individual character in his or her own right.

Hence, Chapter 2 also explores what I introduce as the child as "narrative prosthesis," drawing from David Mitchell and Sharon Snyder. Mitchell and Snyder argue that in certain cases, non-normative characters, for instance, disabled persons – but also children – might be employed by an author or narrative to "lend a 'tangible' body to textual abstractions," such as "disorder" (47). In other words, disabled characters are often utilized to embody – or make more apparent – larger "truths." In Jarrett-Macauley's novel, especially, I see the child figure as symbolizing a sense of social crisis for the narrator, Julia; he does not, however, I argue, exist convincingly as a separate character or person in his own right. In the chapter, I am particularly interested in the convergence of these narratives with related discourses surrounding children, such as the anti-child-recruitment campaign, *Invisible Children,* popular on American campuses in the mid-2000s. It is not that Jarrett-Macauley, Iweala, and Abani set out to advocate humanitarianism in their novels, I suggest, nor is it the only available interpretation of their works. Yet, the narratives do seem to make a tacit pro-interventionist argument when read alongside campaigns such as *Invisible Children* as well as "Save the Children" ads, which, as I go on to argue, represent children – and bodies – in remarkably similar ways.

Chapter 3 presents a possible method of employing children as symbols without entirely instrumentalizing them or reducing their agency. Helen Oyeyemi and Yaba Badoe represent the child as an "outsider," in my reading, in order to explore conditions of social, and cultural, un-belonging in their works. In this way, Oyeyemi and Badoe might be

understood to employ children as conceptual tools or devices, using children's perspectives to consider larger themes of social "outsiderness" in the space(s) of diaspora. Yet they do so without undermining children's volition as characters within the text. In the very way they map the child as an "outsider," I see Oyeyemi and Badoe as making room for the agency of children, rather than othering or stereotyping them. Children are not merely shown as passively "constructed" by adults in Badoe and Oyeyemi's novels, othered or stereotyped; they are also shown to contribute their own meaning to what it is to be a "child," behaving subversively in the text as well as challenging adult assumptions. This is particularly apparent in Oyeyemi's novel, as I explain: the protagonist, Jess, constantly challenges adults' beliefs about her – finds it difficult to live up to the norm of a "happy child."

Moreover, the chapter, as in the two previous, also examines cultural sources for, and influences upon, how Badoe and Oyeyemi think about and represent children. Gothic tropes, I argue, are particularly apparent in the novels' haunted settings and plots driven by madness and murder. The thesis, therefore, makes a case for how several West African writers – Ben Okri, but also Helen Oyeyemi and Yaba Badoe – are influenced by eighteenth- and nineteenth- century British literatures. On the one hand, we could read Oyeyemi's and Badoe's use of Gothic tropes as paying homage to Jean Rhys's *Wide Sargasso Sea* (1966). Rhys rewrites Charlotte Bronte's novel *Jane Eyre* (1847) to create greater room for the suppressed voice of "Antoinette/Bertha," locked away in the attic tower. Badoe's and Oyeyemi's novels, I argue, give similar priority to the "mad" black woman so often elided and/or maligned in colonial discourse. Yet Oyeyemi's and Badoe's Gothic aesthetics not only coordinate them within a critical, postcolonial imaginary spearheaded by Rhys, as I explain, they also point to their own unique (post)colonial

engagements. In particular, Oyeyemi and Badoe, I suggest, employ Gothic tropes to validate indigenous beliefs in witchcraft, using the West African myth of the abiku, especially, to destabilize western epistemologies.

The thesis hence develops in its argument for several contemporary West African novels of childhood as "intercultural," shaped by influences both West African and western as a result of their membership within an elite, global middle class, for whom childhood is often, though not wholly, conceptualized in western terms. It is indeed critical to my discussion throughout that all six authors examined move in global spaces; I see their images of childhood as influenced as much by their complex cultural backgrounds, their position "in-between" the west and West African countries, as by the specific texts upon which they rely in their works, though I also examine how Oyeyemi and Badoe draw attention to the perils of such interstitiality in Chapter 3. Throughout, the aim of the thesis is to draw greater attention to the versatility of the child as a trope as well as to the specific ways in which the writers in question complicate and diversify child characters' roles and functions. To this end, the thesis explores the figure of the child relative to the themes of "creativity," "suffering" and "social exclusion," constantly asking not only what cultural traditions authors draw from when crafting their images of children, but also, what do they contribute? How are common conceptions of childhood informed by what they depict?

# Chapter 1

## Images of Youth in Ben Okri's *The Famished Road*

This chapter examines the way in which Ben Okri employs the child figure in his novel *The Famished Road* (1991) and the work's sequels, *Songs of Enchantment* (1993) and *Infinite Riches* (1998), to explore aspects of the creative life, which is here defined with reference to Okri's wider oevure as well as to the writing of Percy Shelley, John Keats, William Wordsworth, and William Blake. Okri's central child, Azaro, not only takes the form of the spirit-child or abiku familiar from traditional Yoruban folklore, I suggest; he is also fashioned in the image of the artist from Okri's earlier novels, *The Flower and Shadows* (1980) and *The Landscapes Within* (1981). I see Okri's artist-image in these works and others as influenced by the writings of the English Romantics, on whom Okri conspicuously draws throughout his oeuvre; several explicit references to Blake, Keats and Byron in Okri's writing are outlined to follow. The chapter stitches together these three key figures, the Romantic "poet," Okri's earlier artist figures and his central child image, Azaro, arguing that Okri's child figure is a much more complicated, more multivalent figure than many scholars have assumed.

A great deal of the scholarship on Okri's novel so far has focused on the abiku's relationship to West African folklore, as I go on to discuss. This chapter places Okri's image of childness instead in another context, investigating how it might be said to exist in a productive, even enabling relationship to his philosophy of the creative life. The chapter begins with a discussion of Okri's western, specifically British influences. The goal here is to complicate the priority that has been given by scholars to West African folklore and ethnography in the study of Okri's work, offering instead a more syncretic model. While Okri's version of the abiku admittedly converges in many ways with that found in

Yoruba cultural traditions, I proceed to argue, it also importantly overlaps with how many have depicted childhood in western literatures, for instance, in the biographical notes of the poet William Blake, where the child-Blake also experiences supernatural visions, or in J.M. Barrie's *Peter Pan and Kensington Gardens* (1906), which shares Okri's striking imagery of children taking the form of birds (FR 3).

The chapter then moves into a discussion of the child figure in Okri's novel as a symbol of repeatedly regenerating creativity. "[We] went through life with beautiful and fated eyes," Azaro says of himself and his abiku companions in *The Famished Road* (4), so highlighting his unique powers of perception, or ability as "spirit child" to see beyond ordinary realms. Azaro's connection to unseen landscapes, his unusual dreams and visions in the novel, are similar, I suggest, to how several Romantic writers have also depicted creative inspiration, namely as a flash of "epiphanic" insight to quote from Charles Taylor (419). A later section of this chapter places Okri's novel in dialogue with Wordsworth's *The Prelude* (1805),[12] or "Growth of a Poet's Mind" as it was subtitled in the 1850 edition, in particular. Azaro not only encodes a sense of artistic "vision" in Okri's novel, as one characteristic Okri's earlier artist figures and the Romantic poet image share. He also embodies other traits of the artist important to Okri, which are highlighted through the intertextuality set up with the Romantic tradition. These include a profound connection to natural environments; sensitivity to the suffering of others; self-awareness; and an exceptional resilience in the face of personal hardship. I play close attention especially to

[12] Several versions of this poem exist, dated to the years 1799, 1805, and 1850. I have decided to use the 1805 version in this chapter in light of observations made by Stephen Gill. "The 1799 poem cannot be dealt with in detail and as a separate work [...] when most of it is incorporated into the 1805 poem anyway," Gill says, explaining his choice of text in *Wordsworth: The Prelude* (6). The 1850 text, meanwhile, "subjects the 1805 poem to the later thoughts of a much older and much changed poet" (6). Hence, Gill employs the 1805 version of *The Prelude*, which he also sees as "poetically the finest version" (6). I find Gill's reasoning persuasive and cite from the 1805 version throughout this chapter.

Wordsworth's and Okri's shared eco-critical preoccupations in a later section. In this way, and in particular through drawing out influences from Romantic thought on the child, the chapter develops its argument for the child figure as a versatile tool or symbol. Azaro serves to deepen and, possibly, make more imaginatively appealing, various traits of the artist important to Okri throughout his career.

## Western Images of Youth in *The Famished Road*

This section lays out some of the parallels between Okri's Azaro and western iterations and significance of the child figure, arguing that Okri draws on more diverse sources than many scholars of his work have generally assumed. The poet, essayist, and novelist has lived in Britain at least since the late-1970s, when his scholarship to study literature at the University of Essex was withdrawn by the Nigerian government.[13] Moreover, as a child he was briefly educated at the John Donne Primary School in London while his father, Silver Okri, studied for legal exams in London's Inner Temple (Fraser 14). Nevertheless, scholars have almost overwhelmingly connected Okri's work to African folklore and mythologies. Ato Quayson, for instance, frames Okri's novel as a work of animist realism, projecting local beliefs in a spiritual vitality behind objects: "In the [*Famished Road*]," Quayson argues, "Okri produces what might be termed a new mythopoeic discourse with the invocation of myths, folklore, and other aspects of indigenous beliefs" (*Strategic Transformations* 121). Olatubosun Ogunsanwo likewise reads Okri's work in relationship to African folklore and indigenous beliefs. The critic sees a "marvelous African reality" sustained via Azaro's "extraordinary consciousness and powers" ("Intertextuality and Post-Colonial Literature 47).

[13] According to Okri's biographer, Robert Fraser, the scholarship was withdrawn due to Nigeria's financial difficulties following the oil price shocks of the 1970s (xiv).

Whilst Quayson's and Ogunsanwo's readings usefully emphasize Okri's productive relationship to West African folklores, particularly the way in which these inform his visionary child figure, Azaro, they however neglect his indebtedness to western cultural traditions, as I go on to discuss. The syncretic blending of culture traditions in Okri's writing, I conversely argue, is essential to appreciating the depth and complexity of his work. Namely, in eliding the western cultural traditions that also influence Okri's work, as I will show, both Quayson and Ogunsanwo rely heavily on Okri's invocation of the abiku myth. In Yoruba[14] folklore, certain children are believed to die before their appointed time; "Àbíkú literally means 'one who is born, dies,'" as Douglas McCabe writes in his extensive examination of the abiku as a trope in Yoruba literature and folklore, "Histories of Errancy: Oral Yoruba Àbíkú texts and Soyinka's 'Abiku'" (2002) (46). The death of the abiku is no accidental demise, however. The abiku makes plans to perish before the end of childhood in collusion with his or her spirit companions: "[Yoruba elders] apply the term to children who have secret plans to die at a certain time in their upbringing, only to be born again soon afterwards," McCabe explains ("Histories of Errancy" 46). The abiku will then repeat this cycle of death and rebirth until she is "fettered" by her human parents. For instance, in Achebe's *Things Fall Apart*, the parents of the abiku child, Enzinma,[15] look desperately for her *iyi-uwa*, a special stone thought to bind her to the spirit world (79-86). Only by discovering this stone and unearthing it from its place of burial in the forest will they be able to sever Enzinma's ties with the spirit world and ensure her continuance among the living.

Okri's *The Famished Road* alludes to the abiku myth explicitly in its opening passages and admittedly also develops the link throughout. The novel begins with Azaro

[14] The Yoruba are another major ethnic group in Nigeria.
[15] In Igbo, such children are known as *ogbanje*.

in a spirit world, waiting to be born again to new human parents: "[We] were known among the Living as abiku, spirit-children [...] We were the ones who kept coming and going, unwilling to come to terms with life," Azaro explains (4). The novel is clearly an abiku narrative, utilizing the Yoruba myth as a central conceit. Alongside the abiku, an additional reference to African myth or literatures may be found in the novel's motif of the "famished road." Eldred Jones sees this as a borrowed image from Wole Soyinka's early poem "Death in the Dawn": "And the mother prayed, Child/May you never walk/ When the road waits, famished" (Jones, quoting from Soyinka 2). Building on these allusions, Brenda Cooper connects this complex of images in Okri to the writing of Amos Tutuola specifically, and not so much to Soyinka. In *The Famished Road*, Azaro's father, called merely "Dad" in the novel, tells him a story about the King of the Road, a giant spirit who, after eating all the travelers who come his way, eats himself until he is nothing more than a stomach "growing from under the ground" (FM 26). "This is the quite familiar Tutuolan myth of origins and warnings, set in the long past," Cooper argues, referencing Tutuola's most famous work, *The Palm-wine Drinkard* (1952) (*Magical Realism* 70).

Alongside excavating the novel's references to African myth and folklore, the lens of "magical realism" has been another popular way of interpreting Okri's novel. Here, too, we see an emphasis placed on Okri's relationship to indigenous folklore and cultures and *not* to the folklore and cultures of the west. Christopher Warnes, for instance, understands Okri as aiming to portray an "authentic African world-view" in *The Famished Road* (*Magical Realism* 142). By "authentic," Warnes refers to a way of seeing African cultures that views them as essentially unchanged from pre-colonial eras, full of the "essence" of distinctively "African" thought. In his analysis, Warnes acknowledges that such "authenticity" is impossible: cultures are constantly changing and evolving. There is, and

never was, such a thing as a singular, pre-colonial African worldview, just as there is no one, unified way in which Africans – inhabitants of a remarkably diverse and fluid continent – approach life today. Nevertheless, marshaling evidence from Okri's extensive interviews, Warnes argues that reclaiming such alleged "authenticity" is one goal of Okri's work. In his study, Warnes defines magical realism as a mode of narration in which "the non- or extra-rational [...] is represented on scrupulously equal terms with the empirical" (146). He places Okri alongside a number of Latin American magical realist writers, including Alejo Carpentier and Miguel Ángel Asutrias, and argues that, like these writers, Okri's peculiar brand of magical realism is "faith-based" (146). He aims to bring to life a peculiarly "African" – particularly animist – way of seeing the world.

Taking her observations of Tutuolan references within and influences upon Okri's novel further, Cooper also reads Okri's novel through the lens of "magical realism." Contrasting with Warnes, Cooper takes what might be called a "hybrid" approach to *The Famished Road*. That is to say, she is curious to understand how Okri's novel (alongside several others) encodes "process[es] of change, borders, and ambiguity" (*Magical Realism* 15). "[A]t the heart of the emergence of magical realism in the Third World," Cooper argues, "is the fact that these countries encountered western capitalism, technology and education haphazardly" (ibid.). In other words, Cooper is as much interested in Okri's references to modernity, in *The Famished Road*'s many allusions to motorized vehicles, electric lighting, and skyscrapers (*Magical Realism* 81-84), as she is in the novel's filial relationship with African literatures and folklore. Cooper's reading is on the whole convincing and draws out the pronounced asynchrony in Okri's work, in which urban industrial technologies and pre-colonial folk figures collide. At the same time, on a purely textual basis, Cooper spends more time discussing the work's African literary influences in

favor of examining any of the novel's possible western sources of inspiration. In addition to Tutuola, Cooper names two other major West African writers as potential influences on Okri's novel: Camara Laye and Chinua Achebe (73-75). Okri's many western allusions in *The Famished Road* however, such as the biblical reference, "In the beginning [...]," on the very first page, are elided (FR 3).

To be sure, some scholars are beginning to bring attention to Okri as a complex, syncretic writer, as I also suggest, exploring some of Okri's western influences to follow. Critics who have examined Okri's novel for how it engages with western or, more specifically, British literatures and culture alongside African myth include Matthew Green and Douglas McCabe. Green takes an intertextual approach to Okri's *The Famished Road*, reading it in relationship to poetry by the Romantic writer and engraver William Blake. As we shall see in a moment, Blake's work bears many points of resonance with Okri's oeuvre. Yet, until the publication of Green's article "Dreams of Freedom: Magical Realism and Visionary Materialism in Okri and Blake" (2009), the two writers had not been considered side by side. Green sees marked similarities between Okri's peculiar brand of magical realism and William Blake's theory of "visionary materialism" in particular: "[B]oth identify spiritual contention with corporeal effects," the critic argues, exploring how both authors, in similar ways, seek to "re-value the imaginative process of human beings" as a means of bringing change to political, economic, and other social spheres (18). In other words, by influencing how people imagine the world through the creation of poetry and art, both Okri and Blake hope to effect real, practical change in political realms (i.e. "corporeal effects"). They seek to change minds – and communities – by shaping human perceptions, a topic I return to later in the chapter.

Alongside Green, Douglas McCabe is also interested in what might be called the underlying spiritual or philosophical message of Okri's novel, which he sees as deriving not from the writings of William Blake, but rather via Okri's engagement with the central tenets of New Ageism, a spiritual or religious movement that became popular in many western countries, including Britain, in the late 1960s (Lewis and Kemp 3). In "Higher Realities: New Age Spirituality in Ben Okri's *The Famished Road*" (2005), McCabe posits Okri as a subscriber to New Ageist thought, with its emphasis on "sociocosmic millenarism, co-creative idealism, loving monism, self-actualisation, and detraditionalizing perennialism," and looks for evidence of these theories in *The Famished Road* (1), as I will explore further. Finding pervasive references to a "new age" of enlightenment, and to other key aspects of New Ageist spirituality in *The Famished Road*, McCabe eventually argues for Okri's work as nothing less than New Ageist "allegory, reflecting and transmitting central tenets of the human potential movement" (16).

In his chapter on *The Famished Road*, Warnes critiques McCabe's claims as overstated: "McCabe's analysis makes clear that New Ageism is undeniably present in *The Famished Road*," Warnes admits, "But exactly to what extent […] and in what kinds of balance it exists with other discourses, are questions that remain to be answered" (132). Warnes is understandably concerned about the extent to which McCabe's theory displaces other compelling readings, such as the interpretations of Okri's work in relationship to African cultures and folklore mentioned above. Yet, in this way, I suggest that Warnes fundamentally misunderstands one of McCabe's foremost observations. As a personal philosophy that holds that "all the world's religions, deep down, carry the same message" New Ageist spirituality is powerfully able to accommodate other viewpoints (7). That is to say, the act of reading New Ageism as "the most important cultural vector shaping Okri's

novel," as McCabe later argues, need not rule out or even diminish the importance of African folklore and mythologies for Okri's work (7). Instead, it potentially makes the presence of such influences more palpable, as Okri proves a novelist capable of finding value in many different traditions: western *and* African. As McCabe writes, "it is common for New Agers to mix and match the world's spiritual traditions" (8). This chapter returns to the specifics of McCabe's argument later.

Typically, Afrocentric heuristics have been employed in respect of Okri's novel. Sarah Lincoln makes a new departure, which represents another growing trend. Lincoln frames not Okri's *The Famished Road,* but instead his short stories collected in *Stars of a New Curfew* (1988) as works of "petro-magic realism." "Inflation in one sphere – monetized modern life," Lincoln writes, referring to the hyperinflation that characterized Nigeria's economy in 1980s, "finds symptomatic expression in a second-order inflation, in the sphere of literary modernism" (250). Lincoln's approach is highly innovative, and brings Okri's work into much-needed dialogue with the material conditions in which it was produced, i.e. Nigeria in the boom-and-bust decades of the 70s and 80s. Indeed, seeing the formal qualities of his writing as motivated not so much by literary genealogies (i.e. the influence of Tutuola and others), and more by historical conditions shared with several other artists (in particular, Lincoln mentions German post-expressionists in the early 1920s), Lincoln interprets the "magical" aesthetics of Okri's short stories as a response to the increasingly fantastical nature of money and luxury-priced goods in Nigeria in the early 1980s. Before then, in the late 1970s, a sudden rise in global oil price poured thousands of US dollars into the Nigerian economy, Lincoln notes. This rapid influx of income led to immediate investments in infrastructure by the Nigerian state – gleaming skyscrapers and shiny new naira bills – as well as to conspicuous consumption amongst

the Nigerian elite, all of which must have seemed highly surreal to ordinary citizens (Lincoln 251).

In linking Okri's aesthetics to a condition of the global economy, and *not* to genealogical influences by West African cultural traditions and folklore, Lincoln joins Green and McCabe in what Warnes refers to as the second major strand of criticism evident in the commentary on Okri's novel. Here critics observe the "places where Okri's [oeuvre] opens out onto global and generic literary, cultural, ecological and geopolitical discourses" (124). This second strand of criticism then serves to balance out – at times, to trouble – the first, much larger body of commentary in which scholars point "towards African culture, mythologies and literature as the most appropriate markers by which to chart one's responses to the novel" (124). In analyzing western images of childness in Okri's *The Famished Road* (1991), as well as in several of his other novels and essays, this chapter also serves to complicate the existing emphasis on ethnography and African writing within scholarship on Okri's oeuvre, and adds another voice to Green's, McCabe's, and Lincoln's small but still crucial number.

Far from being merely an allusion to oral or "traditional" West African literatures, I submit, Okri's abiku figure is a much more textured image, encoding a variety of ideas and traditions not only related to West African cultures and folklores. By "textured" here I refer to the way in which western ideas of childness, too, are enfolded into Okri's highly distinctive depiction of the abiku. To be certain, there is much about the West African abiku that Okri's novel *does* evoke. We cannot ignore the fact that Okri names the abiku myth in his novel explicitly; Azaro furthermore shares many characteristics with the "spirit child" of West African ethnography. Timothy Mobolade observes, for instance, "The Yorubas believe that the Abikus form a species of spirit by themselves" (62). In Okri's

novel, Azaro is a kind of celestial being, able to communicate with otherworldly dimensions: "I hear things," Azaro explains, "Voices. Words. Trees. Flowers" (FR 431). These ethereal voices then haunt his daily activities, which are shadowed by violent visits from his "spirit companions," who desire his return to the afterlife: "They were the twilight voices of my spirit companions, luring me to the world of dreams [...]" (FR 18). According to Douglas McCabe, in Yoruba mythology, each abiku belongs to an *egbé* or group of companions, which attempts to abduct the abiku should it fail to be fettered by human parents ("Histories of Errancy" 46). As another connection between Okri's novel and African folklores, Azaro moves easily between human and non-human realms: "That was the first time I realized it wasn't just humans who came to the marketplaces of the world," he says, piercing the veil between spiritual and physical dimensions: "Spirits and other beings come there too" (FR 16). Also like many abiku from oral folklores, Azaro has "occult powers," in Mobolade's phrasing, especially the ability to read people's minds and "foretell their futures" (Mobolade 62; FR 9).

This thesis returns to the figure of the abiku in a later chapter, exploring how Okri's *The Famished Road* contrasts with Oyeyemi's *The Icarus Girl*, which, I argue, presents a much darker abiku figure. Oyeyemi's work places greater weight on precariousness of the abiku figure, as I go on to discuss, whereas Okri, as seen in the above, often emphasizes the abiku's extraordinary powers. Such passages serve as reminders that Okri has found West African myth inspiring. However, where scholars have focused primarily on Okri's relationship to indigenous folklores, as explored above, they have helped obscure other key preoccupations of his writing, such as the overriding association of childhood with creativity, as I go on to explore. While taking into account the various important cultural and political traditions that undeniably shape Okri's work, I

also argue that his novels should not be read using one cultural lens only and that other patterns of influence, too, are discernable; specifically, Romantic ideas and images are prominent in his writing on childhood. Okri's work is highly heterogeneous in its terms of cultural reference and need not be read exclusively in relation to the ethnographic frameworks through which he has generally been interpreted. Quayson's, Cooper's, and many others' readings of Okri's novel as influenced by oral folklore rely strongly upon the author's presumed identification with the Yoruba ethnic group, or use of Yoruban mythologies.[16] Soyinka for example has often been read in this light. In what follows, however, I treat such an ethnographically inflected reading circumspectly.

In *Wole Soyinka: Politics, Poetics and Postcolonialism* (2004), Biodun Jeyifo comments upon the importance of the Yoruba deity, Ogun, for Soyinka's oeuvre. Through his life, Soyinka has returned to this deity as a means of self-fashioning: "what we encounter [in the myth of Ogun] is the paradox of the rebel as quintessential hero, the radical iconoclast as heroic protagonist of supreme ethical, self-transcending communal values" (Jeyifo 26). Jeyifo presents Soyinka's relationship to the myth of Ogun as a highly personal one: Soyinka comes from a prominent Yoruba family in Nigeria. He returns to Yoruba folklore, especially, to the Ogun stories and tales from the Yoruba pantheon of gods (known as *orisa*) in order to develop a framework for thinking about his own creative practice, his role as the "*enfant terrible*," as Jeyifo puts it, on Nigeria's literary scene (2).

Ben Okri's relationship to Yoruban literatures and folklore, however, is more complicated. According to his biographer, Robert Fraser, Okri is primarily ethnically Urhobo, not Yoruba. Okri is descended from an Urhobo royal clan on his father's side and

[16] Tribal ethnicities in postcolonial Nigeria, as tragically proven by the Civil War of 1967-1970, have distinctive qualities and separate histories. The Yoruba, in particular, are famed for their esoteric myths and well-developed folklore.

from the Mid-Western Igbo on his mother's (Fraser 12). Okri also attended Urhobo College in Warri from the age of 11 until his mid-teens (Fraser 19-20). This school, like many Urhobo institutions at the time, was devoted to producing more lawyers, teachers and civil servants, professions then rare amongst the Urhobo, according to Fraser (20). As a result, there was not much opportunity for studying literature – there were fewer encounters with Africa's rich literary and cultural past than seem in contrast to have characterized Soyinka's 1930s childhood (Fraser 21).

In *Aké: The Years of Childhood* (1981), Soyinka remembers the diverse blend of traditional Yoruba religion and Anglican Christianity that informed his thinking from an early age. For instance, in a humorous passage in his memoir, the young Soyinka professes confusion at the fact that the saints depicted in the stained glass windows of his parents' Anglican church in Aké, his hometown in Nigeria, were wearing "*egúngún* robes" (32). *Egúngún* are large, masked figures associated with reverence of the ancestors in Yoruba religion. Conversely, in Fraser's biography of Okri, aside from a few references to Christianity, there is little to no mention of religion, especially of an indigenous African variety. Instead, Okri seems to have experienced a mostly secular childhood, one weighted heavily towards science, *not* towards African literatures and folklore. When he left Urhobo College at Warri, it was with the intention of eventually studying natural science (Fraser 20). Only later in his life, particularly after encountering some of the British literary classics housed in his father's study, did Okri begin to consider a career in writing (Fraser 20-22).

On this basis, we might say that Okri makes "strategic" use, to borrow Quayson's phrase, of Yoruban myth and folklore in his novel, using it to project a sense of "Africanness" that is always-already a fabrication or part-invention (Quayson 17). In other

words, we cannot read the author as merely transcribing or even translating "traditional" Yoruban beliefs (acknowledging "tradition" as always-already an arbitrary construction of the past), because he stands considerably outside of these by virtue not only of his early western reading and education, but also as a feature of his own West African background, i.e. the ethnic group and cultural traditions to which he belongs and had recourse in his work.

Another reason for reading Okri's abiku as shaped in part by other cultural traditions may be found in Okri's presentation of the abiku in *The Famished Road* which, while possessing certain points of overlap, also departs considerably from the image found in the oral Yoruba literatures. Douglas McCabe has observed that, according to one *Ifá babaláwo* (a "traditional" leader or priest), the "abiku heaven is an occluded, camouflaging terrain of dense bush" in which the abiku, a kind of trickster figure, plots its next raid on human households ("Histories of Errancy" 4).[17] This dim, foreboding picture of the abiku heaven contrasts strongly with the place of rainbows, magic caves, "fauns, fairies," and "benign sprites" which opens Okri's novel (FR 3-5). Conversely, it is rather like many western conceptions of childness. For instance, fairies and "sprites" have long figured in the western imagination as associated with early life.

In a chapter titled "A Child's Garden of Sprites: English Renaissance Fairy Poetry" (1986), Warren Wooden argues that, while works like Edmund Spenser's *Faerie Queen* (1590) and Shakespeare's *Midsummer's Night Dreams* (1600) were originally intended for

[17] To quote from McCabe: "Each àbíkú is born into an ilé and poses as a child that is either sweet-natured and beautiful (and therefore likely to be lavished with good things) or sickly and disturbed (and therefore likely to be the beneficiary of expensive sacrifices). In such a way, the àbíkú quickly accumulates money, cloth, food, and livestock. Then, at a certain time and by a certain method prearranged secretly with its egbé, the àbíkú dies and takes the spiritual portion of its loot back to heaven. After dividing the spoils with its egbé, it prepares to re-enter the world and fleece the same or another ilé" (McCabe "Histories of Errancy: Oral Yoruba Àbíkú Texts and Soyinka's 'Abiku'" 47).

the delight of both adults and children, fairyland rapidly became the primary property of youth: "The fairies and their lore, done up into attractive verse and accompanied by an occasional woodcut, exerted a particular appeal to children" (102). According to Marina Warner, the English Romantics, whose work I discuss in further detail below, also "revived the fairies whom they encountered in ballads, nursery songs, local legends and superstitions" (*Once Upon a Time* 8). John Thelwall's[18] *The Fairy of the Lake* (1801), for instance, features a "'train of fairies,' 'Giants of Frost,' and 'Incubus, a frozen demon'" (ibid. 9). Fairies and other fantastical creatures have also appeared in the pages of European folklore collections by Andrew Lang and the Brothers Grimm, both nineteenth-century writers whose works remain popular to this day. In particular, The *Continuum Encyclopedia of Children's Literature* (2005) mentions illustrations by Richard Doyle (b. 1824 – d. 1883) a talented artist who brought to life Lang's and the Grimm's Brothers stories and helped to sediment the link between childhood and fairyland (Cullinan and Goetz 247-28). According to the Continuum Encyclopedia, Doyle's illustrations of sprites and other fairy creatures were marketed to children, for instance, as an accompaniment to Lang's *The Princess Nobody: A Tale of Fairyland* (1884) (Cullinan and Goetz 248). Sprites or their familiars may also be found in Hans Christian Anderson's *Thumbelina* (1835), in which a "thimble-sized" girl falls in love with a fairy-prince, as well as in more recent children's stories by Otfried Preussler (*The Little Water-Sprite,* 1960*);* Enid Blyton (*Fairyland Stories,* 1971); and Mackenzie Crook (*The Windvale Sprites,* 2011).

Moreover, the idea of planting his child figure in a "never-never" fantastical world beyond the physical one may not only be an idea Okri derived through his mediated encounters with Yoruba literatures, but also one he gleaned, consciously or not, from

[18] Thelwall was a poet, elocutionist, and friend of Coleridge's.

western children's writers and illustrators. According to Judith Plotz in *Romanticism and the Vocation of Childhood* (2001), island-kingdoms rather similar to Okri's magical abiku heaven were a common feature of children's stories in the eighteenth, nineteenth, and early twentieth centuries, with clear analogies to the colonial territories held by Britain and France. Plotz observes how, in Britain in the nineteenth century especially, several "island kingdoms were invented by and for children" (2). Such fictional kingdoms possibly prepared children to govern British colonies in Asia, Africa, and the Caribbean, as discussed in the previous chapter. Horace Elisa Scudder in an 1885 edition of the *Atlantic Monthly,* even proposed childhood as a kind of "continent" of its own, of which, in Scudder's view, the English Romantic poets such as William Wordsworth and William Blake were intrepid "explorers" (Plotz 1). Scudder's use of the term "explorer" establishes a clear link between colonial territories and childhood, seen as equally in need of mapping and cultivation.

J.M. Barrie's play *Peter and Wendy* (1904) contains a particularly notable example of an early twentieth-century island-kingdom for children, one with especially prominent colonial overtones. Barrie's story imagines three children, Wendy, Michael and John Darling, who are swept away by Peter, a sort of half-fairy, half-child, to a magical island called Neverland. Once on the island, the three children almost immediately set about pacifying the local peoples, called "Indians," and rescue the princess "Tiger Lily" from a savage band of pirates. In drawing out the links between Okri's and Barrie's work, not only the latter's colonialist subtexts, in Neverland, as in Okri's abiku heaven, children are forbidden from ageing (Barrie 65). They play alongside a deep, blue lagoon, in caves, near a "mysterious river," and in the company of sprites like Peter's fairy servant, Tinker Bell (Barrie 57). Indeed, while I do not think Okri shares Barrie's incipient imperialist vision, as

I discuss at a later point, remarking on Okri's many criticisms of colonialism, the similarities between the two narratives are striking. Albeit not in name, Okri's abiku heaven has much more in common with Barrie's island-kingdom, including the latter's alluring rivers, "magic caves," and sunlight grasslands, than it does with the dim, vine-choked jungles of Yoruba myth. This similarity suggests, once more, that we should not only be looking to African mythology as a source for Okri's images.

As aforementioned, Okri attended primary school in England from the age of five to six while his father studied for the bar. According to Okri himself, in several interviews, the Okri household during Ben's childhood was a literate place; Silver Okri had a large and generously shared library. Fraser has observed that during his childhood and young adult years Okri "became a voracious reader: of Dickens and Jane Austen [...] later of African, continental European and American novels, of English-language poetry, and poetry in translation" (20). It is not improbable that Okri would have at one point encountered several works by western children's writers, by Anderson, the Grimm brothers and Lang, as well as Barrie's play, which is performed widely in Britain every year at Christmas time.

As another feature of his abiku heaven linking Okri's images of childhood to Barrie's work especially, Azaro describes many of the "child-spirits" who are not yet human children as birds (FR 3). In Barrie's *Peter Pan in Kensington Gardens* (1906), the prequel to *Peter and Wendy,* the infant Peter is also a bird before he becomes a child: "for, having been birds before they were human, they are naturally a little wild during the first few weeks, and very itchy at the shoulders" (13). With total faith in his flying abilities (i.e. believing he is still a bird), Peter is able to "escape" out this nursery window and arrives in Kensington Gardens. Once in Kensington Gardens, however, a crow called Solomon Caw

tells Peter that he is no longer a bird nor a child, but something Solomon calls a "Betwixt-and-Between" (17). This arrangement of events is almost the exact parallel to what we find in Okri's work, where Azaro begins life before birth as a bird and, once he is born, discovers he has a foot in two worlds, "between" (FR 4). Though the parallel may simply be a matter of unconscious fertilization, if not of complete coincidence, it is possible to assume at least a common source in European stories of fairyland, etc., as collected and written down by Lang, the Grimm brothers, and the English folklorist Joseph Jacobs. In "The Rose-Tree," collected in Jacob's *English Fairy Tales* (1890), a young girl is also transformed into a bird after being murdered by her stepmother. The Grimm brothers' story "The Juniper Tree" follows a remarkably similar plotline, merely switching the gender of the protagonist. Here, a young boy is killed by his stepmother; afterwards, he, too, is magically transfigured into the shape of a bird. The Irish folk legend, "The Children of Lir," retold by Eileen O'Faolain in *Irish Sagas and Folklores* (1954), and "The Swan Brothers," collected by Lang in his *Yellow Fairy Book* (1894), are two additional works of European mythology that imagine children in the form of birds, namely, swans. In both stories, children are cursed by wicked stepmothers.

The overlaps between Okri's novel and western ways of thinking about and imagining children are numerous. Given Okri's extensive reading, it seems likely that he would have also become familiar with the poetry of William Blake, either amongst the "English-language poetry" described by Fraser and collected in Okri's father's library, or later in life, whilst briefly a student in Comparative Literature at the University of Essex and in his capacious reading since. Indeed, we have evidence that Okri is familiar with Blake's poetry in the title of his epic poem, *Mental Fight* (1999), which refers to Blake's *Milton: A Poem*: "I will not cease from mental fight" declares a short preface to Blake's

poem (better known today as the hymn "Jerusalem"). Okri likely derives his "strand of messianic hope," which runs throughout several of his novels, "directly from Blakean calls for the universalization of prophecy as a proliferation of artistic production," Green argues persuasively in his article ("Dreams of Freedom" 17), and indeed, as I will explore, there are several aspects of Blake's poetic persona to which a writer like Okri early on may have felt an affinity, not least Blake's sense of the necessity, and efficacy, of poetic interventions (i.e. acts of "mental fight").

In *Infinite Riches,* the third volume in Okri's abiku trilogy, Okri also cites directly from one of Blake's poems, suggesting an even deeper familiarity with Blake's work. In one of his spirit-child travels, Azaro comes across a "golden cupola" where unseen voices talk amongst themselves "calmly" (IR 313). These voices are clearly meant to be echoes from the period in history when Nigeria suffered British rule, "blown over oceanic spaces" (IR 313). They quote from one of Blake's poems although, crucially, disagree with it. Blake benefits from the ensuing contrast with his work: "William Blake may have said that the black boy's soul is white," one of the voices says, referencing "The Little Black Boy" from *Songs of Innocence and Experience*, "but, to be honest, they are not really like us" (IF 313). In "The Little Black Boy," Blake, conversely, emphasizes the commonalities between black and white, ending with both races reunited in a spiritual afterlife: "And round the tent of God like lambs we joy" (line 24). The reference to "The Little Black Boy" points, I feel, to Okri's substantial, and primarily positive, engagement with Blake's oeuvre. Whilst Blake, as quoted by Okri, privileges "whiteness" as a default and standard (i.e. the "little black boy's soul is *white*"), he is also shown as minimizing the importance of differences in skin color and seeking some form of racial equality ahead of many others of his time.

Another possible allusion to Blake's work in Okri's spirit child trilogy is Azaro's father's boxing pseudonym, which is "Black Tyger," spelt with an unusual "y" after the manner of Blake's well-known poem "The Tyger" (1794). In this poem, the speaker contemplates the cruelty and mystery of the "Tyger" as a wild figure of the forest: "Tyger Tyger, burning bright/ In the forests of the night;/ What immortal hand or eye/ Could frame thy fearful symmetry?," the poem begins (lines 1-4). It makes a fitting inspiration for a boxing pseudonym. As in Blake's attitude toward the "Tyger" of his poem, Azaro occasionally finds his father's violence disturbing, but also, exhilarating, near to the sublime. According to Edmund Burke, a key Romantic-era philosopher, the "sublime" is generated by "whatever is fitted in any form to excite the ideas of pain, and anger [...]" (13), although, as Phillip Shaw remarks, the sublime for Burke "is associated with objects and events that, while threatening, are yet a source of 'delight'" ("Wordsworth and the Sublime"). Like Blake's athletic feline, Azaro's father in Okri's novel is, too, an un-tamed, pacing, and at times enigmatic creature, eliciting both fear and wonder. In the novel, "Black Tyger" begins preparing for a major boxing match: "[T]here was a look on his face I had never seen before. It was the look of a man at home with the great hinterlands and energies of his spirit" (FR 398). Azaro is clearly wary of his father's swinging punches, yet he also finds the display of passion thrilling. Similar to Blake's electrified feline, Okri's "Black Tyger" enables connection with the "dark forests of the night"; his primal energy appears at once disturbing and ennobling.

Building on these links, we could also venture to say that the eighteenth-century poet and engraver's childhood visions could have served as inspiration for the beginning passages of *The Famished Road* often attributed by critics to Okri's West African heritage and not, for instance, to his familiarity with western cultural traditions. In his nineteenth-

century biography of Blake, Alexander Gilchrist describes Blake's childhood walks alone around the crowded streets of London, during which he reputedly experienced a number of supernatural visions. In one, the young Blake looks up and "sees a tree filled with angels, bright angelic wings bespangling every bough like stars" (Gilchrist, qtd. in Ackroyd 23). In another, he spies "haymakers at work, and amid them angelic figures walking' (Gilchrist, qtd. in Ackroyd 23). These visions are uncannily similar to some of Azaro's supernatural experiences in *The Famished Road* and again, I suggest, underline the importance of reading Okri in relation to the British Romantic tradition. In one of his many visions in the novel, Azaro spies dwarfs and other bizarre spirits, such as "men upside-down with baskets of fish on their feet," mingling among the shoppers at a village market (FR 15). In another, he sees a young girl not with "bright angelic wings bespangling" her features, as in Gilchrist's phrasing of one of Blake's visions, but with similar "bangles of blue cooper around her neck, and who was more lovely than forest flowers" (FR 15).

Peter Ackroyd, another of Blake's biographers, has declared that what Blake saw was "not the crepuscular and dirty city of the historian's imagination" as he walked the city streets, first as a child and later as an adult,[19] "but a city filled with angels and prophecies. He saw a biblical city" (24). Allegedly, when a visitor came bringing news of a foreign city, Blake as a child responded, "Do you call *that* splendid? [...] I should call a city splendid in which the houses were of gold, the pavements of silver, the gates ornamented with precious stones" (Ackroyd 4). This, in turn, recalls a vision Azaro has in Okri's novel. As in Blake's imagination, the city that occurs to Azaro, blooming along the forest floor, is ornate, almost biblical in its proportions. Cassocked worshippers enter and exit

[19] Blake's supernatural visions continued into adulthood.

"unpainted churches" (FR 242). An anthill transmogrifies into a magnificent palace with "beryl colonnades and jade green verandahs, parapets of gold" (FR 245).

Later in the series, Azaro begins to see not angel-like spirits, but angels themselves, as if they had stepped directly off the pages of Blake's diary or out of one of the poet's many watercolor paintings, several of which depict divine beings. For instance, in an 1805 watercolor commissioned by his patron William Butts, Blake shows "The Angels Hovering Over the Body of Christ in the Sepulchre." "He was unaware that an angel, all celestial fire and gold, was poised just above him," Azaro remarks of the British Governor-General in *Infinite Riches*, using imagery remarkably similar both to Blake's biblical childhood visions as well as to his unusual, luminous paintings. Angels recur frequently in Okri's third volume in the trilogy: "an angel flew over our street to redeem our suffering in advance," Azaro says (IR 175); "the magnetic field of the angel [...] enveloped the old woman in the forest" (IR 189). Angels, in these passages, provide images of hope in Okri's trilogy, auguring, though not actually presiding over, events of transformation. As I go on to discuss, Azaro and his family remain penniless throughout the narrative; little real change, much less substantial political reform, arrives in Azaro's village. Still, here we see the way in which, for Okri, as for Blake, spiritual and physical realms are interpenetrating.

It is the case, certainly, that spirits visit crowded markets in Yoruba literatures and folklore: a famous example is Tutuola's story of the "complete gentleman," in which a spirit borrows human body parts and arrives at a village marketplace in order to seduce a human bride: "He was a beautiful 'complete' gentleman, he dressed with the finest and most costly clothes, all the parts of the body were completed, he was a tall man but stout" (Tutuola 18). Yet these events are often dark, chaotic – in McCabe's phrasing, "occluded." In support of my speculation, it is interesting to observe that, in Okri's writing, as in

Blake's, supernatural events shine in contrast with a kind of lapidary brilliance, a feature that allows the further speculation that, alongside Yoruba folklore, Okri has also been reading and inspired by western folkloric and visionary writers as well.

The evidence of both J.M. Barrie's and William Blake's depictions of childhood also reminds us that spirit child traditions are as endemic to western traditions of childness as they are to West African ones. Ackroyd's biography of Blake, for instance, mentions a widely held belief amongst eighteenth and nineteenth century Britons that children could experience supernatural vision; until recently, that is to say, British cultural traditions have been as spiritually inclined as those in Nigeria. Ackroyd cites the case of "Henry Prescott, commonly called Joseph,' who began having visions of angels at the age of eight" (Ackroyd 24): "In any event, Blake's early visions were not unusual" (Ackroyd 25). Blake's older brother also claimed to have childhood visions, as did Ben Jonson and Samuel Coleridge (Ackroyd 25). Hans Christian Anderson's "The Little Match Girl" (1845) contains yet another instance of a nineteenth-century child who experiences heavenly visions. Cold and alone on a dark night, the "match girl" of the title sees at first several glorious scenes of comfort and warmth: a well-lit stove, a stuffed goose, and a heavily ornamented Christmas tree. Her final and most vivid vision is of her grandmother, who transports the little match girl to "heaven."

My point is that it is too simplistic to suggest that, because Azaro experiences visions, we should exclusively look to Yoruba folklore by way of explanation, and read Okri as solely representative of West African cultures. It could be, too, that he is also inspired by western traditions of childness. The fact that both, in a sense, feature children who, as in Barrie's novel, exist in a kind of spirit world before birth or who, as in Blake's experience, see into the realm of the supernatural is something that Okri is likely to find

appealing given how often, in his non-fictional writing, he emphasizes shared roots or histories between cultures around the world. “Before the globe was split by the seas, all was one,” Okri observes in the essay “When Colours Return Home to Light” (2011) (115), which borrows the metaphor of light to consider the origins of the world’s mythologies. As a rainbow of colors is merged in a single shaft of sunshine, so too, for Okri, all of the world’s stories are united in a single source (102).

In the essay on “Poetry and Life” (2011), Okri further develops this idea of humanity’s common origins and, especially, of the way literature can throw these commonalities into relief: “Poetry returns us to the surprise of our similarities. It brings us back to the obscure sense that we are all members of the same far-flung family, sharing feelings […] oddly universal” (6). Okri here glosses over the particularities that differentiate individual works; he downplays the importance of history and culture as forces shaping literature and, to an extent, assumes the ease of translating between languages. Nevertheless, what is more interesting to me about this passage is what it suggests about Okri’s own approach to writing, i.e. that he picks readily and easily from the world’s cultures, seeing them as profoundly linked. “[In myself] Africa and Europe meet. I am a crossroads person, a child of intersection,” Okri remarks in a 1999 interview with Roy Hattersly (“A Man in Two Minds”). Okri is here speaking about his peripatetic childhood, but it is possible to read this as a comment also about the diverse influences that mix in his writing. Hattersly goes on to name Okri a “literary legatee of Shakespeare, Milton, and Dickens” alongside several African writers (ibid.) There is little doubt that Okri is a product of more than one literary tradition.

## The Child and the Artist

Indeed, as I examine further in this section, it is necessary to appreciate the wide range of cultural references that inform Okri's oeuvre. For Okri, it seems, there is no zero-sum contest between "African" and "western." Rather, value is to be found in the sum of the world's cultures, especially, in their dialogue and exchange: "This is what is all about [...] The idea is to enrich the world by its greater contact with Africa, and to enrich Africa by its greater contact with the world," he writes in "O, Ye Who Invest in Futures" (2011) (61). On the positive side, such exchange may allow for the development of new art forms, as well as the spread of life-saving knowledge in fields such as agriculture and medicine. Yet, cultural exchange between the west and Africa may also lead to the "flattening" of the globe, to quote from Thomas Friedman, or to the loss of some traditional practices. Okri, I think, overstates the promise of "cross-cultural" dialogue as a result of his privileged position in Britain, which removes him from some communities' struggles to preserve already threatened cultural practices. Keeping such issues in mind, this section of the chapter further develops the case for how western as well as African traditions shape Okri's representations of childness; western works of literature and culture provide inspiration for Okri in his novel alongside the Yoruba myth of the abiku. It does so, however, not by analyzing discreet images associated with childhood or childness in Okri's novel as in the above, but rather by reading the child figure thematically, and so suggesting how multilayered and complex childness in Okri's oeuvre is.

The discussion explores the child figure as a versatile image: a trope used by authors toward a variety of purposes, not a mirrored reflection of indigenous beliefs as critics have sometimes read the image of the abiku. In other words, authors of West African heritage and origin employ images of youth not only to revisit idyllic moments in a traditional African past, as Okolie argues (31), or to construct an allegory of the nation-

state, as advanced by Barker and Bharat, who both draw from Jameson. They also use child figures to explore a range of social and cultural themes. For Okri, these include ideas surrounding human creativity: the child shares many characteristics of the artist-figure familiar from Okri's earlier fiction, as well from the English Romantics, as we will see again. Such traits include the artist's connection to so-called "higher realms"; a sensitivity to the suffering of others, humans and animals; deep connection to natural environments; as well as the ability to benefit from, not be weakened by, experiences of personal trial, a trait this thesis refers to as "antifragility," drawing from the work of cultural commentator, Nicholas Taleb, who I introduce in more detail below.

In *The Ultimate Colony,* Bharat argues that Azaro in Okri's *The Famished Road* serves as a symbol for the emergent Nigerian nation newly "born" around the period in which the novel is set (i.e. the late 1950s)[20] (34-35). The child figure as an image of the nation is indeed a common way of reading *The Famished Road*, prompted in part by Okri's own description of Nigeria as an abiku nation: "Our country is an abiku country. Like the spirit-child, it keeps coming and going," says Ade, Azaro's friend and another abiku in the novel (*FR* 478). Yet it is less the growth of the new nation that Azaro evokes in this passage and more the country's instability. Between 1967, which marked the start of the civil war, and the late 1990s, Nigeria passed through a number of painful coups that several critics, including Bharat and Soliman, have seen as embodied in the spirit child image; like successive military governments, and with them a sense of Nigeria as a stable political entity, the spirit child "comes" and "goes." As another example of a nation-based approach to Okri's novel, Bardolph argues that, "like all epic heroes," Okri's Azaro, alongside Rushdie's Saleem and Farah's Askar, "represent[s] a nation or a people at a

[20] Nigeria gained independence from Britain in 1960.

particular moment of their history" (45). Politics is of course constantly present in Okri's spirit child trilogy: Azaro and his family find themselves roughly jostled between the equally distasteful Parties of the Rich and Poor.

These relatively established postcolonial readings however can crowd out other possible significations for the child figure in *The Famished Road* and the works' two sequels: *Songs of Enchantment* and *Infinite Riches*. Here, I want to read Azaro in particular as a figure of creativity and inspiration. Azaro's half-sight, insight, or seeing into higher realms, relates him to Okri's earlier artist figures; potentially, the child is consciously crafted in the image of the artist figure from Okri's earlier work. "Futures not yet visible crowded the spaces. Powers not yet active crowded the air," Azaro says in *The Famished Road* (FR 293). Azaro's visions in the novel, his forms of access to spiritual realms, are near relations to the Omovo's, the protagonist's, inspiring dreams in Okri's *The Landscapes Within,* as well as to Mrs. Okwe's, a painter's, foreboding premonitions in Okri's earlier *Flowers and Shadows*. Both novels position the artist as a kind of diviner, similar to Romantic aesthetic theories of the poet stripping back the "veil of familiarity" or inspired by epiphany, as described by the philosopher Charles Taylor, whose work I discuss in a moment.

As Marilyn Butler reminds us, the category of the "English Romantics" is arbitrary and constructed. While today, in Butler's words, "We have come to think of most of the great writers who flourished around 1800 as the Romantics," the label is posthumous: it was not until the 1860*s* that the "'the Romantics' became an accepted collective name for Blake, Wordsworth, Coleridge, Scott, Byron, Shelley and Keats, and an agreement began to emerge about what an English Romantic Poet was like" (Butler 1). This is true also of the "Gothic" writers I discuss in Chapter 3. Badoe's and Oyeyemi's novels, I argue, draw

extensively from the Gothic genre as well as African folklores, making their works, like Okri's, complexly intercultural and beholden to western, not only African, traditions. In *Romanticism and the Gothic* (2000), Michael Gamer suggests that the term "Gothic" came to be used of designated literary works only in the late nineteenth and twentieth centuries, that is, long after many novels we know today as "Gothic" were written. Earlier terms referring to such works include "the terrorist school," "modern romance," and "the trash of the Minerva press" (Gamer 3). In fact, according to Gamer, "Romanticism" and the "Gothic" emerged in conversation with one another. Gamer traces how "Romanticism" increasingly came to be known as a "high" cultural form that distinguished itself from the more popular form of the "Gothic," even whilst poets, such as Samuel Taylor Coleridge used distinctively Gothic (or what we could now call Gothic) tropes such as supernatural occurrences in his writing.

Returning now to Butler's framing of the Romantics, the writers we call "Romantics" today, moreover, had very different ideas about what they themselves were engaged in: "no other period has yielded so many poets, novelists, essayists, and critics of true importance and individuality, who are not followers or greater names nor part of a school, but themselves distinctive voices," Butler observes (Butler 1). Incidentally, Sarah Brouillette and Graham Huggan have made similar observations in respect of the many Kenyan, Nigerian, and South African writers who have been indiscriminately branded as "African" or "postcolonial" by western publishing houses, without regard for their often contrasting imagery and uniquely differentiating themes. Brouillette, for instance, examines the way in which "underdeveloped locales" such as "Africa" are seen as distinguishing markers of internationally celebrated authors (61). The term "African," in other words, suggests more affinities than the authors often, in fact, possess. In *The*

*Postcolonial Exotic: Marketing the Margins* (2001), Huggan relatedly analyzes a global book trade that turns on the packaging of "alterity," in which authors are valued (and their works consumed) for their supposed "difference" from their Anglo-American readers – the writers' own differences from each other notwithstanding.

Nonetheless, despite Wordsworth's, Coleridge's and Keats's distinctive differences, similar to how African writers possess unique regional foci and address (often) dissimilar themes, Butler also treats the Romantic writers as a separate school of thought, analyzable as a distinctive category. "[I]t becomes possible to list a set of preoccupations which apparently set the 'Romantic' or modern artist apart from his predecessor […]," she says (184). In particular, from the 1820s onwards, according to Butler, we see "the final emergence of the artist as a recognized public phenomenon – lonely, introverted, unhappy but marked out from the commonalty by his genius" (Butler 182). This section draws on the admittedly complicated consensus Butler as well as Taylor define to argue that the Romantics (and their readers) possessed a distinctive way of approaching the question of "who is an artist?" It also relies upon Judith Plotz's argument in *Romanticism and the Vocation of Childhood* to suggest that the Romantics similarly possessed a characteristic way of understanding childness.

According to Plotz, for many Romantic poets and essayists, the child figure and the figure of the artist were linked: "The mental qualities imputed to childhood are those benefitting a solitary creative genius [….]" (13). "Every child is, to a certain extent, a genius, and every genius is, to a certain extent, a child," Plotz furthermore remarks, quoting from the nineteenth-century German philosopher, Arthur Schopenhauer, to describe Romantic thought (6). Writers, especially Wordsworth, used the child figure to explore their own creative vocation (Plotz 13). In *The Prelude*, Wordsworth reaches back to childhood for

"proof" of his later calling as "Poet": "Fair seed-time had my soul and I grew up/ Fostered alike by beauty and by fear," he says, connecting his mature talents to the sublime experiences of his early life (lines 301-302). This special admixture of "beauty and fear," as we have already seen, also characterizes Azaro's childhood. Clifford Siskin, accordingly, reads Wordsworth's *Prelude* as "the most extraordinary resume in English history" (qtd. in Hess 208). For Stephen Gill, Wordsworth's poem proposes that "all that is strongest and best in the poet's being grows from [the] formative years" of his childhood (62). It is clear that, for Wordsworth, childhood is the wellspring of the poet's later powers.

Examining motifs of the child and the artist figure in Okri's writing and especially their interrelation, this section subsequently argues that Okri is the inheritor, consciously or unconsciously, of several Romantic ideas. In particular, his work recalls the Romantics' casting of the child as an image of creative "genius." "[Childhood] has in it something akin to *genius,"* Okri says in his set of essays, *A Time for New Dreams,* a statement that might easily be applied to Azaro, especially in his unusual dreams and visions (33; emphasis added). This then gives us a far more textured, and intertextual, understanding of the child figure in Okri's oeuvre.

In an essay honoring Achebe, the "father" of modern Nigerian writing who was seriously injured in a car accident in 1990, Okri offers a crystalline précis of a trope for the creative person that haunts much of his writing – extended throughout his novels *The Flowers and Shadows* (1980), *The Landscapes Within* (1981), and *The Famished Road* (1991,) as well as throughout later works like *Starbook* (2007), several short stories, and many essays and poems. "It should no longer be left to the contemporary victors to speak for human history," Okri writes fiercely ("Redreaming the World: An Essay for Chinua Achebe" 21). The "wounded peoples and devastated continents" of the earth must raise

their own voices: "They have to question everything, in order to rebuild for the new millennium. They have to *redream the world*" (Redreaming the World" 21; emphasis added). Okri here makes "dreams" a means of bringing about social and political revolution. While dreams are not directly connected with the artist in this passage, they are in several of Okri's other essays, as well as in his interviews, short stories and earlier novels. "Writing is sometimes a continuation of dreaming," Okri says in his interview with Jane Wilkinson (83). "[Poets] remake the world in words, *from dreams,*" Okri writes in the essay, "While the World Sleeps," which is itself a kind of dream meditation, reflecting on the role of the poet in slow, measured prose (3; emphasis added). What are dreams for Okri? Dreams seem to be both a source of inspiration for the artist figure in Okri's thought and a symbol of the spiritual resources involved in creating works of fiction, poetry, music or visual art.

The protagonist of Okri's second novel, *The Landscapes Within,* Omovo, is a paradigmatic artist figure – a painter. His first painting in Okri's novel is what the narrator calls a "scumscape" and depicts a puddle of slime. The painting is a unique work, with an unsettling sense of miasma, and it wins Omovo a position in a celebrated local gallery: "The black walls were quite beautifully arranged with paintings, small-framed canvases, large etchings, gouaches" (LW 44). Like many of Okri's artist figures, Omovo is plagued by dark yet also inspiring dreams and visions. For example, details of his *tour-de-force* in the novel, a painting titled "Related Losses," come to him in the form of a nightmare: "[H]e realized that he would have to construct something out of what he had experienced in the dream [...] He thought: *it's going to be difficult. A kind of pilgrim's progress through the mind"* (LW 72; emphasis added).

Omovo's reference to John Bunyan here is one example, yet again, of the way in

which Okri draws on western traditions in his writing, or, at least, assumes a common source of myths for both western and African cultures. As does Soyinka in his citation of Greek playwrights in *Myth, Literature and the African World* (1976), and *Art, Dialogue and Outrage* (1988), he sees these different mythologies as tapping into conjoined deep traditions. For centuries, Bunyan's *Pilgrim's Progress,* first published in England in 1678, was one of the most widely read works in the English language. In comparing his artistic journey to Bunyan's long religious allegory, in which the hero, "Christian," encounters many trials along the road to the "Celestial City," Omovo implies that his work will be both difficult and intensely meaningful, an act of salvation, of sorts, for the painter completing it.

Okri's allusion to Bunyan's narrative, however, also subtly affirms the dream motif so important for his artist image. While Bunyan's work today is generally referred to using the shorthand "Pilgrim's Progress," the original title to the work reads *The Pilgrim's Progress from This World to That Which Is to Come: Delivered under the Similitude of a Dream,* with the word "Dream" displayed most prominently in the 1678 edition. Omovo's nightmare of a murdered girl, the inspiration for his painting, is highly evocative, brimming with suggestion: "Strangely coloured mountains. Turbulent and calm seas" (FS 64). Another term for this evocative quality is "oracular." Omovo wakes from his dream struggling to preserve what he has just seen: "I had failed to grasp it. As I lay there in the darkness, seeing nothing, I suddenly had the mad urge to capture that vision" (FS 64). "Vision" is a word that reappears across Okri's novel and, indeed, throughout his wider oeuvre. For Okri, as for Omovo, the dream is not a phantasm arising from the workings of the mind, but rather something autonomous and awaiting discovery by the artist, who serves as a conduit for its deeper "truths."

In *Birds of Heaven* (1996), a collection of essays, Okri asserts, "The greatest inspiration, the most sublime ideas of living that have come down to humanity come from a higher realm [...] Ideas and infinite possibilities dwell there in absolute tranquility" (12). So, in this passage, Okri mystically posits the existence of a "higher realm" from which artists glean their ideas. In Okri's earlier novel, *The Flowers and Shadows* (1980), the protagonist's mother, Mrs. Okwe, is also a painter. She, too, experiences unusual dreams and visions, demonstrates a connection to so-called "higher realms." At one point, Mrs. Okwe speaks in a voice that is backlit with what Okri describes specifically as an "oracular intensity" (FS 115). Mrs. Okwe is able to predict the future, if not in detail, then still with some sense of its general import: "[S]he felt an impending evil brooding about the home [...] every waking morning brought the feeling closer," Okri's narrator explains (FS 183).

In the essay "Writers and Nations" (2011), Okri urges his readers to remember the time of the Ancient Greeks and Romans, when "writers like cracked oracles [...] cried out of the oncoming doom [...]" (16). The image of a "cracked oracle" is particularly suggestive, conveying the great difficulties experienced by prophets (as well as writers) when speaking "truth." "Cracked" conjures the qualities of a human voice exhausted by shouting against a dry wind to unheeding listeners. Prophet or oracle-type figures are present all throughout Okri's short stories and essays. In another essay, "Our False Oracles Have Failed," he writes of "poets and artists crying in the wilderness," employing biblical imagery generally associated with the Hebrew prophets to describe the role of the artist or writer. In Okri's story, "The Dream-vendor's August," collected in *Incidents at the Shrine* (1986), a prophet-type figure furthermore persists in the character of Ajegunle Joe, a penurious pamphlet writer who has visions and (in his eyes) is able to predict the future. Passionate, but also naïve and easily exploited, Ajegunle is a type of "holy fool."

In *The Famished Road*, aside from Azaro, there are at least two candidates for the role of village prophet. The first is the blind old man who is Azaro's nemesis and, arguably, his inverted double. Where Azaro is young, the blind man is old; where Azaro is kind and curious, the blind man is malevolent and resentful. Possessed with a kind of "second sight" to compensate for the loss of his first, the old man often enjoys knowledge he could not have obtained by ordinary means: "'When people keep running, something keeps pursuing them,' the blind old man said, in his sepulchral voice" (FR 362). Spoken within the context of Azaro's abiku condition and harassment by spirits, the old man's words bear the leaden ring of doom. Okri often references Greek mythology in his essays (see, for instance, "Creativity and the Minotaur"), as well as interviews (Davies, "Ben Okri's Left-Handed, Green-Apple Sort of Day"), and it seems likely that the blind old man in *The Famished Road* is an allusion to the figure of Tiresias. Like the blind old man of Okri's novel, the prophet Tiresias also lacks human vision, yet he, too, has the ability to foretell future events, a gift given to him by Zeus after Hera destroys Tiresias's eyes (Buxton 28).

The second prophet-like figure in *The Famished Road,* and a more accurate artist-type image, is the photographer, Jeremiah, whose name recalls the Jewish and Christian scriptures. Crucially, Jeremiah and his camera indicate the arrival of modern technologies in Azaro's village. Philip Whyte, for instance, reads photography as central to the "narrative strategy whereby [Okri] seeks to give form to the innumerable ambiguities and tensions" that characterize a society caught between a traditionally animist religion on the one hand and a rapidly industrializing economy on the other (21). Yet, whilst Jeremiah's artistic medium may be strikingly modern – and indicative of the social changes taking place in Azaro's village – his name is many centuries old. Often referred to as the "weeping prophet" by scholars, the biblical prophet Jeremiah, in the texts attributed to him, laments

the sins of the Hebrew people and predicts impending disaster. Similarly, the photographer Jeremiah, in Okri's novel, takes pictures of the excesses of politicians and mourns the exploitation of the poor in Azaro's village (FR 141). He is a solitary figure, out of touch with the rest of the village, and grows a long wiry beard. As we have seen, Okri is well versed in Jewish/Christian theology: for example, his short story "In the City of Red Dust" (1988) opens with a quotation from the biblical book of Matthew (36). It seems unlikely that the similarity in role and image of the two Jeremiahs – both mourning human evils, both unkempt – is purely accidental.

Okri's *Astonishing the Gods* (1995) contains yet another example of an oracular artist figure in Okri's oeuvre. This is an idiosyncratic work, almost a parable or, after the manner of Bunyan's *Pilgrim's Progress*, a spiritual allegory. It begins with the unnamed protagonist, who is invisible, departing on a journey to gain "visibility." In literature, black, African, or African-American authors have often used the trope of invisibility to speak about the difficulty of black persons to gain civil rights, or public visibility, in white-majority or controlled societies. In Ralph Ellison's *Invisible Man* (1952), for instance, the African-American narrator is "invisible," he tells us, because of others' "refusal" to see him (3): "The invisibility to which I refer occurs because of a peculiar disposition of the eyes [...]" (3). Ellison's narrator struggles to gain "visibility" or social recognition as a person; he fails, however, because of entrenched racist attitudes in early-twentieth century America: "I have been hurt to the point of abysmal pain, hurt to the point of invisibility" (Ellison 580). In one particularly memorable (and painful) scene, the narrator is forced by a club of white men to participate in a "battle royal," where young black men violently confront one another in a boxing ring in order to be seen as eligible for a college scholarship.

Unlike in Ellison's story, however, Okri's trope of invisibility does not seem to be

racially defined or inflected. Rather, Okri's protagonist's search for visibility is not primarily a political struggle but a spiritual one, although, as we have seen, in Okri's oeuvre the two are frequently linked. After arriving in a strange city with marked resemblance to Azaro's spiritual city in *The Famished Road,* as well as to the celestial city of Blake's childhood, the protagonist is attended by several guides, all of whom encourage him to endure tests of will or purpose. Triumphing in these challenges, he then enters a majestic banquet hall where he is celebrated by angelic beings called "Invisibles." Invisibility, for Okri, turns out to be a celebrated condition of the spirit, not a condition foisted upon the protagonist by his society, but rather something he discovers, partially, through his access of the "hidden" truths emblematized by the magical city: "It was only after a while that he realized that the pure fire of the city was burning parts of him away, burning away something within him. He [...] began to see things differently" (45). The "need to see things differently," as Okri says in this passage, is a major theme of the novel, and one that might be interpreted as an ideological imperative, akin to rejecting ill-formed convictions. Throughout, Okri emphasizes the protagonist's exceptional talents of perception. Most visitors to the town take years to see the magical unicorn in the city's mirrors, one of his guides tells him. Yet the protagonist spots it almost right away (AG 11-12). He seems to possess an advanced ability to perceive what the novel explicitly terms "higher" realms or powers: "All things invisible had a hidden glow to them. He sensed in that world something *higher* than marble and gold" (AG 37; emphasis added). The city reveals to him its inner secrets.

Romantic aesthetic thought shares Okri's idea of "hidden" or "higher" realms. Charles Taylor's *Sources of the Self* (1989), a series of philosophical reflections on the self in western thought, sheds light in later chapters on aspects of Romantic thought on

selfhood and imagination. "What remains central," Taylor writes, "is the notion of the work of art as issuing from or realizing an 'epiphany' to use one of Joyce's words in a somewhat wider sense than his" (*Sources of the Self* 419). This idea of art as "epiphany" is strikingly similar to the inspiration or "higher truths" that come to Omovo and Mrs. Okwe in the form of dreams, as well as how the narrator of *Astonishing the Gods* experiences his lightning moments of insight: "He suspected, *in a flash*, how he too was doomed" (AG 82; emphasis added). It also resembles some of the ways in which Okri represents the role or capabilities of the artist in other settings. "Every artist has to be as much a shaper as a diviner," Okri in the essay "Newton's Child," thereby highlighting – particularly in his characterization of the artist as a "diviner" – the rapid, uncontrolled nature of creative innovation. This statement strongly recalls, for me, Percy Shelley's "To a Skylark" (c. 1820), in which the eponymous bird of the poem, an obvious muse for the speaker, unburdens its "full heart/in profuse strains of unpremediated art" (lines 4-5). That is to say, for both Shelley and Okri, the most exalted artworks are instantaneous, free-flowing, not the laborious work of many months and years.

Okri's aesthetic theory also circles back to the Romantics' in other ways. "Artists carry their susceptibility to hidden illumination around with them," Okri later explains in "Newton's Child" (20). Okri's conception of the artist's ability to access "hidden" insight here is deeply reminiscent of the Romantics' notion of "hidden forms," which the poet, through his search for apprehension, helps to reveal. As Taylor further points out, whereas in the late Renaissance, poets sought to reproduce the beauty "without" through mimesis, the Romantic artist looks to the mystery "within": "the poet 'strips the veil of familiarity from the world, and lays bare the naked and sleeping beauty which is the spirit of its forms'," Taylor explains, quoting from Shelley's "A Defence of Poetry" (378). Hence, with

the Romantic poets, Taylor argues, we see the first appearance of the concept of the artist as a true creator or generator, someone who does not merely mimic the world but – by mixing forms, genres, interpretations, or out of some inner illumination – brings something wholly new into it (*Sources of the Self* 378). Okri, too, is profoundly committed to the idea of art as truly creative and inspired: "[Artists] go about with half-sight, partially in this world, partially in an *invented* one, their spine a divining rod," Okri writes in the essay "Newton's Child" (1992) (20; emphasis added). This passage strongly recalls how Okri describes Azaro in *The Famished Road*, with "half" his being in another "world" (4); as an abiku, Azaro perpetually lives with one foot in a more meaningful, rich, suggestive realm, the spirit dimension. "Our mouths utter obscure prophecies. Our minds are invaded by images of the future," Azaro declares of himself and his companions (FR4). Okri makes the artist into a channel, connecting his audience to "higher" domains but also, in this way, introducing them to new experiences. It is not the artist's task, in Okri's thought, to record the world without, but rather to look within, towards illuminating inner landscapes.

In Wordsworth's *Prelude,* the speaker feels his outer and inner experience unite: "For I, methought, while the sweet breath of Heaven/ Was blowing on my body, felt within/ A corresponding mild creative breeze/ A vital breeze which travell'd gently" (*The Prelude* lines 42-44). That the speaker feels a sympathetic, "corresponding" breeze within is illustrative of what Taylor calls the Romantics' notion of expressivism: "But only with the expressivist idea of articulating our inner nature do we see the grounds for construing this inner domain as having depth" (*Sources of the Self* 389). Wordsworth's speaker in *The Prelude,* as well as Omovo, Okri's narrator in *The Landscapes Within,* both live in times of great political turmoil. When Wordsworth began his 1799 edition of *The Prelude*, the

French Revolution was just drawing to a close. The war significantly affected Wordsworth's life: in 1792, he travelled to France, found himself sympathetic to the republican movement, and fell in love with an older woman with whom he would later bear a child (Fitzgibbon, "Wordsworth and the French Revolution"). By 1799, however, Robespierre's reign of terror had cast into doubt for Wordsworth the republicans' high-flown ideals of *liberté, égalité, fraternité.* According to Sinead Fitzgibbon, the poet found himself struggling to reconcile his political idealism with the bloodshed (ibid).

Similarly, for Omovo in *The Landscapes Within,* Lagos in the 1970s is shadowed by post-war disillusionment. The Nigerian Civil War from 1967-1970, of which Okri and Omovo are both survivors, was a remarkably violent conflict; some estimate that as many as three million people were killed as a result of fighting, starvation, and disease ("Nigerian Civil War"). Biodun Jeyifo describes Okri's second novel in particular as an "unsentimental depiction of how the youthful generation of post-Civil War Nigeria came of age [...] floundering in a world they cannot comprehend" (qtd in Cooper 68). Both artist figures, Wordsworth's speaker and Okri's Omovo, subsequently look within themselves to disentangle the commotion happening around them. In both Okri and Wordsworth, private dramas occurring "inside the head," as Butler describes the Romantics' elevation of "inner experience" (9), provide a counterpoint to the spectacles occurring without. Subjective reflection, in other words, provides a way of focusing conflict and rendering it manageable. The artist reaches inside himself, where ideas spring to his imagination, prompted by impressions from outside.

For Wordsworth's speaker, it is the gentle breeze over the Lake District's verdant countryside that stirs his inner feeling. For Okri's Omovo in *The Landscapes Within*, it is the corpse of the murdered girl that he discovers on a Lagos beach: the girl haunts his

dreams, becomes a near obsession. Admittedly, these two images contrast strongly. Wordsworth's gentle breeze evokes bucolic tranquility whilst Okri's mutilated corpse conjures crime, corruption, and, even, black magic: Omovo comes to believe that the girl is the victim of a ritual sacrifice. Possibly, the contrasting metaphors point to the writers' differing responses to their respective conflicts. Much of Wordsworth's *Prelude,* especially in its later chapters, reflects nostalgically on Wordsworth's early travels to France: "Bliss was it in that dawn to be alive/ But to be young was very Heaven," Wordsworth says in reference to his 1792 journey (Book X lines 692-693). The poet expresses disbelief that the values of the Republican's cause could have been betrayed so profoundly. The "sweet breath of heaven" mentioned in his poem (lines 42), though initially benign, anticipates the changing winds of fortune that would transform peaceable republicans into guillotining rebels.

Okri's novel, by contrast, more directly confronts the tumult of civic dissension. In *The Landscape Within,* Omovo is able to come to terms with the memory of a fatal beating of an old man that he witnessed during the Nigerian Civil War only by reflecting on an event of even more gruesome murder: "Her flowered cotton dress had been ripped and was bloodstained. A white, strangely-smelling cloth had been used to cover her lower parts" (LW 58). The mutilated girl seems comforting to him in some way for its flagrant gore; in this case, the violence is not hidden, shrouded in the mists of time or by cunning politicians. Rather it is laid bare, washed up on the Lagos shore for all to see. So, Wordsworth's and Omovo's "inner" experiences admittedly have remarkably different affects. Yet what is interesting to me is the nevertheless strikingly similar way in which Wordsworth and Okri depict the creative process. In each instance, the artist turns away from an event external to himself (i.e. the pastoral scene, the murdered girl) and towards

the impressions that this event excites in his mind. Omovo's painting of the murdered girl is not a strictly realist work, reproducing the girl's tortured features piece by piece, but rather an impressionistic one, giving outlet to his thoughts and feelings: "He is on the edge of an *inner* thrill. A Stygian night. A single shriveled lifeless tree [...] then the girl: looming in the foreground and dominating the painting" (LW 281; emphasis added). To quote from M.H. Abrams, another respected scholar of Romanticism, "the poet [here: painter] reflects a world already bathed in an emotional light he has projected" (52). It is not that Okri and the Romantics fully abandon a mimetic model of "reflection"; rather they modify it substantially. Through bearing different connotations, the gentle breeze and the murdered girl provide a related stimulus to the poet or artist; Wordsworth and Omovo imbue their respective stimuli with substance or "higher" meaning.

In his essay "Form and Content," collected in *A Time for New Dreams,* Okri develops the distinctively Shelleyan idea of the "veil of familiarity": "The spirit, infinitely greater than the form, shines through the form"; "Form is the visible manifestation of spirit" (127). We find a similar idea echoed in Wordsworth's *The Prelude:* "Wisdom and Spirit of the universe!/ The Soul that art the eternity of thought/ that gives to forms and images a breath" (lines 401-403). In other words, for both Okri and the Romantics, in so far as we may find a thread that binds together Shelley's, Coleridge's and Wordsworth's thought, the artist gives "expression" to an inner experience, which then coordinates to an outer truth. In Shelley's "A Defence of Poetry" (1821), the essayist and poet compares his inspiration to the strumming of an Aeolian lyre: "Man is an instrument over which a series of external and internal impressions are driven" ("Defence of Poetry"). The Aeolian Lyre, an instrument popular during the nineteenth-century produces sound when wind passes over its taut strings, stirring them. Notably, Okri is passionate about music, praising the

eighteenth-century composers Georg Frideric Handel (1685-1759) and Giovanni Pergolesi (1710-1736) in his interview with Hunter Davies. In *The Prelude,* Wordsworth also utilizes the metaphor of a harp "played" by passing impressions: "It was a splendid evening, and my soul/ Once more made trial of her strength, nor lacked *Aeolian visitations*" (lines 94-96; emphasis added). In Okri's writing, the metaphor offered, instead, is that of a "divining rod" ("Newton's Child" 20). While a "divining rod," or a y-shaped stick used by folk magicians in sixteenth-century Europe differs greatly from Wordsworth's elegant parlor instrument, it nonetheless gives the related impression of twitching or vibrating in response to some unseen inducement. For the Aeolian Lyre, this is the breeze that caresses its strings; for the diving rod, it is the magical pull of water.

Further support for reading Okri alongside the Romantics are the many allusions to Keats, Lamb, Byron, and Coleridge Okri makes throughout his oeuvre. Okri highlights Coleridge and Charles Lamb, an English writer and essayist, by name in an essay titled "Leaping out of Shakespeare's Terror: Five Meditations on Othello," which was published in 1997, while his work on the spirit child trilogy was still ongoing[21]: "The whole business of Othello as an Arab was popularized by Samuel Coleridge and Charles Lamb," Okri writes, "They did not want to face the full implications of Othello's blackness" ("Leaping out of Shakespeare's Terror" 72). Okri here applies a postcolonial perspective to Shakespeare's play: he interrogates Othello's blackness and, especially, what the character's alleged "nobility" implies about Othello's "neutrality and social impotence" (75). Okri also upbraids Colderidge for his bigotry. Apparently, when Coleridge first saw the play performed on stage by a black actor, he was "revolted by the 'wedded caresses' of Othello and Desdemona" (73). As yet a further allusion to a Romantic writer, Okri declares

[21] The last volume in the trilogy, *Infinite Riches,* was published in 1998.

in the essay "While the World Sleeps" that "Poets are not the unacknowledged legislators of the world," thereby picking up a line from Shelley and adapting it (3). For Okri, poets are not the world's "unacknowledged legislators" because they do not seek to order reality. Instead, according to Okri, they "listen" to it: "Creation speaks to them [...] Storms speak to them" (3). Much like the abiku, the poet hears voices in "thunder" and "flowers" (3). It was Shelley who first proposed that poets *are* such legislators, pointing to the way in which English literature in the eighteenth-century both heralded and accompanied a "national struggle for civil and religious liberty" (Shelley, "Defence"). Nonetheless, in disagreeing with Shelley's views, Okri at the same time reveals his indebtedness to him.

In *Infinite Riches,* Okri makes an explicit reference to Lord Byron, author of *Don Juan* (first published 1819) and *Childe Harold's Pilgrimage* (first published between 1812 and 1818). Okri's Governor-General tries to put "Byron's lines about the second dance of freedom into his own words" (188). On the one hand, this seems as much a misquotation as an allusion. In Byron's *Detached Thoughts of 1821-2,* the poet refers to a *first* dance of freedom, not a second, as Okri states here. On the other hand, Byron's line is fitting for a well-intentioned, albeit blatantly imperialist character such as Okri's Governor-General. "I sometimes wish that I was the Owner of Africa – to do at once – what Wilberforce will do in time – viz – sweep Slavery from her desarts [sic] – and look on upon the first dance of their freedom," Byron writes in his journal ("Manuscript of Byron's 'Detached Thoughts'"; emphasis added). Despite the abolitionist sentiment, it is a distinctively colonialist passage, imagining Byron as the "Owner" of all Africa. Finally, Okri also alludes to John Keats, another major Romantic poet and author of "Ode on a Grecian Urn" in the essay "Newton's Child" (1997), "Our mind should therefore be like Keats' thoroughfare, through which all thoughts can wander," Okri says (20). This is a reference to Keats' theory of

"negative capability." In a letter to his brother, Keats praises the poet's ability to be aware of "uncertainties, mysteries, doubts, without any irritable reaching after fact or reason" (277). Okri's essay draws directly on Keats's notion in order to incite creative writers to expand their purviews: "Maybe our minds should be sensitive to the vastness that lies behind all reality, should be open to the winds and whispers of infinity […]" ("Newton's Child" 19). This is a remarkably Keatsian statement. For Okri, as for Keats, creativity is the result of "inkling and intuition" (ibid); it is not – emphatically not – the product of concerted effort.

After one of his many illnesses, Azaro wakes with a new sensitivity to the spectacle of village life around him: "The world was new to me, everything was fresh," Azaro says (FR 342). Okri's language in this passage is revelatory, tinged with epiphany, as it is in many of the child's visions. "With eyes wide open from a new fear of sleep, I looked at the world, I tried to see all that was in it, I embraced all things into my life" (FR 342). As with Wordsworth's speaker in *The Prelude,* as well as Omovo in *The Landscapes Within,* Azaro's inner and outer landscapes often collide. Frequently, he seems confused about whether what he is seeing is outside of himself or, as in a dream or hallucination, inside his mind:

> Then, suddenly, with the sun burning itself into evening, with so many people around, everyone active, everything moving, I was overcome with a strange panic. I couldn't see a familiar face in the jostling universe. And then just as suddenly, in flashes of lightness and dark, I began to see mum everywhere. I saw her writhing in a basin of eels. I saw her amongst the turtles in the plastic buckets. I saw her amongst the amulets of the sellers of charms" (FR 162).

Details of the "burning" sun, and the chaotic, "jostling" crowd in this passage suggest that Azaro is actually hallucinating. In this sense, while the abiku framework of the novel formally insists that Azaro's experiences are, indeed, happening in the outside world – that is to say, in the spiritual dimensions of the novel – we, Okri's readers, often are given the impression that what Azaro sees are projections, i.e. that he is having spiritual visions,

or "intimations of immortality," to take a phrase from one of Wordsworth's most well-known poems on childhood, that then play upon the outer world like a film upon a screen.[22]

Wordsworth's "Intimations of Immortality," like many of his poems, greatly sentimentalizes childhood. The speaker constructs an idyllic picture of his own upbringing, which he describes as "the glory and the dream," and furthermore idealizes the "happy" shouts of the shepherd-boy playing round him on the hill (lines 35-36). He does not for a moment, however, spare a thought for the many children toiling in English homes, textile factories, and mines – children for whom childhood is not a "blessed" state but rather a period of misery (line 37). These reflections are particularly apposite for a discussion of Okri's novel, which, I go on to argue, presents a similarly whitewashed picture of childhood. For now, what is intriguing about Wordsworth's poem is the way in which, as in Okri's novel, childhood appears "apparell'd in celestial light" (line 4). As does the Romantic poet, Azaro feels the sort of burning inspiration, the quickening felt by Wordsworth's speaker in *The Prelude*, conveyed also by the "flashing eyes and floating hair" of the honey-dew drinker in Coleridge's *Kubla Khan* (1816). "It may have also been that I wanted to taste of this world, to feel it, suffer it, know it, to love it, to have that *sublime mood* of eternity in me as I live the life to come," as Azaro explains his decision to remain with his human parents (FR 5; emphasis added) – another instance of the novel preserving a sense of a distinctive inner world (i.e. Azaro's "sublime mood"), which then serves to illuminate an outer setting, elevating all of this to a "higher" plane.

Okri's use of the term "sublime" here suggests a state of heightened feeling: Azaro enfolds both pain and joy to himself. He seems to find a peculiar pleasure in the mix of

[22] Cf. Wordsworth's "Ode: Intimations of Immortality from Recollections of Early Childhood" (1807).

contrasts – extreme poverty mingled with profound familial affection – that characterizes his childhood. For Romantic-era philosophers such as Burke, whose work had a major impact on writers such as Wordsworth, the "sublime" is an alloy melded from both wonder and pain, especially terror. Coleridge's "Rime of the Ancient Mariner" (1798), in particular, offers excellent illustration of this idea as it is explored by several Romantic poets. In Coleridge's well-known poem, an aged mariner recounts his recent adventures in the Antarctic. When the mariner's crew becomes entrapped in an ice-jam, a mysterious bird leads them to safety. Yet the mariner, then, takes his bow and shoots the albatross, unleashing a series of terrible curses. The subsequent arrival of "Death" personified, as well as the frozen landscapes in which much of the narrative is set, are no doubt intended to induce terror in the reader. Still, simultaneously, the natural grandeur of the story, particularly its oceanscapes, elicit wonder. An analogous fusion of fascination and fright occurs frequently in Okri's novel. In one scene, Azaro encounters a mysterious beast that rises from the jungle floor: "And when I looked out through the mask, I saw before me in that new spirit world a creature ugly and magnificent like a prehistoric dragon […]" (FR 347). Azaro is terrified and tries to pull off the magical mask that has summoned the creature (FR 247). Yet, at the same time, he is also awed by the beast's peculiar majesty and elegance – its mysterious power.

In Azaro's proximity to the poet or artist figure, he also clearly bears distinctive features of the Romantic "child." In *Romanticism and the Vocation of Childhood,* Judith Plotz argues that, in Romantic discourse, "the Poet and Child are mutually supportive" (Plotz 18). Plotz traces at least six features shared between the Poet and the child figure in Wordsworth and Hartley Coleridge's writing: idealism, holism, animism, faith and isolated self-sufficiency (13). "It is through these powers of consciousness," Plotz argues, "that the

solitary child becomes [...] the symbolic representative of the creative mind" (13). For instance, recalling notions of the poet "strip[ping] back the veil from the familiarity of the world," in the aforementioned poem, "Ode: Intimations of Immortality from Recollections of Early Childhood," Wordsworth speaks of the child as a "Mighty Prophet! Seer Blest!" (line 114). For Wordsworth, the child is a natural "philosopher" who, in his untutored ways of thinking, possesses access to eternal truths (line 111). Once more, Wordsworth's romanticization of childhood here helps to obscure the material conditions that made childhood, for many children resident in Britain in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, a living hell. As Lauren Berlant observes, albeit speaking of America in the twenty-first century, the sentimentalization of "innocents," such as children, in forms of public culture may not lead to true social reform. In fact, it may even counter such reform by providing catharsis for emotions that would otherwise persist as productively revolutionary energies ("The Subject of True Feeling" 54).

In other words, by elevating children on pedestals and emphasizing their extraordinary powers, Wordsworth effectively obviates the need for changing children's living conditions. I go on to offer a similar critique of Okri's novel in a later section, arguing that he, too, problematically idealizes children. To be sure, prophet and seer, as Wordsworth labels his child figure, are two words that might also easily be used to describe Azaro. Prophet-like, in an early scene in the novel, Azaro is able to predict the future. "[A] voice said: 'Cross over.' I tugged Mum across the street and a few moments later an articulated lorry plunged into the house we had been standing in front of" (FR 9). The child in Okri's novel possesses powers of prolepsis that enable him to anticipate up-coming events. Additionally seer-like, Azaro can see into the past. In one oft-cited scene from *The Famished Road*, Azaro has a vision of former slaves in chains moving amongst

the revelers at a party: "I saw the ghost figures of young men and women, heads bowed, necks and ankles chained together, making their silent procession through the celebrations" (FR 455). The novel thereby sets up a temporal dialectic wherein past events in Nigeria grimly augur its national future(s). Okri implies that Nigerians may, once again, find themselves enslaved, this time serving the greed not of foreign oppressors, as under colonialism, but of their own, elected politicians.

On this basis, there is some ground for suggesting that *The Famished Road* reads in part as a kind of prose-narrative *The Prelude,* or sketch of the "Growth of a Poet's Mind"– in other words, as a kind of Künstlerroman. This again allows us to give full credence to Okri's claims for the child, in any culture, as self-generating and inspired. In his entry for *The Encyclopedia of the Novel* (2011), Joseph Slaughter categorizes the Künstlerroman as a subset of the Bildungsroman, which, according to Slaughter, "imagine[s] the possibility of the individual and society achieving a mutually beneficial and fulfilling harmony" (Slaughter 93). The Künstlerroman then forms a specific subtype of the Bildungsroman by plotting a state of harmony more specifically between the artist and society – that is to say, the full development of the artist's skills and talents (Slaughter 96).

In "Portrait of a Young Artist in Ben Okri's *The Landscapes Within*" (1991), Ayo Mamudu reads Okri's second novel as a kind of Künstlerroman, furthermore connecting it to Wordsworth's *The Prelude*, one of the first Künstlerromans (despite the fact that this work is a poem, not a novel) in the English-language: "[T]*he Landscapes Within* throws its spotlight on the turbulent, clustered mind of Omovo in order to make clear the lines of a mind's growth (with an intensity which brings to mind Wordsworth's *The Prelude*)" (85). In Okri's novel, Omovo gradually matures in his abilities as a painter. Moving through the "first" and "second" stages of development, in which painting is transformed from a mere

hobby into a more sophisticated means of self-expression, Omovo at last arrives at the final, "third stage": "Now in the third stage, painting has become […] 'a means to explore the deeper, more unconscious meanings and miasma of his life and the landscapes about him'" (Mamudu, quoting from the novel, 85). So, Okri shows Omovo as employing painting as spiritual guide, a tool for exploring the "unconscious" (read: intuitive) images that spring to his mind. While Okri's work here investigates the "deepening" of the painter's talents, Wordsworth's semiautobiographical poem similarly chronicles the growth of the poet's powers. Monique Morgan argues, "the goal of the poem is to demonstrate [Wordsworth's] fitness to produce great poetry" (288). In *The Prelude,* as in *The Landscapes Within,* the speaker begins by discussing the relatively cloistered surroundings of the childhood and the early stages of his art. The poem then rapidly opens outwards, exploring the (mostly) salutary effects of Wordsworth's Cambridge education, Alpine walking, and even his travels to France upon his writing.

*The Landscapes Within* is perhaps not the only example of a Künstlerroman in Okri's oeuvre. It is possible to read *The Famished Road,* too, as a sort of Künstlerroman, indebted to Wordsworth's poetic prototype in the genre. Like the young Wordsworth, Azaro grows in his ability to access "hidden," mysterious worlds. Whilst many of his visions in the opening passages are relatively trivial – "I suddenly saw them all, spirits in full bloom on a field of rainbows […]" (18) – these become darker, more prophetic of future events, as the narrative and series progresses. A well-known example occurs in the second volume, *Songs of Enchantment,* when Azaro has a vision of Madame Koto, the prominent owner of a local bar, giving birth to three repugnant babies: "I saw that she had given birth to three baby Masquerades in her dream, children who spent their lives divided, warring against each other, fighting for their mother's milk" (SE 142). Kim Sasser reads these three babies,

with whom Madame Koto – a kind of "Mother Africa" or "Mother Nigeria" figure – has been pregnant for much of the narrative, as the "nation's antitheses": "While the true abiku nation represents Nigeria's destiny, these bogus national abikus will destroy their mother, Nigeria" (92). Madame Koto, like the nation she inhabits, threatens to be torn apart by her warring "children." Pietro Deandrea similarly sees Madame Koto's three fetuses as a trinity symbolizing "the three main Nigerian ethnic groups": the Yoruba, the Igbo, and the Hausa, who in 1967 became embroiled in civil war (56).

It is not compulsory to read Okri, whose work is variable and multi-layered, exclusively as an allegorical writer. I particularly reject the suggestion that Okri is "necessarily" an allegorical writer simply by virtue of his African upbringing, as Jameson's theory of "third world" literature implies. Although, there is certainly a suggestiveness to this passage that invites an (albeit limited) allegorical reading, as Sasser and Deandrea also detect. "Whatever multiplies suggestiveness is best," Okri declares in the essay "Form and Content" (129). Azaro's vision of the three fetuses is darker than many of his earlier sights or visions (the narrative lingers on the gory details of the infants' destruction of their mother), but also, somehow, more significant: this vision anticipates events of consequence not only to Azaro and his family, but also to the nation as a whole. The three babes vying for their mother's milk do indeed seem clear analogues for the factions that competed for control over the nation's resources during the civil war. By the time of the third novel, *Infinite Riches*, Azaro is nearly a vatic voice, not a child character in the novel: "I am a spirit-child wandering in an unhappy world. Draw a deep breath, for my new song is pitched to the wings of those birds of omen, birds that fly into new dawns" (IR 249). His perspective is unlimited and omniscient. He communes intimately with the "birds of omen," and is able to inhabit the thoughts of those around him. However, this time,

instead of simply telling us that Azaro is reading the thoughts of others, Okri takes us into other characters' minds directly. Azaro enters the thoughts of the Governor-General, for instance, almost seamlessly, without any "magical" ability or effort: "[the Governor-General] remembered the smell of chicken blood and the sweating bare-chested African men […] he experienced the lust awakened in him by the virility of the men and the sensuality of the antimony-charmed women" (IR 182). The details in this passage give it a vitality and immediacy that collapses the distinction between Azaro's consciousness and the Governor-General's. Azaro has become a near perfect seer.

Another, perhaps more obvious way in which *The Famished Road* and its sequels resemble Wordsworth's *The Prelude* is in its semi-bucolic setting. "Oh, many a time have I, a five years' child[…]/bask'd in the sun, and plunged, and bask'd again/[…] or cours'd/Over the sandy fields, leaping through groves/Of yellow grunsel," Wordsworth recalls in *The Prelude* (lines 292-299). In another passage from the poem, he rejoices at an escape from crowded urban dwellings: "Of bondage, from yon City's walls set free" (*The Prelude* line 7). Wordsworth's "The Idiot Boy," "Ruth," "The Highland Boy," and "The Boy of Winander" all likewise see the child figure placed in solitary landscapes. Azaro in *The Famished Road* is similarly an isolated, even lonely figure, strolling the borders of the village and surrounding woodland by himself: "The world was changing and I went on wandering as if everything would always be the same" (FR 104). All three novels see him largely un-socialized, with neither a designated place in society nor indeed, aside from his previous life as an abiku – which belongs more to the realm of myth than history – a well-developed past. While Dad, providing contrast, dives into the political fray of the village as things

reach a fever pitch in advance of the first independent Nigerian elections,[23] Azaro is most often alone, either surrounded by spirits or walking solitary – lost in his own visions in the forest.

Several critics have remarked upon the eco-critical aspects of Okri's spirit child trilogy – aspects that petro-magic realist readings also highlight. These readings then provide further insight into Okri's indebtedness to the English Romantics and to Wordsworth, the "wandering poet," in particular. In "An Evening Walk" (1793), Wordsworth "rove[s]/ through bare grey dell, high wood, and pastoral cove" (lines 1-2). His observations of the surrounding flora and fauna are astute:

> Sweet are the sounds that mingle from afar,
> Heard by the calm lakes, as peeps the folding star,
> Where the duck dabbles 'mid the rustling sedge,
> And feeding pike starts from the water's edge [...] (lines 279-282)

Wordsworth is intimately knowledgeable of the bird life in the Lake District. He takes a keen interest in the activities of the local waterfowl and presents to us, his readers, an animal world that is wholly contained and self-sufficient; the poet appears here as a mere observer looking inwards upon a contented community, bustling and energetic. Dewey Hall therefore frames Wordsworth as a "Romantic naturalist" deeply interested in the environment not only for how it might be exploited as material for his poetry, or serve his reputation as the great "poet of nature," as Scott Hess for instance argues (see *William Wordsworth and the Ecology of Authorship*), but also, indeed primarily, for its own sake. Hall sees Wordsworth as an important precursor to, and influential upon, the later environmentalist movements of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries (*Romantic*

[23] In "Temporality and the Geographies of the Nation: 'The Future Present' in *The Famished Road*" (1999), Eleni Coundouriotis reads Okri's novel as set in the 1950s, the decade before Nigeria gained autonomy from British rule: "[...] *The Famished Road* revisits the recent past much like Walter Scott's *Waverly,* or *'Tis Sixty Year Since* in a conventional gesture that invites an analysis of the author's present in view of the decade of the 1950s that gave birth to independence" (142).

*Naturalists* 108).

Certainly, Wordsworth's ecological politics are especially apparent in his protests against the great railway expansions of the 1840s. In a sonnet published in 1844 in *The Morning Post*, Wordsworth mourns the ecological damage that will likely result from a proposed railway line through the Lake District, from Kendal to Windermere. "Is then no nook of ground secure/ From rash assault?" he pleads, linking the proposed line to a wider, equally ill-considered "attack" on the English countryside in the form of newly-constructed towns, factories, and mines (lines 1-2). Airing related concerns, in the same year, Wordsworth wrote a letter to the author of the Railway Act of 1844, William E. Gladstone, arguing, "the project if carried into effect will destroy the staple of the Country which is its beauty [...]" (qtd. in Hall 95). A similarly conservationist sentiment runs throughout his poem, "Steamboats, Viaducts, and Railways" (1833). Here, Wordsworth's speaker laments the way in which "Motions and means" – i.e. new forms of transport by land and sea – "mar/ the loveliness of Nature" (lines 1; 4-5). Indeed, as Hall notes, Wordsworth was very much actively and personally committed to the preservation of the English countryside.

Related ecological preoccupations, if not even a similar kind of environmental activism, also characterize Ben Okri's work. In "From Cultural Hybridization to Ecological Degradation" (2012), Chengyi Coral Wu draws attention to the destruction of the forest surrounding Azaro's village, which British colonial engineers are systematically felling in order to make way for new roads and urban settlements: "Bushes were being burnt, tall grasses cleared, tree stumps uprooted [...] I could hear the sounds of dredging, of engineers, of road builders, forest clearers, and workmen" (FR 104). "The forest in Okri's novel [shows] that the impact of colonialism is not exclusively political and cultural, but

also ecological as well," Wu argues (104). I firmly agree. What Okri's novel highlights in my reading is what Rob Nixon terms "slow violence." In his eponymous study, Nixon describes the way in which the damage done to nature – unlike, for instance the rapid destruction of human societies during war – is often incremental and "out of sight": "a violence of delayed destruction that is dispersed across time and space" (2). In *The Famished Road*, the efforts of the engineers are likewise gradual, inexorable. One day Azaro wanders through areas "thick with bush and low trees" (FR 104). The next he finds himself in "open spaces of soft-river-sand" (FR 104). Okri, like Nixon, draws attention to the insidious and latent violence of colonial rule – a kind of violence that is inscribed not only on the bodies of African persons via slavery, but also on the landscape, in the deep ruts of railways and roads.

This destruction of the landscape in Okri's novel is furthermore shown to have cascading effects for the inhabitants of Azaro's village, who, as Jonathan Highfield observes, depend on the environment for food (143-144). Especially in the work's many scenes of villagers utilizing the forest for sustenance, fuel, and shelter, Okri links the fate of human and natural landscapes. Okri's depictions of nature, therefore, have clearly postcolonial implications, yet his attitude toward the environment also evokes Romantic commitments. The "slow violence" occurring around Azaro's village, for instance, is not unlike the creeping environmental destruction that writers such as Wordsworth, John Clare, and William Blake also witnessed and protested. While Okri, in his novel, chronicles the incremental ruin of a West African forest by "engines" and "road builders," Wordsworth relatedly laments the inching tentacles of the British railroad system in his letter to William Gladstone. John Clare, in two sonnets, "The Mores" (1821-4) and "To a Fallen Elm" (1821), mourns the gradual enclosing of the commons in his hometown of

Helpston. "The Mores" especially gives a powerful picture of the changed fens after enclosure, when "Fence now meets fence in owners' little bounds" (line 47), and the pretty "hedgerow briars" that once traced meandering pathways through the moors are "all destroyed" (lines 43-44). William Blake of course also provides one of the most enduring images of nineteenth-century industrialization run amok in his poem from *Milton,* "Jerusalem," which imagines "dark, Satanic mills" glowering over an otherwise "green and pleasant" countryside (line 8; 16).

Expanding on Okri's ecological commitments, Erin James, too, adopts an eco-critical approach to Okri's novel. In "Bioregionalism, Postcolonial Literature and Ben Okri's *The Famished Road*" (2001), James productively deploys the concept of "environmental refugeeism," taken from Mitchell Thomashow, to think about how Okri's novel links environmental degradation and forced migration. Thousands of persons around the world – many of them in Sub-Saharan Africa – have been forced to flee their homes "as result of drought, rising sea levels, and natural disasters associated with global warming," James notes, citing a UN report (271-272). Okri's novel might be understood to metaphorically evoke this situation, James argues, in a passage in which the very trees themselves, through the unusual powers of Azaro's perception, are anthropomorphized and shown fleeing the violence of the government's deforestation and construction: "It seemed that the trees, feeling that they were losing their argument with human beings, had simply walked deeper into the forest" (FR 104). In this passage, Okri clearly pities the trees, sides with them. Via Azaro's narration, they become additional victims of the colonial government in its mission to extract all possible wealth from Nigeria's human and natural resources.

Many of Wordsworth's poems ascribe a similarly wounded sentience to nature. In "I Wandered Lonely as a Cloud" (1807), the mentality of the "dancing" daffodils is, admittedly, "jocund" (line 16), though the mood turns somber in "On the Projected Kendal and Windermere Railway" (1844), where Wordsworth urges the very "winds" and "torrents" of the Lake District to find their voices and protest: "Speak, passing winds; ye torrents, with your strong/ And constant voice, protest against the wrong" (lines 13-14). It is possible, therefore, to draw yet another connection between Okri's writing and Wordsworth's: both authors anthropomorphize a landscape that either has been or will be wronged by human actors, though Wordsworth's poem, arguably, envisions a different outcome. That is to say, while the trees in *The Famished Road* admit defeat, creeping further and further into the forest, Wordsworth goads the rain and wind to take a stand. From this, it seems that Wordsworth is a more "resistant" writer than Okri, who conversely appears resigned to nature's destruction. Yet, a better way, in my view, to account for this discrepancy is to take stock of history. Wordsworth pens his poem when it is yet possible to forestall the planned railroad. Okri, instead, looks back on an event that occurred at least forty years before his novel: *The Famished Road* "resists" by remembering, or by giving the lie to the alleged benevolence of British colonialism.

In each case, the eco-critical aspects of Okri's novel are borne out, heightened, through Azaro's solitary wanderings. It is a child, and not an adult, who brings us to the pain of the tortured forest. It is through Azaro's eyes that we see the retreating trees, the hungry villagers, and the devastated fauna made fodder for an avaricious regime. In a sense, like many of Wordsworth's child figures, as well as the Romantic poet himself, who finds solace and inspiration in the English countryside, Azaro becomes not a figure *in* a natural landscape but a figure *of* it, embodying it, speaking on its behalf. Azaro's

Romantic associations thus reinforce the symbolism of this central character. So, in "Home at Grasmere," Wordsworth describes himself as a "nursling of the mountains" (line 729). In *The Prelude,* he is a "wanderer among the woods and fields" (line 587). The ghostly "Danish Boy," in Wordsworth's eponymous poem is equated with the flower-strewn dell his spirit haunts: "The Danish Boy walks here alone/ The lovely dell is all his own" (lines 21-22). Similarly, Azaro fully inhabits the forest, which provides a backdrop to many of his visionary journeys. It is an environment given significance through him and closely associated with him, and not with any of the other characters. This is different to how we see the abiku in Yoruba folklore, immersed in his *egbé*, or clan of spirit companions, and also to how we find the child figure in much of African literature: "the child in African literature is always intrinsically enmeshed in a cultural or social community," Hron observes (29). Okri's novel clearly points to the limits of Hron's generalization. In *The Famished Road* Azaro, admittedly, often enjoys the company of his family and fellow villagers, yet just as frequently he wanders unaccompanied through the forest, isolated, too, by his unique connections to the spirit world, which few of the other villagers share.

So, Okri's novel, in my reading, resists some of the conventions of the Bildungsroman, while also supporting others, particularly in its narrative of an artist-type who matures in his extraordinary powers. Azaro is not a fully incorporated or "productive" member of his community, as Slaughter describes the ultimate aim of the Bildung story ("Bildungsroman/Künstlerroman" 94). Indeed, Azaro's solitude sets him apart, marks him out as a distinctively Romantic figure in his connection to natural landscapes. It also serves as a way of distinguishing him as a kind of "genius," cut from an uncommon cloth. The Romantic poet finds comfort in natural landscapes not only for the inspiration they provide, but also what they suggest, affirm, about his distinctiveness from the common

crowd. "Wordsworth's individuality – the Poet's awareness of his separateness form the ways of the community – reveals itself primarily as an obsessive preoccupation […]" Richard Onorato observes: "It seems that his proper activity is his attempt to maintain that individuality through self-conscious scrutiny" (79-80). Fraser similarly remarks, speaking of Okri's earlier writings, "In many of Okri's stories the principal character, *a paradigm of the artist whether he recognizes it or not*, guards and nourishes his independence and precocious determination," keeping the wider community "[…] at a tactful, subtly manipulated distance" (21-22; emphasis added). Fraser might well be speaking of Azaro, who remains a solitary and often "distant" figure throughout the trilogy.

Several of Okri's other writings on childhood also present the child as an epitome of creativity. These other works, I suggest, support this interpretation of Azaro as a symbol for the artistic self. In "Newton's Child," which was delivered as a lecture at Cambridge University in 1992, Okri alludes to Isaac Newton's (alleged) comparison of himself to a "boy playing on the sea-shore, and diverting myself in now and then finding a […] prettier shell than ordinary whilst the great ocean of truth lay undiscovered before me."[24] Newton is clearly an important figure for Okri. Whilst on his prestigious fellowship at Trinity College, Cambridge – Newton's own college – Okri delivered a poem on the eighteenth-century English polymath (Davies). Moreover, in Okri's short story "The Dream Vendor's August," Ajegunle Joe also possesses a ring that was supposed to have been "found on the dead body of Isaac Newton" (115). Newton was, however, a famously problematic figure for

[24] This quote is widely attributed to Newton, allegedly said while the famous physicist and mathematician lay on his deathbed. Still, it is difficult to ascertain exactly where and when (and even if) Newton actually made this statement. Nevertheless, many scholars attribute it to Newton and my version of the quotation here comes from Sir David Brewster's 1855 *Memoirs of the Life, Writings, and Discoveries of Sir Isaac Newton,* Volume 2 (p. 407).

William Blake, who included Newton amongst his "infernal trinity," alongside John Locke and Francis Bacon (Damon 298).[25] Okri's allusion to Newton in "Newton's Child," as in his short story, and his ability to venerate both Newton and Blake in his writing, though it may seem contradictory, is however consistent with his position of intellectual ecumenism. "There is also intellectual hospitality, the hospitality to ideas, to dreams, to ways of seeing, to perception, to cultures […]," Okri says in the essay "Hospitality" (2011) (55). That is to say, Okri's personal philosophy allows him to embrace wide-ranging, even at times conflicting creeds. "Hospitality is something we should be able to extend not just to our friends but even to our enemies," he says (55). Okri is speaking here not only about practical hospitality, or the sharing of fellowship and food; he is also, I think, exploring something more profound: an opening toward seemingly antagonistic ways of thinking.

While in Newton's seashore analogy (or that attributed to him), the child figure serves an image of the scientist toiling next to the ocean of "truth," in Okri's essay it is clearly meant to provide an allegory for the artist. "The *artist* should never lose the spirit of play […] the biggest tasks are best approached tangentially, with a smile in the soul," Okri urges in "Newton's Child" (22; emphasis added). Okri's earlier novel *The Landscapes Within* also utilizes Newton's image. The child becomes the "repository of the creative power to be reclaimed by the retrospecting adult self," Plotz says, adumbrating Romantic views (13). We see a similar relationship played out in Okri's novel, which imagines a child figure possessing innate talents of imagination and vision that are coveted by an adult artist. In *The Landscapes Within*, Omovo receives a poem from his brother, Okur. In Okur's poem, as in Newton's analogy, the child finds "bright pebbles/ and strange corals" (LW 286). Yet he also finds "other things, too/ like little half-defaced sketches on the

[25] According to Samuel Foster Damon, the difficulty with Newton's cosmology, for Blake, "was that it left out God, man, life and all the values which make life worth living" (298).

sand/ pointing a way through the tormented seas" (LW 286). Omovo takes this image of the child explicitly as a source of guidance, mimicking the child's "sketches" in his painting: "Yes, Sketches and journeys, different ways through the many seas," Omovo says (LW 156). His *tour-de-force* draws directly on the child's model: *Related Losses* depicts the murdered girl not "half-defaced," as in Okur's poem, but more so, completely faceless (LW 281).

For Okri, in other words, the child emblematizes a sort of "natural" creativity and vision, which the novelist repeatedly harkens back to throughout his oeuvre. In an interview with Saskia Vogel of *Granta*, Okri observes, "[F]or most of us, childhood was a period of our most intense and furious dreaming" ("Interview: Ben Okri"). In *A Time for New Dreams* (2011), he similarly speaks of the "unseeing, or rather pure seeing" of children, "uncontaminated by structures of habit" ("On Childhood [1]" 11). This is not unlike Romantic theories of defamiliarization. One is recalled to Coleridge describing Wordsworth as "awakening the mind's attention from the lethargy of custom" ("Biographia Literaria (Damon)"). As still yet another instance of the child figure as an image of creativity in Okri's oeuvre, Omovo remembers a doodle he had drawn in primary school. "It was a series of squiggly lines that went round and round and formed different shapes. The ends of the lines were always lost in the maze of meaningless shapes" (LW 95). Omovo's primary school teacher makes a photocopy of this drawing and pins it to the classroom wall (LW 95). His father marvels at what his young son has produced. "Omovo, this is life. You know what you have done?" (LW 95). Omovo will struggle for the rest of his life to achieve the same depth of insight; he certainly will not again experience the same warmth in terms of public reception.

True, Omovo's doodle with its ends of lines "lost in meaningless shapes," could provide a clue to Okri's aesthetics, or what Ato Quayson describes as the "eschew[al] of explicit teleological patterning" in Okri's novel (*Strategic Transformations* 149). At the end of *The Famished Road* (and more so, in the later volumes), Okri's novel's many storylines, e.g. Dad's political career, Azaro's adventures in the spirit world, the family's constant battle against poverty, are, like the ends of the lines in Omovo's doodle, tangled, lost inside one another. So, for example, near the end of *The Famished Road*, Dad begins to take on some of Azaro's abiku gifts, prophesying about a future era marked by the arrival of "justice" and "truth" (FR 494). It is not in my view that Okri wishes to be intentionally obscure, or to confuse his readers; the novel ends with a dizzying array of omens, dreams, and voices. Rather, he considers works of art superior which do not spell out "truth" for their audience and instead hint at it, as through a "glass darkly" as Okri writes of childhood in *A Time For New Dreams*.[26] "Art wants to move into silence, into the emotional and spiritual melodies […]," Okri declares in "Beyond Words: A Secular Sermon" (5). We also see this idea present in Omovo's painting of the murdered girl, whose partial representation (i.e. her facelessness) seems to make her more meaningful, more "true": "The power and simplicity of the painting, if it succeeded, would arouse the associated images and emotions of the vast *unknowable* things he wanted to communicate" (LW 208; emphasis added). There are again strong resonances of Keats in Okri's writing. Omovo implicitly borrows Keats's theory of "negative capability" and

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[26] "Oh childhood […] where what was is almost forgotten, and where what will be is seen as 'through a glass, darkly," Okri writes ("On Childhood [4]" 112), again investing in a sort of myth of childhood, while quoting from the King James Version of the Bible: "For now we see as through a glass, darkly, but then face to face," Paul declares in his first letter to the Corinthians (1 Corinthian 13:12).

gropes in his imagination for a painting that, despite not being fully complete or "rational," will yet convey great spiritual coherence.

Gothic fiction constitutes another body of writing that, alongside Romanticism, critically questions the dominance of reason. In Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein* (1818), for example, the inventor's scientific and medical tools are of little help to him when his creation rebels. In my third chapter, I draw on related observations to argue that Oyeyemi and Badoe employ Gothic tropes such as ghosts to destabilize western epistemologies, similar to the way in which Okri's writings frequently privilege "mystery" and "unknowability" over empirical fact. In A *Time for New Dreams*, Okri writes, "Childhood ought to terrify us with a gentle wonder. It ought to make us feel curiously humble" ("On Childhood [1]" 11), a passage that further suggests Okri does not merely employ the child as an artist-figure in *The Famished Road,* for instance, due to his unusual insight and visions. He also finds the child figure and, especially, children's way of thinking "asequentially, tangentially," as he puts it, personally inspiring ("On Childhood [1]" 11). "[Childhood] is the only reservoir [writers] have got, and they want to keep it that way," Okri says in his interview with Wilkinson (77). It is clear that he is talking at least in part about himself. So, Okri employs the child figure in *The Famished Road* to develop aspects of the artist's creative thinking important to him throughout his career.

This section has set up a case for Okri's central child character, Azaro, as a distinctively Romantic figure in the specific way in which he experiences inspiration, projecting an "inner" illumination upon the outside world, wandering solitary in the forest and separate from ordinary village life. It has also examined Okri's eco-critical preoccupations as another Romantic, especially Wordsworthian, aspect of his work. Yet, even in how Azaro reprises the "visions" and solitary journeys of the artist, I have

suggested, Okri's child might be described as peculiarly "Romantic" in his make-up. The Romantic poets, too, employed the child as a precursor of the creative self or "poet." "Whither has fled the visionary gleam?" Wordsworth asks in reference to his childhood in "Ode: Intimations of Immortality" (line 57). As we have seen, Wordsworth saw in childhood the origins of his later talents. Okri's remarkably similar investment in the inspired child figure, as I have discussed it in this section, is such that he attributes to the "child" all the gifts and insights of the poet and prophet. These are the self-same gifts we find outlined in Romantic writing, especially poetry, thereby suggesting Azaro not only as a "portrait of the artist" from Okri's earlier fiction but, more specifically, a rendering of the Romantic poet operating at the height of his powers.

## "Higher Self": Okri and New Ageist Thought

This section continues to develop the case for Okri's child as wrought in the image of the artist set up in Okri's earlier work. It might therefore be understood to build on a notion of Okri's Romantic inheritances as well as to read the child in Okri's oeuvre as a creative symbol. The first part of this section goes on to suggest that, alongside his references to the Romantic writers, Okri's influence from New Ageism serves as productive means of drawing out Okri's idealized vision of childness; I particularly offer a critique of the way in which Okri, seemingly, ignores the adverse effects of difficult life experiences on children, especially Azaro, who lives in acute poverty throughout the trilogy. The argument in this section about Okri's New Ageist influences should not be understood to displace what I earlier suggested about Okri's Romantic inheritances, however. In fact, it might even be said to consolidate an argument for Okri's oeuvre as shaped by Romantic thought. Although New Ageism and Romanticism differ in many respects, as I go on to explore, the philosophy of Jean-Jacques Rousseau provides a

conceptual seedbed for both traditions. Moreover, "[T]he New Age or 'human potential' movement is one contemporary inheritor of Romantic expressivism and [its] values [...]," McCabe suggests (9). Still, it is important to remember that the particular construct of "Romanticism" on which New Ageism draws would likely seem unfamiliar to Wordsworth, Keats, and Shelley. Therefore, at no point do I suggest that the two movements be equated.

The section next returns to Azaro in Okri's *The Famished Road* as an artist-type figure. Azaro resembles Jeffia and Omovo from Okri's *The Flowers and Shadows* and *The Landscapes Within* not only in his inspiring dreams and visions, as I go on to discuss, but also in his sensitivity to the suffering of others. In the context of New Ageism as an influence upon Okri's work, this pity for the suffering of others might then be read as commending Azaro, as well as Okri's other artist-figures, as "higher" persons, or more "advanced" in their spiritual or moral reasoning. There is one key difference between Azaro and Okri's earlier artist figures, however. Whereas Jeffia and Omovo are arguably on a journey of self-discovery, Azaro is born knowing his place in the world and aware of his separate existence as a spirit child. In this way, the section continues to develop an argument for Okri's novel as influenced by Romanticism. Wordsworth, too, placed an emphasis on self-understanding and, especially, sincerity. "The ideal poet, to Wordsworth, would have self-knowledge," Richard Onorato argues (79). Tim Milnes and Kerry Sinanan relatedly examine the poet's struggle to express an "authentic" self in many of his works, as I proceed to explore. At the same time, Azaro's attribute of self-knowledge also serves to underpin and develop Okri's veneration of childness. Azaro surpasses Omovo and Jeffia in his powers of self-insight; Okri repeatedly returns to childness as an idyllic, inspirational image throughout his oeuvre.

By now it should be obvious that Okri is influenced by both western cultural and literary traditions and the folklore of his native Nigeria. In addition to this, McCabe's article, while to some extent neglecting other cultural traditions present in Okri's writing (cf. Warnes 2014; Bruijn 2007), makes a compelling case for adding New Ageist thought as an influence on Okri's *The Famished Road* as a whole. By New Ageism here I refer to the complex and transnational cultural movement that emerged in the post-Second World War period and achieved critical mass in the 1960s, when student activists and radicals in America and Britain began to reject conventional forms of religion, embrace esoteric forms of generalized "spirituality," and espouse notions of "non-violence" as well as the importance of "cultivating the virtues of goodness, love and compassion" – key New Ageist tenets (Chryssides 6-8). The philosophical undertow to these New Ageist phenomena grew in part out of the theosophical, anthroposophical, and other spiritual writings of religious seekers and commentators like Rudolph Steiner (1861-1925) and Alice Bailey (1880-1949), but also out of the work of twentieth-century spiritualists such as Sir George Trevelyan and David Spangler, founders of the influential "Findhorn" community in Northeast Scotland.

To illustrate the prevalence of New Ageist thought and imagery in Okri's writing, we might think, for example, of a detail as apparently superficial, yet in this context important, as the many references to the color aquamarine throughout the novel. Azaro's abiku heaven, while also resembling the many island-kingdoms popular in western children's literature, contains an unusual image *not* often found in these stories, which is an "aquamarine air of love" (FR 4). Later, Azaro describes his mother as telling him "stories of aquamarine beginnings" (FR 183). The novel furthermore describes an "aquamarine sky" (FR 457). As far as I am aware, the color aquamarine does not feature

prominently within any major work of African literature or mythology. Drawing upon McCabe's observations, however, we could interpret these images as allusions to the Age of Aquarius, which, for New Agers, is "a new era [...] in which each person's inner potential for divine love and wisdom will be fully realized" ("Higher Realities" 6).

The Age of Aquarius is a key idea associated with the New Age movement and is mentioned in influential works such as Trevelyan's *A Vision of the Aquarian Age* (1977) and Marilyn Ferguson's *The Aquarian Conspiracy* (1981). Okri in fact dedicates his set of essays *Mental Fight* (1999) to "Humanity in the Aquarian Age," citing this idea directly (McCabe 10). Several of his other writings contain similar allusions. For instance, McCabe paraphrases a passage from the collection *A Way of Being Free:* "Only when people let go of their 'uncertainties' and awaken to the wonder of the 'human mystery' will 'a *new age* of miraculous rivers, hidden dreams [...] emerge" (qtd. in McCabe 11; emphasis added). References to a "New Age" of human enlightenment may also be found in *The Famished Road*, for instance, when Dad declares towards the end of the novel, "We have entered a *new age* [...] The whole of human history is an undiscovered continent deep in our souls. There are dolphins, plants that dream, magic birds inside us. The sky is inside us. The earth is in us [...]" (FR 498; emphasis added). Okri's writing here is the pat, pithy prose of new spiritualist pamphlets. Yet, it is also a powerfully suggestive passage, permitting detailed exploration of some of the New Ageist influences on Okri's work, as I now examine.

Okri's allusions to dolphins, plants, and magic birds in this passage are rather cryptic, but possibly what they are iconizing is the New Ageist concept of a "Higher Self." According to New Agers, all human persons are "born free," to quote from Rousseau's

*Social Contract* (1762), and only eventually do they become enslaved by the conventions of society. As McCabe adumbrates,

> […] The Self is immortal, has extraordinary powers, is infinitely good, and is connected with all things […] The problem, according to New Agers, is that this Self' is hidden behind 'a lower self' or 'mind' or 'ego.' This ego side of humans is the part constructed by society and is the sum total of all the inauthentic directives (e.g. to follow the rules) and ways of knowing (e.g. rationalism, empiricism) that society – through parenting, education, work and institutionalized religion – has foisted upon us and inscribed over our Higher Selves. (McCabe "Higher Realities" 7)

As this might suggest, Rousseau had an influence on New Ageist thinking, as he also of course had on Romanticism. In *Emile* (1782), Rousseau similarly denounces the negative effects of bad parenting, education, and institutionalized religion on children. "Why do you want to deprive these little innocents of the enjoyment of a time so short which escapes them […]?," he asks, urging parents to treat their children more kindly (79). Rousseau educates his young pupil not in the confines of a conventional classroom, but out of doors: "Exercise his body continually; make him robust in order to make him wise and reasonable" (118). So, Rousseau, too, like Wordsworth, venerates bucolic environments.

For Rousseau, in other words, as for the Romantics, the objective is to preserve children in a "natural" state for as long as is possible. "Why with such earnest pains dost thou provoke/ The years to bring the inevitable yoke […]?" Wordsworth asks the "little Child" in "Ode: Intimations of Immortality" (lines 128-129). "Full soon thy soul shall have her earthly freight/," he continues, "And custom lie upon thee with a weight" (lines 131-132). Rousseau, likewise, urges his readers to "Respect childhood, and do not hurry to judge it" (107). Elsewhere, he instructs young mothers to "form an enclosure around your child's soul" so as to protect it from corrupting social influences (38). Similarly, for New Agers, "salvation" consists not only in protecting childhood or preserving the pure,

"Higher Self" for some length of time; it is also a matter of recovering it, or restoring the better self that has been "inscribed over" by society's conventions. George Chryssides describes this New Ageist tenet as the "belief in the desirability of self-improvement [...]" (22). New Ageists have a highly "optimistic view of the self," Chryssides continues, "even to the extent of identif[ying] the self with a 'God within'" (22).

In *The Famished Road,* the dolphin, "dreaming" plants, and magic birds all seem to be illustrating this idea, though of course we need not see Okri as adopting New Ageist ideas wholesale; he adds his own nuance to them. Okri mentions the magical creatures in the context of the "New Age," when humanity will achieve enlightenment. As a class, each exists "inside us." Each seems to represent a face or aspect of the "Higher Self," or the divine personality hidden under the layers of unnatural socialization, which will be revealed, according to New Ageist thought, in a utopic "new" era. In the same passage, Okri makes an even more direct reference to the New Ageist doctrine of a "Higher Self." "Human beings are gods hidden from themselves," he writes in *The Famished Road*, so evoking the New Ageist notion of a semi-divine, inner being (FR 499). Later, Dad urges his listeners to "Listen to the spirit of things. To your own spirit. Follow it. Master it" (FR 499). [I]t's time we started healing the human spirit by getting back to its full rich, *hidden* dimensions," Okri says in an interview with Ogunsanwo (qtd. in McCabe 11: emphasis added). As McCabe points out, this is "New Ageism *par excellence*" ("Higher Realities" 11). Okri sees his task as a writer as helping his readers first discover, and then more fully express, their latent, transcendent personalities.

Okri offers not only dolphins and magic birds as images of the "Higher Self" in his oeuvre, but also, as fits closely with New Ageism (as with Rousseau) the child-figure. In *A Time for New Dreams*, he writes:

> The child is moulded. That is the beginning of its fall, the loss of its Eden [...] Wonder is driven out of the world. Mystery is chased away from the fabric of reality. The tendency to ask questions is turned into a tendency to fear. Flexibility is misrepresented as weakness. Sensitivity is distorted into timidity. The child is shaped; or should one say misshaped. Its open nature is closed off; its river canalized; its mind trapped; its spirit caged; its playfulness made forced; its joys made suspect; its laughter imprisoned. ("On Childhood (2)" 33)

This is a highly idealized expression of childness, deserving of critique. Okri, like Wordsworth, distracts from the reality that, for many children, childhood is not a pre-lapsarian "Eden" but rather a far less pleasant time of life. According to the World Bank, 400 million children globally live in extreme poverty ("Report Finds 400 Million Children Living in Extreme Poverty"); many of these children work, some in horrifying conditions (see Montgomery, *An Introduction to Childhood* 189-202). That is to say, Okri's view of early life, at least in this essay, is distinctively middle-class. His framing of childhood leaves out the thousands if not millions of children who have not had the privilege to experience "wonder," freely "ask questions" and attend school, or indulge in any sort of "sensitivity," as Okri suggests.

Rather, in this excerpt from Okri's essay, we hear inklings of Wordsworth describing the "prison-house" descending, of Rousseau lamenting the way the child eventually comes to be "enchained by our institution" (*Emile* 42); more generally, of Romanticism's insistence on the immaculately "innocent" child. For Okri, as also for New Agers (and Rousseau), life begins in a state of perfection. Okri describes the child's "moulding" by society as a kind of "fall," making an allusion to the biblical book of Genesis. He mourns the way in which the child is "misshaped" and laments the transformation of children's "flexibility" into "weakness"; their "sensitivity" into "timidity"; their "playfulness" into seriousness. In my second chapter, I go on to discuss the way in which several child soldier narratives, alongside certain human rights discourses, likewise

frame childhood as a time of innocence and "play." For Okri, in other words, childness represents the pinnacle of human existence, a construction that again dangerously displaces attention from real children and the miseries many of them face. Chapter 2, relatedly, examines how Iweala, Abani, and Jarrett-Macauley mask the actual phenomena, such as fractured communities and a lack of social services, that contribute to underage recruitment. As I go on to address, their novels overwhelmingly represent militarized children as "vulnerable" and "innocent," a construction that, in my view, problematically elides the fact that many children – though not all – participate in conflicts by choice, driven to their decisions by deplorable conditions.

Similar to Iweala, Abani, and Jarrett-Macauley, Okri presents us with a child who is idealistically – unrealistically – morally "innocent." In adults' socialization of the young, for Okri, "*mystery* is chased from […] reality"; "*wonder* is driven from the world" ("On Childhood [2]" 33; emphasis added). Later in the same collection, Okri once more puts forward childness as a utopic image. Childness, as I have defined it in this thesis, refers to a state of being a "child," or to the traits ascribed to children by members of society: adults and children alike. In the essay "On Childhood (4)," Okri refers to "child*hood*," that is to say, to a life-stage, not a social identity. However, he again romanticizes features of early life. "Childhood is the great puzzle, the marvelous symbol, the emblem of the quintessence, the magic mirror, the little grail, the missing key to our future" (110). Okri here renders childhood into something mystical, magical even; it is hard to see in this passage reflected the estimated 22,000 children who die of poverty each day (Unicef, "Childhood mortality rate drops by a third since 1990"). Further, Okri does not merely represent childhood as a kind of ideal in *A Time for New Dreams* (the "emblem of the quintessence" is an elevated phrase indeed); he also makes clear that this ideal is "hidden,"

similar to how New Agers understand the "higher self," in need of restoring. Okri presents it as a "puzzle," a "little grail," "missing." We can appreciate the extent to which Okri venerates childness, or the qualities of being a "child," in his writing. The child figure for Okri does not merely represent the artist at the height of his powers, as discussed above; he also represents all of us in our most idyllic being.

As Azaro encodes a kind of "higher" or more "actualized" mode of being for Okri, so also do many of Okri's artist figures from his earlier fiction. New Ageist thought as an influence on *The Famished Road* not only serves to underline Okri's admiration for children; it helps as well to cement the link between his artist image and the child figure. Okri is unambiguous about the fact that the "new era" of which he often speaks will be free from human violence. In *The Famished Road,* Ade references a "great transformation" after which "suffering people will know justice and beauty" (FR 478). In "Plato's Dream," Okri furthermore contrasts the chaos of present times with the quietude humanity will experience once universal "self-knowledge" (as in the New Ageist doctrine of "self-transformation") has been attained: "Only by knowing ourselves can we begin to undo the madness we unleash on the world in our wars [...]" (29). Okri here underestimates the difficulty of resolving international conflicts. Many global clashes are generated not by ideological differences, as, for instance, feed present-day strains between radical Islamist groups and the west. Instead, they are fomented by practical matters such as resource constraints, territorial disputes, and economic competition. Okri's emphasis on enlightened "self-knowledge" fails to take these other, less "spiritual" exigencies into account.

Nevertheless, "Plato's Dream" opens a window onto Okri's oeuvre and, especially, his sense of what it means to be an ethical person. Being a "fulfilled human being" for Okri

entails finding freedom from the personal hardships brought about by violence: "What hope is there for individual reality and authenticity when the forces of violence and orthodoxy [...] make it impossible for us to be authentic and fulfilled human beings?," he asks (*A Way of Being Free* 55). Okri's essay here recalls the 1802 advertisement for Wordsworth and Coleridge's *Lyrical Ballads*, which similarly stresses the value of "reality" and "authenticity" by promising readers that they will encounter in the work a "*natural* delineation of human passions" and incidents based on "well-authenticated fact" ("Advertisement"; emphasis added). Likewise, in *The Prelude,* Wordsworth's speaker seeks "Simplicity and self-presented truth" (line 249). According to Tim Milnes and Kerry Sinanan – and as a feature evident throughout *The Prelude* – "sincerity," or a desire to convey the most *truthful* self*,* is a guiding principle for Wordsworth*,* as well as a force behind works such as Rousseau's *Confessions* ("Introduction" 15-18). Rousseau begins, "I mean to present my fellow-mortals with a man in all the integrity of nature; and this man shall be myself" (*Confessions,* 1). Okri shares the Romantics' respect for the unadorned, un-altered self by making a sense of "individual reality," uncluttered by orthodoxy, the supreme reward for achieving peace.

Simultaneously, being a fulfilled or "authentic" human being for Okri not only involves a personal pathway out of violence, but also the act of remaining sensitive to the suffering of others, although, in Okri's writing, a sentiment of pity does not always lead to social action, as I go on to explore. In *The Famished Road*, Azaro, an "enlightened" abiku, fears "the heartlessness of human beings" (FR 3). Of all the characters in the novel, with Dad as one exception (Dad campaigns for political election as an advocate for the poor[27]),

[27] In the later passages of the novel especially, Dad laments humanity's suffering, "Dad was redreaming the world as he slept," Azaro tells us, "He saw the scheme of things and didn't like it. He saw the world in which black people always suffered and he didn't like it" (FR 492).

Azaro is the most attune to human suffering. He remains in the human world to "make happy the bruised fact of the woman who would become my mother" (FR 5). He looks with pity upon the pained faces of his neighbors: "My heart heaved for them all" (FR 343). His father's exhaustion as a load-bearer, carrying massive bags of salt, weighs heavily on Azaro's conscience: "[F]or the first time in my life I had seen one of the secret sources of my father's misery" (FR 149). Okri takes great care to show Azaro as an empathizing not only potentially empathet*ic* figure.

Along with his father, Azaro also befriends a troupe of disabled beggars who arrive in his village, though, as Green points out, "one of the dangers of Okri's art is that it transforms the representation of suffering into a set of aesthetic effects [...]" (24). The beggars are carnivalized in Okri's novel, made into a grotesque spectacle: "Some of the beggars had legs that were limp and pliable as rubber. Some had twisted necks. Others had both feet behind their heads" (FR 416). Such descriptions recall the highly exoticized representations of spirits featured in earlier passages: "people who walked backwards [...] men upside-down [...] women who had breasts on their backs" (FR 15). The beggars are similarly – sensationally, even – deformed. Azaro looks upon the troupe with sympathy, if also an uncomfortable sense of voyeurism and detachment: "The girl stared at me with her sad, hungry eyes" (FR 418). Okri's writing once again transforms the beggar girl into an aesthetic object; she becomes someone whom Azaro finds it enjoyable to look at – he meditates pleasantly on her "sad" eyes – but far less enjoyable to assist. The beggars prove ill receptive to Azaro's and his father's succor, creating divisiveness and jealousy among the members of Azaro's family. The second volume of the trilogy in particular see Azaro's mother and father estranged, divided in part by the latter's infatuation with the attractive beggar girl, Helen.

Azaro's sensitivity to others' suffering, though it does them little immediate benefit, is similar to how Jeffia and Omovo are portrayed in Okri's earlier novels. Okri seems to experiment with animals as objects of pity here, moving toward the later tableau of human pain we find in *The Famished Road:* "Suffering is one of the great characters of the books," Okri says in his interview with Wilkinson, a statement tacitly undermined in my reading by the way in which, as I go on to explore, attention to suffering in his novel seldom leads to practical change (85). In *The Flowers and Shadows,* Jeffia rescues a puppy from a gang of children who are torturing it (FS 8). Later, he nearly cries when a big, "muscular" man knocks a nest of baby birds from a tree (FS 26). Omovo, too, is empathetic in the face of others' suffering, both human and non-human. For instance, in a scene similar to the torture of the puppy in *The Flowers and Shadows*, the mistreatment of a goat by a gang of children chills Omovo's body: "Something undefined froze. There was a shimmering outer flash which was in fact inner; and he suddenly shouted 'Hey, make un leave the goat alone!'" (LW 7). Devastated by the violence of Lagos in the post-war period, he spends many of his days trying to solve the murder of the mutilated girl.

Empathy for the suffering of marginal figures is a theme we also see running throughout some of the Romantics' writing, especially Wordsworth's earlier poetry. James Averill for instance comments on what he sees as Wordsworth's "fascination" with suffering; "The early poetry, after all, is virtually a parade of victims; the insane, the miserable, the diseased, decrepit, dying and dead […]" (FR 223). Averill is here likely thinking of works such as "The Thorn," which describes a woman abandoned by her betrothed; "The Mad Mother," another story of an insane, forsaken woman; "The Last of the Flock," the tale of a proud man forced to sell his sheep to feed his children; "Old Man Travelling," a meditation on old age and "decay"; and, finally, "The Idiot Boy," which

describes a young boy who is "not so wise as some folks be" (line 257). As we have seen, Okri's novel, too, favors pathetically bereft or malformed figures: Madame Koto, limping and pregnant (though she is also capable of great evil); the blind old man, raging from his chair; the troupe of beggars, "each with sticks and pads of cloth beneath the joints of limbs that scraped on the rough earth" (FR 416). The beggars' abjection is particularly harrowing, described with multi-sensory terms that active sight, sound, and feeling.

Wordsworth furthermore declares in *The Prelude*, "In temperament withal a happy man/ therefore *bold to look on painful things*" (Book X, lines 869-871). Many of Wordsworth's poems, John Worthen affirms, examine how "people manage pain and loss" (164). Okri might be said to evoke a similar sentiment across his oeuvre. "At last I knew what she was getting at. Why she had made sure I struggled in the bus to see those beggars, the dead, the starving, the deeply suffering [...]" Jeffia says of his love-interest, Cynthia, in *The Flowers and Shadows,* "She wanted [...] to make me for a moment look outside myself to a world teeming with *pain and loss*" (FS 233; emphasis added). In "Simon Lee" (1798), Wordsworth's speaker, an apprentice poet, is profoundly moved by the gratitude of a decrepit huntsman, who bursts into tears when the speaker stops to help him cut a stubborn tree-root. "I've heard of hearts unkind, kind deeds/ With coldness still returning/ Alas! The gratitude of men/ Hath oftener left me mourning" (lines 93-96). This is similar, in my reading, to the deep stirrings of sympathy that Azaro also experiences when he sees the "bruised" face of his mother, or the trials of his father. "My wanderings had at last betrayed me," Azaro declares (FR 149).

It must be remembered, though, that in both cases – the Romantics and Okri's – social reforms remain elusive. Plotz points out that although "the 'Child' was a cherished object of contemplation to many," including to Wordsworth, to Lamb, and to Coleridge,

these same writers "were indifferent to the contemporary humanitarian child relief movement" (38). They did not join organizations such as the Friendly Society of Chimney Sweeps, or protest against children's appalling home and work conditions in the manner of reformers Jonas Hanway and Samuel Roberts (Cunningham, *Children of the Poor* 51-3). Indeed, Plotz argues, "the very category of childhood as a valorized state [...] a separate world, tend[ed] to discourage social intervention" (28). A similar phenomenon is felt in Okri's novel, in which human suffering is repeatedly gestured to – fetishized, even – but seldom relieved within the diegesis. Azaro and his father's political movement falls flat; the characters cycle endlessly in perpetual poverty and violence; the ubiquitous prophesies of *The Famished Road* and its even more proleptic sequels are never realized. A limitation of Okri's work in my view is its tendency to place events of extreme suffering behind glass, so to speak, inviting readers to admire and to pity them, but seldom to respond to social problems with a sense of moral outrage and, more than that, considered action.

We may observe one notable distinction between Okri's child figure and his artist image. Whereas Azaro seems to come by his knowledge of Self innately, the road towards self-understanding, for Jeffia and Omovo, consists of near constant struggle. Mrs. Okwe, Jeffia's mother, tells him "that the real meaning of life was [...] to express one's self in the noblest endeavours, and to improve one's self in one's own way" (FS 63). This passage explicitly recalls the New Ageist doctrine of "self-transformation," in which the act of "looking inwards to the Self and finding ways to free it from the anxieties and hang-ups and perceptual cookie-cutters of the ego," as McCabe puts it, provides the pathway toward individual and collective "healing" (McCabe "Higher Realities" 7). At the same time, it is also reminiscent, for me, of what McCabe, drawing from Charles Taylor, calls the

Romantic idea of "expressivism," where one "looks inside oneself for truth and guidance" (9). For example, in *The Prelude,* Wordsworth looks not only "to probe/ The living body of society," as he states in a latter passage, aiming to understand political events happening in France at the time of the French Revolution (Book X lines 874-875). He also, even chiefly, seeks to chronicle the myriad impressions happening within himself: "Yet [...] neither be I taught/ *To understand myself*, nor thou to know/ With better knowledge how the heart was fram'd/ Of him thou lovest, need I dread from thee/ harsh judgments [...]" Wordsworth says, explaining his auctorial ambitions to Coleridge, the addressee of the poem (655-659; emphasis added).

We find a similar idea of authenticity or sincerity explored in Okri's writing. Gradually, in *The Flowers and Shadows,* Omovo learns to still the "dark thoughts" that rage within him (FS 169), to grow in his knowledge of Self. "I had found [peace] within me [...]" Jeffia says after the death of his father, Jonan, "*In finding it, I had found myself*" (FS 254). Jeffia learns to be in touch with his inner feelings, "Love flowed out of me," he remarks (FS 254). Nonetheless, this lesson of self-insight and peace comes only at the end of a long and weary struggle. Much of the novel, instead, sees Jeffia frightened and confused: "Jeffia stood under the mango tree. He was staring into the distance, trying to sort out the jumble of thoughts that jumped across his mind like maddened monkeys" (FS 164). Jeffia's journey towards self-understanding is fractured, piecemeal, continually sabotaged by the machinations of his father, Jonan, as well as by the chaos of post-war Lagos.

Omovo, too, labors to realize his self-knowledge and abilities in *The Landscapes Within*. The painter's journey towards the "third stage of development," as Mamudu suggests, is not an easy one. Resident in a small and crowded commune, Omovo is depressed by the sight of filth and human feces: "It was as though society took a twisted

delight in presenting to him the morbid and unclean aspects of itself" (LW 114). Near the end of the novel, his girlfriend, Ifeyinwa, who seems the only person to love and understand him, is murdered in a tribal dispute. Poor and perpetually unemployed, Omovo often does not feel certain of his place in the world. The conclusion of the narrative finds him still wrestling, still maturing in his knowledge of Self and in his talents as a painter. "It's about surviving, but it's also about becoming a life-artist," he says to his friend, Keme (LW 286). "What's that?" Keme asks, referring to Omovo's new calling as "life-artist" (LW 286). "I'm still learning," Omovo replies, signaling his own gaps in self-understanding (LW 286). The novel ends in "Manic silence. Voicelessness," suggesting that Omovo has not yet found a way to give proper "voice" to his inner thoughts (LW 286).

Contrast this partial, or late-blooming authenticity, on Jeffia's and Omovo's part with Azaro, who is born knowing both who he is and what his place is in the world: he is an abiku who desires to remain in the land of the living. This one simple quest provides the impetus behind the whole of Okri's spirit trilogy: "[T]his time [...] I chose to stay. This meant breaking my pact and outwitting my companions" (5). Azaro, then, battles with his companions for the rest of the trilogy. It is true that Azaro grows in his "visionary" abilities, his insight into spiritual realms, but not necessarily in his knowledge of himself. He is born aware of his status as a spirit child and remains in touch with his abilities throughout the trilogy: "I felt prone to simultaneous visions. I felt like one perpetually on the verge of a fit or seizure," Azaro says in the third and final volume, referencing his abiku condition (IR 392). Unlike Jeffia and Omovo, who achieve a modicum of self-insight or sincerity only towards the end of Okri's earlier novels, Azaro is awake to his inner experiences and feelings from the start: "[...] I wanted to taste of this world, to feel it,

suffer it, know it, to love it, and make a valuable contribution to it [...]," he says early in the trilogy (FR 5), aware of his fundamental motives and desires.

In other words, while Jeffia and Omovo are clearly on the *path* to self-discovery, Azaro, in a sense, has already arrived, already reached this state of perfection, which is celebrated by Wordsworth in *The Prelude,* but also by New Agers according to their doctrine of "self-actualization," as well as by Okri himself in several of his non-fictional writings. "We need to teach students the inevitable necessity of self-discovery," Okri says in "Plato's Dream" (28), so inciting his audience to live more "authentic" lives, in touch with the reality of their "inner" experience. In "Beyond Words," Okri likewise urges his readers to "sit still within [their] deep selves," to develop in their self-understanding (13). There seems little doubt that, for Okri, childhood presents an ideal and inspiring image, though this is in itself deserving of critique, as I have addressed. The child in Okri's work comes "trailing clouds of glory," to quote from Wordsworth ("Ode: Intimations of Immortality" line 65), dressed in the garb of the artist not as he is, but as he might be: highly visionary, but also, enviously authentic, in touch with his "true" inner self.

## "Adversity wakes us up": The Child as a Symbol of Strength

This section explores a final main trait that is shared between the child and the artist figure in Okri's oeuvre, as yet another way in which *The Famished Road* might be read as exploring the nature of the creative life and Azaro interpreted as an idealized, Romantic image. Namely, both Azaro and Okri's earlier artist figures, Jeffia and Omovo, appear as exceptionally resilient persons, finding "strength" in experiences of personal hardship. It is possible that an idea of "growth from suffering," as we find it in Okri's writing, derives from his own difficult life experiences. Okri is a survivor of the Biafran War, which he describes vividly in the short story "Laughter Beneath the Bridge" (1986). In

an interview with the *Guardian*, Okri furthermore declares that one of the things he most admires about his father is the "courage with which he bore adversity" ("Ben Okri: My Family Values"). Yet, this section also sees the theme of "growth through suffering," or "the imaginative redemption of deprivation," as Fraser puts it in his reading of Okri's work (38), as still yet another of Okri's Romantic inheritances. As I proceed to explore, the Romantic poet, like Okri's child, is a highly resilient, if also constantly bereft and beset figure, oppressed by the stresses of modern urban life as well as by the anxieties that attend his unique gifts of "vision" and inspiration.

In the essay "The Romance of Difficult Times" (2011), of which the title alone evokes an idea of the personal resources to be found in suffering, Okri observes, "Adversity wakes us up. It reminds us not of who we think we are in our vanity, but who we really are in our simplicity" (40). Here, adversity for Okri actually improves moral character. It "wakes" individuals; it does not weaken them or, like resilience, merely allow them to return to the status quo. Given what Okri has said about the need to eradicate human violence and misery, as explored in the previous section, we might ask, how does this idea of the personal rewards of hardship fit with Okri's general lament for suffering in essays such as "Plato's Dream," as well as in *The Famished Road*? In an aforementioned scene from Okri's novel, Azaro, via his special gifts as a spirit child, sees a ghostly vision of slaves underlying the bacchanalian splendor of a party to celebrate the dawn of Nigerian independence (FR 455). The image works as an indictment of colonial rule, especially of the transatlantic slave trade, while also casting a long shadow forwards on the question of Nigerian self-rule. Elsewhere, Okri is equally critical of historical events that have contributed to human misery. For instance, in "Redreaming the World," he again rages at colonialism: "Those who dream of dominating the world should expect the world to

overrun them" (23). In "Our False Oracles Have Failed," he expresses regret at the devastation caused by the 2008 financial crisis, in which a few highly paid individuals at the top of society, it is said, created complex financial tools that resulted in the loss of jobs, homes, and security for those at the bottom. "Huge financial success has hidden the moral bankruptcy in our civilization," Okri declares, referring not only to Britain, but more generally to western societies: "We must discover our lost values or perish" ("Our False Oracles Have Failed").

It is true that, in the hands of some, a message of the rewards of suffering may be used to undermine social movements that seek equality and the reduction of poverty and violence. That is to say, by encouraging individuals to find value in personal hardship, pundits or politicians may be understood to encourage acceptance of the status quo or, even, of worsening conditions. However, Okri's work is multifaceted, and does not seek reform in a simplistic or merely programmatic way. A call for recovering "lost values" is indeed a call for social reform, although it lacks the urgent demand for systemic restructuring – e.g. reductions in poverty, improvements in governance – generally associated with a revolutionary politics. It is not contradictory to desire that individuals find resources within, or rise above, hardships in their personal lives and to want them to fight injustice on a larger scale, in their public role as citizens. However, admittedly, again, action is seldom the subject of Okri's writing, which tends to focus on changing not political institutions but private feelings. At Trinity College, Cambridge, Okri delivered what he subtitled a "Secular Sermon" to British students and academics in 1993, "We need more stillness, more of a sense of wonder, a feeling for the mystery of life" ("Beyond Words" 7). By "we" here, Okri no doubt has in mind his well-heeled, British audience but also, in my view, anyone who seeks a more fulfilled existence; the author *imagines* a wider

audience than his narrow podium allows. Continuing in the pastoral vein, Okri praises the teachings of Jesus and Buddha in the essay "Aphorisms and Fragments" (37). In "Writers and Nations" (2011), he urges, "[W]riters herald discovery, fertility, and *resistance to spiritual despair*" (15; emphasis added). This passage neatly arrogates to the writer the role of the priest in averting spiritual disaster.

The voice of the pastor, in my view, allows Okri to speak personally to individuals, as well as to wider problems. In forms of "transcendental meditation" common in the west since the Beatles and often practiced by adherents of New Ageist spirituality, persons are urged to accept their feelings of physical and psychological pain. "Transcendental" meditation teachers encourage their students to take a "detached" stance to their own suffering and realize, as Francis Roles puts it in *A Lasting Freedom: An Introduction to Transcendental Meditation* (1972), "it isn't our lives – our outer lives, our inner lives – which are wrong; it's simply the *attitude* one has about them" (28; emphasis in the original). Okri's writings on adversity, potentially, operate on a similar model. He does not consciously aim to steer his readers toward the passive acceptance of suffering, though this does often feel like the message of his fiction: in *The Famished Road,* Azaro and his family prove unable to improve their lot, despite Dad's campaign for political election. Instead, where suffering cannot be mitigated by collective action, as in much of Okri's spirit child trilogy, Okri seeks to encourage his readers to "resist spiritual despair," to stop fighting their problems, and to find that in this way they are able to move beyond their troubles, or achieve a measure of spiritual and psychological "transcendence" in their lives. Of course, approaching Okri's work critically, this solution allows little opportunity for real systemic change: "accepting" suffering likely means that social and economic

inequalities remain intact, corrupt politicians stay in office, and poverty continues pervasive.

"Freedom" through the embrace of hardship is especially connected to the artist in Okri's oeuvre, who repeatedly encounters serious setbacks and challenges. In his essay "While the World Sleeps," which was first delivered to the International Pen in 1988, Okri encourages poets and other writers not to let difficult life events overwhelm them: "What doesn't kill us makes us stronger," he reminds his audience, which is a line, slightly rephrased, from Nietzsche's *Twilight of the Idols* (1889) (15).[28] Okri's novel *Flowers and Shadows* also contains an image of an artist or artist-like figure who improves as a result of personal difficulties. The novel is a nascent Bildungsroman, which shows Jeffia's development from a spoiled oligarch's son[29] into a mature person in tune with his society.[30] Drawing on the work of Nicholas Taleb, *Flowers and Shadows* might, in fact, be called Okri's most "antifragile" work of fiction. In his book on the 2008 financial crisis, Taleb uses the term "antifragile" to describe objects that "benefit from shocks; they thrive and grow when exposed to volatility, randomness, disorder, and stressors, and love adventure, risk, and uncertainty" (3). As a popular economics writer, Taleb's audience differs significantly from Okri's. Whereas Okri's work ostensibly addresses *all* persons looking for greater "fulfillment" in their lives, Taleb's book specifically advises western business executives seeking to extract a lesson from the 2008 crisis. Moreover, as a former

[28] The original line reads, "*From the Military School of Life*. – Whatever does not kill me makes me stronger" (Nietzsche 5).
[29] Robert Fraser calls Okri's novel "a study in privilege" (24).
[30] In an article on the Bildungsroman and its "enabling" relationship with human rights law, Slaughter cites Wilhelm Dilthey's definition of the genre. In the Bildungsroman, or coming of age novel, according to Dilthey, "A lawlike development is discerned in the individual's life [...] on his way towards maturity and harmony" (qtd. in Slaughter, "Enabling Fictions" 1410).

hedge-fund manager, Taleb is positioned at the center of the exact same financial networks that Okri, in "Our False Oracles Have Failed," derides.

Nonetheless, I see Taleb's concept of the "antifragile" as a useful way of describing the central events of Okri's *Flowers and Shadows,* in which "adventure, risk and uncertainty" are prized. On the one side, at the start of the novel, Jeffia languishes in his family's sprawling mansion in Ikoyi, a rich suburb home to political elites and ex-pats, where life is boring and predictable. Yet, at the end of the narrative, he comes alive, thrives even in Alaba, the slum where Jeffia and his mother are forced to move after his father's death. That is to say, by any measure, Jeffia arguably improves as a result of the chaos that is introduced to his life by his father's, Jonan's, gradual downfall and eventual demise (Jonan perishes in a car crash at the end of the narrative). Whilst the titular image of the work, a flower in a vase next to a wall of shadows, threatens fragility – i.e. weakness as a result of hardship, not strength – the opposite turns out to be true. Jeffia feels himself enlivened in the slum as he never felt in the family's mansion: "For as dirty as the place is and uncared for as the roads were, the lives of the people are a quiet celebration of the strength of the human spirit, its adaptability," he says (FS 57). The word "adaptability" intimates a kind of hyper-resilience, or what we might wish to call "antifragility," riffing on Taleb. Still, there are certainly risks to this way of thinking. Jeffia idealizes the "adaptability" of the people in Alaba; he does not recognize it for what it is – a means of coping. Okri in this way again exhibits a tendency to romanticize suffering in his writing. He does not look it in the face and, moreover, imagine practical ways it might be alleviated.

Many times in Okri's fictional writing, characters, especially artists, are implicitly praised for their ability to rise above hardship; they are offered even as subtly more worthy

or interesting for their experiences of pain. A notable example can be found in Okri's shorter fiction. The visions of the pamphlet writer, Ajegunle Joe from "The Dream-vendor's August" (1986), would arguably be much less interesting – less urgent – if his living situation were more comfortable. In Okri's story, Ajegunle lives in a ramshackle flat; he suffers from impotence and barely scrapes a living as a pamphlet writer. At the end of the story, Ajegunle plans a new pamphlet titled, "How to Turn Experience into Gold."[31] This phrase later reappears in *Astonishing the Gods*, wherein the narrator speaks of "a suffering which keeps renewing itself in the soul, which refuses to be forgotten, a *suffering which demands to be continually turned into gold*" (71; emphasis added). In "The Dream-vendor's August," Ajegunle even attempts to write a correspondence course assignment on the "theme of adversity" (118). The farthest he gets, Okri tells us, is to pen: "Adversity is the way to the centre, to the base and springboard" (118). It is remarkable how often Okri speaks positively of adversity throughout his oeuvre, an idea that, as I have discussed, could be interpreted as capitulating to the status quo, passively accepting forms of governance that perpetuate poverty and violence, though it also resonates sympathetically with the New Ageist idea of "self-transformation." Ajegunle's course assignment is nearly a paean to personal challenge, framing it as the road "to the centre" and speaking as though "antifragility," as I have termed it, were a religious doctrine.

Okri is a survivor of the Biafran War, which some estimate claimed as many as two million human lives between the years 1967-1970 (Horvitz and Catherwood 44). He gives us an impression of how terrible this experience was in the short story, "Laughter Beneath

[31] Intriguingly, this phrase appears again in another one of Okri's short stories. In "The City of Red Dust," the protagonist, Emokhai, finds sixteen lessons for a correspondence course titled "Turning Experience Into Gold" amongst his friend's, Marjomi's, belongings. Marjomi, like Ajegunle, is a kind of dreamer, but also, antifragile, not allowing his difficult circumstances to overwhelm him. "Emokhai marvelled at the gentle ferocity of his spirit," Okri's narrator tells us ("In the City of Red Dust" 78).

the Bridge," in which a young narrator (who is about the same age as Okri was at the time[32]) describes rivers clogged with bodies, the whole country seemingly drowning in blood: "By Saturday the town had begun to smell [...] at night swollen ghosts with large eyes clanked over the bridge" ("Laughter Beneath the Bridge" 18). Clearly, Okri has experienced great adversity in his life and might find solace in the idea that his difficult life experiences have made a positive contribution to his art. After arriving in England in the late 1970s to study at university, Okri furthermore lived "rough" for a period, sleeping on friends' couches and scrounging for food in bins. "The worst time was 1983," he says to Hunter Davies, "Love and life and everything went wrong. I reached absolute rock bottom" ("Interview"). He often cites this period in interviews, implying that it, and the hardships it contained, played a central role in his development as a writer.

At the same time, "antifragility," or some rendition thereof, is also a theme we find running throughout Wordsworth's writings; we may also describe this idea as yet another of the author's Romantic inheritances. In "The Character of the Happy Warrior" (1807), Wordsworth reflects upon a superior type of person, "Who, doomed to go in company with Pain,/ And Fear, and Bloodshed, miserable train!/ Turns his necessity to glorious gain" (lines 12-13). This is not merely the endurance we find celebrated in poems like Wordsworth's "Resolution and Independence," (1807), wherein the Poet is inspired by an old leech-gatherer, who is capable of withstanding the cold and natural elements: "I'll think of the Leech-gatherer on the lonely moor!" (lines 139-140). Rather, here Wordsworth praises a trait more like "antifragility," or the ability to improve from or through, not merely to withstand, personal hardship: "As tempted more; more able to endure,"

[32] According to Ato Quayson, Okri was aged seven and away school in Minna at the start of the Nigerian Civil War (146). In "Laughter Beneath the Bridge," the unnamed protagonist also begins the conflict at school, later fleeing with his mother to the south. It thus seems likely that this is at a highly personal story for Okri, based on some of his own experiences.

Wordsworth writes (line 24). The "Happy Warrior" in question, when met with difficult life experiences "controls them and subdues, transmutes, bereaves/ Of their bad influence, and their good receives" (lines 17-18). This is obviously an idealized portrait of Lord Nelson, in whose honor Wordsworth writes; "controlling" bad influences and "subduing" them is no easy feat. Nevertheless, it points to a similar principle to "antifragility." In both instances, bad experiences are "transmuted" into valuable lessons; adversity, as Okri puts it, is turned into "gold."

Wordsworth invokes a similar sentiment in "Lines Written a Few Miles Above Tintern Abbey" (1798), wherein he speaks of "the din/ Of towns and cities" (lines 26-27) and the "heavy and the weary weight/ Of all this unintelligible world" (lines 40-41). For many Romantic writers, but especially for Wordsworth, according to Michael Ferber, urban centers symbolized excessive commercialism and social decay, whereas natural landscapes allowed them the serenity to explore passing impressions (Ferber 99). In "Tintern Abbey," before his retreat to the banks of the river Wye, Wordsworth is overwhelmed by the hustle and bustle of London. Similar to Omovo and Jeffia, Wordsworth's poet not only struggles with the chaos that attends creative life externally, in the cacophony of crowded towns; he is also beset by the turmoil within that accompanies his creative production. "The Poet […] Hath, like the Lover, his unruly times […] Though no distress be near him but his own/Unmanageable thoughts: his mind," Wordsworth writes in *The Prelude* (lines 134-139). In *The Landscapes Within,* Omovo is similarly plagued by "dark thoughts" (LW 86): "He reminded her of a lost child; he also reminded her of her elder brother who had killed himself," the narrator says, referring to Omovo's lover, Ifeyinwa (LW 103). Jeffia, too, in *The Flowers and Shadows,* is described as a

sensitive young man often burdened by a peculiar "heaviness of heart" and disturbing dreams (FS 24; 36).

Wordsworth's poet figure, also like Jeffia and Omovo, not only endures many forms of suffering in "Tintern Abbey," as in *The Prelude*; he is furthermore able to conquer them – to flourish, even – particularly, as a result of his connection with the natural world: "Therefore am I still/ A Lover of the meadow and the woods/ And mountains," Wordsworth states in "Tintern Abbey" (lines 103-105). Such are "the anchor of my purest thoughts, the nurse," he continues (ibid. 110). The glories of Nature are what help Wordsworth overcome his inner crisis. Having just escaped from the crowded towns in *The Prelude*, he describes himself a "discontented sojourner, now free" (line 8). The poet rises above his difficulties and even finds a way to use them as fodder for his art, juxtaposing the past misery of his urban travels with the present tranquility of his meditations along the Wye.

In Okri's novel, Azaro, too, demonstrates an ability to withstand, even improve as a result of personal hardship. As Wordsworth's trials make his experience of his natural surroundings so much the sweeter, so also do Azaro's near-death experiences contribute to his inspiring, visionary powers. Azaro's name is a derivative of Lazaro: "many were uneasy with the connection between Lazaro and Lazarus" (FR 8) Like the biblical Lazarus, whom Christ raises from the dead (John 11: 1-44), Azaro does not easily succumb to the threats made against his life. Throughout the novel, malevolent "spirit companions" harass Azaro, seeking his return to the spirit world. In one scene, thanks to their guidance, Azaro nearly drowns in a gutter (FR 8); in another, he collapses on a busy tarmac, with dangerous lorries "thundering" all around (FR 18). The child's body here lies prone and vulnerable; it is a powerful image but one that also potentially participates in visual

grammars of "poverty porn," or the fetishization of the wounded, black or "Third World" body, particularly, in development literatures (Collin, "What is 'Poverty Porn'," aidthoughts.org). I return to questions of poverty porn, especially in relation to African children, in the following chapter. For now, Okri invites us, his readers, to look on Azaro's suffering, to pity him, although at times the novel's relentless presentation of Azaro's pain, as in this scene, raises difficult questions of voyeurism.

Escalating the danger, Okri's novel shows a set of increasingly more powerful spirits sent to fetch Azaro from the human world. The first is a spirit with three-heads, followed by one with four-heads, five, and so on: "And when it gets to the turn of the seven-headed spirit nothing will be able to save you," the three-headed spirit tells him (FR 303). Azaro's resilience is, in these ways, put to greater and greater tests. Nevertheless, despite the increasing risk, Azaro not only survives these difficult experiences; he also seems to personally improve as a result of them. "The air was clear and wide. In my sleep I found open spaces where I floated without fear," Azaro says near the end of *The Famished Road*, with little trace of his difficulties etched upon him (FR 500). So, Okri's novel manages to access a "reality" in which relentless, debilitating poverty and violence has little effect upon a child. It is at odds with his claim in *A Time for New Dreams* to "know of childhoods so severe, brutalized and poverty-stricken that it's a wonder the children didn't become mass murders" (35). This statement, though hyperbolically phrased, recognizes the damaging effects of adverse life experiences on children's physical and psychosocial development, as is the consensus among many childhood experts (see, for instance, Anda et al. 2006; Felitti 2009). It is a perspective, however, that *The Famished Road* eschews.

In another scene from *The Famished Road*, whilst walking with his father in the forest, Azaro stumbles over the unusual sight of a "flowering pole": "This is what you must be like," Dad tells his son, "grow wherever life puts you down" (FR 45). The time and place where Azaro is "planted" is a tumultuous period in Nigeria's history, in a poor, rural village. Nonetheless, despite or even as a result of this adversity, Azaro matures in his unusual powers. "I looked at the world," Azaro reflects after one of his many spirit-compelled illnesses, "I hugged the alarming mystery of the world and *grew stronger*" (342; emphasis added). "Suffering will never destroy you" Madame Koto prophesies to Azaro after one of his mysterious illnesses, "but will make you stronger. Success will never confuse you or scatter your spirit, but will make you fly higher into the good sunlight" (FR 47). Her statement reverberates throughout the novel as a critical clue to Azaro's characterization and, potentially, its hidden moral: that suffering can and should be embraced as a means of personal strength. It is a message, as I have explored, with distinctively conservative, though not entirely anti-revolutionary undertones, potentially dissuading action to dismantle repressive regimes.

In "How Reality Overwhelms Good Fiction," Okri declares, "Nigerian writing is about how to write about chaos without making the material chaotic and unresolvable" (25). To succeed, the Nigerian writer must resist the urge to "write exclusively about social problems"; he or she must "figh[t] with words against the confusion and dissipation," Okri advises (ibid.). In his interview with Davies, Okri remarks, similarly, "I believe writers should *struggle, suffer*, live and love and laugh, be in the streets, the pubs"; should embrace chaos, "never los[e] touch with the quick of life" ("Interview"; emphasis added). As a result, even in his "antifragility," or affection for, rather than hatred of, disorder, Azaro once more steps forward as an artist figure, an artist of dreams as well as of turning

suffering into beauty. In this, Azaro of *The Famished Road* reprises several traits of the artist from Okri's earlier fiction. He also looks forward to how Okri writes about creativity in later works and essays, for instance, in *A Time for New Dreams*. This, then, I have argued, allows us to see Okri's novel and his central child character as an extended if also coded commentary on the inspirations and the exigencies of the creative life.

Alongside a symbol of creativity, indeed, as a critical part of this reading, this chapter has also built a case for Azaro as a Romantic child image. With little doubt, the English Romantics have left indelible marks on Okri's thinking. Okri's indebtedness to the Romantics is most apparent, arguably, in Okri's use of dream motifs, which bears similarities with the Romantic artist in an inspired state of "epiphany." "[W]ith an eye made quiet by the power/ Of harmony [...] We see into the life of things," Wordsworth writes in his "Lines Written A Few Miles Above Tintern Abbey" (lines 48-50). This passage recalls the way in which Azaro is able to see into the "spiritual" life behind ordinary events. "I saw it all. I, the spirit-child, who knows something of the bright havens, of shallow and mythic glories [...]," Azaro says (IR 368). Okri furthermore represents the child as sensitive to human suffering, profoundly attuned to natural environments, self-aware (self-actualized even), as well as hyper-resilient or "antifragile," additional traits of the child as well as of the artist figure in Okri's oeuvre that the chapter reads as distinctively "Romantic."

The earlier section of this chapter argued, relatedly, for diverse influences upon Okri's novel. Okri's representation of Azaro does not just recall the abiku from traditional Yoruban folktales; it also draws on images such as sprites and fairies found in western canons, as well as on Blake's childhood visions and Barrie's depiction of children in the form of birds. What emerges from these investigations is a more nuanced, more textured,

understanding of Okri's child figure, one that supplies a complexity of reference, and a greater depth of cultural diversity. West African folklore may indeed provide one layer in the complicated combination of cultural reference that makes up Okri's novel, including his representations of childness. Yet, it is clear that English Romantics' view of the child – how they idealized youth as well as saw it a "reservoir" for aspects of the creative mind – supplies another.

The next chapter of this thesis continues to think about the child figure as a multivalent symbol, moving away from conventional postcolonial readings and seeking to explore how West African authors use images of childness toward diverse ends within their writing. The three novels studied in the following chapter – Chris Abani's *Song for Night* (2007), Uzodinma Iweala's *Beasts of No Nation* (2005) and Delia Jarrett-Macauley's *Moses, Citizen and Me* (2005) – were all published as part of the wave of African child soldier novels that swept across Europe and North America in the mid- to late-2000s. While many of these novels have been praised by critics for their ability to generate public awareness of children's involvement in military contexts, as I discuss, the next chapter looks at these works, for the most part, critically, arguing that they stereotype children by employing them as devices and tacitly encourage western intervention in African, or other so-called "Third World," theaters of war through how they represent, and emphasize, children's suffering. More specifically, the next chapter reads three novels by Abani, Iweala, and Jarrett-Macauley as examples of "human rights" literature.

# Chapter 2

# Pain in the Child-Body: Three Child Soldier Novels

From the mid-to-late 2000s, dozens of personal memoirs and novels were published internationally that prominently featured the figure of the African child soldier. This chapter focuses on three Anglophone West African child soldier novels within this wider body of writing: *Song for Night* (2007) by Chris Abani, *Beasts of No Nation* (2005) by Uzodinma Iweala, and *Moses, Citizen, and Me* (2005) by Delia Jarrett-Macauley. In the discussion to follow, I engage with how scholars have previously read the African child soldier figure, resisting excessively celebratory formulations of the child soldier genre that overlook some of the ways in which children are stereotyped in Abani's, Iweala's, and Jarrett-Macauley's works, although I consider ways in which these writers challenge stock tropes of the child soldier – such as his or her presumed innocence – as well. Child figures in African writing, I suggest, need not only be seen through the lens of "Empire" and "Nation," interpreted as devices used by writers for contesting colonial rule (Wallace) or read as an allegory for postcolonial communities (Bardolph; Barker). Rather, they function in complicated and multivalent ways and are used to advance or promote certain causes, often from a non-African perspective. Here, child figures are often seen to help stir concern for, and encourage western readers to "save," real-life children fighting in African conflicts.

In this way, child figures serve as tools within what this chapter sees as tactical "human rights novels," a term I go on to define with reference not only Iweala's, Abani's, and Jarrett-Macauley's works, but also to Dave Eggers's writing. Since the publication of his novel *What is the What* (2006), as I discuss, Eggers has emerged as a key figure in debates on how to represent African conflicts in literature. My critique of Iweala's,

Abani's, and Jarrett-Macauley's novels in this chapter is primarily directed at how they elide recognition of child soldiers as competent, self-directed individuals, as children in conflict situations have been described by anthropologists such as Paul Richards and Jason Hart. Instead, I see these novels as telling a specific, calculated story that aligns them with western humanitarian discourses and, in particular, endorses a view of the west as "rescuer" and of African countries as in need of western assistance. In her article "American humanity, African atrocity" (2014), Yogita Goyal explores how, through literature, television, and film, western readers/viewers are invited to see themselves as "global citizens" by experiencing "empathy for the African victim of atrocity" (48). The African child soldier figure in these novels provides precisely such a sympathetic "victim," I argue: the child's innocence and vulnerability – as well as the lack of any African actors to rescue him – establishes the western actor predominantly as "savior" while casting doubt on African societies' ability to address the problems they presently face.

Indeed, by showing African children as vulnerable victims in regional conflicts and, furthermore, eliding the various economic and political reasons behind their recruitment, Iweala's, Abani's and Jarrett-Macauley's narratives, I suggest, risk perpetuating a narrative of "Afropessimism," in which the continent is seen as inherently flawed – morally "corrupt," even – and dependent on outsiders for help. Boulou Ebanda de B'béri and P. Eric Louw define Afropessimism as the idea that "something is wrong with Africans [...] that Africans are failing to live up to a set of criteria generated by Westerners who want to develop Africa" (337). It is a story, as I go on to discuss, with particular agency-denying or depersonalizing outcomes not only for African countries, but also for the child figure. A later section of this chapter examines, more specifically, how Jarrett-Macauley's and Iweala's novels might be said to stereotype children in the way they

employ the child as a "narrative prosthesis." In my definition of "narrative prosthesis," I draw from the work of David Mitchell and Sharon Snyder and refer to the way in which children, in these novels, are used as props heightening the works' overall sense of crisis; they do not, as I go on to argue, have much agency or personality of their own.

The three child soldier novels discussed, Abani's *Song for Night* especially, not only write about children in ways that reinforce images of the west as "Savior," although they also occasionally challenge the west's alleged "superiority," as I go on to explore; *Song for Night*, in addition, mobilizes imagery of the child body to shore the credibility of his narrative. Abani's oeuvre, alongside the work of several other writers, has lately come under attack by critics. More specifically, in the early 2010s, the Nigerian blogger Kennedy Emetulu began to raise doubts about Abani's alleged imprisonment in Nigeria's Kiri-Kiri prison, which features centrally in his autobiographical collection of poems, *Kalakuta Republic* (2000). Abani's child-images do not answer these criticisms directly; his novel was published before the more recent scandal. Yet, Abani's use of child-imagery does, I submit, help the pathos of his novel. As I address, My Luck, Abani's mute narrator, employs a form of "Home Sign," or self-constructed sign language, that innovatively persuades readers to believe his story – that, in my view, invites readers to connect powerfully with Abani's work. In other respects, all three novels discussed in this chapter generate concern or sympathy amongst the reader, showing children in pain, victimized, and morally innocent of their actions in war. I see these tropes of the child as strategic on the part of the authors, and read Abani's, Jarrett-Macauley's and Iweala's novels as implicated in wider discourses, particularly ones that promote western humanitarian intervention in African wars.

## Challenges in Reading Child Soldier Novels

This section addresses several ways in which critics have explored Iweala's, Abani's and Jarrett-Macauley's novels previously, arguing that they frequently overstate the novels' commitment to representing historical fact and correspondingly understate the extent to which these works are distanced from, or represent in realistic terms, contemporary African conflicts. To date, novels featuring child soldiers such as I discuss here have mostly been read as works of "witness-bearing," bringing much needed attention to the estimated 300,000 children fighting globally (UNICEF "Factsheet"), 40% of these in African countries (David Francis; qtd. in Schultheis 31). An overview of the reception of the three novels to date follows, by way of exemplification.

Andrew O'Hagan says of Delia Jarrett-Macauley's novel, "Anyone who has spent time in Africa can immediately recognize the power and *truth* of her descriptions," so suggesting that Jarrett-Macauley has persuasively captured the horror of Sierra Leone's civil war, which lasted from 1991-2002 ("Reviews: Moses, Citizen, and Me"; emphasis added). Jarrett-Macauley's *Moses, Citizen, and Me* tells the story of Julia, a British woman of Sierra Leonean origins, who returns to Sierra Leone to visit family. During her visit, Julia learns that her eight-year-old cousin, Citizen, has shot and killed his grandmother during the conflict: "[Citizen] pointed to a bulky shape, twisted and distorted [...] It was Adele, his own grandmother" (2). Later in the novel, Julia becomes close to Citizen and helps him and several other child soldiers stage a production of Thomas Decker's Krio-language adaptation of Shakespeare's play, *Julios Sizah,* in a dream forest located in Julia's imagination.[33] This performance serves as the apex of the narrative and, potentially, draws from real-life events. After the close of the Sierra Leonean civil war, according to Shanee

[33] Decker's play is based on Shakespeare's *Julius Caesar.*

Stepakoff, several victims delivered their testimony before the Special Court using drama, not spoken testimony (Stepakoff, "Telling and Showing"). Similarly, the child soldiers in Jarrett-Macauley's novel "try" their case before an assembled audience of villagers and foreign aidworkers. Decker's play, filled with scenes of intrigue and murder, allows the children to "testify," albeit obliquely, to their own horrific experiences of war.

When speaking of her novel's reception, it is notable that Jarrett-Macauley received the Orwell Prize in 2006, a prize typically awarded to books of non-fiction. Past winners include Michael Ignatieff's *Virtual War: Kosovo and Beyond* (2001) and Robert Cooper's *Order and Chaos in the Twenty-First Century* (2004). In *The Economy of Prestige* (2005), James English argues that modern literary awards, such as the Orwell Prize, confer valuable "cultural capital" on selected texts (*Economy of Prestige* 10-12). Certainly, Jarrett-Macauley's receipt of the Orwell Prize signifies, and has helped to perpetuate, her novel's moderate success in a highly competitive literary marketplace. Yet, her receipt of the award also implies, to me, much about the how the judges read or assessed her novel. Jarrett-Macauley's award of the Orwell Prize suggests in my view that the prize judges, such as Hagan, saw *Moses, Citizen, and Me* as presenting factual or historic "truths" about the Sierra Leonean civil war. That is to say, they related to her work as they did to Ignatieff's and Cooper's, i.e. as a work uncovering the harsh realities of warfare in the twenty-first century. Why else, we might ask, would the judges award a novel a prize generally reserved for works of sociology and military history?

Iweala's and Abani's child texts have similarly been read using heuristics of "truth" or history. For instance, John Hawley claims that Uzodinma Iweala's *Beasts of No Nation* "might be said to be a novel for the entire African continent, and beyond: a novel that *gives voice* to an entire subaltern social class around the globe" (24; emphasis added).

Hawley's use of the phrase "giving voice" suggests, to me, an amplifying process at work, wherein the novelist finds a worthy subject who has not been allowed to speak his or her story – in this case, "an entire subaltern social class around the world" – and, subsequently, brings this subject's story to the page. There are obvious questions of ventriloquism here, of the "First World" author exploiting the pain of the "Third World" subject for personal gain, and I return to such concerns later in the chapter. For now, what is interesting to me is the way in which Hawley seemingly encounters little distortion in this supposed "transcription" process. For him, the essential qualities of the subaltern's "witness" remain unaltered. Hawley sees Iweala as indexing – "embodying" even, to use his phrase (22) – real-world events in the young protagonist's, Agu's experiences of fighting in an unidentified West African war. Hawley particularly finds Agu's experiences of forced conscription and rape convincing, since these are similar to events recounted in the personal testimony of historical children fighting in Uganda, the Democratic Republic of the Congo, and Colombia, and elsewhere (Hawley 23).

Indeed, "giving voice" is a rhetoric that has been used by several scholars in respect of the child soldier genre. This points, in my view, to a sort of consensus among scholars, who see child soldier narratives as faithfully describing real-world events. Allison Mackey, for instance, employs similar phrasing to Hawley's in "Troubling Humanitarian Consumption: Reframing Relationality in African Child Soldiers Narratives" (2013). "How are we to hear the voice of the child soldier, as a quintessential figure of the voiceless?" Mackey asks, seeming to find the answer in several child soldier narratives, including Iweala's *Beasts of No Nation*, Jarrett-Macauley's *Moses, Citizen and Me,* and Abani's *Song for Night* (99). Her language, like Hawley's, implies that fiction not only mediates, but also amplifies children's experiences, bringing them (largely unaltered) to a wider audience.

Mackey's article reads these works sympathetically, that is to say, she explores how these novels coax their readers "into confronting difficult questions [...]" (99), paying close attention to details of narration, metaphor, and plot. She does not, however, in my view give sufficient attention to history. For instance, to what extent do these novels delve into the causes of the conflicts they represent? The answer is, very little: Iweala's novel is set during an unspecified war begun for obscure reasons; Abani's novel is the same. Jarrett-Macauley's novel carefully skirts the complex networks of patronage and their collapse that contributed to the onset of the Sierra Leonean civil war (see Richards *Fighting for the Rainforest* 52-53). All of this raises doubts, for me, about the validity of the novels' supposed historical "witness."

Mackey's article, in other words, celebrates child soldier novels as "giving voice" to stories of child soldiering without adequately questioning the extent to which these novels in fact mediate perceptions of African conflicts, or slot imperfectly onto the events that they, allegedly, describe. Alongside Iweala's and Jarrett-Macauley's novels, Abani's *Song for Night* has also attracted approaches that frame the novel as "bearing witness" or representing history. For instance, in an article on "The Child Soldier Narrative and the Problem of Arrested Historicization" (2010), Eleni Coundouriotis claims that, in *Song for Night,* "Abani's memory of the Nigerian Civil War grafts on to his awareness of West Africa's more recent wars" (195). Admittedly, Coundouriotis's reading is more sophisticated than either Hawley's or Mackey': that is to say, she sees Abani not as "recreating the specifics of a particular conflict" (195), but rather as blending his childhood memories of Biafra with his knowledge of contemporary crises in Liberia and Sierra Leone, such that "the past is part of the present consciousness" (195). For this reason,

Coundouriotis is adamant: Abani's novel is not set during the Biafran War, although Biafran references, for instance, to tensions between Igbo, Hausa, and Yoruba, abound.

Whilst conducting early research for this chapter, I, too read Abani's novel within the context of Biafra, even taking the connection further than Coundouriotis. More specifically, I saw *Song for Night* as a work of revisionist history, attempting to highlight children's, not only adults' involvement in the Biafran conflict. In Abani's novel, the fifteen-year-old protagonist, My Luck, serves as a landmine diffuser in a platoon of other children. Interestingly, Chimamanda Adichie's *Half of a Yellow Sun* (2006), published around the same time as Abani's novel, also returns to the Biafran conflict, narrating at least part of the story throughout the main character's, Olanna's, houseboy: "[…] Ugwu remembered he was a child. Only thirteen" (363). Ken Saro-Wiwa's *Sozaboy* (1985) also of course features a youthful protagonist, Mene, who becomes a soldier in the federal Nigerian army.[34] However, prior to Abani's, Adichie's, and Saro-Wiwa's novels, few adopted the child soldier's perspective, or even deigned to acknowledge that children had been recruited in the fighting. Instead, many fictional and non-fictional representations of the Nigerian Civil or Biafran War, at least at first, valorized its events. Craig McLuckie, for instance, upbraids S.O. Mestus's *Behind the Rising Sun* (1971) as a "torturous statement of continuing support for the failed Biafran ideal" (92). Chukwuemeka Ike, likewise, puts Biafra's military defense, not its suffering citizens, center-stage in his novel *Sunset at Dawn* (1976). Hence Abani's *Song for Night*, like Adichie's novel, I initially thought, contests or at least qualifies these other narratives by lingering with some of the war's most abject victims: children.

[34] I return to the specifics of Saro-Wiwa's novel in a later section.

Abani's mention of the "infamous Boys Brigade, Biafra's child army" in his autobiographical poem *Daphne's Lot* (2003), provides further evidence for this reading (46). In one passage from this poem, Abani remembers meeting young members of Biafra's secessionist forces while his family waited to board a plane for Europe, fleeing the violence. The children "bristl[e]" with heavy weapons (*Daphne's Lot* 47). They point a gun at Abani's mother and try to recruit his brother, Mark (*Daphne's Lot* 47). Yet, even whilst the young soldiers depicted in Abani's autobiographical poem are fearsome, they are also pitiful: Abani describes one young man in the group as "pimply-faced," a reminder that these armed militants are, after all, only 15 to 16 years old (47). The propinquity between these two pieces of writing, i.e. between *Daphne's Lot* (2003) and *Song for Night* (2005), suggests that in his later novel, Abani is trying to give these miserable, forgotten children a face and a story.

While my initial readings of the novel framed *Song for Night* as a work of historical witness bearing, subsequent readings have pushed in a different direction. Read in the context of a much-publicized spate of child-soldier writing, Abani's novel seems much more invested, instead, in telling a particular, even singular story with clear links to contemporary aid and development discourses, as I will show. First, it is questionable whether as many child soldiers as is sometimes assumed were active in African conflicts in the final decades of the twentieth century and into the twenty-first. According to Egodi Uchendu, while secessionist Biafran forces did eventually recruit under-18s in the later years of the war, "arming persons below the age of fifteen was certainly abnormal" (402). Jason Hart has similarly provided reasons to be skeptical of the 300,000 figure often cited as the number of children fighting globally today. "In war zones, research of any kind is

often extremely difficult to conduct," Hart observes; "suspicion and fear" moreover make collecting accurate data difficult ("The Politics of 'Child Soldiers'" 217).

As another reason for contesting many critics' framings of Abani's, Iweala's and Jarrett-Macauley's novels, especially those that see them as "giving voice" – mediating, though minimally, the "child soldier's" story (as if there were only one to tell) – the portrait of child militarization and recruitment found in these works is often exaggerated when compared with historical records. For instance, in her exhaustively researched study of the Biafran conflict, Uchendu makes no mention of persons as young as eight – the character of "Amex's" age in Abani's novel (SN 123) – recruited as mine diffusers.[35] Instead, where they were involved, she argues, boys as young as ten were often enlisted as spies (402). Of course, children involved in espionage still count as "child soldiers." In international law, the definition of a "child soldier" is any person under the age of eighteen who is involved with a military group in any capacity (Cape Town Principles). So, the child who cooks, cleans, and carries heavy loads, not only the child holding a gun, is categorized as a "child soldier." Nevertheless, spying is a much less dangerous task than the one My Luck performs in Abani's novel. At one point, My Luck tells the reader that his commander has surgically severed his vocal chords so that, should he step on a live mine, he will not distract his fellow child mine diffusers with his "death screams" (SN 25). It is important to remember, too, that Abani was only aged two when his family fled Biafra. His portrait of child militants in *Song for Night*, therefore, cannot be reliably drawn from memory.

[35] While I have not been able to find documentation of children used as mine diffusers, Abani's novel is correct in one respect: landmines, particularly the *ogbunigwe,* or "mass killer," *were* put to widespread use in the war and still retain close association with Biafran forces among survivors (cf. Harneit-Sievers' *A Social History of the Nigerian Civil War: Perspectives from Below*).

**Writing "Human Rights"**

In this section, I proceed to argue for "human rights literature" as a better way of framing Abani's, Iweala's, and Abani's novels than Mackey's and Hawley's rubrics of "giving voice." In other words, having begun to decouple the novels from the notion that they merely "amplify" or "record" particular conflicts, I now go on to consider the ways in which these works highlight specific aspects of child soldiering and suppress others, all whilst overlapping in their imagery and terms of reference with contemporary human rights organizations that seek the end of human suffering globally, often, through western-led interventions. In their introduction to *The Routledge Companion to Literature and Human Rights* (2016), McClennan and Schultheis Moore define "human rights literature" not as a "set of texts, but as the outcome of a reading practice that focuses on the interplay of literary representation and juridical-political rights work" (2). In what follows, I similarly read Iweala's, Abani's and Jarrett-Macauley's novels as engaged in "juridical-political rights work," setting them along prominent human rights discourses that share critical features, including a tendency to place endangered child figures in the arms of western "saviors."

In the introduction to his short study, *That the World May Know: Bearing Witness to Atrocity* (2007), which is divided into chapters addressing "Genocide," "Interrogation," "Burnout," and "Storytelling," James Dawes begins with this observation:

> Many of the most recognizable organizations that intervene in humanitarian crises do so in large part by using language instead of food, medicine, or weapons: the most important act of rescue, for them, is not delivering supplies, but asking questions, evaluating answers, and pleading with those of us who observe from a distance. (2)

Here Dawes points toward the reliance of many humanitarian organizations upon storytelling. Their use of personal narrative puts a face and name to human rights abuses;

components of setting, characterization, and plot cooperate to encourage audiences to identify empathetically with victims and donate money, time, and personal support. In his forward to *Theoretical Perspectives on Human Rights and Literature* (2012), Joseph Slaughter offers a similar portrait of how literature can prove helpful in protecting human rights. Slaughter recounts how Amnesty International, a prisoners' rights group, launched a successful campaign in 1961 by profiling the stories of "six men imprisoned by governments for their political or religious views" (xi). These stories, published in the British *Observer,* helped to generate public pressure on the erring governments, and, as Slaughter observers, "what literature does clearly has some influence on human rights" (xii). Literature can be a means of galvanizing public opinion such that rights abusers are either forced or persuaded to change their behavior and aid is provided to victims.

This is what one might call an "instrumental" conception of human rights literature, where literature not only helps us better understand human rights frameworks as a product of western cultural history; it actually contributes to these frameworks, serving to promote humanitarian action or rights protection in different regions of the world. In this sense, then, the relationship between human rights and literature explored in this chapter must be distinguished from Joseph Slaughter's thesis about the "mutually enabling fictions" of human rights law and the Bildungsroman. In the early chapters of *Human Rights, Inc.* (2007), Slaughter investigates how ideas drawn from Daniel Defoe's *Robinson Crusoe* (1719), particularly, about the development of the human personality, were influential in the drafting of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR), ratified in 1948 (47-48). His approach is, therefore, what I would call a "cultural heritage" analysis, thinking about the ways in which human rights frameworks and literary forms rest on shared, Enlightenment assumptions about what constitutes the "human" and

about the dignity of human life. Slaughter's work also, of course, though it is not so relevant to my immediate discussion, points to the colonial entanglements of human rights law, since world governments drafted documents such as the UDHR by drawing on peculiarly western notions of the "liberal subject," "freedom," and "society," that many scholars, for instance, Elizabeth Swanson Goldberg and Alexandra Schultheis Moore (2013), have gone on to critique (3-6).

By contrast, this chapter sees human rights literature, and specifically the three child soldier novels, as an extension of human rights law or discourses, or in other words, as an instrument that rationalizes or effects, possibly without specific intent, human rights discussion. As McClennan and Schultheis note, "[human rights literatures] exist with agendas, motives, and desires, some of which may not even be readily apparent to those that create them" (300). In other words, authors may write without a clear sense of the political structures their works, implicitly, endorse. So it is, too, with several child soldier novels, I argue, and go on to explore the ways in which Iweala's, Abani's, and Jarrett-Macauley's works may be seen as supporting humanitarian models – though it is not necessary, in my view, to understand the writers as explicitly aiming to promote African children's rescue in order to appreciate this as one salient outcome of their works.

Some examples of such "instrumental" human rights narratives, as I have termed them, may be found in Kay Schaffer's and Sidonie Smith's *Human Rights and Narrated Lives: The Ethics of Recognition* (2004). Most of the works Smith and Schaffer address are personal testimonies that attempt to raise the visibility of human rights abuses in America and abroad. Spreading their net wide, Schaffer and Smith, for instance, analyze narratives

about Korean "comfort women"[36] as well as the injustices of the American prison system. In *That the World May Know,* Dawes also explores several works that help to rationalize human rights discussions, such as a handful of novels written in the wake of the Rwandan Crisis. Even though the Crisis had already passed when these fictional works were published, many nevertheless plead for greater international attention to rights abuses in the future, arguing "never again" must atrocities like the genocide be allowed to occur. Zoe Norridge, noting such features, categorizes these works as "*testimonial narrative (non) fiction*," suggesting that, for example, by contesting anti-Tutsi propaganda and exploring themes of community reconciliation, they seek both the "commemoration and prevention of genocide" ("Writing Against Genocide" 255; emphasis in the original). The writer, in other words, steps into the role of activist, aiming to preserve human dignity through literary means.

It is worthwhile to pause and reflect on some of the controversies surrounding human rights and humanitarian frameworks generally, before going on to consider how they overlap with the three child soldier novels, as I explore. In his wider study, Dawes is largely uncritical, supportive even, of international intervention in humanitarian crises. This is far from a universal position; many, especially in the developing world, see human rights frameworks as both a product of, and tool used by, western countries to rationalize (neo)imperialist expansion. Illustrating this point, McClennan and Schultheis Moore cite the case of several post-9/11, Afghani poems studied by David Holloway, which explicitly "associate the discourse of human rights with imperialism in almost a matter-of-fact way" (403). In other words, many Afghans saw the alleged prevention of human rights abuses in their country as an excuse by the Americans to invade. Even within the US, many

[36] In the context of Schaffer and Smith's study, "comfort women" refers to sexual slaves used by the Imperial Japanese Army before and during the Second World War.

observers in the early 2000s viewed the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan as thinly veiled ruses for the US to secure oil streams in the Gulf. At the very least, according to McClennan and Schultheis Moore, George W. Bush's claim to protect the "rights" of some Afghanis by trampling the rights of others, was fraught through with "hypocrisy" (3).

These are complicated issues, and it is not my intention to adjudicate between them here, merely, to note the presence of a debate. As another source of controversy for some humanitarian approaches, they can, especially with regards to Africa, also be patronizing. The spoof of a 1980s UK musical group, "Band Aid," by a recent Norwegian group calling itself "Radi-Aid" reveals just how demeaning aid discourses often are. In the original 1984 video, "Band-Aid" called for western donations to help fight famine in Ethiopia. "Radi-Aid" facetiously turns the tables on this discourse by urging Africans to donate radiators to Norway, and uses a similar style of sentimental music video. "Honestly I find Band Aid really offensive," says Anja Bakken Rise, one of the organizers of "Radi-Aid," explaining the group's motivation: "'Where nothing ever grows, no rain nor rivers flow' – I mean, come on! I understand their motivation for writing this in 1984 [...] But the song and its video is so patronizing" (Chandler, "Radi-Aid: The Making of a Viral Video"). In this way, Rise brings salient attention to what this chapter derides as Afropessimism, or the persistent view that Africa is a "broken" continent in need of foreign aid. While the severity of the 1984 Ethiopian famine certainly did require multi-lateral action, and American support in particular, Rise objects less to the fact of western assistance, in my view, and more to the gross generalizations that groups like Band-Aid flaunt. "Nothing ever grows, no rain nor rivers": such statements condemn Africa, wrongly, to a future of perpetual poverty and crisis.

I am on the whole sympathetic to these views, but, however, return to a discussion of the complexities of human rights discourses later. For now, I want to trace the similarities between Iweala's, Abani's, and Jarrett-Macauley's works and humanitarian frameworks, as a way of understanding the former's images and themes. As I see it, human rights discourses and the three child soldier novels share four key traits, which help us to appreciate the novels' humanitarian commitments: 1) both are oriented toward western, not African audiences; 2) they use first-person address; 3) both rely on imagery of wounded bodies, children's bodies in particular; and, 4) they prioritize the western actor as rescuer, putting vulnerable child figures into the arms of mostly Anglo-American "savior" figures.

Beginning with the question of audience, humanitarian organizations "[plead] with those of us who observe from a distance," Meister writes at the start of his study, and as quoted above (2). That is to say, he understands human rights groups as looking not within the countries or regions they depict but instead without, bringing local stories of injury to the attention of a wider global audience. Iweala's, Abani's, and Jarrett-Macauley's novels are all, similarly, outward-facing: *Beasts of No Nation* was published by Harper Perennial in New York; *Song for Night* by Akashic Books in Brooklyn; and *Moses, Citizen and Me* by Granta in London, positioning them toward this "global" audience. Furthermore, all three novelists write in English, not in an African language, and their books are marketed and promoted internationally. Does this mean, therefore, that we can describe their novels as "instrumental" human rights works, effecting humanitarian discussion?

Certainly, it would be difficult to imagine a human rights novel that did not solicit the attention of an international or, more specifically, western audience with the power to

influence governments and mobilize financial aid. Yet, there are even more crucial ways in which Abani, Iweala, and Jarrett-Macauley draw from, or mesh with, humanitarian discourses. Dawes also brings attention to humanitarian organizations' predominant use of the first-person in their storytelling: "Indeed, for people in need of rescue and care, the hope of being able to tell their story is sometimes their only hope. How do you make your case? Get someone to believe you"? (2). As this statement implies, many of the narratives addressed in Dawes's *That the World May Know,* and which we may also describe as works of human rights literature, are told from a personal perspective. "*I* was covered by dead bodies. But my husband was not," human rights activist Spéciouse Mukayiraba says, remembering her devastating experiences during the 1994 Rwandan Crisis (qtd. in Dawes 45; emphasis added). Similarly, "*I* am blessed to have lived to inform you that even when my hours were darkest, I believed I could some day share my experiences with others," Valentino Achak Deng, a survivor of civil war in Southern Sudan, writes in the preface to *What is the What* (2006), which was co-authored with American novelist Dave Eggers (xv; emphasis added).

*What is the What* is a perplexing case of possible ventriloquism. Valentino Achak Deng, the subject of the "autobiographical novel," eventually migrated to the United States where he met Dave Eggers, an established writer and author of the bestselling memoir, *A Heartbreaking Work of Staggering Genius* (2000). *What is the What* is a result of their collaboration. On the one hand, Eggers arguably uses Deng's name and story to enhance his own fame. Lee Siegel of the *New Republic* particularly questions Eggers decision to label his work an "autobiographical novel": "How strange for one man to think that he could write the story of another man, a real living man who is perfectly capable of telling his story himself – and then call it autobiography?" ("The Niceness Racket"). Siegel

makes an astute point about the power imbalance implicit in Deng and Egger's relationship, wherein Deng's life and traumatic experiences serve as the material for Egger's best-selling "autobiography," which was even selected as a set text at several major universities. Notably, Deng's name does not appear on the book's cover as a co-author, lending further credence to Siegel's theory that Eggers has, in some way, stolen Deng's personal story. However, Eggers also sensitively creates room for Deng's story: the novel is the result of hundreds of hours of interviews. While Deng's name does not appear on the cover, it would be patronizing, at the very least, not to recognize his free and elective contribution to its creation.

More interesting, in my view, though, than the controversy surrounding the works' authorship is the peculiar construction of the narrative: *What is the What* moves back and forth between Deng's recent difficulties assimilating in America and his past experiences as a youth combatant in South Sudan. In this way, the novel creates a complex picture of global "atrocity"; attention is not unduly paid to Africa's problems at the neglect of America's. The novel opens with Deng tied and bound on the floor of his Atlanta apartment, the victim of a violent burglary. So, in Deng's/Eggers's novel, America is not the "virtuous" party, providing aid and succor to the rest of the world. In many ways, the social crises that Deng encounters in Sudan – disaffected youth, prolonged economic deprivation, and poor governance – are equally salient in the US, as *What is the What* makes clear. By narrating Deng's experiences during the second Sudanese civil war of 1983-2005 in parallel to the break-in at his Atlanta apartment, *What is the What* invites readers' to recognize the commonalities between the two countries, thereby unraveling narratives of Afropessimism (i.e. Africa as unique in its problems) and American exceptionalism (the US as striking in its successes) simultaneously.

Still, returning to the discussion of human rights discourses, there is little doubt that the novel attempts to generate awareness, especially among westerners, of human rights abuses happening in the so-called "third world," and so, is open to some of the critiques made above. The novel describes Deng's experiences as an underage combatant with the Sudanese People's Liberation Movement. It includes a map with place names and a historical summary to assist non-Sudanese readers. Demonstrating how his ambitions extend even beyond the text, in 2007, Deng founded his own charitable organization to help rebuild his hometown of Marial Bai. The Foundation remains active today, improving youth access to education in South Sudan. Further, the website for *What is the What* initially featured a "Reader's Guide" edited by Greg Larson and entitled "10 Things You Can Do for South Sudan," with key suggestions for readers on how to become more politically involved. In encouraging readers that they should not only read about or empathize with Deng's past experiences, but also take action to address conflicts on-going, the guide included advice such as "write a letter to your senator or representative" (#1) and "press for punitive measures against the [Northern Sudanese] regime" (#9). *What is the What* is, therefore, a paradigmatic example of what I have described as the "instrumental" human rights novel. It seeks to change minds, persuade governments, and un-lock material and financial resources – a portion of the book's profits went to support Deng's foundation directly.

Incidentally, Eggers, Deng's co-author, is another key figure within human rights writing. Through his press, McSweeney's, Eggers recently launched what Dawes describes as an "oral history series on human rights crises" entitled "Voice of Witness" (*That the World May Know* 176). Volumes in the "Voice of Witness" series include *Throwing Stones at the Moon: Narratives from Colombians Displaced by Violence* (2012) and *Palestine*

*Speaks: Narratives of Life Under Occupation* (2014). Though Egger's "Voice of Witness" series is, technically, a collection of oral histories, and so, more interested in documenting the past than affecting present politics, others of Eggers' publications following *What is the What* reveal an abiding preoccupation with the potential of literature to bring public attention to human rights abuses and concerns. For instance, in his non-fiction work, *Zeitoun* (2009), Eggers tells the story of an innocent American-Syrian man who was arrested and detained by American authorities in the wake of 9/11. This biography, like *What is the What*, seeks to change minds and, more specifically, to create a civil society movement that will place pressure on American officials, encouraging them to rethink legislation that trespasses on individual rights. In the work, Eggers describes how Zeitoun was painfully (and wrongfully) detained shortly after the controversial "Patriot Act" of 2001, which gave federal officials expanded powers of surveillance and arrest (American Civil Liberties Union).

To return now to the question of first-person address and its central role in human rights discourses, Abani's *Song for Night,* like several narratives mentioned above, is narrated in the first person. Human rights narratives, such as Deng's and Egger's novel, use the address of the first person to build a sense of trust and create empathy: the narrating "I" speaks to a listening "you" who will hopefully offer assistance or at the very least provide sympathy. Yet Abani's novel not only employs the intimate address of the first-person, it also arguably deepens this sense of intimacy by having My Luck communicate "telepathically": "What you hear is not my voice: I have not spoken in three years: not since I left boot camp" (SN 10). As mentioned earlier, My Luck's vocal chords and those of the other child soldiers in his platoon have been surgically severed in order to ensure their concentration. The "telepathic" means by which My Luck communicates

deepens the pathos of his narration. It makes his narrative of pain more urgent: if the reader does not "hear" and respond to his story, who will? The alternative to My Luck's mind-to-mind narration, as Abani's readers are reminded, is silence.

Iweala's novel also opens with a characteristic, narrating "I," as one way his novel, like Abani's, may be said to borrow from humanitarian campaigns: "It is starting like this. I am feeling itch like insect is crawling on my skin and then my head is just starting to tingle" (BNN 1). In this scene, Agu hides from several attackers. *Beasts of No Nation* indubitably owes part of its narration to the influence of Ken Saro-Wiwa, who was executed by the military dictatorship of Sani Abachi in 1995. Like Iweala's novel, Saro-Wiwa's *Sozaboy* (1985) also adopts the idiom of "Rotten English," a "hybridized, syncretic" language resulting from mixing between indigenous Nigerian languages and colonial English, according to Michael North ("Ken Saro-Wiwa's Sozaboy" 109). Both protagonists, Iweala's Agu and Saro-Wiwa's Mene, use the verb form of the present progressive (e.g. "I am looking at him"[37]) and litter their English with vivid, onomatopoeic phrases ("KWAPA! He is hitting me"[38]). Later passages of this chapter discuss how Agu's use of the present progressive may encode a sense of western childness in Iweala's novel. For now, it is important to emphasize that the child's pathetic, frequently victimized "I" – e.g. "I am tasting blood. I am feeling like vomiting" (BNN 3) – immediately pulls Iweala's reader into Agu's story, establishing an impression of need and trust: the reader wants to listen to, to help him.

By contrast, Jarrett-Macauley's *Moses, Citizen and Me* draws in the reader in a different way. Julia, the adult protagonist, not its titular child soldier, Citizen, narrates Jarrett-Macauley's novel. It would seem, therefore, that Jarrett-Macauley's work departs

[37] BN 3.
[38] Ibid.

from the usual convention. However, a useful conceptual tool for understanding the powerful presence of these other lives within Julia's story is Marianne Hirsch's well-known formulation of "Postmemory." According to Hirsch, postmemory "describes the relationship of the second generation to powerful, often traumatic experiences that preceded their births" (103). It is often used to consider the transmission of Holocaust experiences, for instance, from one generation to the next, where the memory of the older generation becomes the substance of history (or possibly myth) for the young.

Though the generations are inverted, in respect of Delia Jarrett-Macauley's novel, the concept of "postmemory" might be helpfully employed to describe how the memories and internal experiences of the child soldier characters become Julia's own. In one scene illustrating this transfer, Julia visits a local hairdresser and feels that the landscapes of Sierra Leone, including its desolate cast of child militants, are being pushed into her scalp: "The central parting of my head became a valley lying between high green mountains" (MCM 51); "Up the smooth dark skin of my neck marched a band of boy and girl soldiers, young, scabby creatures in all shapes and sizes" (MCM 51). The "marching" soldiers do a kind of violence on Julia's body, winding their way into her skin. Yet they also, more positively, bind her to a landscape and community from which – as a "returnee" from England – she has previously felt estranged. From this point on, Julia seems to possess the ability to know what the former child soldiers are thinking and feeling.

Consider this description of Julia watching the boy soldier Citizen during a performance of Decker's play (the novel often places child soldiers on stage, as if to register their status as objects of international attention): "He feels a gun being pressed into his hands, another gun pressed to his head [...] this is not what he wants" (MCM 208). Julia's narration becomes omniscient almost, peering deeply into the child's mind. Citizen

is mute at the start of the novel; he has spoken only a handful of words since the end of the war. Hence, for most of the narrative, he exists before the reader most vividly not as a voice, but as an energetically squirming body: "'Without warning he jumped to his feet, shouting into the air, hitting and punching" (MCM 41). After her visit to the hairdressers, Julia now appears to speak on the child soldier's behalf. Julia's witness, her narrating "I," becomes Citizen's. Through the process of postmemory, the form of first person-address is rendered a factor creating empathy and trust. The "child's" narrating "I," his first-hand witness, is now radioed – transmitted – through Julia's.

Alongside forms of first-person address, bodies – their visibility or place of priority within the text – provide another identifying feature of human rights novels that is also shared by Abani's, Iweala's, and Jarrett-Macauley's fiction. According to Matt Collin, a term popular throughout development studies is the phrase "poverty porn," which suggests that prevalent aid images, for instance "Save the Children" commercials, which focus on the wounded or emaciated human body as a way of generating concern, can often become voyeuristic, encouraging western or First World audiences to fixate, sometimes with an odd sense of pleasure or gratification, on the sight of the injured body, to the exclusion of other pressing rights concerns (Collin, "What is 'Poverty Porn'," aidthoughts.org). For instance, thinking only about wounded bodies may distract attention away from community ties severed by war or limitations placed on freedoms of speech by some governments. In my last chapter, I discussed poverty porn briefly: Azaro's prone body in *The Famished Road,* I argued, attracts the reader's pity and attention, though it also fetishizes the child's suffering. Moreover, images of "poverty porn" often distort the events that produced them: photography, by its very nature, cannot depict the globally connected webs of financial capital and economic dependency responsible for

many crises. "Poverty porn" is also frequently complicit in a process of ventriloquism, wherein the story of the suffering "Third World" subject is told, albeit visually, by an often "First World" journalist.

Further, when thinking of the hegemony of the body when it comes to both defining and protecting human rights, alongside humanitarian images, we might also place the special status of the word "genocide," a term used to describe the specific targeting of a racial, ethnic, or religious group for murder. "Genocide" is often used to describe violent, physical actions by one group against another – that is to say, crimes against bodies – and is unique in the way it can commit western governments to action.[39] As Robert Meister argues, "Today's Human Rights Discourse contributes to the counterrevolutionary project of reassuring structural beneficiaries by focusing on violent crimes against the *bodies* of victims" (14; emphasis added). What does Meister mean a "counterrevolutionary project"? In intervening in civil conflicts ostensibly to provide "aid" or "security," Meister suggests, western powers often end up either buttressing corrupt regimes or, at best, preserving the status quo. As a result, western powers prevent some new and possibly more humane governments from being born (cf. Ch. 1, "The Ideology and Ethics of Human Rights"). I return to some of these discussions later. For now, there seems little doubt that, for better or worse, the body does hold a special place in human rights discourses; we do not often act with the same swiftness or urgency when learning of crimes against other aspects of the human personality.

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[39]The term "genocide" has a specific definition within international law and is outlawed under Articles II and III of the 1948 Convention on the Prevention and Punishment of Genocide. In 2006, the US Government passed the Darfur Peace and Accountability Act increasing sanctions on the North Sudanese government and expanding peacekeeping forces in the region. The Act was widely seen as a direct outcome of President Bush's government declaring events in the region as "genocide" and is a good example of how the use of the term "genocide" can commit ratifying or acceding governments of the 1948 Convention on the Prevention and Punishment of Genocide to action.

Given the importance of the body to human rights discourses more generally, it is perhaps unsurprising that images of the body, especially the pathetic child-body, are especially prominent within human rights literatures. For example, nearly all of the novels and non-fiction narratives discussed by Dawes in *That the World May Know* focus on an event of physical injury. In Michael Ondaatje's *Anil's Ghost* (2000), the narrator and protagonist unearths a skeleton, nicknamed "Sailor," which she hopes will provide evidence of rights abuses to incriminate the ruling Sri Lankan regime. Ondaatje's novel is resonant with another human rights narrative addressed by Dawes, in which Clea Koff describes her work as a forensic anthropologist collecting evidence for the International Criminal Tribunal for Rwanda: "I had known for years that my goal was to help end human rights abuses by proving to would-be killers that *bones can talk*" (qtd. in Dawes 67; emphasis added). Admittedly, the geo-political contexts of these two narratives are distinct: one addresses military rule in Sri Lanka, while the other is situated in the aftermath of the Rwandan Crisis. Yet both prioritize bodily imagery as a way of acknowledging "truth." Koff, in particular, sees exhumed bones as evidentiary "texts" on which the genocide's events have been inscribed, and which can help bring justice to survivors.

Bodies in these two narratives work to point fingers at, or condemn guilty parties. Prioritized in other ways, bodily images may also serve to generate a sense of urgency or create concern: western audiences are used to seeing wounded or emaciated figures in "Save the Children" or "Red Cross" advertisements as signs to donate money or "act now." In Uzodinma Iweala's novel *Beasts of No Nation,* violence in respect of bodies follows the usual logic of the "outside-in," as perpetrators "jump" on their victims' chests, crushing them (BNN 63). However, putting physical violence center-stage, Iweala also shows us

bodies turned inside-out, possibly as a way of generating even more horror or concern within his reader. "Everything is inside out like my shirt I am wearing," Agu says at a critical point in the narrative (BNN 65). Agu struggles to separate present from past, nightmare from reality, as the bodies of the child soldiers' victims are torn asunder. At another key moment in the narrative, before his recruitment, Agu fears, alongside other villagers, that the rebel forces will "be playing with our body and using our intestine [sic] as whip" (BNN 88). In this way, Iweala's novel invites the reader to imagine one of the most horrific forms of abasement possible, in which the dignity of the human subject is grossly violated and his entrails exposed – as so many animals' – to the sky.

A gruesome logic of the "inside-out," or motifs of penetration, also applies to Agu's own physical suffering in *Beasts of No Nation*. I see this as yet another way in which Iweala's work resonates sympathetically with human rights discourses and read his novel, alongside Jarrett-Macauley's and Abani's, as creating a sense of crisis around militarized children. Of course, as mentioned, this does not have to be Iweala's specific intent for it to be a plausible effect of his writing. At several points *Beasts of No Nation*, Agu is raped by his "Commandant": "he was entering inside of me the way man goat is sometimes mistaking other man goat for woman goat and going inside of them" (BNN 104). Some readers have objected to this sensationalist, gratuitous violence: "This outstanding first novel would be even better if it did not deliver so much more shock value than genuine surprise," Janet Maslin writes, for instance, in her review of *Beasts of No Nation* ("A Conscripted Child Soldier's Tale"). Indeed, Iweala's description of Agu's rape is detailed and disturbing. "[M]y buttom [sic] is burning like it has fire in it," Agu says (BNN 104). The Commandant's fingers on his back feel like drops of "hot, hot boiling water" (BNN 109). Such "shock value" succeeds in creating an atmosphere of emergency around the child:

western audiences almost universally condemn child sexual abuse, as seen in the outraged response to the 2002 Boston Catholic church scandal, in which dozens of priests were found to have molested young girls and boys ("Scores of Priests Involved in Sex Abuse Cases").

Abani's novel is less graphic but, still, every bit as impactful, implicitly persuading readers of the need to aid children involved in war. It also in my view stirs sympathy within the reader through how it represents, and uses, the child body. In one of the most moving images from *Song for Night,* My Luck cuts a series of crosses into the skin of his arm: "one for every loved one I lost in the war" as well as "one for each person that I enjoyed killing" (BNN 28, 29). The crosses point to My Luck's psychological traumatization, his pain at experiencing personal loss as well as the psychic tolls of being forced to kill. As physical scars, however, the crosses also serve as echoes, reminders, of the many other somatic injuries My Luck has sustained throughout the narrative – not least his own demise. As the narrative progresses, Abani's reader eventually realizes My Luck has been killed in the opening mine explosion that has also separated him from his companions. Throughout the novel, Abani provides several clues to My Luck's death, such as when an old man asks him to step across a ritual line in order prove he is not a ghost: My Luck finds he cannot move (SN 104). My Luck remains a liminal, interstitial figure throughout the narrative, fully aligned with neither living communities nor the dead.

*Song for Night* might, therefore, be described therefore as a failed or "dissensual" Bildungsroman, similar to the narratives discussed in the following chapter. Badoe and Oyeyemi, I go on to argue, comment on the social marginalization of racial, cultural, gendered, and age-based minorities in Britain by showing their protagonists, who are all of these things, as unable to mature into "productive," fully-integrated members of their

society (*Human Rights, Inc.* 181). Likewise, when interpreted generously, Abani's novel lodges a form of political protest. My Luck cannot find a community in which he is embedded. So, seeing Abani's protagonist as representative for militarized children around the world, he figures the crisis of thousands of youth who have been let down by state and civil society, failed by institutions that were supposed to protect them, and shut out by communities that find former combatants' rehabilitation and reintegration difficult. As a less sympathetic interpretation of Abani's novel, however, the author may simply find it challenging to imagine a life after child soldiering. His novel feels "end-stopped," to borrow from Boehmer ("South African" 45), pulled short; it does not consider the possibly more complicated questions of what do to after a child has been "rescued." Again, My Luck cannot "grow up." The end of the novel places him in a shadowy afterlife. To an extent, *Song for Night* refuses to engage with the long-term social consequences of child soldiering, e.g. how to reintegrate demobilized combatants, how to restore them to productivity in the workforce.

In contrast to Iweala and Abani's novels, bodies do serve in Jarrett-Macauley's novel, *Moses, Citizen and Me* – as they do in the human rights narratives from Dawes's study – to point fingers or incriminate, not only to generate concern for the child. In one scene from the novel, Julia, and her uncle, Moses, develop photographs that Moses has taken of Sierra Leonean officials. They find in one corner of each a small image of a child "rising as a bruise must in response to a blow, scar tissue to a wound" (MCM 119). Jarrett-Macauley's language of physical injury in this passage is intriguing, as it implies that the child soldier figure is wounded, too. Given that he "ris[es] as a bruise," we, the novels' readers, might also imagine the ghostly child soldier is bruised; since he appears as "scar tissue to a wound," it is easy to develop in the mind the image of a child covered in

abrasions. Here, since it appears on photographs of Sierra Leonean government officials, the wounded image of the similarly wounded child might on the one hand be understood to indict the Sierra Leonean government for its failure to defeat the Revolutionary United Front, which widely employed children under the age of 18 during the civil war (cf. Richards Chapter 4: "The Voices of Young People"). The ghostly child emblematizes the many victims of the decade-long conflict, which the government might have prevented. On the other hand, it also possibly points to the fact that Federal, as well as rebel, forces recruited underage combatants, and so, contributed directly to many children's suffering. In Jarrett-Macauley's novel, the ghostly outline of a "small boy, holding a gun" hovers as a symbol of judgment over the head of the Sierra Leonean president, assigning him clear blame (MCM 119).

Whilst using imagery of the wounded body to point fingers, Jarrett-Macauley's novel, like Abani's and Iweala's, also brings readers directly to the image of the injured child-body, similarly creating a sense of urgency and concern. In one of the children's performances of Decker's Krio-language play, Julia describes the child-soldier actors kicking into the air, falling, fighting, and engaged in a mock-battle which Julia describes as a "wasteland of child flesh on show" (MCM 208). It is a highly carnivalesque scene, evoking some of the early violence of the civil war which *Moses, Citizen, and Me,* for the most part, leaves unexplored. That is to say, in my reading, Jarrett–Macauley's novel seems more interested in remembering and memorializing violence – for instance, through the children's performance and its proximity to their "real-life" experiences – than in investigating the experience of war directly. In this passage, Jarrett-Macauley's choice of words is, like her description of the ghostly child image, highly suggestive: "wasteland"

conveys a sense of desolation, while "flesh" intimates something almost inhuman, as though the children were carrion, laid out under circling vultures.

Although Jarrett-Macauley also presents the former child soldiers as clean, well-dressed and "sharp-witted," as she describes them in another scene (MCM 128), the predominant pathos created by the wounded child body in *Moses, Citizen and Me,* as well as in *Beasts of No Nation* and *Song for Night,* gestures towards the works' convergence with prominent humanitarian discourses. They participate eagerly in an imagery of injured, stolen childhoods(s), parading victimized children's bodies before their readers in a way that, indeed, recalls "Save the Children" advertisements, or as Clare Barker writes, "the non-western disabled child repackaged and redeployed [...] as an image of pathos, a symbol of incessant suffering" (9). Nancy Batty likewise critiques what she calls a "Semiotics of Seduction" in "International Children's Relief Efforts," which is emblematized, for Batty, in the image of the "eerily reflective eyes and bulging stomach of a starving infant" (18). Such images were particularly common during the Biafran War, when federal blockades led to widespread starvation in the southeastern region. "I do not intend either to disparage the work of this organization or diminish the tragedy of famine victims," Batty continues, "I do, however, question the way that the image and idea of the starving child have been manipulated," that is to say, how they help create a narrative that "(mis)informs the perception of the Third World in North America" (18). What is perhaps most important about these images is what they leave out, not what they feature. Notably absent is a sense of the competencies of African countries and of the African people working to improve them.

As still yet another way in which these novels mesh with humanitarian frameworks such that, in my reading, a subtle aid or interventionist message emerges, all three works

furthermore end with their child protagonists in the arms of mostly western "mother" figures. This is not necessarily a feature exclusive to the human rights novel. Many aid discourses similarly depict a western mother or "Savior" figure standing in for the absentee or defeated African parent: "the figure of the starving child performs a relentless, a historic narrative of Third World failure and helplessness" (Batty 18). Nonetheless, the image does highlight those ways in which these novels potentially inspire intervention, or do not simply describe the world as it is, but rather mount a case for how it should be, and, in mounting such an argument, deploy child imagery.

A parallel might be noted here with the child figure in Okri's *The Famished Road* which, I argued, functions as an image of inspiration – aspiration, even – providing Okri's reader with a model of how to foster creativity and, especially, embrace personal hardship: Azaro teaches Okri's reader a "lesson," in other words, about how best to respond to suffering. Here, the "salvific" endings at the close of Jarrett-Macauley's, Iweala, and Abani's novels are likewise instructive for the reader, not merely entertaining. They accept only one conclusion for the child at war: his salvation or rehabilitation. After the troupe of child soldiers has finished their production of Decker's play in Jarrett-Macauley's novel, they are shepherded onto peacekeeper trucks to be taken to a UN camp. "The time has come for you children to move on," Bemba G., their aged, shaman-like director tells them, "You can do it now" (MCM 211). The implication is that, through the catharsis of the children's performance, in which they re-enacted roles similar to the ones they held during the war – "Among the countless scenarios [Decker] had imagined surely never this one with performers who knew what is was to see a throat being slit" (209) – they have become ready to rejoin civilization. The children's brief time in the dream forest, which is depicted as a place of myth, magic, and, crucially, transformation in Jarrett-Macauley's

novel, serves as the bridge between the children's traumatic experiences of the war and their new life as "Citizens."

Jarrett-Macauley's novel is, indeed, unambiguous about the need for rescue and, moreover, clear about whom ultimately should be responsible for this task: the UN. "We needed this international community with us," Julia says, referring to the large group of aid workers who gather for the children's play (202). On the one hand, Jarrett-Macauley's novel is unusual in showing an indigenous figure, Bemba G., as an agent of rehabilitation. Bemba G. is modeled after a figure from Richards' ethnography of the Sierra Leonean conflict, *Fighting for the Rainforest: War, Youth, and Resources in Serra Leone* (1996): the "real" Bemba Gogbua is an oral performer, who tells Richards a story about violence, slavery, and the history of the Gola Forest (95-100). Similarly, in Jarrett-Macauley's novel, Bemba G. directs the children's play, confronts their personal histories of violence, and begins their journey towards individual and collective healing. Two additional local "healer" figures are supplied in Jarrett-Macauley's novel in Anita, Citizen's neighbor, and Olu, a young social worker who is the first person to care for Citizen at the reception center.

However, most of the responsibility for the children's rehabilitation falls to western actors, although the novel also subtly satirizes well-meaning foreigners in the German program director who marvels, condescendingly, that the "child soldiers are capable" of producing such a play (MCM 209). Julia, rightly, ignores his inane prattle. Mostly notably, it is Julia, the Londoner, who takes responsibility for Citizen. So, the novel lodges the final act of "rescue" with a western actor. In the closing scene, Julia imagines two futures for herself and Citizen. In one, she and Citizen decide to remain in Freetown, accompanied by Moses, Anita, and Olu (MCM 225). In the other, Julia dreams that she has

adopted Citizen and brought him back with her to London: "we jumped into the car and headed for a café off Lavender Hill" (MCM 225). The novel ends here, not in Sierra Leone, thereby suggesting that Julia's daydream is not merely a passing fantasy, but indeed an image of things to come. The child, ultimately, finds refuge in Britain, not in an African country.

Following a similar logic, Iweala's *Beasts of No Nation* also ends with its central "child" figure in a refugee camp, cared for by a "white woman from America" named Amy (BNN 175). In an article for the *Guardian,* Ali Smith reads the novel's last line as pointing out a terrible "lostness": "I am all of these things," Agu says to Amy, "but I am also having mother once, and she is loving me" (BNN 177). In emphasizing Agu's "lostness," Smith implies that Agu's statement is backward-looking, mourning the death of Agu's natural mother during the war. Yet we might also read this line, not as an image of abjection or dislocation, but as an image of hope. Agu's use of the present progressive in the novel, i.e. "I am also having," makes it difficult to separate the distant past, that is to say, his early childhood and time with his biological family, from the recent past, i.e. his time with Amy and afterwards. Hence, the "mother" to which Agu refers in this passage may not, in fact, be his mother of early childhood, but rather Amy, who, in Agu's words, "is just looking at me" and crying (BNN 176). Iweala's novel subtly encourages the reader to look through Amy's eyes, to pity Agu, and possibly, to take steps to rescue him.

Other critics have noted this tendency of child soldier novels and memoirs to end with their titular figures in the arms of western mother figures.[40] The Ethiopian novelist Dinaw Mengestu, for instance, states,

[40] As another example, at the end of the *A Long Way Gone,* a white, American woman named Laura adopts the former child soldier, Beah.

> What attracts immediate and superficial attention to Africa's child soldiers [...] is that the brutal existence of a child soldier dovetails neatly with depictions of Africa both as a place born of hell and misery and a continent that, *like a child*, can be saved. (qtd. in Schultheis 33; emphasis added).

Mengestu points angrily to what I have introduced as Afropessimism, which sees Africa as somehow "arrested" in its development and, therefore, in need of paternalist "rescue" by the west. Likewise, for Makau Mutua, Director of the Human Rights Center at the State University of New York, what is so disturbing about many human rights discourses is their use of the "SVS" metaphor, short for "Savage-Victim-Savior." The entire human rights regime, from pieces of international legislation down to works of fiction, Mutua argues, relies on a logic whereby African, or other "Third World" actors perform the role of "Savage," committing human rights atrocities against other "Third World" actors (i.e. "Victims"), while western actors uniquely get to play the role of "Savior." There are few counter-hegemonic possibilities within this logic: in each case, African subjects are consigned to roles that primarily dehumanize or immiserate them, while westerners, predominantly, enjoy positions of moral probity and power.

We see this geopolitical imbalance to some degree replicated in Abani's novel. My Luck's platoon leader, "John Wayne," is as, if not more of a "Savage" figure than Iweala's Commandant, who at least shows some regret in the suffering he causes Agu.[41] He is also more brutal than the Sierra Leonean president who functions as the "Savage" figure in Jarrett-Macauley's novel. "John Wayne" is of course a resonant appellation. Abani gestures wryly, in my reading, to America's bloody history of settler colonialism, in which cowboys like those played by the eponymous actor decimated indigenous populations with as least as much ferocity as "John Wayne" exhibits in Abani's novel. In one scene, John Wayne proposes to rape a "seven-year-old" girl named "Faith" (SN 31). The incident is a turning

[41] "Agu. I am not a bad man, he is saying softly and putting his hand on my back" (BN 108).

point for My Luck. From hereafter he will struggle to muster the same belief he once held in the Biafran cause. My Luck shoots John Wayne and accidentally kills "Faith" in the crossfire: "Gladness would come later," My Luck reflects about the death of his terrible leader, "But for now, all I could think was that *the only real casualty was Faith*" (SN 32; emphasis added). Though Abani's novel is, perhaps, heavy handed in its symbolism, the girl's name resonates with obvious, if also slightly over-determined meaning: My Luck has at last lost his loyalty to the rebels' cause.

Three additional "Savage" figures in Abani's novel are the witch-like women – possible references to Shakespeare's *Macbeth* – whom My Luck discovers in the forest (SN 18). In Shakespeare's play, the three witches are brewing potions, but in Abani's novel, the old crones feast on an infant corpse; understandably, My Luck's reaction to these women and their "gory feast" is one of repulsion (SN 18). Abani's novel paints a bleak picture of Biafran landscapes.

Mengestu's and Mutua's observations are both important, however, because they highlight a potential divergence in the ending of Abani's novel, not only showing some of the ways in which it fulfills the expectations of the "human rights" genre. Abani's novel does not replicate the clichés of the SVS metaphor wholesale. While on the one hand *Moses, Citizen and Me* and *Beasts of No Nation* both end with their central child figures in the arms of distinctly western "Savior"-figures (i.e. Julia in Jarrett-Macauley's novel and Amy in Iweala's), thereby exemplifying Mutua's SVS metaphor, *Song for Night* arguably subverts the western "Savior" trope: Abani's novel concludes with My Luck not in the arms of a western aid worker, but folded in the embrace of his own Nigerian mother, with whom he is reunited in the afterlife. "'Mother,' I say, and my voice has returned" (SN 158).

Abani's novel thereby subverts the SVS trope by putting a West African person, not a British or American one, in the role of "Savior." Nevertheless, the narrative's ending repeats some of the aforementioned patterns of Iweala's and Jarrett-Macauley's works. Whether West African or western, the only place for My Luck is in the arms of a mother. *Song for Night* tacitly aligns with humanitarian discourses that, according to David Rosen, "amplify the helplessness of children" ("Child Soldiers" 229), and, so, implicitly argue for their rescue. In this way, Abani's child soldier novel again deftly prescribes a humanitarian message: "making a case," not simply telling a story or describing past events. Moreover, if we consider that the majority of Abani's readership is likely to be in Europe and America, invited by the child's suffering and his first-person narration to imagine *themselves* in the role of rescuer, then perhaps *Song for Night* has done little to subvert the western "Savior" trope after all. Further to this point, My Luck's mother may not be said to fully embody "competence and efficacy," to quote from Batty on the problematic "displacing" of the Third World parent (18).[42] We must remember that My Luck's mother is already dead, killed in the northern pogroms (SN 72). Hence, the children who are My Luck's historical analogues in real-world conflicts will require another, possibly western, agent of salvation.

To summarize, in their use of the first-person, their marked attention to injured bodies, and their "salvific" endings with the militarized child safely in the arms of a western "mother" figure, we have good reason for reading three novels by Chris Abani, Uzodinma Iweala, and Jarrett-Macauley as human rights narratives, or works that assist, or are instrumental to, humanitarian discourses, not only resonant with them. These novels, in my view, build a subtle argument for the need to "rescue" children and use children figures as devices to do so. It is necessary, also, to take into account the contexts

[42] Batty critiques the way images from international children's relief efforts seduce their viewers into a paternalistic relationship with young, "Third World" crisis victims (18).

of reception into which these narratives emerged, when public concern for militarized children was at its zenith. For example, Graça Machel published her landmark UN report, "Impact of Armed Conflict on Children" as early as 1994. Yet Chris Blattman names 2006 – the year in between Abani's and Iweala's novels – as the date when the African child soldier became an "American icon" ("Stopping the Use"). In 2007, Starbucks, the global coffee company, chose Beah's memoir for special promotion, drawing attention to Africa's child soldiers as never before. Stoking the fires of public concern, *Invisible Children,* an activist campaign working to end the conscription of Ugandan children was founded only slightly earlier, in 2004.

To be sure, the years between Iweala's, Abani's, and Jarrett-Macauley's novels, 2005, 2006, and 2007, were among the most important for the child soldier figure, when s/he became a major presence on the world stage. Read within this environment of heightened attention, Iweala, Abani, and Jarrett-Macauley appear, at first, to be capitalizing on the child soldier crisis. Their fictions, potentially, leverage widespread anxiety surrounding Africa's child soldiers into increased sales. However, given the evidence of their novels, it is more probable, in my view, that the writers were aiming not to benefit by the crisis (though, that is in fact probably what occurred), but rather, in some ways, to contribute to it, or to convince readers that child recruitment is a global problem. At least, this is what is suggested by the way their works, similar to contemporary humanitarian campaigns such as *Invisible Children,* predominantly place child soldier figures in the hands of western "Savior" figures and underscore children's vulnerable, wounded bodies, as I have and will continue to discuss. Schultheis remarks, in particular, on the way in which *Invisible Children* encourages its mostly Western activists to "become hero[es]!" on its website, coaxing them into donating money or personal time

(34). The eponymous film made by the organization's founders, too, prioritizes child-bodies, panning slowly over masses hiding in bus stops and hospitals at night.

Iweala's, Abani's, and Jarrett-Macauley's novels, then, may be seen as part of a wider social movement in the mid-2000s, which sought an end to child recruitment worldwide. It was, and most likely is, easy for western readers to draw direct connections between Iweala's, Abani's, and Jarrett-Macauley's fictions and the more explicitly "activist" campaigns, such as Ishmael Beah's Foundation, which works to support children affected by violence in Sierra Leone. Moreover, some of the novelists, Abani especially, were and remain involved with humanitarian networks; it makes even more sense, therefore, to read their novels as informed by, and rationalizing, human rights discussion. Even today, Abani works closely with PEN International, an organization that supports freedoms of speech and creative expression globally. His website goes so far as to describe Abani as an "international voice on *humanitarianism*, art, ethics, and our shared responsibility" (www.chrisbani.com; emphasis added), so claiming human rights awareness as one outcome of his work. Jarrett-Macauley, too, has publicly praised the response of humanitarian workers in Sierra Leone: "[A]bout 7,000 former child soldiers have been [...] settled into community education programmes. Much work remains to be done" ("Caesar in Africa"). This statement, to my mind, professes profound support for western humanitarianism. It further suggests her novel as aimed at catalyzing, not only imagining, the rescue of African children.

## Childness in the Child Soldier Novel

"Child soldier" is itself something of a politicized term, further pointing towards these writers' embeddedness in humanitarian discourses. In a document unfortunately no longer available on her website, Jarrett-Macauley sets the word "child" against the term

"soldier." In one column, she lists words such as "play," "innocence," and "trusting," and, in the other, "adulthood," "violent," and "war." Already, looking at Jarrett-Macauley's two columns written out on a piece of paper, the term "child soldier" connotes notions of abnormality, criminality, and abuse. To be sure, compulsorily recruiting children below the age of eighteen is prohibited under international law, outlawed by a United Nations 2002 "Optional Protocol to the Convention on the Rights of the Child." In this section, I explore fundamentally western conceptions of childness in these novels as an additional part of how they function as human rights narratives, oriented toward the west and especially towards a western reader. I also continue to elaborate an argument for the child figure as symbol. The child's innocence, dependence, and vulnerability, all traits of his western childness, alongside his victimized embodiment, first-person address, and "rescue" by western powers, could be seen as part of the way in which childness functions as a device within these novels, working to prompt concern for – and potentially action to end – the use of under-18s in war.

The argument here is notably similar, though not identical to the one in the previous chapter, wherein I argued that Okri idealizes children, which Abani, Iweala, and Jarrett-Macauley also do, especially in the way in which they emphasize children as helpless victims in a regional crisis. Yet these latter authors' idealization of childhood has a more explicitly political outcome, I suggest: whereas Okri's Romanticized notions of childhood serve his theories of human creativity, helping the novelist to elaborate his concept of the artistic life, Iweala's, Abani's, and Jarrett-Macauley's ossified images of the "innocent" child, I suggest, implicitly support an argument in favor of humanitarian action. The "innocence" of the child, in other words, underscores his status as a victim. Moreover, as I go on to discuss, contrasting these novelists' images with more objective

accounts of child recruitment given by Paul Richardson and Jason Hunt, the novels also problematically distort understanding of African civil wars, especially of the conditions that encourage under-18s to join military groups.

The section, therefore, also raises a potential problem with children's symbolization. The representation of West Africa as a place of death, disease and "savagery" is, indeed, one problem that has been addressed by scholars in respect of several child soldier narratives already.[43] For instance, in an article for *Peace Review*, Alexandra Schultheis considers what she calls a "politics of humanitarian consumption" surrounding several child soldier narratives and films, including *Invisible Children*, in which stories of human suffering, as in the pain of the child soldier, are produced, packaged, and exported globally. Scholars such as Norridge have raised similar concerns, for instance, about the Rwandan genocide narratives that present the crisis as a result of mere African "tribalism," not of social inequalities – some dating to the colonial era – that helped to incite the violence ("Writing Against Genocide" 249-250). For Schultheis, relatedly, what is particularly alarming about contemporary child soldier narratives is how these can mask the "global structural inequalities" that contribute to the phenomenon of under-age recruitment, for instance, in the production of "light weaponry," "faulty family structures," and problems of "postcolonial statehood," which may make the exercise of good governance – and the protection of children – difficult (35). Instead, according to

[43] The recent Ebola crisis, in which travel bans were placed on several West African countries and persons from these places stigmatized, supplies continuing illustration of the way in which Africa is often depicted as the "dark continent" by global news organizations – a region characterized by suffering and death. Binyavanga Wainaina speaks eloquently about such issues in "How to Write About Africa" (2006), where he sets out just a few of the tropes that typify western representations of the continent: "Never have a picture of a well-adjusted African on the cover of your book or in it," Wainaina satirically advises, "[…] An AK-47, prominent ribs, naked breasts: use these" ("How to Write About Africa"). Unfortunately, Wainaina's satirical prescriptions remain all too common.

Schultheis, many organizations that condemn the use of under-18s as soldiers in Africa seem to imply that Africans are personally and morally at fault.

A more pressing concern for this thesis, however, is not how several child soldier novelists represent Africa, although that is a worthy topic of discussion; rather, I am interested in how they present, and especially what they do with, the child figure. This section draws on an idea first proposed by Sharon Snyder and David Mitchell that particular characters, especially, non-normative ones such as disabled persons as well as children (although, of course, these two figures should not be conflated), can serve as what they call a "narrative prosthesis" in literature: "disability pervades literary narrative, first, as a stock feature of characterization and, second, as an opportunistic metaphorical device" (48). In other words, Mitchell and Snyder observe a process whereby non-normative bodies help texts convey ideas that they would otherwise have difficulty articulating. The disabled body or, in this case, child-person comes to represent ideological concepts larger than itself, such as social "disorder," cultural "decline," and, most importantly within the context of this chapter, the notion of a continent in "crisis."

Building on these concepts, and using notions of "disability" more as an analogy than as a lens for reading, the reading that follows explores the child figure in Jarrett-Macauley's novel especially as a metaphorical contrivance, or in Barker's words, a "crutch that supports a text's figurate content" (131). In his or her fragile embodiment, innocence, and vulnerability, the child can be said to function as a "narrative prosthesis" for the humanitarian message of the novel to lean on, a prop for the narrative to exploit. Indeed, although Snyder and Mitchell do not say so explicitly, the process of serving as a metaphorical contrivance can be dehumanizing: "Disability marks a character as 'unlike' the rest of a fiction's cast, and once singled out, the character becomes a case of special

interest who retains originality to the detriment of all other characteristics" (Mitchell and Snyder 55-56). So it is, too, with several child figures. Children's childness, vulnerability, dependence, and especially innocence becomes a programmatic part of their personalities, as I go on to explore. The child soldier is not presented as a convincing character, but is stereotyped and again instrumentalized, his uniqueness as an individual swept aside.

What *is* a western conception of childness? Building on what was already said in the introduction about the differences between constructions of childhood globally, this chapter defines a western conception of childness by drawing from the work of Heather Montgomery. In remarking upon the first wave of childhood studies scholars, such as Allison James, Alan Prout, and Jean la Fontaine, Montgomery offers a useful starting definition of a western conception of childhood, where we of course allow that this might not be held by all persons living in western countries, and might hold true in places outside the west as well:

> In particular, they [La Fontaine, etc.] examined how childhood came to be understood in contemporary Western society as a time of separation from the adult world, where children were sent to school rather than staying with their families, where they were characterized as weak, powerless, dependent, and vulnerable, and as beings who must be protected rather than empowered" (43-44).

Montgomery draws out several key traits of western childness, acknowledging these traits as true of childness among the world's middle-classes as well: "weak[ness]," "powerless[ness]," "dependen[ce]," and "vulnerab[ility]." To this list, this chapter proposes to add one more: moral innocence.

In my proceeding chapter, I analyzed the way in which, for Okri, as for Romantic-era philosophers such as Rousseau, children enter the world in a state of perfection. Moral innocence is a long-standing trait of the western child, and well acknowledged. As Warner declares in her 1994 Reith lecture, "Little Angels, Little Devils: Keeping Childhood

Innocent," "Although the cultural and social investment in childhood innocence is constantly tested by experience, and assailed by doubts, it's [sic] still continued to grow" (45). Works of public legislation in western countries reinforce notions of children's innocence by protecting young people from criminal trial, although, the age at which children are deemed "criminally responsible" may seem to some surprisingly young. In Britain, for example, the minimum age at which children may be held culpable, to some degree, is 10 years ("Age of Criminal Responsibility"). In the US, where standards are set on a state-by-state basis, it ranges from 6 to 12 years (Unicef "Progress of Nations").

Weakness, powerlessness, dependence, and moral innocence: this is the cluster of traits with which we might conduct an analysis of specifically *western* childness in Iweala's, Abani's, and Jarrett-Macauley's novels, thinking about how these works draw from diverse, not only African, traditions. Uzodinma Iweala declares, in a statement quoted by Schultheis, "To me, Agu's voice is as much a character as his person"; "[it] tries to convey the *purity and simplicity of childhood* in contrast to the complexity and chaos of the events happening around him" (qtd. in Schultheis 38; emphasis added). Though one must be cautious of granting Iweala special privileges in the task of interpreting his novel, already, in Iweala's explicit attribution of "purity" and "simplicity" to the state of being a child, we find ourselves in a western imaginary – "innocence" being one of the aforementioned traits of western childness.

Agu's unusual narration could of course be understood, like Mene's in Saro-Wiwa's novel, to forward an anti-war message. The "child's" use of "pidgin" or "Rotten English," which transcends regional dialects and mixes various forms of standard and non-standard English, might be discerned as a figurative attempt to knit the nation back together, to undo the damage done by civil war. "[T]he virtue of Rotten English," Michael North

observes in his article on Saro-Wiwa's novel, "is due [...] to its rottenness, its impurity, which becomes in Saro-Wiwa's eyes a positive value at a time when deadly lines are being drawn between the major groups of Nigeria" (109). The transgression of "Rotten English" in crossing ethnic lines, in other words, subversively undermines the prevailing politics in 1960s Nigeria when Igbo, Yoruba, and Hausa faced one another in a bloody standoff.

Another reading of Agu's distinctive narration in *Beasts of No Nation,* however, is that it underlines his status as a child and, more explicitly, establishes his characterization as a child figure who is incredibly overwhelmed by what he is experiencing, who is too naïve or "simple," to quote from Iweala, to fully incorporate these experiences into his psychology. Iain Lambert concurs, "[Agu's] constant use of the present continuous as a narrative tense [...] provides an immediacy that is effective in conveying the adrenalin rush Agu is experiencing" (289). Relatedly, we might see Agu's use of the present progressive or present continuous as suggesting not only immediacy, but also his inability to get outside or gain mastery over his traumatic experiences, which include the deaths of his family, rape, murder, and constant fear for his life. Agu is unable to cope with what is happening around him, a common experience for trauma survivors, according to Elaine Scarry, who sees physical pain as "oliberat[ing] psychological content," or robbing a victim of his ways of making sense of the world (34). Scarry's study, though focused primarily on western, not African experiences of suffering, brings to light the way in which, for Agu, his experiences of pain have been "world-destroying." That is to say, Iweala's use of creolized or vernacular grammatical structures dislocates the speaker/narrator from the seat of agency, producing a persona to which things happen, but by whom little is decided: "I am tasting blood, I am feeling like vomiting" (BNN 3). Even the occasional use of the simple

past "I tast*ed,"* "I vomit*ed"* would remind us as Iweala's readers that Agu is looking back at these events from a position of relative safety following his rescue and rehabilitation.

Instead, partially through his choice of verb form, Iweala places Agu in the middle of the action, constantly reacting to events, and never quite fully possessed of what he is experiencing: "I am hearing screaming and gunfire" (58); "I am standing outside of myself," Agu says, in a violent scene in which he and several other child soldiers beat a woman and her daughter (BNN 63). Agu, in this way, separates himself from his violent actions. So, the child figure appears cognitively simple and "innocent"; yet, partially as a correlate of this affect, Agu appears morally innocent in my reading of Iweala's novel as well. In the passage just mentioned, in which Agu and his unit of child soldiers and rebels beat a woman and her child – "I am jumping on her chest KPWUD KPWUD and I am jumping on her head KPWUD" (BNN 63) – the child's professed out-of-body experience means that, as one possible interpretation of Iweala's work, he cannot be held accountable for the actions his body commits. Indeed, as the narrative progresses, Agu becomes more and more dissociated from his physical body: "Hunger is attacking me […] sleep is attacking me," Agu says in one emblematic passage (BNN 60). Scarry remarks that "a person in great pain," be it in a hospital, battlefield, or torture chamber, "experiences his own body as the agent of his agony" (*Body in Pain* 47). Iweala's novel lends substance to Scarry's theory: Agu senses that his body is his enemy.

To be sure, we may read this dissociation as an attempt on Iweala's part to portray Agu's physical and psychological traumatization, building on the links with Scarry's work. The more Agu suffers, the more he withdraws into his inner psyche, seeking (if unsuccessfully) to become inured to the violence around him. "I am just walking walking walking to where the sun is setting. I am looking at it and wanting to catch it in my hand

to be squeezing it until the colours are dripping out from it forever" (BNN 168-9). Agu's statement here suggests a profound state of apathy, or what mental health professionals call *anhedonia*: a desire to withdraw from the world. The *Oxford English Dictionary* defines anhedonia as "having little or no capacity to feel pleasure" ("anhedonia, n."). It is often a symptom of depressed individuals who have suffered trauma and, in Iweala's novel, serves as a reminder of the severity of Agu's experiences and their effect upon his psyche. Agu no longer feels he has control over his life and, worse, no longer desires it. Vibrancy and pleasure has been drained from his existence as, in Agu's dark fantasy, color drips languidly from the sun.

In returning to the question of Agu's moral innocence, we might also read Agu's antagonistic relationship to his body, which commits several horrific crimes without his permission, as it were, as a device on Iweala's part for distancing Agu from the violence, protecting his innocence, and so ensuring his freedom from culpability. Agu's separation from his body intimates, albeit indirectly, that he should not be held responsible for the actions his body commits. True, Agu's physical self perpetrates several crimes against others in Iweala's novel; though, lest we forget that his person, his seat of agency, and his body should not be equated, it is also Agu's own oppressor: "my feets are paining me because my skin is just rotting and peeling away [...]" (BNN 156); "my mouth is tasting of salt [...] It is making me to thirsty so much" (BNN 161). Iweala's novel once more supports Scarry's theory, exploring the way in which "The ceaseless, self-announcing signal of the body in pain [...]," as Scarry writes, "contains not only the feeling 'my body hurts' but the feeling 'my body hurts me'" (*Body in Pain* 47). In one scene, Agu even seems to equate his body with his gun. Both, in his perception, are allied against him: "if [gun] is saying go right, then my body is walking to the right [...] and if it saying for me to stop then I am

stopping to catch breath" (BNN 160-161). Agu in this scene presents his gun, not his mind, as his master. So, the sources of violence reside outside the child, not within him, and the child becomes the victim, not the perpetrator.

Iweala's novel stresses the child soldier's innocence also in other ways. "I am not a bad boy I am not a bad boy," Agu chants early during the war (BNN 29). The novel flashes back to scenes of Agu learning to read and declares his "favorite book" the "HOLY BIBLE" (BNN 30), making it difficult for the reader to doubt the child's claims. As a further key measure whereby Agu is shown to be morally innocent and not responsible for his actions in *Beasts of No Nation*, Agu is forcibly conscripted to join in the fighting. That is to say, Agu does not enter the conflict with full knowledge of what he is committing to, as neither does Saro-Wiwa's Mene, who joins to prove he is a real "man," a real "sozaboy." Instead, like Mene – though, arguably, Agu is even less free in his decisions – the child is swept along, threatened with death if he does not join the Commandant's unit. "What am I supposed to be doing? So I am joining. Just like that. I am soldier" (BNN 13). Reinforcing this point, in one scene in the novel the Commandant actually guides Agu's hand as he kills an enemy combatant: "he is taking my hand and bringing it down so hard on top of the enemy's head" (BNN 25). In this scene, Agu becomes a tool of violence. He is not the one instigating the crime, but is dehumanized, objectified by the Commandant's actions, which make him the mere instrument to murder.

An earlier section of this chapter explored Jarrett-Macauley's, Iweala's and Abani's as a-historical, or at least not strictly "factual" novels. I now resume that discussion, investigating how these works present a *particular* picture of child soldiering that brings them into conversation with humanitarian discourses and, accordingly, distances them from realities in historical regions where underage combatants are actually employed.

Iweala's picture here of child soldiering is substantially, if not dramatically different to the image we find in many sociological records; this, again, aligns his work with explicitly humanitarian perspectives, which likewise emphasize the "innocence" of the child at war. Schultheis, for instance, remarks upon the tenacity with which *Invisible Children's* founders insist on the "innocence" of Ugandan children despite observations from local intellectuals that they exhibited "violent, sexualized behavior" ("African Child Soldiers" 35). Indeed, according to Paul Richards, an esteemed ethnographer of the Sierra Leonean civil war, as well as many other scholars of child militarization, numerous child soldiers from around the world have actually joined groups of their own volition. In other words, to put this in the context of the wider chapter, against the western conception of the innocent child, we might counterpose how some child soldiers in West African countries actually are, or, if we dislike recourse to such a notion as a "real" child, then to what we have reasonable evidence for believing them to be.

In *Fighting for the Rainforest*, a riposte to Robert Kaplan's 1994 article "The Coming Anarchy,"[44] Richards describes under-18s in Sierra Leone who joined rebel forces in exchange for protection, access to medical services, food, education, and clothing (52; 54). Admittedly, military groups that offer children food or access to medical care may still be understood to be involved in coercion. In some cases, children are without provisions because rebel groups have killed their guardians or protectors (Richards 89). In other instances, young children cannot be expected to understand fully what their decision

[44] Kaplan's article in the *Atlantic* advanced what has since come to be known as the "New Barbarianism" thesis, arguing that "scarcity, crime, overpopulation, tribalism and disease" were on the rise in West Africa and would soon come to dominate the rest of the world ("The Coming Anarchy"). Richards's ethnography offers a counterargument to this hypothesis, in part, by outlining some of the structural causes of the violence West Africa, and – as in the case of the Sierra Leonean civil war – bringing attention to some of the fundamentally rational (i.e. not "barbaric") motives of many West African actors, including child soldiers (see Richards, Ch.2 "State Recession and Youth: The Political Culture of Patrimonial Decline").

entails – or what they are sacrificing for such limited goods as, say, new sneakers. Other children have joined military groups more freely, in order to achieve political change. Jason Hart, for instance, critiques a "child-focused humanitarianism" that "forecloses the possibility that children under 18 years old may be capable of engaging with political issues" ("The Politics of 'Child Soldiers'" (224). On the contrary, Hart argues, "for teenagers who have grown up in a highly politicized environment where survival depends on understanding and negotiating local power relations, the reality is likely very different" (224). Much of Hart's career research addresses youths who have joined armed groups for ideological reasons in Palestine.[45] Some under-18s even appear to relish the opportunity for violence. "When I was fighting, I enjoyed it – killing and destroying," says one former child combatant quoted by Jacqueline Bhabha in "The Child – What Sort of Human" (2005) (1532).

In such cases, it is important to be aware of issues of indoctrination and exploitation. Many military organizations may take advantage of children's lack of a tight-knit family group in order to convince children to join their units. For instance, one young Colombian combatant interviewed by Jamie Briggs professes to look upon his commander as his father, replacing the one he lost during the war. "[Piolin] is like a dad for me. He understands people. You ask him for a favor, and he does it right away" (qtd. in Briggs 76). As another tactic of exploitation, military leaders may terrorize their young recruits or, in one of the images of child soldiering popular in television and film,[46] expose them to mind-altering substances, rendering them more reckless or risk seeking in battle. The easy

[45] See, for instance, Hart's articles "Children and Nationalism in a Palestinian Refugee Camp in Jordan" (2002) and "Displaced Children's Participation in Political Violence: Towards Greater Understanding of Mobilisation" (2008).

[46] For example, in the 2008 film *Johnny Mad Dog,* which is based on Emmanuel Dongola's novel *Johnny Chien Méchant*, a troupe of Liberian child soldiers are fed cocaine.

exploitation or indoctrination of children by no means legitimizes the use of youth in conflict. In fact, it may even be said to point to the enormity of child recruitment, as under-18s prove easily influenced, less able, possibly, than adults to resist social persuasion or coercion. As one conflict zone psychologist interviewed by Peter Singer remarks: "It [is] sobering to think that under certain conditions, practically any child could be changed into a killer" (qtd. in Singer 75). Nevertheless, the child who enjoys killing and fighting, or who does so voluntarily, for rational social, economic, and political reasons, not as a result of coercion, radically challenges western ideals of the innocence of youth. As Jacqueline Bhabha puts it, writing about the former child soldier quoted above, "Such a case is hard to square with the idea of the sanctity or distinctiveness of childhood" (1532).

The emphasis placed on children's moral innocence in international discourses of human rights is worrying to scholars such as Bhabha, Hart, and Richards – and to me – because, in certain cases, it can distract from the real issues at stake. For instance, seeing under-18s as entirely without volition in their participation in military conflicts may draw attention away from the justified dissatisfactions some youth have with their societies. A classic case here, alongside Hart's examples, are the Sierra Leonean youths who, according to Richards, joined the Revolutionary United Front (RUF) after economic decline in the country eroded the networks of patronage that were their main source of access to schooling. As early as 1977, Richards observes, student riots were common and unrest over unsatisfactory education persistent (52). Therefore, "when the RUF invaded Sierra Leone it sensed a potentially receptive audience among the many *drɛgman dɛm* (youths struggling for their livelihoods and living by their wits) in the diamond districts" (Richards 52). Some

of these young men, aiming to improve their future prospects, joined the RUF voluntarily (Richards 52).

Relatedly, in the case of children who "may already lack the internal constraints against violence that ordinarily develop" (Singer 75), seeing these as innocent, and not already inclined to violence, overlooks the social breakdowns that have taken place in these young person's communities. In many cases, structural defects, say, in the economy or political order, leave children without "positive role models, a healthy family life, and the rewards for socially constructive behaviors" (Singer 75). To quote from Hart, who articulates many of these ideas clearly, "Abhorrence needs to be combined with clear-sighted analysis of the multiple factors that give rise to situations of child soldiering," so that the needs both of militarized under-18s and their communities may be addressed ("The Politics of 'Child Soldiers'" 224). One particularly overlooked aspect of child soldiering is that some communities see militarized youth as guilty. Speaking of Sierra Leone, Rosen observes, "[…] the Sierra Leone government, and numerous Sierra Leoneans […] felt that justice could not be served unless some children were put on trial for their crimes" ("Child Soldiers" 302). It may be necessary, therefore, to admit some guilt on the part of former child soldiers in order to achieve social reunification.

The international advocacy group is not alone in eschewing local contexts; the child soldier novel, too, also favors a pared-down picture of child recruitment. For instance, in almost all the novels addressed – Iweala's especially – children are conscripted by force. Indeed, despite the fact that many under-18s do join military groups of their own volition, and, therefore, may appear to be at least partially or potentially culpable, Iweala's novel, as we have seen, remains remarkably committed to the idea of a fundamentally innocent child. It is hence at risk of some of the same problems as "child-focused

humanitarianism": that is to say, of obscuring the complexity of child soldiering in African countries and so reducing awareness of the complicated factors that lead to children's involvement with military groups.

Abani's *Song for Night* admittedly revises the western trope of innocence and dependence; Abani attributes to children some independence and capability – culpability, too. In Abani's novel, My Luck is fifteen, so, much older than Agu and nearer to the notion of an "anti-social youth." He moreover explicitly tells the reader that he enjoys killing: "the truth is, deep down somewhere I enjoy it, revel in it almost" (12). At times, My Luck engages in the fighting directly, for instance, by shooting the three old women at the campsite. He and his fellow child soldiers are also heavily involved in the conflict by diffusing landmines – a skilled task, though, crucially, My Luck diminishes the skill that is required:

> We were not chosen for our manual dexterity or because of our advanced intelligence, though most of us are very intelligent. We were chosen simply because we were small, slight even, and looked like we wouldn't grow much in the nutrition-lacking environment of a battlefield. (SN 10)

Abani seems to give My Luck a backdoor out of adolescence in this passage, emphasizing his diminutive, child-like frame. The child is competent and capable as a mine diffuser, certainly, yet he is also depicted as vulnerable and fragile. My Luck describes himself as physically no bigger than a "twelve-year-old" – in a word, pathetic (SN 11). It is possible to see this as one attempt on Abani's part to protect his protagonist from culpability.

To be sure, given his complicity in the violence, it is remarkable that Abani is able to retain any notion of innocence for My Luck at all. Abani in my view partially accomplishes this, however, not only by underscoring My Luck's "slight" frame, but also by making all of My Luck's intended "victims," such as the three old women and his commander, grotesque: "John Wayne, the officer who enlisted and trained us and

supervised our throat-cutting [...] the man who was determined to turn us into animals" (29). My Luck clearly finds John Wayne repelling, which he is; it is difficult to fault the protagonist for his role in John Wayne's death. My Luck also develops a love interest in fourteen-year-old Ijeoma, which reveals his lack of sexual innocence – "In the faint light I see her body [...] the womanly swell of her hips belying the small buds on her chest" (SN 50) – but also serves to make My Luck more relatable, undersigning his status as a victim. With Ijeoma, that is to say, My Luck is able to reflect back on his early days of childhood. He is able to remember all that he has lost. "While I don't feel innocent, and even though I no longer know what that can mean, it seems attainable," My Luck says, basking in Ijeoma's presence (SN 50). His statement holds out the possibility of a return to "innocence," even though, as My Luck admits, it is presently difficult for him to understand what this term precisely means: the events of war have so clouded his memories of a life without fear, without pain, without violence.

Abani's readers, in other words, are not allowed to see My Luck as wholly culpable in Abani's novel, but rather encouraged to recognize how he can yet be rescued from his current predicament, "restored" to childhood, as in the novel's ending. Of course, My Luck's reunion with his mother does not necessarily signal his regained "innocence," though it strongly gestures towards it. With the meeting of his mother, My Luck finds his "voice has returned" (SN 158). It is an image of hopeful rejuvenation, of turning back the clock. Reinforcing this point, a woman named "Grace" escorts My Luck to the afterlife: in Abani's novel, where almost every appellation holds a deeper meaning, the woman's name suggests that My Luck has been pardoned for his crimes. At the same time, however, it also highlights My Luck's fault; "grace" reveals a need to be forgiven. In many ways, *Song*

*for Night* is a more complicated novel than Iweala's, more willing to embrace children's capacity for wrong.

A regime of innocence, dependence, and vulnerability is more firmly reinstated in Jarrett-Macauley's novel. Of the three, this work seems most clearly to stereotype children, not approaching them as social agents with wills and desires of their owns, but rather turning the child figure into a "narrative prosthesis," a prop for the novel's politics of humanitarian advocacy. In *Moses, Citizen, and Me,* Jarrett-Macauley shows us Citizen as morally innocent. He is forced by his commander to kill his grandmother, brainwashed by his fellow combatants. As another sign of the novel's position within a western imaginary of childness – and a rather stereotypical one at that – it also characterizes Citizen as weak and dependent. Citizen is infantilized at several points in the narrative, as when workers at the rehabilitation centre draw attention to his "baby-sized hands and fingers" (MCM 219). Jarrett-Macauley often brings attention to Citizen's diminutive body, appearing to underline Citizen's physical powerlessness. In one scene, Citizen flies at Julia with kicks and punches, yet the narrator remains unharmed (MCM 41). In another scene, Julia describes him as looking "burnt" and "punished" (MCM 7), terms that underscore his pathos in the novel.

Elsewhere, Julia furthermore uses the child-body to intuit the truth of Citizen's inner experiences. When Citizen has a vision of his grandmother, Adele, Julia "reads" his facial features: "His face spoke of a heart softening from fossil to pearly shell. His open lips said the shell was ready to be broken" (MCM 208). This is rather similar to the way in which children's bodies have sometimes been turned into documents at critical junctures in western history, "read" as clues to their inner feelings or experiences. For instance, in Alan Prout's *The Body, Childhood and Society* (2000), Nick Lee discusses how, in the

"Cleveland Crisis" of 1987, local pediatricians in Cleveland county diagnosed 125 children as sexually abused by using a technique called Renal Anal Dilation (RAD). The technique of RAD involves separating the buttocks to stimulate the external and internal sphincter. In the "Cleveland Crisis," evidence from this procedure was used in the court, displacing children's spoken testimony. Hence, as Lee sums the jurists' prevailing attitude, "The truth of the child is to be found in her physical body" (149) – *not* in his or her use of language.

Similarly, in *The Bite of the Mango,* Kamara describes how, when she requested not to be fitted for prostheses, arguing that they made simple tasks like eating, dressing, and carrying small objects more difficult not less, Canadian aid workers equipped her with them anyway. Similar to the children involved in the Cleveland scandal, Kamara's body was judged to be more "truthful" than her voice; her spoken testimony was negated. We see a similar process underway in Jarrett-Macauley's novel, where adults, like Julia, "read" the surfaces of children's bodies for their inner lives, as a kind of palimpsest. The children's own thoughts and feelings are subsequently displaced, pushed from the central focus of the narrative. In another scene similar to the one above, Julia intuits Citizen's thought-processes, not precisely from his body, but still, from his physical actions. He hands her a block of wood carved into "439K," which is etched permanently onto the back of his head, a vestige from the war. "*Citizen had needed to make it* and I had needed to see it […] He must have asked himself many questions as to 'why' he had become 439K […]" (MCM 163; emphasis added). Here, as in the above, the child's actions speak the "truth," for Julia, of his inner feelings – emotions he rarely has the opportunity to communicate for himself.

To be sure, there is a kind of "resistance" in Citizen's refusal to speak, and prudence in Jarrett-Macauley's hesitancy to put words into his mouth. Her novel keeps a

respectful distance from the actual events of the war, not wishing, possibly, to attract the same criticisms as Eggers's work about the "ventriloquism" of its author. The novel takes care to avoid the risks inherent in a "First World" writer attempting to recreate the experiences of a "Third World" subject. It largely leaves the actual events of the war to memory, dealing mostly with the difficult questions of witnessing, memorialization and, as Mackey observes, "responsibility": much of the novel's suspense revolves around the question of whether or not Julia will take custody of Citizen. Yet, for me, the respectful distancing of *Moses, Citizen, and Me* borders on a problematic silencing, especially when seen in the light of the suppression of children's voices in hospitals and courtrooms, as discussed above. Allison James and Alan Prout, furthermore, remark, "The history of the study of childhood in the social sciences has been marked not by an absence of interest in children [...] but by their silence" (7). In other words, for many years, children in scientific study – as in law and medicine – were merely observed from afar; only recently have scholars such as James and Prout begun interviewing children, not merely talking *about* them.

As one strength of her novel, it is clear that Jarrett-Macauley wishes to explore the traumatic effects of violence. "Was there any bridge back to normal childhood?" Julia asks in respect of Citizen (15). The horror of what Citizen has experienced makes him, for Julia, "confused and confusing" (MCM 15). Much of the narrative considers the possibilities for reconciliation between Citizen and his community, for instance, through his interactions with his relatives and neighbors. Yet Jarrett-Macauley's efforts to emphasize Citizen's traumatization – to stress his distance from her and from a "normal" child – and, especially, his overwhelming silence in the narrative, mean that we, her readers, largely lose sight of Citizen as a separate character. Instead, Citizen more often seems a vessel, a

metaphorical contrivance for Julia to work out her neuroses about the violence: "*Citizen, wear your name with pride* […] *You were never meant to be a soldier, just a boy-citizen named George*" (MCM 195; emphasis in the original). The novel's focalization with Julia, here and elsewhere, obscures what Citizen is actually thinking. It allows him to be a channel through which the narrator is able to explore her own difficult responses to violence. The result is self-indulgent, narcissistic almost, marginalizing children's voices to the advantage of adults'. "Could anything have prepared *me* for this?" Julia asks desperately of Citizen's crimes in another passage (MCM 7; emphasis added).

With Citizen, in other words, we do not feel ourselves in the presence of a real "living" child, but rather of a flattened image, one that Jarrett-Macauley has in a sense plucked from the global media and pinned to the page. According to her article for TES, Jarrett-Macauley first learned about child soldiering by watching a news report on the BBC. Within the context of her novel's representation of children, this admission is striking: a western media outlet facilitated Jarrett-Macauley's initial encounter with Africa's child soldiers. She is careful to observe that "I have never met a child soldier, but I have heard many tales of how grim such an existence is" ("Caesar in Africa"). "A boy soldier to the last, he stared at my anxious face, knowing that I wanted to run but could not," Julia says in respect of Citizen in the novel (MCM 162). Citizen eventually relinquishes the knife with which he threatens Julia in this passage, thereby affirming his fundamental innocence as a child who is viewed, within the novel, through a predominantly western lens. Still, as a part of the way in which he appears as an underdeveloped character, Citizen also struggles to escape this limited "boy soldier" persona throughout the narrative.

True, Jarrett-Macauley may emphasize Citizen's and the rest of the child soldiers' militarized status – she refers to them as "child soldiers" throughout the novel although, technically, they have been demobilized – in order to highlight the difficulty of rehabilitating and socially re-integrating children who have been involved in violence. Mackey argues of *Moses, Citizen and Me*, comparing it to *Beasts of No Nation* and *Song for Night*, "The novel also, like Iweala and Abani's texts, encourages the reader to consider what happens to child soldiers after the dehumanizing experiences of war" (113). At the same time, there is a strong sense in the novel that Julia is not able to depict Citizen convincingly as a person because he is not, in many ways, a person to her: "I was afraid of him; not because he was dangerous, but because I didn't know him at all, did not know how I could reach his mind" (MCM 8-9). Citizen's horrific experiences and the effects of these on his psyche are almost more than Julia is able to imagine. This could be seen, once more, as a way of paying homage – and respect – to Citizen's (and real-life child soldiers') horrific experiences. Yet, in my reading it is also depersonalizing. It is difficult for the reader to truly empathize with, not just pity, Citizen throughout the narrative because he remains more of a symbol, or "narrative prosthesis" iconizing crisis, than a character. He lacks individuality and substance.

A similar process, though one not quite so pronounced, also emerges in Iweala's novel. In *Beasts of No Nation*, Agu appears to be an amalgam of assorted child soldier figures from the media, with aspects taken from various news stories (in his interview with Dinitia Smith, Iweala cites an 1994 *Newsweek* story as a primary inspiration), none of which align to give a strong sense of individuality or personal history in the novel. Thus, Iweala, too, is inspired in his representations of African children by western media sources; he brings these together to craft an image of childness that, as in Jarrett-

Macauley's novel, is drained of subtlety and complexity. Rather than a convincing personality, Agu, like Citizen, is most often alive to the reader as a pulsating physical body, a "body in pain," to borrow from Scarry's title. That is to say, in his mediatized figuration and foregrounded physicality, Agu becomes a "symptom of life's sordid aspects," to quote from Stephanie Yorke and her work on disability; he does not appear as an image of a "life *with* sordid aspects" ("Materiality, Construction, and the Disabled Body"; emphasis in the original). The distinction is important. As in Jarrett-Macauley's novel, Iweala's reader may find it challenging to appreciate Agu as a separate character behind his physical suffering. The reader struggles to move beyond his many injuries to arrive at a robust sense of his personhood in the work.

To put it differently, Agu, like Citizen, is a mono-dimensional or flattened character in my reading of Iweala's novel. He becomes stigmatized, fetishized even, presented as a physical spectacle but seldom as possessing a self-reflexive inner mind. Corporeal images of pain dominate the narrative from its earliest passages, effectively obscuring Agu's unique personality. "It is starting like this I am feeling itch like insect is crawling on my skin and then my head is starting to tingle right between my eye, and then I am wanting to sneeze," Agu says, as he waits in hiding for the rebels to find him (BNN 1). Later, Iweala describes Agu's heart beating wildly in his chest, "BUMP BUMP. BUMP. BUMP" (BNN 19). In both passages, we are not told anything of Agu's fearful emotions, which are channeled through his body. "[…] I am saying to myself if it is time to be killing I am ready, but I'm putting my hand between my leg because I am feeling like I need to be going to toilet" (BNN 19). Hence, Agu too, might be named a prosthetic contrivance. He exists more as a vehicle for the novel's tacit humanitarian message, to communicate or

make clear the horror of child recruitment, than as an autonomous, complex, or compelling character.

## Pain in the Child-Body

The next section further considers the child as a symbol, with particular reference to the child-body as a device of "truth" or truth-telling, and not so much as a prosthetic contrivance. The child soldier genre has been plagued by a number of credibility crises in recent years. Authors involved in these crises include Abani, whose collection of poems *Kalakuta Republic* (2000) has recently come under fire from several bloggers, who have questioned a number of the truth claims of the work, including the assertion made that Abani was briefly imprisoned by the Nigerian government. This section first considers the implication of these attacks for how readers encounter child soldier narratives; it also reflects upon the difficulties of traumatic witness, as another factor that might be understood to undermine the relationship of trust between the narrator and the reader, which I see as essential for how these narratives draw from, and deepen, a sense of crisis surrounding militarized children.

Indeed, the "witness" of the child soldier, or the way in which these narratives might be understood as expressing an "authentic" voice of pain is fundamental to how they operate human rights works making a case, albeit an implicit one, for the need to "rescue" children involved in African wars. "Telling the *True* Story of the Child Soldier," reads the original subtitle to Ishmael Beah's *A Long Way Gone* (it was later changed to "Memoirs of a Boy Soldier"). "[I]t reads, *in all its truth*, like fable," Ali Smith says of Uzodinma Iweala's *Beasts of No Nation* for *The Guardian* ("The Lost Boys"; emphasis added). Smith's description suggests a particularity to Iweala's novel: "its" truth" not "the" truth. Yet her review also coordinates *Beasts of No Nation* with recent African conflicts,

such as the war in Sierra Leone. The child soldier genre is, as we have seen, widely populated with truth claims. For instance, in an interview for National Public Radio, Abani tells Michael Martin that in *Song for Night* he wanted to write a novel that "would speak to young people and to people everywhere about what war *really* does to young people and does to their psychology" ("'Song for Night' Highlights Hope, Despair"; emphasis added). Abani's stress here on the word "really," suggestive of actuality or fact, is interesting to me; it seems that Abani would wish readers to approach his novel as an act of bearing witness to the experiences of real children involved in violence.

The section, then, moves into a discussion of how bodies in "human rights" narratives generally, but especially in Abani's *Song for Night,* might be understood to provide some protection from the uncertainty that is introduced to the genre by the constant questioning of credibility and the problematic nature of traumatic "truth." I consider somatic imagery in China Keitetsi's *Child at War*: *Fighting for My Life* (2002) as illustrative of the connection between physical suffering and auctorial legitimacy that is found in some human rights discourses, and end with a discussion of Abani's novel, in particular, as a work that utilizes the child-body in fascinating ways. One outcome of the way in which My Luck's and the other child soldiers' bodies are presented in Abani's novel, I submit, is that it lends a kind of credibility to the child's witness. As I go on to explore, the body speaks through its own suffering directly, through the medium of Sign, in *Song for Night*. With their vocal chords severed, the children of My Luck's platoon are forced to communicate with one another through gesture, a feature of Abani's novel I examine.

In 2008, the publishers of Ishmael Beah's memoir were faced with a dilemma: to discontinue promoting Beah's first-hand account of his involvement in the Sierra Leonean

civil war, or to change the subtitle of the work from "Telling the True Story of a Child at War" (which clearly labeled the work as non-fiction) to "Memoirs of a Boy Soldier" (a statement less direct in its truth-claims). The dilemma came following a 4,600-word article that had been released by *The Australia*n, which questioned key details of Beah's experiences, such as his claim to have been recruited at the age of 13 not 15, as the magazine identified, and, so, to have spent two years not two months with federal forces. *The Australian* also challenged Beah's assertion that he was shot in the foot with an AK-47 and witnessed brutal murders in a UN refugee camp (Sherman "The Fog of Memoir").

Public scandal followed almost immediately. A student reporter questioned Beah about the dates of his experiences when he arrived to speak at the Oxford Student Union (ibid.). Several newspapers, including the *Times* and the *Guardian*, repeated the story (cf. Appleyard; McMahon). James Frey's faux memoir of recovering from drug abuse, *A Million Little Pieces* (2003), and Margaret Seltzer's faked account of her involvement in a notorious Los Angeles gang, *Love and Consequences* (2008), had been discredited around the same time, helping to stoke public interest in the controversy surrounding Beah's memoir. Today, Beah continues to travel and speak widely as an advocate for Unicef. However, it seems that Beah has been affected by the negative attention his memoir received. His latest work, *The Radiance of Tomorrow* (2014), is a novel, not a memoir, despite the fact that it, like *A Long Way Gone,* also addresses events related to the Sierra Leonean civil war.

The most recent credibility controversy to involve an Anglophone child soldier writer concerns Chris Abani. Abani's collection of poems, *Kalakuta Republic,* is reputedly based on a period of imprisonment that Abani endured when his first novel, *Masters of the Board* (1984), attracted the ire of Nigerian authorities. According to Abani, *Masters of the*

*Board* was suspected of inciting a military coup when the leader of a conspiracy was found to have it in his possession (Tunca, "Christopher Abani"). *Kalakuta Republic* details the tragic lives of some of Nigeria's maximum-security prisoners. One notable poem, for instance, describes the torture and death of a 14-year-old prisoner, "John James," whose penis is nailed to a table and the victim left to "drip/to death/3 day later" (qtd. in Schultheis 33). It is a highly sensationalized image of a child in pain and, seemingly, little based on actual fact. According to Ikhide Ikheloa, author of a popular blog on Nigerian writing, Abani is unlikely to have been imprisoned in Nigeria in the first place. "Kalakuta prison! Who knows of such a prison?" Ikehloa asks, questioning the veracity of Abani's claims ("The Trials of Chris Abani").

It is worth noting that Ikheloa's views are often extreme or inflated. For instance, in another article he calls for the University of California, Riverside to take the measure of removing Abani's website from its platform.[47] Yet, it seems equally evident that Abani plays fast and loose with "narrative truth," stretching fiction into fact. This chapter, earlier, noted a discrepancy in Abani's *Daphne's Lot*: Abani could not possibly have been old enough to remember the events he describes. Other bloggers have picked up the debate surrounding Abani's poetry collection, putting further cracks in the edifice of Abani's auctorial credibility. In "Chris Abani: Lie$ of the Truth-Seller," Kennedy Emetulu notes, alongside Ikheloa, that there is little evidence to support Abani's claim that he was imprisoned before fleeing Nigeria, as he describes in *Kalakuta*: "[…] the writer Lola Shoneyin, who along with other writers […] had been involved in a six-month investigation of the Abani incarceration story in Nigeria, reported back that they came up with 'didley, zilch, nada.' No records," Emetulu reports ("Lie$ of the Truth-Seller").

[47] See "Chris Abani: Distorting Africa's History."

Emetulu furthermore questions Abani's claims to have fled to the United Kingdom alone, without his family, and to have been interrogated by Scotland Yard for alleged involvement with "terrorist" activities. He sees the authors' fabrications as part of a calculated attempt to win favor and finances from western organizations, many of whom view West Africa much in the way Abani's allegedly "non-fictional" works describe, that is to say, as plagued by human misery and violence: "Thus, when we see him on speaking tours all over the world [...] It is to validate the image of the savage Africa that needs all their tears, a bit from their purse, [...] their help to civilize us!" (Emetulu). Emetulu writes about Abani's embellishments passionately, and with good reason. Abani's works paint a dark picture of Nigeria, indeed – a portrait which, if true, would be cause for concern enough, but which, as falsified, is indeed highly problematic, since it reinforces a neo-colonialist mindset in which the west must be the "savior" of the rest of the world, and by which Nigeria's history is distorted. "I do not want my son to look back at the history of Nigeria and believe that fourteen-year-old boys were killed on death row for the crimes their family committed. Unless of course there is documentary proof!," Emetulu quotes from one of his friends, a woman named Meg ("Lie$ of the Truth-Seller"). It is easy to sympathize with Meg's perspective.

All of this, of course, creates significant problems for Abani. While many readers, at least in Europe and North America, are unlikely to be familiar with Emetulu's article, published in the *Sahara Reporter*, they are likely at least to know the names of James Frey and Ishmael Beah. *Song for Night,* as we have seen, reads in many ways like a memoir, adopting the testimonial use of the first-person, claiming to bear witness to historical events. In any case, this is how Abani promotes his book in interviews:

> When I was doing research on mine diffusers [...] I came across these little notation somewhere that someone had made that sometimes these kids – that

> when they would be diffusing the mines, some of them would accidentally set off a mine, and in the explosion, they would scream and startle the other kids who would shatter through minefield. So the idea was that their vocal chords were cut so that they couldn't scream and startle the others [...] (Martin)

Abani's source of "somewhere [...] someone" is a little too vague to be convincing. It is possible he has fabricated this story, too. However, for the moment, what is also interesting about this quotation is the way in which Abani connects the experiences of the fictional children in his novel to the experiences of actual, historical children in the world; it would be a mistake to read Abani's novel as seeking only "poetic" truth. "If you want to know about Africa, read our literature," Abani says in a talk for TED ("Chris Abani: Telling Stories from Africa"). Abani here invites readers to expand their knowledge by reading stories set in Africa. It is good advice, and counteracts the tendency of westerners to rely only on non-African news sources when learning about the continent. Yet, his emphasis on "literature" feels dangerously limited to me. Certainly, it is also worth consulting non-fictional works of sociology and anthropology – history, too – to balance out the, sometimes caricatured, portraits drawn in fiction.

As another factor carving fractures in the all-important foundation of trust between the child-soldier narrator and the reader, in recent decades there has also been an increased awareness of the difficulty of bearing witness to traumatic experience. Stef Craps has been an important voice sitting at the intersection of postcolonial literature and trauma studies, urging more cross-cultural sensitivity. In *Postcolonial Witnessing* (2013), Craps examines several postcolonial novels for how they address culturally specific forms of trauma. Trauma theory generally, Craps argues, has been too Eurocentric in its focus, too reliant on modernist aesthetics – obsessed with ideas of "fragmentation" and "non-linearity" – as well as too event-based, centered on singular incidents such as a family death or train crash (2-5). In counterpoint, Craps considers what he calls a "supplementary

model of trauma that, unlike the traditional individual and event-based model, can account for [...] collective, ongoing, everyday forms of traumatizing violence," for instance, as a result of colonization and Apartheid (4). Craps' work takes a necessary and critical step toward widening the scope of trauma studies in the direction of African cultures and narratives, such as I discuss. Nonetheless, I find the earlier theories held by Cathy Caruth, Dori Laub, and Shoshana Felman, actually more useful when exploring Iweala's, Jarrett-Macauley's and Abani's novels, drawing out, in particular, the complicated ways in which they explore the "submersion" of traumatic memories.

In a 1996 study exploring "Trauma, Narrative, and History," Cathy Caruth describes trauma as an "unclaimed experience." Trauma is not experienced "in the first instance," Caruth explains (4); it is only fully understood afterwards, in the way the traumatic experience reasserts itself through debilitating memories and flashbacks. For illustration of this idea, Caruth turns to the medieval Christian myth of Tancred and Lucinda. In this myth, Tancred unknowingly kills his lover, Lucinda whilst she is disguised as an enemy knight. Then he wounds her *again*, when he strikes a tree containing Lucinda's spirit. Notably, it is only in this second wounding that Tancred realizes he has killed his lover. This repetition is important, Caruth argues, because it illustrates how trauma is not, as many might believe, simply a "violent or original event in an individual's past" (Caruth 4). Rather, it is a kind of absence or not knowing. Trauma only comes to knowledge later through the "nightmares and repetitive actions of the survivor" (4). In Abani's novel, similarly, My Luck is initially unaware that the blast that has separated him from his companions has also killed him. He returns obsessively, mentally and physically, back to the original spot. So, *Song for Night,* like Caruth, examines the "repetitive actions" of the

survivor and points, like the myth of Lucinda and Tancred, to the delayed effects of trauma, its register in the psyche only after the initial "wound."

Caruth's theory has obvious implications for traumatic testimony: if traumatic experience is, by its very nature, imperfectly known, finding expression only after the event, then how can it be adequately shared in forms of bearing witness, as in the child soldier novel? Relatedly, esteemed scholars Dori Laub and Shoshana Felman have drawn attention to the difficulty of speaking about, and comprehending, traumatic experience, or what seems to defy both knowledge and truth. Like Caruth, both Laub and Felman build their theories around mostly western literatures, yet they also point to an important feature that, in my reading, crucially characterizes Iweala's, Abani's, and Jarrett-Macauley's novels: "[T]he traumatic experience has normally long been submerged and has been distorted in its submersion" (76), Laub and Felman write, so highlighting the difficulty of recovering traumatic memories after they have been suppressed under many layers of human emotion. In Iweala's novel, as we have seen, Agu's narration becomes more "un-seated," less stable, as the conflict worsens. In *Moses, Citizen and Me,* similarly, Julia's "dreamscapes," or flashbacks to the war, are misty-edged, as though she remains unconvinced of their reality: "My thoughts vacillated between *disbelief* at those bizarre, distressing images of Citizen's war and the desperate conviction I could assist him now" (MCM 67; emphasis added). In other words, Iweala's and Abani's novels, not only Abani's, explore what Caruth, Laub and Felman refer as the psychological "distortion" of traumatic experiences, or the difficulties of remembering traumatic incidents, much less of sharing them.

In the wake of the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan, public awareness of post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) is rising and has seen more media attention. In 2010, *The*

*New Yorker* ran a long story on the "Traumatized Veterans of Iraq and Afghanistan" in which the author, David Finkel, outlined some of the typical symptoms associated with PTSD, including nightmares, flashbacks, difficulty recalling traumatic events, and thoughts of suicide: "Every war has its after-war: depression, anxiety, nightmares, memory problems, personality changes, suicidal thoughts" (ibid.). "If the studies prove correct," Finkel continues, "the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan have created roughly five hundred thousand mentally wounded American veterans," a significant number (ibid.). Similarly, in the UK, the *Guardian* has covered the lives of several British soldiers who have returned from Afghanistan laden with anxiety, anger, and depression (cf. Hattenstone and Allison).

One way of looking at the child soldier narrative, building on the links above, is as nothing other than an act of bearing witness to traumatic experience. "I am blessed to have lived to inform you that even when my hours were darkest, I believed I could some day share my experiences with others," Valentino Deng says at the beginning of Eggers's bio-fiction (xv), pointing towards the harrowing events of murder, rape, and near-starvation that follow in his narrative. Similarly, "I am part of a platoon of mine diffusers. Our job is to clear roads and access routes or mines," My Luck narrates in *Song for Night* (SN 11), proceeding to detail many of the gruesome aspects of his occupation. Child soldier narratives are surely themselves part of the new awareness of PTSD that has arisen in western society. Such narratives relay, sometimes in graphic detail, an individual's search to regain his "humanity," in Abani's phrasing (cf. Martin), or journey towards psychosocial rehabilitation.

Beah's memoir provides a particularly prominent example. In *A Long Way Gone,* Beah remembers experiencing nightmares and flashbacks; Beah's early days in Benin Home, the rehabilitation centre where he recovers, are marked by continued violence and

chaos, as Beah and his fellow former child soldiers terrorize the staff; experience painful withdrawals from cocaine and marijuana; and repeatedly relive the terrible experiences of their pasts. "I tried to think about my childhood days, but it was impossible, as I began getting flashbacks of the first time I slit a man's throat. The scene kept surfacing in my memory […]," Beah says (*A Long Way Gone* 160). By 2010, Beah's memoir had already sold 1.25 million copies (Piepenbring). It is cited in works such as Harvey Schwartz's *Wolves and Sheep: A Relational Approach to Internalized Perpetration in Complex Trauma Survivors* (2013), a non-fictional handbook for therapists (p. 17), and has clearly exerted profound influence on the popular understanding of the nature of trauma. "Former child soldier uses storytelling to heal from trauma," reads the byline of a story about Beah published in *The Missourian* (Horn).

Whilst former child soldiers like Beah are themselves part of the greater public understanding of trauma, at the same time, the rising awareness of PTSD subsequently poses a potential challenge for the child soldier novel or memoir, in my view. If the traumatic experience is truly as difficult to recover in memory as the experts suggest, then possibly, though this is not the only option available, we are left accepting the child soldier narrative as a set of partially recovered and, therefore, potentially embellished memories. My point is not that we *must* interpret Beah's and Abani's works, for instance, in this way. Merely, that this is how many readers are likely to approach them. Whilst reading Beah's memoir, Kamara's, or many other works of life-writing in the child soldier genre,[48] readers may have found themselves wondering, "How can s/he possibly remember these events with such poise and specificity?" Traumatic experience, by its very nature,

[48] Emmanuel Jal's *War Child*: *A Boy Soldier's Story* (2009) is another well-known child soldier autobiography. It details Dal's experiences as a youth combatant with the Sudanese People's Liberation Army in South Sudan.

would seem to preclude such linguistic eloquence, as Elaine Scarry has explored, studying how torture victims are sometimes robbed of speech: "A [...] dimension of physical pain is its ability to destroy language, the power of verbal objectification" (54). Extreme pain, according to Scarry, reduces a subject to the sounds "anterior to learned language," screams, cries, grunts, moans (54). At the very least, even in its aftermath, it makes sophisticated expression difficult. Furthermore, as Lawrence Swain observes, Beah's self-professed use of drugs makes his personal testimony even more difficult to trust or accept for the reader: "And the powerful drugs that the author was given [...] and the disorienting environment in which he was given them, would similarly make memory suspect" (16). Of course, memory already is suspect: few of us can recall what we had for lunch last week, much less recount, in specific detail, disturbing experiences that unfolded over years.

Credibility controversies and the difficulty of bearing witness to traumatic experience: these two factors, primarily, in my view, erode the trust between speaker and reader important for child soldier narratives, memoirs especially. Yet even child soldier novels, not only works of life-writing, in my understanding, rely on a certain level of trust and notion of "truth-telling" – bearing witness, albeit mediated, to real-world events – in order to inspire readers' concern, and to fire them into action. Still, if the reader's faith in the child soldier narrative is in danger of being fissured by the aforementioned challenges, then how can the novel's implicit witness reach, and move, its audience? In seeking to provide an answer to this question, and to consider some of the devices to which Abani makes recourse in affirming notions of "truth" as related to his work, the chapter now turns towards a discussion of the truth-bearing properties of the child-body.

China Keitetsi's memoir, *Child Soldier: Fighting for My Life* (2002), is emblematic of the emphasis we find placed on physical pain in human rights narratives and discourses

generally. Telling Keitetsi's own story of recruitment at the tender age of eight, her memoir raises crucial awareness of the under-18s who were conscripted under Yoweri Museveni's Ugandan Resistance Army in the 1970s and 1980s. It has also inspired other writers in the child soldier genre. Iweala, for instance, gives credit to Keitetsi's *Child Soldier* in his interview with Dinitia Smith ("Young and Privileged"). Iweala apparently heard Keitetsi speak about her experiences at the Harvard African Students Union and found them deeply moving ("Young and Privileged"). Afterwards, according to Smith, "he dug up his old sketch [of *Beasts of No Nation*] and began to expand it. This time 'it just flowed' [...]" (ibid.). Iweala, so, finds a helpful resource in Keitetsi's story and, in his interview, subtly uses it to undersign the "legitimacy" of his novel: inspired by *Child Soldier, Beasts of No Nation* allegedly draws from real-world events, albeit not any that Iweala has personally experienced.

Whilst Keitetsi's descriptions of her experiences have, thereby, usefully motivated some of her fellow writers, and brought critical attention to the Ugandan children involved in violence, they are also remarkably bloody, sensationalist even. Not only after her recruitment but also before, whilst still in her family's compound, Keitetsi seems eager to parade her wounds before us, her readers. Early passages in the novel describe Keitetsi severely stung by bees, bitten by a snake, and burned – her burns then become infected with maggots. Keitetsi is also the victim of a serious machete injury. Later passages see her (like Agu in Iweala's novel) repeatedly raped by the men in her unit. So, why does Keitetsi's memoir in these ways prominently display her bodily injury? Cynically, we might say that Keitetsi aims to grab her readers' attention. Since publishing her memoir, Keitetsi has made a successful career for herself as a human rights ambassador, travelling widely to speak about her past. Norridge has relatedly explored how experiences of pain, for

instance, in Rwandan genocide narratives, can become "culturally commodified into a potentially problematic social currency" ("Comparing Pain" 219). That is to say, in Norridge's view, authors sometimes exploit their own traumatic pasts in order to enhance their fame and gain access to valuable resources. Keitetsi, then, potentially lingers with physical suffering in order to leverage the attention such experiences typically garner into an expanded readership.

Still, as another, I think, equally convincing theory, the body may also serve as a critical part of making Keitetsi's "case," anchoring her memoir in the realm of the material so that the "truth" of her story will not be doubted. In an article on literature and disability, David Mitchell suggests that "corporeal metaphors" of bodily impairments in literature – from Teresius's blindness to the illness of Dickens's Tiny Tim – offer "narrative the one thing it cannot possess – an *anchor in materiality*" ("Narrative Prosthesis and the Materiality of Metaphor" 25; emphasis added). Exploring this idea further in a chapter with Sharon Snyder, Mitchell elaborates, "literary narratives revisit disabled bodies as a reminder of the 'real' physical limits that 'weigh down' transcendent ideals of the mind" ("Narrative Prosthesis" 225). Bodies, in other words, for Mitchell and Snyder, root personal narratives in matter, co-signing the text with the purportedly more "objective" evidence of flesh and bone. In their chapter, Mitchell and Snyder define a disabled body as any body "capable of being narrated as 'outside the norm'" (224). Hence, their definition extends to include Keitetsi's. Her wounded, aching body serves as a "real physical limit," weighing down textual abstractions, "a hard kernel," which, to again quote from the two scholars, "cannot be deconstructed away" ("Narrative Prosthesis" 225). In other words, Keitetsi's body, not easily categorized or silenced by social norms, defies the reader to question the truth of her story. Non-compliant, insistent, material, it works against the ambiguities of

language and the vagaries of traumatic witness. It serves to undersign the trauma of her experiences, daring readers to question the trustworthiness of her memoir, as well as the reality of her past.

Madeline Hron, relatedly, sees "woundedness" as "the basis of knowledge and moral authority" in US identity politics (*Translating Pain* 58). Hron explores, especially, the way in which feminists and immigrant groups "particularize" and "substantiate" their suffering in order to prove their "legitimate right to speak" (ibid.). Pivoting now towards Abani's novel, not only bodies generally, but in particular the child-body might also be said to harbor a truth-securing or protective function. So, Abani's novel, too, as I go on to explore, relies on the "substantiating" qualities of the body to "prove" the legitimacy of the child soldier's story. In *The Case of Peter Pan*, Jacqueline Rose observes that western writers, from Rousseau to the modern children's author Alan Garner, have used notions of children's bodily speech or pointing – as well as their presumed love of pictures – to evade the indeterminacy of the written sign: "In *Emile*, therefore, the child is being asked […] to take language back to its pure and uncontaminated source in the object of the immediate world" (Rose 47). The child's pointing suggests a direct relationship between words and things uncontaminated by the arbitrariness of language.

Similarly, anthropologist Michael Taussig reads Hans Christen Anderson's fairy tale "The Emperor's New Clothes" as promoting the idea that children "tel[l] it like it is," or "take things literally" (461; 462). In Anderson's story, it requires a child to inform the Emperor that he is actually naked, not clothed as he believes. Whereas the other villagers are unable to speak their minds and circumvent social pressures, the "natural" child, untouched by such norms, finds that his speech reflects the world at it is. The Emperor is not wearing "new" clothes, as the cunning weavers spin it, but rather no clothes at all.

Similar to Rose's idea that the child "restores" a lost world of primitive linguistic meanings to adults, "giv[ing] them back to us with a facility or directness" (Rose 9), so, too, the child's literal-mindedness, in Taussig's reading of Anderson's fairy tale, allows adults to indulge in a fantasy of a "language before the Fall between names and things were unified" (Taussig 463). Children's "innocence," their unmediated relationship to things and objects, suggests the possibility of a language without ambiguity.

Reflecting on Rose's and Taussig's observations, one way we could interpret the children's lyrical Home Sign in *Song for Night* is as a means of creating empathy. Through the children's imaginative, embodied Home Sign, Abani's novel gives the impression that the child soldier figures bear witness to their own traumatic experiences directly, without any interruption from the arbitrary, spoken word. "Night is a Palm Pulled Down Over the Eyes" (SN 15); "Death is Two Fingers Sliding Across the Throat" (SN 21). The novel endorses the fantasy of a mimetic language, whereby words and things are unified. As Mackey writes, "The voiceless voice of My Luck lingers poetically and calls not for comprehension […] but for a different kind of imaginative reaching out toward an/other" (112). Mackey points to the powerful way in which Abani's novel invites readers to connect with My Luck's story. We, Abani's readers, might find it difficult *not* to replicate the children's hand-signals – "Love is a Backhanded Stroke to the Cheek" (SN 48); "Imagination is Forefinger Between the Eyes" (SN 33) – that serve as the novel's chapter titles. In this way, moving with Abani's character, we feel – or at least are invited to feel – as he does.

In light of the discussion above, however, especially, the truth-bearing properties of the child-body, the children's Home Sign might also be read as a means of establishing trust. I find both readings compelling, and offer them as complementary interpretations

here. The seductiveness of the children's Home Sign, certainly, creates a sense of empathy and connection. Yet their pictorial nature – for example, "Fish is a Hand Swimming Through the Air" (SN 105); "Town is Hands Making Boxes in the Air" (SN 81) – also draws on notions of children's "literal-mindedness," as highlighted by Rose and Taussig in the above. That is to say, Abani not only shows that he endorses ideas of children's linguistic innocence: "Innocence of the child and of the word – the concepts seem to draw on, or attract, each other," Rose remarks in *The Case of Peter Pan* (49). He also employs this idea to effect within his novel, using children's bodies, not simply their words, to speak the traumatic "truth" of their experiences. In Abani's novel, "The Soul Has No Sign" (61); the body communicates pain in a form of language unique to its ontology.

In other words, the children's Home Sign clearly evokes bodily states – even coaxing the reader gently to "join in" – and anchors Abani's narrative in matter. As in Keitetsi's memoir, My Luck's mute and wounded body "weighs down textual abstractions," to quote again from Mitchell and Snyder, and defies us to question the truth of his traumatic past. The child's Sign makes My Luck's body visible in a way that mere description might not achieve. Abani's reader, to decode the chapter titles properly, must visualize a squirming child, bringing the body swimmingly before the mind's eye. The child-body is hyper-inscribed, in other words, fetishized even, through the use of physical gesture: "A Hand Held Like a Pistol" (SN 96); "Dreaming is Hands Held in Prayer Over the Nose" (SN 79); "This is how we sign this: forefinger pointing to the sky while the whole body gyrates" (SN 99). Having made the child-body palpable, Abani then covers this body in scars. As mentioned earlier, the crosses on My Lucks' arm bear "testimony" to the wounds that he has experienced physically and psychologically – even, to his own demise. "With my knife tip I cut a small cross into my arm for Nebu, wincing as the blood blisters

up" (SN 28). The same explosion that killed Nebu, as we have seen, also leads to My Luck's death.

Here we might witness the trump card of the child soldier genre. By creating a material sense of the child-body in pain and foregrounding it, the child soldier novel develops emotions of sympathy and concern in the reader; it aligns itself with other visual grammars, such as those found in *Save the Children* ads, which might tacitly aid its argument for humanitarian rescue; it even, potentially, defies the reader to question the "truth" of the child's traumatic experiences. Spoken testimony introduces questions about the possibility of traumatic memory – the difficulty for the witnessing individual to recall, and then to share, experiences of past suffering. Bodily pain, however, is in a sense indisputable. We have only to look at the way in which twentieth-century atrocities such as the Rwandan Crisis are depicted and memorialized, with the bodies of victims lined row upon row as in the Polytechnic at Murambi, to appreciate the way in which physical pain is highly valued in modern global discourses of human suffering.

I am not suggesting it should be otherwise; certainly all kinds of human pain deserve proper respect and mourning. Yet what concerns me is the way in which bodily pain, especially, is sometimes easily fetishized. The "atrocity photographs" of emaciated holocaust victims, in Anne Rothe's phrasing, supply an additional example of body-focused discourses and visual grammars (94). Susan Sontag (2003) and Norridge (2012) have likewise raised concerns about what such spectacles of physical pain in photographs and novels obscure. Norridge, for instance, argues that the "fascination with the wounded body" in cultural responses to the Rwandan genocide "hides the complex politics of the Great Lakes Region" (19). She also, like Sontag in *Regarding the Pain of Others,* questions

the extent to which such representations elide the suffering person's humanity, or reduces them to a single moment – and facet – of their lives (19).

The three child soldier novels addressed within this chapter reveal their indebtedness to western, not only West African, ways of thinking about children in how they represent child characters as mostly dependent and innocent. They differently stereotype or stigmatize African persons in how they juxtapose a child "Victim" against an adult African "Savage." Worse, they may even be said to exist in a problematic relationship to West African countries in their emphasis on militarized children's need of rescue, particularly, by western actors. Batty refers to the images used by "International Children's Relief Efforts" as "colonialist" for how they perpetuate an idea of an Africa in need of "saving" (18). Similarly, in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, many European imperial powers saw themselves as superior. They rationalized their rule in places like India, the Caribbean and Africa using what Harald Fischer-Tiné and Michael Mann call the notion of a "civilizing mission," or, in French, *mission civilisatrice,* drawing from Aimé Césaire: "The most powerful tool of self-legitimation was the colonizer's claim to improve the country and bring the fruits of progress and modernity to the subject peoples" – in other words, to "save" them (5). Césaire incisively critiques this "civilizing" project in his *Discours sur le colonialism* (*Discourse on Colonialism,* 1950).

Moreover, where international organizations actually do intervene in civil conflicts on behalf of children, they might be said not only to foster a paternalistic attitude, or to cast aspersions on the competency of Indian, African, Asian or other "Third World" peoples to care for their own children, but also to practice paternalism itself: that is to say, to undermine particular African nations' right to self-determination. As Meister observes, one challenge of the contemporary human rights regime is its tendency to privilege

certain evils over others, more specifically, "the evil of genocide [….] over the contestable, culturally relative notions of good on which politics might otherwise rest" (5). To put this in the context of child recruitment, the humanitarian actors who rush to save children for an idealized "childhood" may ultimately compromise the struggles of certain groups for better government, placing the rights of children over the rights of rebel movements seeking to effect change. "The image of the child soldier – to the extent that this image is created and burnished by international humanitarian groups […] vilifies military life," David Rosen argues (ibid. 9). Rosen once more usefully points to a "politics of age," where children's rights advocates employ images of child recruitment to malign military groups that, potentially, fight for greater freedom and equality, values that, in other contexts, westerners vociferously promote.

These issues are not straightforward; many of the groups who recruit children have less than laudatory ambitions and not all the conflicts in which children are involved are liberation struggles. Yet, it is important to at least note the tension here: that the welfare of the child and the good of the nation may not always be aligned. Of course, the state that decimates its children does severe damage to itself; yet, equally, the child living in a repressive society is not truly free, has more limited opportunities. It is difficult to say at any given moment whether protecting the well being of children is more important than, say, allowing a rebel group who employs under-18s to topple an oppressive regime or – to state the dilemma even more strongly – permitting African individuals to decide questions of government for themselves. Further drawing out the paternalism implicit in many children's rights discourses, Karen Valentin and Lotte Meinart discuss the way in which "civilizing projects" by western governments and NGOs targeted at the education and welfare of children in the global South suggest a "patronization": "[…] the global North

assumes as it were a parenting role towards the global South, where the 'adult North' can bestow rights and duties on the 'young South' and, if the South fails to comply with these, can implement sanctions" (23-24). Sanctions are a clear example of the global North imposing its will on other regions, forcing them to align with its concept and values, specifically, about youth.

Child soldier novels, likewise, may play a fundamental part in how definitions of childness, in Rosen's phrase, function as a "political proxy" – a tool for the west to export its cultural values – by circulating the image of a child soldier as in need of rescue, as well as by affirming, again, an image of Africa in which African actors are unable to care for their own children. Only one of the three novels addressed within this chapter, Jarrett-Macauley's *Moses, Citizen, and Me,* foregrounds a major African, not western, "Savior" figure in the character of Bemba G., and even then he appears secondary to foreign actors, especially Julia, in the novel. Admittedly, Abani's novel also has something of an African "Savior" figure in the character of My Luck's mother, although, crucially My Luck is not rescued by his mother, but rather reunited with her in the afterlife. She, therefore, appears another innocent "Victim" of the crisis.

From the child soldier genre and our responses to it, we learn a lesson about our own commitment to the sanctity of childhood, I think. Images like the ones present in several child soldier novels "disturb us," according to Rosen, "because they confound two fundamental and unquestioned assumptions of modern society: war is evil and should be ended; children are innocent and must be protected" (1). In the child soldier narratives studied in this chapter, these assumptions are, on the whole, upheld. Young children, even teens involved in violence should be rescued, we might feel, influenced by these novels' disturbing images of pain. Of course, the novels also show us children who are violent –

and culpable. Yet, culpability, in my reading, is balanced in these works by notions of children's innocence that, ultimately, drive the stories. "Children shouldn't have to carry, let alone use weapons like that [...] and they shouldn't be expected to," one enthusiastic reader posted in an online chat room devoted to Beah's memoir (Teresa J.). Her statement might be understood as representative for western attitudes toward child recruitment generally, as well as for the pervading, albeit implicit, thrust of Abani's, Iweala's, and Jarrett-Macauley's works.

By contrast, this chapter has sought to challenge, not affirm the Rousseauian conception of the child as "sacred" or set apart, or at least to show that there are alternative ways of viewing children. In light of its discussion, we might not wish to read these narratives as instances of recording history, or as offering the only viewpoint available on the child. Instead, as I have shown, Abani, Iweala, and Jarrett-Macauley endorse a conception of childness that is particularly common among middle-class adults globally, but which also serves their narratives of rescue. According to anthropologists like Richard and Hart, children do often participate in conflicts of their own volition; "innocence" is a complicated label when applied to under-18s who fight and kill willingly, even with some sense of enjoyment.

The chapter has also endeavored to examine the child figure as a conceptual device, a "narrative prosthesis" used by authors toward specific ends, some conscious, many likely unintended. The child-body, palpable, injured, wounded serves to create a sense of the "truth" of the child soldier's story against the uncertainty introduced by contemporary credibility controversies, as well as by the complicated nature of trauma. It also cultivates feelings of urgency and concern. At the same time, emphasizing the child's body over his inner life may make it difficult to appreciate him as a character; the child is

successful as a device, but less so as a convincing personality. For this reason, this chapter has critiqued several child soldier novels, arguing that they do insufficient justice to the child's personhood and verge on the edge of stereotype. This is particularly apparent in Jarrett-Macauley's work, where Citizen is difficult to recuperate as a separate personality behind, or apart from, all of Julia's comments about him. Though Jarrett-Macauley's novel also probes important questions surrounding memory, as well as the complex category of the "child soldier," Citizen's obscurity in the narrative is especially problematic if, as examined, we keep in mind the historical silencing of children in medicine, law, and other domains.

In this way, the chapter looks back to previous discussions: Okri's oeuvre, too, as I explored, stands on the precipice of stereotype in its emphasis on children's unique innocence and "vision." Much like Wordsworth, I argued, Okri eschews historical realities in his preoccupation with childhood as an ideal time of life. Jarrett-Macauley's, Abani's, and Iweala's novels also, as we have seen, elide some of the social conditions facing children in African countries, especially those that encourage them to join military groups. The novels addressed in the next chapter, by contrast, offer a more nuanced and especially agency-endorsing view of children. In what follows, I explore how the marginal status of children in Oyeyemi's and Badoe's novels helps to make apparent the related social un-belonging of minority racial and gender groups, especially in Britain. That is to say, I see children in these novels as subtly instrumentalized, but instrumentalized in such a way that draws enhanced attention to their agency and personhood. In Oyeyemi's and Badoe's novels, children are "othered" or stereotyped by adults, but they are also shown as having strategies to resist this "othering" as well. In this way, the child figure serves as a conceptual "tool" for two West African writers: aspects of her childness serves to make

clear, or support, Oyeyemi's and Badoe's wider investigations into the challenges facing racial, cultural, and gender minorities. However, the child is not depersonalized or sacrificed to the thematic concerns of the novels. Rather, her personhood is valued. In short, the next chapter explores the way Oyeyemi and Badoe present children as construct*ive*, not merely passively construct*ed* social agents.

# Chapter 3

## Race, Culture, Gender and Childness in Novels by Helen Oyeyemi and Yaba Badoe

The two diasporic women novelists Helen Oyeyemi and Yaba Badoe, the subjects of this final chapter, have not been exclusively connected to West African cultures or identified as West African writers, contrary to the writers discussed in the previous chapters. However, their work is deeply preoccupied with the status of children and young adults of West African background in Britain, and as such makes a significant contribution to our understanding of childness. In this chapter, I read their works as utilizing the marginal status of youth to buttress or make clear the "outsiderness" status of racial, cultural, and gendered minorities. In this way, the chapter, like the one previously, sees works of West African fiction as leaning on childness as an instrument to an aim or message. However, interestingly, the fact that the texts have an implicit agenda, by contrast with the child soldier narratives, gives the characters a plausibility and conviction – a real life, or authenticity effect – paradoxically often lacking in the works that make truth claims.

The scholarship on Oyeyemi's work (Badoe's writing has yet to be examined by many scholars) is already sensitive to the complexity of the diasporic child character and, in this chapter, I draw especially on what scholars have noted about Oyeyemi's complicated cultural background, or the way in which both western and Nigerian images of youth mix throughout her writing. Christopher Ouma, for instance, reads Oyeyemi's *The Icarus Girl* (2005) as a "syncretic meta-fictional structure that borrows from Greek, English, and Yoruba worlds" (202). Also connecting Oyeyemi's novel to cultures both on the African continent and beyond, Brenda Cooper sees child figures in Oyeyemi's *The*

*Icarus Girl* and several other women's novels as a "coded language for the writers' own splitting, doubling and questing for their identities in London or Alberta, as well as for their connection to Africa" ("Gender, Diaspora, and Identity" 2). In this chapter, I, too, think about how Oyeyemi and Badoe borrow from European Gothic novels as well as West African folklores in their works, interweaving references to both. In this way, the chapter looks back to, and builds upon, earlier discussions: Oyeyemi and Badoe, like Okri, in his allusions to English Romanticism, I argue, derive sustenance from an eighteenth-century literary tradition. Gothic tropes of haunting in their novels, in particular, serve to challenge western epistemologies, as I go on to explore.

To date, Oyeyemi has published five novels, *The Icarus Girl* (2005), *The Opposite House* (2007), *White is for Witching* (2009), *Mr. Fox* (2011), *Boy, Snow, Bird* (2014) and two plays*, Juniper Whitening* (2004), and *Victimese* (2005), which she wrote while studying for a degree at Corpus Christi College, Cambridge. Oyeyemi famously published her first novel, *The Icarus Girl,* while still at school (Sethi). Ouma and Cooper, above, both bring attention to the dual cultural traditions indexed in Oyeyemi's writing; how she is inspired both by her cultural knowledge of West Africa as well as by her lived experience in Britain. Indeed, much of Oyeyemi's work speaks to her own complex cultural experience as the daughter of two Nigerian immigrants to Britain [49] and, while the majority of her fiction is set in either Britain or the United States,[50] hearkens back to Oyeyemi's Nigerian heritage via the use of traditional Yoruba folklore and interspersed Nigerian settings. *The Icarus Girl* supplies a case in point: it imagines a young, mixed-race British child, "Jess," visiting her family in Nigeria.

[49] Oyeyemi emigrated to London with her parents at the age of four (Sethi).
[50] Both of Oyeyemi latest two novels, *Mr. Fox* and *Boy, Snow, Bird,* are set in the US.

Once in Nigeria, Jess meets a strange girl much like herself called Titiola, or TillyTilly: "There was something about her that was out of proportion. Was she too tall and yet too [...] small at the same time?" (43). At first, Jess thinks that TillyTilly is the "forever friend" she has always longed for: "It was a peering through good and pretty coloured glass, this gladness, this feeling that someone had been around the compound, knowing who she was, and wanting to talk to her" (47). She eagerly anticipates a nourishing companionship with Titiola. Yet, when Jess returns to Britain with her Nigerian mother, Sarah, and British father, Daniel, TillyTilly follows her and, there, reveals her darker side. TillyTilly, a kind of ghost or specter, is associated with what Jess calls her "attacks," the intermittent moments when she loses her temper and experiences strange hallucinations: "You are so *weird*!" Jess's cousin Dulcie shouts at her, addressing her change in behavior, "You weren't like this before you went abroad! What *happened* to you?" (148; emphasis in the original). The rest of the novel explores Jess's attempts to rid herself of TillyTilly and also to come to terms with her complicated mixed-race, bicultural identity.

Yaba Badoe, this chapter's other subject, has not yet attracted as much critical attention as Oyeyemi; this thesis breaks new ground as one of the first works of scholarship to study Badoe's writing in any depth. Badoe, who is Ghanaian by birth, has produced and directed a number of documentary films, including several for the BBC; so far, *True Murder* (2009) is Badoe's only novel. Yet, like Oyeyemi's *The Icarus Girl*, Badoe's novel, set in both Britain and Ghana, is also a syncretic cultural mixture. It draws from local Ghanaian beliefs in witchcraft as well as British genres such as the Gothic tale or boarding school story (Badoe worked for a time as a documentary filmmaker in an exile's camp for women "witches" in Northern Ghana), often, as I examine, to question or

critique western belief systems. The plot of *True Murder* follows the eleven-year-old protagonist, Ajuba, as she moves from Ghana to Britain to attend a British school following the death of her mother. Like her protagonist, Badoe also attended boarding school in Britain from a young age and, according to her interview with Belinda Otas, was inspired to write her novel by personal experiences ("In Conversation: Yaba Badoe").

The first section of this chapter explores the mixed traditions of childness present in Oyeyemi and Badoe's novels. In contrast to Iweala's, Abani's and Jarrett-Macauley's works, whose western indebtedness is largely implicit, evident in the ways they think about or represent children, Oyeyemi and Badoe are both overt about their dual cultural inheritances, providing complicated cultural images and making explicit references to western as well as African literatures and genres. The next section moves on to investigate how childness in these women's novels helps them to paint a picture of social outsiderness. In their novels, Oyeyemi and Badoe are severely pessimistic about the opportunities for the racial, cultural, and gendered minority to "belong." The protagonists of their works lie outside of the social mainstream by virtue of their culture, race, and gender. While Oyeyemi's and Badoe's novels present their protagonists as "outsiders" on the basis of their race, culture, and gender, age-based forms of discrimination, also, come alongside to buttress, eddy around, and complicate these other ways of being "other." Badoe and Oyeyemi, for instance, show children as "othered" by adults, sometimes even injured: "the knowledge remained that we were acutely vulnerable in a world controlled by adults," Ajuba says near the end of the novel, after the murder of her friend, Polly Venus, by Polly's mother, Isobel (TM 248).

In this way, Badoe and Oyeyemi demonstrate a way of instrumentalizing images of childness: the outsiderness of the child as a child serves to make clear her other vectors of

un-belonging, her "otherness" as black, bicultural, and female. Yet the novelists do so, importantly, without stereotyping children, as was argued of Jarrett-Macauley's and Iweala's novels in the previous chapter. Jarrett-Macauley and Iweala depersonalize the child figure in how they employ the child as a flat trope, or "narrative prosthesis," it was suggested. Rather, Badoe and Oyeyemi conversely stress the subjecthood and agency of children: Ajuba and Jess, the two young protagonists of Oyeyemi and Badoe's works, are shown to devise their own conceptions of childness, which exist in tension with adults' conceptions, flouting adults' stereotypes and norms. Hence, Oyeyemi and Badoe develop our understanding of the child figure in literature; the objective, ultimately, is to look for and examine more complex resonances of the child image.

## Crossing Continents

This section reads Oyeyemi's *The Icarus Girl* and Badoe's *True Murder* for their dual, sometimes competing, elements drawn from African literary and cultural traditions and the west. In contrast to much of the scholarship on Okri's, Iweala's, Abani's, and Jarrett-Macauley's novels, which positions these authors relative to West African contexts alone, Oyeyemi's *The Icarus Girl* has already been appreciated for its manifold cultural inheritances, read in relationship to multiple literary traditions and cultures. Diana Mafe, for instance, sees Oyeyemi as indebted to the Yoruba "bush tradition" iconized by Tutuola's *The Palm-wine Drinkard* and Daniel O. Fagunwa's *Forest of a Thousand Demons* (21). Mafe is particularly interested in the way in which Oyeyemi's novel sets "bush" motifs, such as a dark, occluded jungle, alongside images generally associated with the Female Gothic tradition in western women's writing, which, according to some scholars, uses Gothic themes such as "haunted (patriarchal) houses [and] terrified (and sometimes terrifying women)" to question male privilege and power (23). In Mafe's words, explicating

this idea, "Oyeyemi puts the Female Gothic narrative in conversation with the traditionally androcentric discourse of the Yoruba bush tale" (23). Oyeyemi's novel, certainly, does draw from Gothic tales as well as Yoruba folklores, for instance, in the doppelganger-like figure of TillyTilly; I return to the specifics of Oyeyemi's use of Gothic tropes later.

Other scholars have similarly framed the novelist as at a crossroads, looking across at least two cultures in her work. Cooper, for instance, spends considerable time cataloguing the many diverse cultural traditions that are referenced in Oyeyemi's novel. On the last page of *The Icarus Girl*, for example, we find a quotation from a Yoruba poem, "*Gentle hunter/his tale plays on the ground/ while he crushes the skull*" (IG 323). Cooper, like Mafe, also notes the work's evocation of the Yoruba bush tradition. Near the end of the narrative, Jess mysteriously arrives in a dark, densely forested netherworld: "The way was dim, and she could hear a distant noise, like water running" (IG 320). This is a clear allusion to works like Tutuola's *Palm-wine Drinkard* and *My Life in the Bush of Ghosts*: "The Bush. A wilderness. A wilderness for the mind," Oyeyemi's passage begins (IG 318). Yet, in this scene, we may also locate a potential reference to Ben Okri's oeuvre, as another possible Nigerian influence on Oyeyemi's novel. In Okri's short story, "The Worlds That Flourish" (1988), the protagonist arrives in an eerie bush world after being involved in a car crash. In *The Icarus Girl*, Jess, too, arrives in a nightmarish forested region following an automobile accident in Lagos. The endings of the two stories are remarkably similarly, suggesting that Oyeyemi has been reading Okri's work. Yet, a more likely explanation, in my view, is that both authors draw from the source text of Tutuola, incorporating his images of "dead's town" in coincidentally resonant ways.

Indeed, diverse cultural intertexts are pervasive throughout Oyeyemi's writing. There are multiple allusions not only to African images or literary traditions, but also to western ones all the way through Oyeyemi's *The Icarus Girl*. For instance, the novel makes a particular reference to Louisa May Alcott's nineteenth-century American novel *Little Women* (1880), a volume of which Jess discovers on the shelf of her grandfather's library, as well as to Lewis Carroll, whose *Hunting the Snark* (1876) Jess reads in the evenings with her mother (IG 240). Cooper also draws attention to the epigraph to the novel, which is a quote from Emily Dickinson: "Alone I cannot be– /For Hosts do visit me," a phrase no doubt foreshadowing Jess's haunting by TillyTilly in the story. Dickinson is an important figure for Oyeyemi: "As a literary figure, she is huge and intimidating to me, because of how sophisticated she is in putting across her inner life," she says in an interview with Forna (53). This statement not only suggests that Dickinson has been a source of inspiration for Oyeyemi, especially in the deftness with which the poet conveys her "inner" life, but also that Oyeyemi continues to grapple with Dickinson's legacy. Oyeyemi finds the poet "huge" and intimidating; interestingly, as I go on to discuss, Jess employs remarkably similar language to describe her mother, Sarah, in Oyeyemi's novel (IG 130).

Badoe, too, alludes to western as well as African literary traditions in her work. The novelists are similar in their position as globally mobile members of the African diaspora and in how they interweave western and African cultural references in their writing. Yet, hearkening back to Selasi, I would not go so far as to call Badoe and Oyeyemi "Afropolitan," since "Afropolitan," to me, suggests a comfort with inhabiting global spaces. Selasi celebrates how "African young people working and living around the globe [...] belong to no single geography but feel at home in many" ("Bye-Bye Babar"). In other words, she sees global mobility as an opportunity, not as a burden, as Oyeyemi and Badoe,

I argue, conversely explore. Later in the chapter, I examine the authors' pained depictions of diaspora, especially the social marginality of their young protagonists. However, in first tracing the novelists' complex cultural inheritances, Western literary traditions are present in Badoe's *True Murder* via the novel's detective-story structure; according to Richard Bradford, the crime novel originated in eighteenth-century England, inspired by the fiction and crime biographies of Daniel Defoe and Henry Fielding (3). In Badoe's novel, much of the plot hinges upon Ajuba and her friend Polly's attempts to solve the mystery of two murdered infants found in Polly's attic. Whilst cleaning out the attic at the behest of Polly's mother, Ajuba and Polly discover small bones hidden in the lining of an old fur coat. The cloaked setting of the remains, as well as their age, evokes an idea of a crime committed long ago and never solved. Ajuba and Polly, therefore, make solving the mystery of the infants' death their mission. "We became 'Crimebusters', junior sleuths to track down whoever was responsible for the heinous crime," Ajuba remarks (TM 83).

Alongside the detective story or crime novel, Badoe clearly also draws from the Gothic genre in her work, and in this way, too, her writing is linked to Oyeyemi's. This thesis brings attention to earlier periods and genres as influential on West African writers, especially, their narratives of childhood as seen, initially, in the discussion of Okri's Romanticized child. Indeed, we might even venture to say that Gothic tropes are more prevalent in Badoe's novel than in Oyeyemi's, despite the latter's haunted houses and ghostly doppelgangers. In the *Cambridge Companion to Gothic Fiction* (2002), Jerrold Hogle defines the Gothic using two categories: the "terror Gothic" and the "horror Gothic." [51] In the "terror Gothic," as Hogle adumbrates, characters and readers are kept in "anxious

[51] These two types of Gothic stories were first defined by Ann Radcliffe in her essay "On the Supernatural in Poetry" (1826) and later revived for critical discussion in a 1969 essay by Robert Hume (Hogle 19-20).

suspense about threats to life, safety, and sanity kept largely out of sight or in shadows or suggestions from a hidden past" (3). For example, in Henry James's *Turn of the Screw* (1898), a terrified governess imagines that she can see the ghosts of two former domestic servants on her employer's estate. These "suggestions from a hidden past," in Hogle's phrasing, threaten her "life, safety and sanity" (ibid.). One of the governess's charges, Miles, dies in her arms after confronting one of the specters. The governess fears, and indeed several critics have suggested,[52] that she is gradually losing her mind.

By contrast, in the "horror Gothic," characters (and readers) are confronted *directly* with "the gross violence of physical or psychological dissolution" (3). Here we might think of works like Bram Stoker's *Dracula* (1897), in which a Transylvanian vampire terrorizes a group of English men and women. In one of *Dracula's* early scenes – a scenario of "gross violence," as Hogle might put it – the hero, Jonathan Harker, is nearly devoured by three horrific vampire "sisters" in Dracula's castle. This latter scene, especially, illustrates how Stoker's fiction relies not only on racialist stereotypes, as Stephen Arata, for instance, argues, pointing to the novel's preoccupation with Dracula's Transylvanian origins and imperialist subtexts: "*Dracula* enacts the period's most important and pervasive narrative of decline, a narrative of reverse colonization" (627). It also relies on gender norms and stereotypes as well. The three "sisters," prurient and ravenous, represent a kind of corrupted femininity in contrast to the heroine, Lucy, who until her similarly deviant transformation by Dracula, iconizes sexual purity and domestic obedience (see, for instance, Eltis, "Corruption of the Blood" 457).

Hogle also names the incursion of the supernatural as another key characteristic of Gothic narratives: "Gothic fictions generally play with and oscillate between the earthly

[52] Edmund Wilson famously argued that the governess was insane, that the ghosts were "not real ghosts at all but merely the governess's hallucinations" (385).

laws of conventional reality and the possibilities of the supernatural" (2). For instance, in Horace Walpole's *The Castle of Otranto* (1764), the son to the Lord Manfred, Conrad, is mysteriously killed by a falling helmet for which no physical explanation can be found. While Gothic fictions sometimes side with either "the laws of conventional reality" or "the possibilities of the supernatural," Hogle observes, they also "raise the possibility that the boundaries between these may have been crossed" (Hogle 3). Similar to the Romantic poem, especially Coleridge's "Ancient Mariner," the Gothic novel is a space in which the ordinary and extra-ordinary meet and merge; Hogle quotes from the Preface to Walpole's *Otranto* to describe the "Gothic Story" as one in which "fancy" is given "liberty to expatiate through the boundless realms of invention" (qtd in Hogle 14). Both Romanticism and the Gothic, Michael Gamer further argues, used non-rational or supra-physical motifs to probe "fundamental problems of representation, knowledge, interpretation, and consciousness" (101). Alongside the incursion of the supernatural and elements of suspense and terror, more mundane tropes, such as the spooky, crumbling mansion, also typify the Gothic genre (Hogle 2).

Polly's family home, Graylings, where the two girls spend their school vacations, is a sprawling, stone-walled mansion set deep in the countryside, an antique structure many readers will recognize as familiar from Walpole's *Castle of Otranto,* which unfolds on a haunted Italian estate, or James's *Turn of the Screw,* set in a similar, stately country home. The scene is set for one or more of the central traditions of the gothic to be activated. Yet, though there are some "horror Gothic" elements to Badoe's novel, specifically, in Polly's murder by her mother (an event of "gross violence [...] explicitly shattering the assumed norms" (Hogle 3)), much of the discomfort of the narrative relies upon the gradual accrual of suspense – a feature of the "terror Gothic." Ajuba constantly fears, as she puts it, that

she will descend "into my mother's nether landscape again" (TM 33). At the beginning of the novel, it is relayed to the reader that Ajuba's mother, Grace, has fallen ill and been committed to hospital. Later, however, Badoe reveals that Grace has actually committed suicide. The memory of her mother's mental illness – a trait Ajuba believes is hereditary – is a constant threat to Ajuba's life, safety, and especially sanity throughout the novel, contributing to the work's dramatic tension.

Dominican writer Jean Rhys has also employed Gothic motifs, in particular, to challenge imperialist hegemonies. A brief examination of her work helps to shed light upon Badoe's novel and, especially, its representation of Ajuba's mother's "madness." In Rhys's novel, *Wide Sargasso Sea* (1966), the Jamaican creole protagonist, Antoinette, marries an English gentleman and travels with him to his country estate. Rhys's narrative retells Charlotte Bronte's *Jane Eyre* (1847): Antoinette's husband is an image of Bronte's "Mr. Rochester," and Antoinette, eventually, becomes the miserable "Bertha" locked away in a lonesome tower. In the novel, Rhys performs a critique of Empire as well as of Victorian patriarchy. Antoinette's time in England is miserable; she is fundamentally destabilized by her displacement from her island, its traditions, and peoples and is turned into a ghost of her self – a "doll" in Rhys's description – who walks the corridors of a "cardboard" house, Mr. Rochester's estate, at night (Rhys 181). In this way, Rhys gives privileged space to a suppressed figure from Bronte's novel: the "mad" black woman who, in *Jane Eyre,* is hidden away from society and stigmatized. *True Murder,* likewise, potentially draws from Rhys's model by showing Ajuba's mother as driven "insane" by her displacement from Ghana. Her story is given prominent placement in the narrative, and Ajuba writes empathetically about her mother's suffering. In other words, Badoe's novel, like Rhys's, does not simply draw from the Gothic genre, incorporating tropes such as the

haunted mansion; it also revises it, giving space to the elided voices of women and racial minorities. That is to say, by telling the story from Ajuba's, a young black child's, and her mother's, a black woman's perspective, *True Murder* humanizes the colonial-era stereotype of the "mad black woman," as found in works such as Bronte's.

Another source of growing fear for Ajuba throughout the narrative, and a further sign of *True Murder's* dialogue with the "terror Gothic," is Polly's increasing conflict with her mother, Isobel. Polly and Isobel Venus vie with one another for Polly's father, Peter's, affections: "I now understood how she could turn her back on her mother. They were rivals," Ajuba says (TM 105). Ajuba agonizes when Isobel, an accomplished artist, draws portraits of Polly that depict her as a "monster" (TM 174). Ajuba finds a crumpled up piece of paper on the floor. She opens it up to find a "picture of Polly drawn by her mother: a drawing that made the poster of Dracula appear angelic" (TM 174). The image is gruesome and disturbing, pointing to Isobel's harbored feelings of hatred towards her daughter. Eventually, Ajuba begins to fear that Isobel actually has plans to hurt Polly. Her worst fears are affirmed when Isobel smothers Polly with a pillow toward the of the novel (TM 241).

Moreover, alongside these terrifying elements of suspense, the "terror Gothic" also enters Badoe's novel in the "suggestions from a hidden past," which are scattered throughout the Venus's (Polly's family's) mansion, Graylings (Hogle 3). Ajuba and Polly, again, find the skeletal remains of infants in a trunk in Polly's attic. These remains point to a previous event of child murder that took place in the house, one that will repeat itself in the event of Polly's death: "For the rest of the term we returned […] [to] the babies in Miss Fielding's trunk […] revisiting it because it held a clue which, if unraveled, would enable us to understand everything we would ever experience" (TM 115). Ajuba's statement proves

proleptic as Polly, too, is murdered by her mother in the manner of the smothered infants. In these ways, Badoe's novel incorporates the Gothic device of the "uncanny": in *True Murder,* it is not simply persons that are duplicated, as in Freud's theory of the "double." For Freud, the "doppelganger," or mirror image, stirs up primitive superstitions in the reader (see *The Uncanny)*. In Badoe's novel, events are repeated as well, creating an overriding sense of doom. The haunted mansion of Graylings, in particular, appears trapped in a recurring cycle of infanticide.

Badoe further highlights the incursion of the supernatural as another iconic trait of the Gothic genre mentioned above, though the novel's endorsement of witchcraft also aligns her work with African folklores, as I go on to discuss. In *True Murder*, supernatural elements are entertained via Ajuba's mother, Grace's, traditional Ghanaian beliefs. Oyeyemi's novel, likewise, explores the possibilities that events in the narrative may not only have physical explanations, but supernatural ones as well, thereby destabilizing secular western beliefs-systems, as I will later show. In Badoe's novel, Grace scrupulously avoids the surfaces of mirrors: "It was said in her village that the reflection of lightning in a mirror could kill you. What was even more terrifying were the ghosts in mirrors" (31). Ajuba's Aunt Lila, skeptical of such theories, attributes Grace's superstitious beliefs to mental illness: "Can you believe it, Ajuba? She thought we were feasting on her fetuses, that's how ill she was" (TM 29). To Aunt Lila, Grace's theory that her husband's girlfriends have "eaten" her fetuses though witchcraft can only be pathological symptom. At the same time, however, *True Murder* also leaves open the possibility that the spirits Grace senses in mirrors might be real, not a mere figment of her imagination. At the end of the novel, Ajuba sees Polly's ghost in a mirror (TM 260): "The glass clears, revealing the face of a pale, angry child, her eyes flashing blue in a stormy sky" (TM 260). In Polly's resurrection,

that is to say, her appearance to Ajuba in the surface of a mirror, Grace's so-called "superstitions" take on more substance and reality.

Oyeyemi's novel, similarly, offers supernatural phenomena as an explanation behind unusual events. Namely, Jess's haunting by TillyTilly, her strange "attacks" – "she mumbled, made small sounds, like singing noises, broken songs because when she was ill she could never speak properly" (IG 80) – are attributed in the novel to Jess's mother, Sarah's, failure to carve a ritual *ibeji* sculpture upon the event of Jess's twin, Fern's, death. "Sarah began rambling, 'Three worlds! Jess lives in three worlds [….] The spirits tell her things. *Fern* tells her things. We should've […] we should've d-d-done the *ibeji* carving for her. […] oh, oh" (IG 174; emphasis in the original). Sarah's reference to Jess's "three worlds" here could be understood as an analogy for her mixed-race, bicultural status. In *The Location of Culture,* Homi Bhabha explores the notion of a "third space" to conceptualize the "hybridity" of the migrant, his or her status, like Jess, in-between two other cultures (55). So, Oyeyemi's novel, potentially, offers an image for understanding how migrants move within the home culture, the host culture, and a murky space that is situated between them both. Yet, when read within the context of the novel, Jess's "three worlds" are not mere metaphors for the complicated identity of the migrant, but robust ontological truths. In traditional Yoruba culture, a set of anthropomorphic sculptures is carved upon the birth of twins in order to keep their unusual cosmic relation in balance: "The head seemed unnaturally pointy, and the sloping cheekbones beautiful and stylized […] supposed to represent Fern but not" (IG 300). Jess dislikes the statue that has been made of her dead sister. Should one twin die, his or her corresponding sculpture will be fed, rocked, caressed and cared for as if it were a living child (The Africa Centre, "Doubly Blessed: The Ibeji Twins of Nigeria"). Failure to observe this tradition, however, will result

in the spiritual and psychological dislocation of the living twin, as depicted in Oyeyemi's novel.

Admittedly, secular explanations for Jess's condition are considered in *The Icarus Girl* as well. Jess's British psychiatrist, Dr. McKenzie, diagnoses her with Dissociative Identity Disorder, according to Ouma, who reads the work as exploring the tensions between modern psychiatry and traditional myth (Ouma 191). In this way, the work gives some credence to modern medical science. Still, Oyeyemi's novel also firmly leaves open the idea that one possible cause of Jess's condition is not some form of mental illness, as Aunt Lila also believes of Grace in Badoe's novel, but rather the disruption of the spiritual connection between herself and Fern. When Jess is involved in the car accident, her grandfather, Gbegba, carves an ibeji statue and leaves it in her hospital room, "And when he'd gone, the ibeji statue/ (*dull, unbelieved-in wood)*/ guarded the corner for the little twin who needed its help/ needed to win/ more than ever" (IG 318; emphasis in the original). The phrase "dull, unbelieved-in" subtly coaxes the reader to believe in the sculpture and what it stands for, specifically, the idea that Jess has been jeopardized by Sarah's neglect of Yoruba custom and will soon engage in a battle with the specter, TillyTilly.

Cooper provides a useful reading of *The Icarus Girl's* ending, which imagines such a quarrel occurring. At the end of the novel, Jess runs, jumps, and leaps magically into TillyTilly: "*it hurt them burningly*" (IG 322; emphasis in the original). She next experiences a rising sensation: "Jessamy Harrison woke up and up and up and up" (IG 322). In this way, Jessamy "soars up like the doomed Icarus and becomes the Icarus girl of the title," Cooper argues, pointing to another western reference in Oyeyemi's work: by tradition, Icarus was the son of the master craftsman, Daedalus, who flew too close to the sun ("Diaspora,

gender and identity" 33). Following the logic of the novel's title, Cooper sees this ending as foreboding: like Icarus, Jess will soon fall to her death. It is possible, Cooper insists, pointing to the "Praise of the Leopard" poem which serves as the novel's postscript, that Jess has not defeated her specter but rather become more like her. The postscript of the novel includes an image of the leopard, "split[ing] the antelope's heart." Before that, in the scene of the bushworld, Jess's dead twin sister, Fern, "has begged her not to take the route of merging with the wicked TillyTilly" (Cooper "Diaspora, gender and identity" 63). "The overtones," Cooper suggests, "are that Jess has destroyed herself, become prey to the leopard"; let herself be beaten by TillyTilly ("Diaspora, gender, and identity" 63).

In refusing to foreclose the possibility that TillyTilly, as some sort of malevolent spirit, may be behind Jess's unusual condition, Oyeyemi as well as Badoe may be seen as decolonizing metropolitan epistemologies which would hold such beliefs to be irrational, or incapable of explaining natural phenomena. In other words, the two novelists evoke the work of V.Y. Mudimbe, who similarly remarks upon a "silent dependence on a Western episteme" amongst both African and non-African scholars (*The Invention of Africa* x), their reluctance, for many decades, to challenge intellectual categories endemic to the west. Instead, Oyeyemi and Badoe give a place of priority to local West African beliefs in their novels, subtly suggesting that a belief in spirits and witchcraft, for instance, is as much a plausible way of interpreting the world as a faith in modern medical science: "They cursed me. His women cursed me," Ajuba posits, thinking of different ways to solve the murder of the dead babies in Polly's attic (TM 96). She gives credence to the possibility of witchcraft. Far from being a mere backdrop to the story, the Gothic and, especially, its images of haunting, in my view, enables this exploration of indigenous frameworks by clearing space for spiritual, instead of merely physical phenomena, as I go on to discuss.

Averring my reading of Oyeyemi's work, Ouma, likewise, sees the abiku as another supernatural explanation behind Jess's mysterious condition (192). "She's abiku," Jess's mother says (IG 174). In the abiku myth, addressed at length in the first chapter of this thesis, so-called spirit children inhabit a precarious position between the world of the living and the dead. Jess's unusual illnesses could be a sign that her spirit companions are calling her back to the realm of the ancestors, as is also the case for Okri's Azaro, who, as we have seen, experiences frequent illness as a part of his abiku condition. Indeed, "as a doppelganger," Ouma argues, "TillyTilly, exposes the errant nature of Jess's abiku identity, allowing her to travel across spiritual and physical worlds, giving her knowledge of events before her birth" (192). TillyTilly, too, not only Jess, resembles the abiku figure from West African myth. In "Histories of Errancy," McCabe observes that, within the oral folklore of the Yoruba, abiku are often trickster figures, stealing from human families to support their spirit companions in the afterlife: "If pressed to use an English word to characterize *àbíkú, Ifá babaláwo* [traditional leaders] might well call them 'errant,' a word that combines the two interrelated senses of vagrancy and delinquent behavior" (McCabe 47). To be sure, TillyTilly is both vagrant and delinquent, suggesting that she, too, supplies an abiku figure in the novel. In one scene from *The Icarus Girl*, TillyTilly tricks Jess into breaking a bathroom mirror (IG 243). The exploded image surely emblematizes Jess's fractured sense of Self, ruptured by her travels between England and Nigeria. Yet it also, in my view, underlines TillyTilly's "errancy" within the narrative, her status as a disruptive figure. In another scene illustrating this point, TillyTilly forces Jess to destroy her mother's computer (IG 255); throughout the narrative, she repeatedly "steals" from Jess's safety and security.

Oyeyemi, in my view, hearkens back to Okri's earlier fiction and offers a departure from his representations of the abiku, while also using abiku references, as we have seen, to destabilize western epistemologies. Whereas in Okri's novel, Azaro's abikuness brings him enhanced vision and expanded insight, Jess experience as an abiku is debilitating. Distracted by TillyTilly, she struggles to complete her schoolwork; her friends at school find her "weird." Instead of feeling greater pity for, or emotional connection to, her parents in the manner of Azaro, Jess becomes increasingly estranged from them: "So now they both hated her [...] Well, fine, she hated them, too" (IR 247). ). In *The Icarus Girl,* the exemplary status of the abiku does not bring joy alongside suffering, as in Okri's earlier work; it is rather a condition mostly of misery. To my mind, this points to a fundamental difference in outlook between the two writers: whereas Okri embraces the alterity of the abiku as a way of thinking through the unique capabilities of the artist, especially vision, Oyeyemi presents the "othernesss" of the abiku as profoundly immiserating. Jess's unique abikuness, possibly, encodes Oyeyemi's own, pained sense of being "errant," at home in neither Britain nor Nigeria, as I go on to explore.

Still, in interweaving the abiku trope alongside the ibeji into her novel, Oyeyemi subtly unravels the privilege that has been paid, at least in the west, to secular medical frameworks; her novel challenges the idea that western epistemologies are the only legitimate means of interpreting the world. At the same time, we might also see the novel's oscillation between "earthly conventional reality and the possibilities of the supernatural" (Hogle 3), that is, the slippage between Jess's secular diagnoses and abiku references, as another means by which *The Icarus Girl*, as well as Badoe's *True Murder* borrows from, and belongs at least partially within, the Gothic genre. The Gothic, though traditionally a western genre, proves conducive to the authors' explorations of African

indigenous beliefs. The "terror Gothic," according to Hogle, purposely leaves open the possibility that events may have either a physical rationale or a supernatural one. Hence the way in which critics have debated whether the ghosts of James's governess's experience are "real" or mere figments of her imagination (cf. Edward Parkinson). Likewise, in Badoe's and Oyeyemi's novels, neither secular nor spiritual explanations are clearly privileged; rather both are placed alongside one another as competing explanations of the narratives' events.

In continuing to map Badoe's complex cultural inheritances, alongside Oyeyemi's, another western influence on Badoe's novel is Toni Morrison's *Beloved* (1987). When asked whether any writers have inspired her in an interview with Geosi Gyasi, Badoe declares, "I'm a great fan of Toni Morrison. I think 'Beloved' is out of this world" (Gyasi). Her statement highlights a profound indebtedness to Morrison's work. In 2003, Badoe also directed a one-hour documentary on Morrison for BBC3. Morrison is complicated as a "western" influence on Badoe's work because her fiction often focuses on poor persons of African descent, for instance, slaves in the American South (*Beloved*), or impoverished blacks in the American Midwest (*The Bluest Eye* 1970). Nonetheless, as a Professor Emeritus at Princeton, Morrison is firmly entrenched in the American academy, such that it makes sense, in my view, to speak of her as a western influence on Badoe's writing. Given Badoe's comments, and her effusive praise of Morrison's novel, the similarities between *Beloved* and *True Murder* are not as many as might be expected. Nevertheless, the two novels do share one fundamental aspect: both revolve around a central event of infanticide. In Morrison's novel, the protagonist, Sethe, an escaped slave, murders her two-year-old daughter, seeking to spare her from recapture: in Sethe's fear-fuelled reasoning, death is better than slavery. Likewise, in Badoe's novel Isobel murders her

daughter, Polly, smothering her with a pillow; another, earlier event of infanticide occurs in the deaths of the two babies found in the attic room.

The latter event, that is to say, the deaths of the two babies before Polly, binds the relationship between Morrison's and Badoe's novels even tighter. After their death, the murdered and/or stillborn infants (Badoe's novel implies that one is murdered, the other stillborn) come to haunt Polly's family's home at Graylings: "Although there were only three of us in the house, I became convinced that there were others among us," Ajuba says (TM 178). Polly herself is a kind of revenant, appearing to Ajuba in the mirror. In Morrison's novel, infanticide results in a spectral haunting as well. The murdered infant, Beloved, takes up residence in the house that Sethe shares with her other children and mother-in-law, which is referred to simply by its number, "124": "124 was spiteful. The women in the house knew it and so did the children" (*Beloved* 22). Bhabha reads Beloved's haunting positively, as a kind of "self-love" on the part of Sethe: "through the death and the return of Beloved [...] the slave mother regain[s] through the presence of the child, the property of her own person" (55). That is to say, by killing Beloved, Sethe destroys her former slave-masters' property and so gains for herself the dignity of defiance, as well as the company of her ghostly daughter.

While Bhabha's reading is powerful and opens a fruitful perspective onto Morrison's work, "ghostliness," in my view, also symbolically captures the "undead" status of the enslaved person in a slave economy: such an individual is not fully recognized as a person by society and yet feels herself to be, as much as anyone, a living, sentient being. Together, the two novels craft what might be called a "postcolonial Gothic," where gothic tropes of haunting serve to symbolize pained experiences such as slavery and the dislocation the African migrant. In Badoe's novel, Polly's spectrality mirrors – and

ultimately affirms – Ajuba's feelings of un-belonging. After Polly's death, Ajuba increasingly feels that she is "invisible" to the adults around her – that, when they look at her, they see Polly alone: "I was her best friend and for as long as I lived, she would live as well" (TM 244). This "invisibility" might be understood to emblematize Ajuba's profound sense of social outsiderness, or her status as a "missing person." As we have already seen, Ralph Ellison uses "invisibility" to comment on the "second-class" citizenship of African Americans. Likewise, in Badoe's novel, Ajuba does not see herself as registering in the minds of those around her; her condition in Britain is similar to that of a ghost, living and dead at the same time.

So, Badoe and Morrison, whom the former admires, look back to earlier art forms, specifically Gothic tropes, to engage what might be termed broadly "postcolonial" conditions: the "undead" status of the African in a slave economy, as well as the "invisibility" of the migrant in the space/s of diaspora. The detective story, the Gothic novel, and Morrison's *Beloved*: all three might be said to be western antecedents to Badoe's writing, underlining her diverse life experiences and cosmopolitan status as a writer. Shifting now to the ways in which *True Murder* is indebted to West African cultural traditions, not only western ones, Ajuba also explores West African cultural practices in the letters she writes in her head to her cousin, Esi. "The English learn how to cook from books, I explained later to my cousin Esi, Aunt Lila's daughter in Ghana" (TM 62). Ajuba finds this method of cooking odd. Her own mother served her traditional Ghanaian dishes and fruit from the garden (TM 46). On the one hand, Ajuba's letters to Esi could be understood as a means of "writing back." In an interview with Belinda Otas, Badoe says, "You know usually in stories, it's the black child who is seen as exotic. I wanted to look at all this from the young point of view of a young black child" ("In Conversation: Yaba

Badoe"). Ajuba's letters reverse the colonialist gaze. Instead of a white (adult) traveller writing with semi-astonishment/horror about local customs in a foreign land, in Badoe's *True Murder,* the young, black, Ghanaian child, Ajuba, writes with marked disbelief/disdain at the strange customs practiced in England: "Polly's people are always touching each other. They're nice but they're *not like us,*" Ajuba declares, pointing out her differences from Polly's family in another letter (TM 63; emphasis added).

At the same time, while Ajuba's letters to Esi may provide a means of "writing back," turning English persons, not Africans, into exotic "others," they also allow opportunity to consider competing cultural paradigms in Badoe's novel, specifically, as relate to childness. "In England, I wrote in my letter to Esi, children are allowed to be rude to their parents and adults serve their children" (TM 63). In this passage, Ajuba highlights one difference between how children are treated in Polly's upper-middle-class British household versus in Ghana. She remarks in particular on differences in parenting. Oyeyemi's novel, too, explores cultural discrepancies in the way adults behave toward children; while Oyeyemi's novel mostly offers us a childhood that is familiar in a western sense (e.g. Jess spends most of her days either playing or pursuing an education), it also points toward other cultural traditions/practices that Oyeyemi has knowledge of as well. In one scene, Sarah, Jess's Nigerian mum, chastises Daniel, Jess's British father, for letting his daughter challenge him at the dinner table: "If that had been *my* father 'handling that', she would've been flat on the floor with a few teeth missing!," Sarah exclaims (IG 198). "I don't *get* you, Sarah," Daniel replies, "one minute you want me to hire a psychologist and the next you want me to beat her senseless" (IG 198). Sarah's reply seeks refuge in a kind of universalist position – "It's just [...] it's just *discipline,*" she says (IG 198) – even while hinting that what actually may be taking place is a clash of cultural parenting perspectives:

"You're turning this into some kind of [...] some kind of European versus African thing," she shouts at him (IG 198).

Oyeyemi and Badoe, in other words, appear to recognize that childhood is not the same around the world, but rather experienced differently by children living in different regions. How Ajuba relates to the Venus family is dissimilar, for instance, to how she behaves in the presence of her own kin. "Struggling to suppress my misgiving, I watched the Venus family lavish affection on one another [...] The Venuses were a tactile family" (TM 63). This contrasts with how Ajuba interacts with adults in Ghana: "Like a kitten brought from the cold, thawing out before a fire I warmed myself against the Venuses," she continues (TM 63). Similarly, Jess's arrival in Nigeria is enlightening, as she gradually learns the rules of a new environment: "'Why did you tell your grandfather to leave you alone, now?' Funke was asking Jess [...]. "We never talk to our elders like that, Jessamy,' Biola added" (311). Jess realizes quickly that the rights and privileges allowed to her as a child in Britain are different from those awarded to her in Ghana. In this way, Oyeyemi's novel, like Badoe's, presents a contrast with those examined in this thesis previously. Variations in cultural conceptions of childness globally are not the backdrop against which we can read their work, for instance, by investigating western conceptions in three child soldier novels. Rather, they appear integral to the novels themselves, as a key part of how Oyeyemi and Badoe explore the complicated cultural terrain of diaspora, as I go on to explore.

This section has examined Oyeyemi's and Badoe's novels for their mixed cultural references: the novelists draw from western literary genres such as the Gothic novel while also alluding to West African cultures, folklore, and customs in their work. Even in the way in which Badoe and Oyeyemi represent childness – for instance, how they depict the

differences between African and western parenting styles – their works point to the writers' own complex cultural inheritances; images of childness in their novels are not exclusively drawn from West African cultural contexts alone. The next section continues to explore cultural differences as these are highlighted by Badoe's and Oyeyemi's works. It does so, however, not by excavating the writers' diverse cultural influences and literary allusions; instead, in what follows, I investigate child figures and images of childness as a means of exploring the social "outside." I also continue to explore the writers' framing of diaspora, examining the way in which they might be understood to give new, if less celebratory, meanings to terms such as hybridity and interstitiality, challenging the excessive valorization of these concepts by theorists such as Bhabha.

## Through a Child's Eyes: Exploring Social Outsiderness

This section considers forms of race-, culture- gender- and age-based outsiderness in Badoe's *True Murder* and Oyeyemi's *The Icarus Girl*, particularly analyzing gender-based outsiderness through the resonant themes of parenting, mothering, and infanticide. What is childness doing, or how is it functioning, in Badoe's and Oyeyemi's works? As one of many possible answers to this question, this section argues that childness serves to reinforce or enhance the other vectors of social difference or outsiderness explored within these women's novels (conversely, adult figures, possessed with a modicum of social influence or power, might serve to undermine these novels' overarching, abject themes). Abjection is defined in this section as a condition of profound outsiderness, a sort of "throwing off" in Jerrold Hogle's words, by the majority culture; I go on to unpack the term in greater depth later (7). Beginning, first, with a discussion of racial outsiderness, the section then moves through a discussion of culture, gender, and age, examining each with special focus on children's perspectives. Throughout, the goal will be to show how

these novelists explore multiple, distinctive strands of un-belonging simultaneously, revealing their protagonists as expelled from the mainstream in more than one sense and then using these different senses to support and reinforce one another.

Some critics, including Brenda Cooper and also Pilar Cuder-Dominguez in an article on "Double Consciousness in the Work of Helen Oyeyemi and Diana Evans" (2009), have read the child figure, especially twins, as a kind of allegory for dual or mixed belonging in Oyeyemi's and several other diasporic woman's novels.[53] The figure of twins, to borrow from John Lash's meditation on *Twins and the Double* (1993), suggests or makes present a boundary: "Etymologically speaking, 'twin' denotes both union and separation, joining and parting" (Lash 6). Hence, at least one way of interpreting twin figures in Oyeyemi's novel might be as means of making apparent the author's sense both of dual and divided belonging: "I am British *and* Nigerian"; "I am British, *but,* I am also Nigerian." By her use of twins, in other words, Oyeyemi suggests a state of belonging both to two cultures and, ultimately, to none at all.

In this way, the novel resists celebratory formulations of hybridity, for instance, as exemplified by Salman Rushdie's praise of "impurity, intermingling" and "mongrelization" in his set of essays, *Imaginary Homelands* (394). Rushdie praises "new and unexpected combinations" brought about by "mass migration," in particular, panegyrizing his novel, *The Satanic Verses,* as a "love song to our mongrel selves" (394). Instead, Oyeyemi presents the migrant's supposed "hybridity" as debilitating. "Stop looking to belong, half-and-half-child," the specter TillyTilly, associated with Jess's twin, Fern, taunts her (IG 250). Fern's statement transforms Jess into something monstrous almost: a "half-and-half" child,

[53]Cooper also examines Ghanaian-Canadian author Esi Edugyan's novel *The Second Life of Samuel Tyne* (2004) and British-Nigerian writer Diana Evans's *26a* (2005), while Cuder-Dominguez looks strictly at Oyeyemi's *The Icarus Girl* and Diana Evans's *26a*.

conjuring a gruesome image of body parts knit together. As a "half-and-half" child, it is clear to Jess that she will never truly belong in any polity. TillyTilly taunts her that she can "never go home," a statement that not only forecloses the possibility of Jess's future incorporation into Nigeria, her mother's country; it is also a stark reminder that Jess does not really feel at home in Britain either.

So, Oyeyemi's novel also revises Bhabha's theory of the "third space" of the migrant as a place of plentitude and creativity, where nationalist notions of cultural "purity" and "origins" are contested and transformed (see also "Cultural Diversity and Cultural Differences"). Bhabha's theories have been widely disseminated by scholars, who have, on the whole, embraced his idea of the "third space" as a counterhegemonic site of possibility (see, for instance, Joel Kuortti's and Jopi Nyman's *Reconstructing Hybridity: Post-Colonial Studies in Transition,* 2007). By contrast, Oyeyemi's protagonist finds the interstices, or the place between two cultures, destabilizing. "Abjection" is a term taken in this chapter from Julia Kristeva's *The Power of Horror* (1982); I find it useful for drawing out this aspect of Oyeyemi's work. For Jerrold Hogle, in his brief gloss of Kristeva's essay, "abjection" means a kind of "throwing off"; Hogle points to the literal meaning of the word *ab-ject,* which is, to "throw off" (Hogle 7). In Kristeva's words, she describes it as a kind of expulsion: "Their looms, within abjection, one of those dark violent revolts of being" (1). One way of framing Jess's, but also Ajuba's, un-belonging in Oyeyemi's and Badoe's novels, therefore, is as condition of abjection. Both protagonists, not only Jess, are expelled in a sense. "I was dislocated, adrift," Ajuba says, following the loss of her mother and her best friend (TM 244). Ajuba furthermore describes herself as a "capsized child clinging to the wreckage of my childhood" (TM 252). This is not, to my mind, a Crusoe-like image of the child coming to colonize a foreign land, similar to the way in which the shipwrecked

Crusoe, in Defoe's novel, becomes master of a deserted island. Rather it is an image of unmooring; Ajuba sees herself as a citizen of no country at all. Likewise, at the end of Badoe's novel, Ajuba advances on her pregnant stepmother, Nina, with a steel-toothed comb, intent on killing her. The scene presages not only an act of murder but also, potentially, an act of *self*-erasure. In murdering her (step)mother and Nina's unborn child, Ajuba could be said to be symbolically murdering herself. The novel ends tantalizingly with Ajuba, steel comb in hand, opening the door to Nina and her unborn child (TM 262).

In her attempted murder of her pregnant stepmother, it is Ajuba who becomes an image of the Gothic monster, abject and revolting, while in Oyeyemi's *The Icarus Girl*, the author frequently maps her protagonist in an outside, or "other" space, as a way of foregrounding her position on the margins of society. In his essay "Of Other Spaces" (1967), Foucault describes the heterotopia as a "counter-site," a place where "the other real sites that can be found within the culture are simultaneously represented, contested, and inverted" (IG 3). Like the heterotopia, Jess's cupboard, in which we find her playing at the start of the novel, in a sense converts, contests, the outside world. In the cupboard, Jess feels inverted, at the bottom of a "bottle or a glass cube" (IG 3). Her mother's voice outside sounds "strange, wobbly, misinformed"(IG 3). In the cupboard, Jess enjoys a sense of safety and quiet. By contrast, the world outside is "too fast, all colours, all people talking" (IG 4). In this way, Oyeyemi's novel might be said to evoke what Bhabha, drawing from Freud, also calls the "unhomeliness" of migrant/postcolonial experience; he does not always extol the rewards of diaspora in his writing. In "The World and the Home" (1992), Bhabha contemplates how the blurring of borders between the "home" and "outside," as in many Gothic texts, provides a profound way of thinking through "the anguish of cultural displacement and diasporic movement" (142). The cupboard in Oyeyemi's novel similarly

reflects Jess's sense of social outsiderness: it provides Jess shelter while also symbolizing the way in which, in Britain, her presence is continually estranged.

The cupboard is only one example of a heterotopia in Oyeyemi's novel. In another scene, TillyTilly also appears to Jess in the surface of a mirror. The mirror, Foucault writes, is a "mixed, joint space" between the utopia and the heterotopia (4). In the mirror, I see "myself there where I am absent: such is the *utopia* of the mirror" (4; emphasis added). To be sure, the mirror in Oyeyemi's novel signifies identity: Jess's confrontation with TillyTilly might be read, as argued in the above, as a metaphor for her conflicting selves. When the mirror cracks, so does Jess's carefully stitched together identity. Providing yet further support for this theory, the mirror also functions in Oyeyemi's novel, as in Foucault's theory, as a heterotopia in the sense that it "exerts a sort of counteraction on the position that I occupy" (4). In Oyeyemi's novel, Jess's experience of the mirror is highly heterotopic, profoundly disconcerting. It contests her temporarily safe position standing on the bathroom tiles. "Oh, she was scared again," Oyeyemi's narrator tells us, when TillyTilly asks Jess to "swap places," inviting her into the odd, inverted mirror world: "[Jess had] never been *more* scared" (IG 242). The scene is carnivalesque, destabilizing. TillyTilly reaches out from her strange mirror world to grab hold of Jess when, suddenly, the glass explodes.

Ajuba, too, in Badoe's novel frequently can be found inhabiting odd, perverted, or "other" spaces. For instance, the attic room where the two girls find the murdered infants is a kind of heterotopia, excluded from the normal spaces of the house. The heterotopia is "outside of all places," Foucault writes (4). Alongside the attic room, Badoe's novel also employs the heterotopic image of the mirror throughout. It is in the surface of a mirror that Polly appears to Ajuba and in which Grace, Ajuba's mother, fancies she can see the

faces of her husband's "whores." "'Look,' she said, turning her face to the mirror. 'Can you see your father's whores? Look at them all. [...] Look how they hate me, Ajuba!" (TM 31). The mirror, as it does in Oyeyemi's novel, contests the secular, "realist" spaces of the novel. Mirrors unravel the staid, British world that Ajuba shares with her classmates. They represent an anarchic, subversive dimension that, in the novel, is associated with witchcraft and magic. So, Badoe's novel, like Oyeyemi's, embraces an aesthetic of the unhomely, using images of mirrors and cramped attic quarters to underscore Ajuba's uncertain habitation in Britain.

Accordingly, I read these narratives as "dissensual": Ajuba and Jess do not mature into "productive" members of their society, as Slaughter remarks of the typical progression of the Bildungsroman ("Bildungsroman/Künstlerroman" 94). Rather, they remain children throughout the narratives, a detail that could be seen as reflective of Badoe's and Oyeyemi's exclusive interest in the lives of children, wanting to make young girls the heroines of their novels, but which might also be read as an implicit act of protest. How, we might ask, will Jess and Ajuba grow up? How will they become fully "incorporated" members of a society that continually rejects them? Indeed, motifs of Gothic monstrosity or self-erasure, as well as images of the heterotopia, show the two protagonists as expelled, yet why or by whom are two different matters. As I go on to explore, Jess and Ajuba are shown as outside, abject, in part, on the basis of their race, culture, gender, and age. Frequently, as I now examine, both novels linger on the protagonists' difference from, and even disadvantage relative to racial, cultural, gendered, or age-based majorities, giving us reason to believe that these differences might be the source of the protagonists' suffering, contributing to their joint inability to "fit in."

To begin with a discussion of race-based outsiderness first, racial differences enter these novels largely through the protagonists' physical lack of resemblance to their mostly white, or blond peers. Hair, in particular, serves as a means of representing racial differences in *True Murder* and *The Icarus Girl*. In her novel, Oyeyemi brings attention to Jess's physical dissimilarity from her blonde, brunette, and redheaded classmates, for example, the "reddish brown" haired Colleen McLain (IG 81) and the blonde-haired Allison Carr, "the prettiest girl in the class" (IG 83). By contrast, Jess's black hair is braided into cornrows. This white-skinned, light-haired duo teases Jess: "Maybe Jessamy has all these 'attacks' because she can't make up her mind whether she's black or white!" Colleen McLain announces loudly one day (IG 86). Oyeyemi's novel could, on the one hand, be understood to refer to what W.E.B. Du Bois calls "double consciousness," or the internationalization of white norms by a minority subject, thereby producing "two souls, two selves, two unreconciled strivings [...] in one dark body" (*Souls of Black Folk* 10). In the novel, Jess does not know whether to embrace the blackness of her skin, or the whiteness of her culture. The conflict between the two, as it does for Du Bois, creates for her a state of internal confusion. Yet, the fact that Jess is mixed-race means that she is perhaps particularly conflicted about her racial identity. In truth, though her hair and skin are dark, neither "black" nor "white" applies to her, a situation made even more perplexing by the fact that these terms seem to be mutually exclusive, as Colleen's either-or construction suggests, and as I go on to explore.

Throughout, Colleen McClain and many of the other white characters in the novel use the word "weird" to describe Jess's mixed-race status (Sarah, Jess's Mum, is Nigerian, while her father, Daniel, is white British), and Oyeyemi also employs the word "group" to signal Jess's alienation from her Caucasian peers. One of the first uses of the "group" in the

novel refers to the clique made up of Colleen, Andrea Carney, Andrea's cousin, Sonia, and Allison: "Oh the disgusting disgusting saliva [Colleen McLain chews on her hair tips] and this *group* not liking her" (IG 107). In such a way, or by using the vocabulary and dynamics of the playground, Oyeyemi shows Jess as outside the racial mainstream.

Yet, while Oyeyemi in this way highlights Jess's antagonistic relationship with whiteness, Jess is shown as alienated from forms of blackness in the novel as well. In my reading of Oyeyemi's work, it is not, in fact, the case that Jess is distanced from blackness by her identification with white culture as, for instance, Frantz Fanon argues, alongside W.E.B. Du Bois. In *Black Skin, White Masks* (1952), Fanon examines how racist norms in colonized societies encourage black-skinned persons to imitate white culture, or wear "white masks." Rather, Jess's mixed-race status, in my view, makes it difficult for her to find belonging *within* blackness, due to the complex inscription of her body. Here it is helpful to read Oyeyemi's first work back through the themes and images supplied by her second novel, *The Opposite House*. In "Unplaced/Invaded: Multiculturalism in Helen Oyeyemi's 'The Opposite House'" (2012), Helen Cousins reads this work as a critique of multiculturalism. "Oyeyemi's novel operates as a treatise on multiculturalism and its failures to promote equality through diversity for the black population in particular" (2). That is to say, as a black Cuban, not from Africa, or born in London, the protagonist of the novel, Maja, finds it difficult to fit in with the other black African or Black British students at her school: "[…] Maja, experiences her 'differences' as fragmenting her community, not as creating a new social fusion" (ibid. 3). For instance, Maja learns that the girls with "African parents" at her school consider her in another category from themselves (IG 97). "Thus," in Cousins' words, "Maja is disabused of her notion that a 'black girl was a black

girl'"(Cousins 5; quoting from the novel). Maja and her friend, Dominique, to the "African" girls, are "black without coming from the right place. [They] were the slave girls" (IG 97).

This notion that there are many forms of blackness and, furthermore, that it is possible, as a dark-skinned or minority ethnic person, to find oneself outside them is also explored in *The Icarus Girl*, although arguably not in as great a depth as in Oyeyemi's *The Opposite House,* which puts these issues center-stage. In *The Icarus Girl,* Jess is teased by her classmates on the playground not for being "black": many other, admired students at her school such as Tunde Coker, who is Sierra Leonean, are ethnically black. Instead, Jess's struggles seem to result from her status as mixed-race, so, twice othered or removed. Writing of such mixed-race or mixed-parentage children, Anne Phoenix and Charlie Owen observe that, in Britain, while some "have experienced racial discrimination," that is, been labeled and discriminated against as black, "[…] many children and young people of mixed parentage experience discrimination specific to their mixed parentage" (89). The scholars list a number of derogatory terms such as "peanut," "half-breed" and […] "redskin" used of biracial children by their peers (89). Indeed, of the fifty-eight mixed-parentage children interviewed by Phoenix and Barbara Tizard, "20 per cent of them said that they were called racist names by black as well as by white people" (qtd. in Phoenix and Owen 89). These figures show that Jess is not alone in failing to be accepted by both her white and black peers.

Indeed, as a child of mixed-parentage, Jess cannot find purchase in either identity. She is in a sense outside, erased, unable to find a foothold in the white-majority British culture, nor amongst the handful of other "multicultural" minorities that populate her London school, as emblematized by her South Asian teacher, Miss Patel, the Sierra Leonean Tunde, and Nam Hong, an ethnically Chinese classmate. Oyeyemi is clearly

aware of the "multiculturalist" policies that have characterized Britain since the late 1960s (Modood 1), and, in my reading, critical of them. According to Tariq Modood, an influential report on "The Future of Multi-Ethnic Britain" commissioned by the Labor government in 1997 promised "the creation in all its citizens of a sense of belonging to its polity" (17). Yet, Jess, in Oyeyemi's novel, has little sense of belonging to any sort of polity at all, not despite the many ethnicities that characterize her school but in fact because of them. Jess is a loser of Britain's multiculturalist policies, we might say. She does not fit in to any of the ethnic or cultural "identities" that multiculturalism, in its celebration of "difference," reifies. Her own mixed-race status is not accommodated by these policies, not awarded a pride of place amongst the "rainbow."

As another similarity between the two novels, Badoe's *The True Murder* also depicts its young black protagonist as alienated as a result of her race. However, while Oyeyemi's novel shows Jess as socially "outside" not only for her status as half-black (so, outside forms of whiteness), but also as a result of her mixed-race parentage (outside white and black identities), Badoe maps Ajuba's racial outsiderness in a more traditional sense: that is to say, as outside forms of whiteness alone. Like Jess, Ajuba is obsessed with hair. For many black women, as explored recently in Chimamanda Adichie's *Americanah* (2013), hair has proven a powerful means of discussing racial differences. In *Americanah*, the Nigerian protagonist, Ifemelu, begins a blog in which she advises black women on hairstyles and speaks about the politics and importance of "natural hair." "Hair is hair," Adichie says in an interview with Kate Kellaway of *The Guardian*, explaining some of Ifemelu's perspectives, "yet it is also about larger questions: self-acceptance, insecurity, and what the world tells you is beautiful" ("Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie"). Hair for many

black women is a means of exploring their racial identity; challenging white norms; embracing blackness; and communicating this self-acceptance to others.

In *Americanah*, Ifemelu begins to wear her hair in tiny cornrows, defying her white boyfriend to dislike her new look. Her decision reflects Adichie's comments above: for Ifemelu, natural hair is a means of celebrating her black identity. In Badoe's novel, however, Ajuba has not yet had the opportunity to feel so empowered by her natural hairstyle; instead, her "unruly" African hair, which Ajuba describes pejoratively as "thick and impenetrable, a dark jungle of matted curls" (TM 101), is a constant source of embarrassment for her. Ajuba's description of her hair as a "dark jungle" plays with colonial archetypes; it clearly associates Ajuba's natural hairstyle with pejorative ideas of Africa as a "heart of darkness," suggesting strongly that Ajuba has internalized white norms. Ajuba's "unruly" hair marks her out as different from her best friend, Polly (a stunning blonde) as well as from many of her British classmates such as Beth (a demure brunette). Whilst noting Ajuba's physical differences from her peers, Badoe also maps Ajuba's racial outsiderness, her social exclusion, through Ajuba's sense of shame at her physical appearance.

True, Ajuba feels not only different from her white British classmates (unlike Jess, Ajuba does not attend a very multicultural or multiethnic school), she also feels lesser to them, hating her own natural features. Whilst undressing in the school dormitory, Ajuba dreads the glances of "strangers who marveled at the paleness of my palms and fingered the stubborn resilience of my hair" (TM 24). When her stepmother, Nina, shaves off Ajuba's unruly hair instead of styling it, she experiences a telling feeling of relief; Ajuba is now rid of one of her greatest sources of self-consciousness (TM 112). Constantly bemoaning her own tangled hair and dry, cracked skin, she is enthralled by the blonde,

lank-haired, long-legged Polly. That Ajuba has internalized some sort of racial prejudice is clear in the way she constantly disparages her own appearance and praises Polly's: "The new girl was dazzling [...] Her eyes were a flash of king-fisher blue" (TM 6).

Both Badoe's and Oyeyemi's novels feature protagonists who are embarrassed by their dark skin and hair. Like Ajuba, Jess also seems self-conscious about her physical appearance – not only "different from" but also "lesser than." She is constantly comparing herself to her classmates and to her cousin, Dulcie, finding her own features wanting. "Everyone always went mad over Dulcie's long blonde hair, it was just like Allison Carr's" (IG 139). Jess's childhood slang in this passage throws racial prejudices into stark relief; Jess presents the adults' preference for Allison's hair as a kind of "madness," which in a sense it is – without rational cause. For a time, Jess similarly becomes obsessed with a photograph in an encyclopedia of two blonde girls, images that appear, for her, to epitomize notions of physical beauty (IG 179). Oyeyemi here employs accouterments of childhood to engage with race-based thinking. The novel explores the protagonist's early encounters with racist stereotypes in picture books, encyclopedias, as well as in school and amongst her friends. Achebe remembers a similar program of education in *The Education of the British-Protected Child,* remarking on the dominance of British stories – *Treasure Island, Tom Brown's Schooldays,* etc. – in his library at school (21). Throughout *The Icarus Girl*, Oyeyemi likewise brings attention to Jess's Eurocentric reading. With her mother or her teacher, she devours Lewis Carroll's *Hunting of the Snark,* Louisa May Alcott's *Little Women,* C.S. Lewis's *The Lion, The Witch, and The Wardrobe,* as well as western fairy tales such as Sleeping Beauty, all of which, notably, are absent of persons who look like her. From an early age, Jess is exposed to a world in which white norms of beauty are prioritized and black role models, largely, absent. Admittedly, Jess belongs to a

much younger, and so, potentially more progressive generation than the half-Nigerian, half-Scottish poet Jackie Kay, who remembers growing up "in love" with black activist Angela Davis in *The Adoption Papers* (27). Yet Jess is, in a way, even more isolated than Kay, less able to access images that empower her, though Kay, too, struggled to find strong black women to admire. In other words, in Jess's whitewashed education, Oyeyemi's novel further challenges the notion of a celebratory "multicultural" Britain, emphasizing the way white norms and practices, to this day, remain dominant.

Alongside racial exclusions, culture-based experiences of un-belonging are explored in these novels, too; children's perspectives serve to highlight prejudice along cultural lines, not only racial biases, as I now address. At first, cultural outsiderness might be thought to be difficult to disambiguate or untangle from race. After all, Jess, in Oyeyemi's novel, is not only mixed-race; she is also bi-cultural. Therefore, Colleen McLain's prejudiced description of her family as "weird" could refer to either category: "My mom says it's not your fault you're mad, she says it's the way you were brought up. Your family is *weird,* didn't you know?" (IG 108). "The way you were brought up," in Colleen's phrasing, seems to be a reference to Jess's mother's Nigerian culture, more specifically, to her African parenting practices, not only to her race. Hence Oyeyemi once again explores a situation of social outsiderness using a kind of playground politics. In other words, the children's struggles on the school ground might be understood as a metonym for British society more generally. In Colleen's playground taunts, Oyeyemi boils downs the xenophobic attitudes tacitly expressed, for instance, in Margaret Thatcher racist immigration politics,[54] making these explicit.

[54] See, for instance, the British Nationality Act (1981), which revoked automatic citizenship to some children born in Britain to foreign parents, especially those deemed "unsettled" or "Illegal" (Winston James, "The Black Experience in Twentieth-Century Britain" 382-383).

While cultural differences are thereby explored obliquely, or in tandem with racial ones in Colleen's jeering, *The Icarus Girl* makes an explicit case for Jess's cultural outsiderness as well. Interestingly, many of the scenes in which Jess is presented as a cultural outsider in the novel occur not in relation to Britain, but rather in relation to Jess's mother's native Nigeria. For instance, when Jess arrives in Nigeria, she immediately realizes that it is a problem she cannot speak Yoruba, or indeed any other indigenous African language. The taxi driver calls her an *oyinbo*, a racially charged word for "foreigner" (IG 17). Sitting in the back seat on the ride from the airport, Jess waits for the unifying smile from her mother, "the smile that they would all be smiling because it was important that they *could all understand and share this country too*" (IG 17; emphasis added). It never arrives, suggesting to Jess that she will never quite belong in her mother's homeland. In this way, Oyeyemi explores a peculiarly diasporic feeling of un-belonging. Her novel gives space to the dislocation of the second-generation migrant who not only feels ill at ease in the host culture (i.e. Britain), but also has no anchor in the culture of origin: Jess is as much out of place in Lagos as she is in London.

Later, at her extended family's compound, Jess struggles to find a playmate amongst her cousins: "[She] couldn't tell them," the narrator reflects, speaking of Jess's first frightening encounter with TillyTilly, "Because they were boys, because they were her cousins, because *they belonged here and she didn't?*" (IG 40; emphasis added). Jess's question acknowledges her cultural outsiderness in Nigeria, her unfamiliarity with many customs. In an essay for *The Guardian*, Oyeyemi explains that, while she feels more comfortable in her skin in Nigeria – less noticeable for being black – she does not feel at home culturally there: "When it comes to Africa, I just don't get it […] I have the muddled perspective of someone who is in a Nigerian cultural framework but not of it" ("Home,

Strange Home"). Oyeyemi thereby underlines her own sense of dislocation in Nigeria as someone who looks similar to the others around her but yet has little idea of how behave. In *The Icarus Girl*, Jess, likewise, uses familiar British customs to decode strange Nigerian ones. At the zoo, for instance, she unwraps her Gala, a kind of Nigerian pastry, "just like a sausage roll" (IG 29), relying on what she knows of British food to navigate Nigerian cuisine; Oyeyemi is clear about which culture takes priority.

In shifting again to Badoe's novel and reading these two works comparatively, *True Murder*, too, shows Ajuba as a cultural outsider relative to Ghana, even while she also inhabits a culturally marginal position in Britain. Like Jess, Ajuba is what we might call, drawing from Barrie's *Peter Pan in Kensington Gardens*, a "Betwixt-and-Between."[55] Bhabha evocatively uses this term, "in-between," to describe the cultural position of the migrant in *The Location of Culture* (1994) (2), and, in my reading of their novels, Oyeyemi and Badoe breathe new life into this term by exploring its dark underbelly, or what is lost for persons straddling two cultures not only, as Salman Rushdie celebrates, the "newness" that is created (394). Themes of cultural hybridity and especially dislocation characterize Yaba Badoe's novel, not only Oyeyemi's, reflecting, possibly, her own lived experience. Following school, Badoe attended King's College, Cambridge and has lived and worked in several countries, including Spain, Jamaica, and most recently Ghana, for the making of her latest film (Ellerson, "Yaba Badoe Talks").

While at first, in the novel, Ajuba is alienated by what she experiences upon her arrival in England – "We ate lots of McDonald's in London," Ajuba remembers, "[…] I don't like the food in London" (TM 46) – eventually, Ajuba has lived in Britain long enough that she begins to identify herself with the majority culture. For instance, at the

[55]Barrie uses this phrase to describe Peter, still half-bird, trapped in Kensington Gardens (17).

Venus's home at Graylings, Ajuba learns to enjoy British cuisine as a result of Isobel's excellent cooking: "Polly hadn't lied to me. Isobel cooked well [...] Nothing was too much trouble" (TM 62). Later, Ajuba and Polly choreograph a dance to British pop star Cliff Richard's "Living Doll" (TM 218). This scene shows Ajuba's gradual assimilation, as Ajuba, alongside Polly, embraces one of Britain's most beloved musical performers.

At one point, Badoe even shows us the two young girls, Ajuba and Polly, "strait-laced in candy-striped dresses and straw hats," having tea with Ajuba's father and his girlfriend, Nina, at a well-known country estate in Dorset (TM 108). Were it not for Nina's bright clothing (Ajuba describes her as "flamboyant in red"[56]), as well as the fact that "Englishness" has often been often construed historically as "whiteness" (cf., for instance, Byrne's "Crisis of Identity? Englishness, Britishness and Whiteness") it might well be described as the quintessential "English" scene. Indeed, the children's outfits are almost too perfect, the weather too pleasant. Ajuba is performing "Englishness," but not with the degree of subtlety that would make her performance convincing. Ajuba's self-identification with some form of English culture or, at least, with the glamorous cosmopolitanism that is iconized by Polly's Anglo-American family, becomes so strong in the narrative, however, that she even begins to disparage the cultures of her native Africa – Ghana in particular. It is in this way that Badoe really begins to underline Ajuba's total, not only partial outsiderness, or her position "in-between."

Disgusted with Nina, who is Senegalese, after Nina becomes pregnant, Ajuba asks her, "Is it the same in *your culture*, Nina?" (TM 258; emphasis added). Ajuba is here referring to the fact that, in Ghana, as her father reminds her, "we don't address adults by their Christian name. It's considered rude" (TM 258). Ajuba's question to Nina is

[56] Ibid.

condescending, biting, clearly meant to distinguish Nina from herself. Throughout, Nina serves as a kind of outlet – a screen of projection, possibly – for Ajuba's anger over her mother's death as well as her own self-hatred and alienation from West African ways of life. Constantly comparing Nina to Isobel, Polly's svelte mother, Ajuba finds the former lacking. Nina's clothes are too bright, her accent too heavy. When Ajuba learns that "Executive Administrator" (Nina's job title) is a glorified term for "secretary," it stretches her patience to the limit: "Executive Administrator indeed! Mama was a qualified nurse" (TM 257).

Badoe, admittedly, incorporates a strong class narrative into her novel, showing the upper-middle-class Ajuba, the cosseted daughter of a well-paid nurse and lawyer, scorning the working-class Nina. However, she perceptively overlays this with a notion of regional or cultural differences as well. In Ajuba's increasingly assimilated, some might even say colonized eyes, while everything English or "cosmopolitan" is beautiful, many things associated with Africa – especially Nina – are lesser, uncouth. Ajuba's seduction by a "cosmopolitan" culture is particularly apparent in her admiration for the Venus family home, which, like an imperial museum, is filled with treasures from all over the world: "exquisite porcelain from Singapore, metal-topped side tables from North Africa, and crockery from Andalusia" (53). James O. Young describes "cultural appropriation" as a process whereby "members of one culture (I will call them *outsiders*) takes for their own, or their own use, items produced by a member or members of another culture (I will call them *insiders*)" (4). The Venus family home, by this definition, is then a clearly paragon of cultural appropriation: the urbane Venuses collect attractive objects from all over the world, with seemingly little regard for their original use.

While Ajuba does her best to fit in with this metropolitan or cosmopolitan grandeur, she nevertheless remains mostly culturally "outside." "Africa's a strange place," a girl at Ajuba's boarding school tells her, lumping all the countries of the continent together: "All sorts of weird things happen there" (15). Ajuba's schoolmate here not only erroneously refers to an undifferentiated "Africa," she also underlines Ajuba's difference from the other children. As mentioned earlier, Ajuba's original arrival in England, moreover, brings with it a measure of befuddlement:

> I was inclined to believe that [Polly] found the codes and habits of the English middle classes as bemusing as I did [...] their love of rambling, their obsession with tea at elevenses and teatime, their snacks of flapjacks and marmite on fried bread (41).

Ajuba finds the predilections of the English odd. Even Ajuba's imaginary letters to her cousin, Esi, while also lending a subtle decolonizing touch to Badoe's narrative, tacitly point to Ajuba's position on the cultural margins: Ajuba is confused by the strange customs she encounters in the Venus home.

As another sign of her cultural outsiderness, while Ajuba increasingly identifies with some notion of English culture in Badoe's novel, this does not mean she has found the means to inhabit it. Throughout, Ajuba remains obsessed with notions of witchcraft and ghosts – beliefs that separate her from her British peers. "Aj, you're *weird*," Polly tells Ajuba, when the latter suggests that the murdered infants found in Polly's attic are the victims of witchcraft: "They cursed me [...] My husband's girlfriends. So my babies came out dead [...] I hid them in the trunk" (TM 96; emphasis added). Interestingly, "weird" is the same term that Colleen, Jess's bully, employs in Oyeyemi's novel. So, Badoe, too, employs a kind of playground politics in her novel, foregrounding her protagonist as "other." Schoolyard scuffles in *True Murder,* as in *The Icarus Girl,* bring into focus wider social attitudes, especially regarding "foreigners." Polly's description of Ajuba's beliefs is

not so far away from sniffy British media portrayals of West African traditional healers as "bogus" and "hacks" in tabloids such as *The Daily Mail* (see, for instance, Andrea Thompson's "Witchdoctors Exposed").

In this way, that is to say, by showing Ajuba as culturally alienated from Ghana and from Africa, more generally, but also from "Englishness" in her story, Badoe makes a case for her protagonist as "in-between" but, really, outside; both novelists focus on the pain of the transplanted/translated person. In *True Murder* and *The Icarus Girl*, Badoe and Oyeyemi speak about the difficulties of the immigrant trying to make a home in a new place. More specifically, their novels might be understood to bring attention to the unique challenges facing minority ethnic immigrants in Britain or, at least, in England, where both of their novels are set. As further support for this reading of *True Murder,* in particular, Badoe has directed several films on the topic of racial discrimination in England for the BBC. These include *Black and White* (1987), a series of investigative documentaries exploring the prevalence of racism in the UK; *I Want Your Sex* (1991), an arts documentary about western myths surrounding black sexuality; and *Race in the Frame* (1996), a series of training videos for the BBC about the representation of racial minorities in the media. All, as does Badoe's novel, examine race relations in Britain critically.

Helen Cousins similarly reads Oyeyemi's third novel, *White is for Witching* (2009), as a "counter-narrative to the notion of racial purity associated with English nationhood" ("Helen Oyeyemi and the Yoruba Gothic" 47). Oyeyemi sets her novel in Dover, England's first port of entry for immigrants, which, according to Cousins, allows her, firstly, to contemplate whom English society defines as a racialized "other" and, then, to complicate this definition, drawing attention to the "cycles of immigration, co-existence, and

integration that have always existed in English history," in part, by incorporating Yoruba tropes such as the "abiku, *aje* and ancestors" into her story (ibid. 47). Cousins reads Oyeyemi's novel as racially or culturally alienated or, rather, critical of the kinds of political discourse (exemplified, perhaps, by the xenophobic immigration policies of Margaret Thatcher) that would turn her, as a black British woman born to Nigerian immigrant parents, into a cultural and/or racial "other." In "Home, Strange Home," Oyeyemi furthermore speaks explicitly about the racial discrimination she has experienced in England, remembering, for instance, being called "jungle bunny" by her classmates at school.

In their essays, interviews, as well as novels, Badoe and Oyeyemi also bring attention to the injustices they have suffered as women, not only as racial and cultural minorities. For instance, in a blurb on a website dedicated to her latest film, Badoe deplores the fact that, internationally, only "10% of directors and only 15% of screenwriters" are women, so bringing her readers' attention to the substantial gender inequality in the film industry, where Badoe has been employed for many years (ammatafilm.com). Oyeyemi, too, has experienced injustice as a result of her gender. For instance, in "Once Upon a Life," she painfully recounts how a male stranger once attacked her in a London Park. Keeping in mind such incidents, I now go on to examine forms of gender- not only race- and culture- based prejudice in Badoe's and Oyeyemi's novels. When analyzing Badoe's *True Murder,* in particular, it is useful, first, to examine some of Badoe's other writings, as well as her documentary, *The Women of Gambaga* (2010), which focuses on the lives of several women in an exile's camp in Northern Ghana, where the women have been banished on allegations that they practice witchcraft.

In her essay titled "What Makes a Woman a Witch?" (2005), Badoe speaks at length about the patriarchal structures that enable this gendered subjugation (in the exile's camp, the women have a very low quality of life; their wealth and businesses have been taken from them). In Ghana, as Badoe describes, accusations of witchcraft serve in part as a means of policing gender norms. The women who are most vulnerable to allegations of witchcraft are those who have violated established ideas of femininity: "Listening to her story," Badoe says about one of the women in the camp, "I was made aware of the acute vulnerability of women who choose to head their own households in the region; woman audacious enough to live independently of men" ("What Makes a Woman A Witch?" 45). Anthropologists Shirley Ardener (1973) and Ifi Amadiume (1987) have, likewise, described African women who reside independently and challenge gender norms. Ardener, for instance, addresses strategies of "female militancy" amongst the Bakweri, Balong and Kom in West Cameroon, while Amadiume discusses how sex and gender are differentiated amongst the Igbo, allowing Igbo women to take on roles such as acting as a "husband" to a younger woman. Yet, amongst the communities of Northern Ghana studied by Badoe, such open defiance of the social order is not tolerated. Badoe's women must, for their subversion, bear the burdens of exile and financial ruin.

Badoe's comments in "What Makes a Woman a Witch?" shed light on some of the gendered themes in *True Murder*. While Peter and Michael, the two main male figures, do not engage in such an explicit form of gendered violence as the men of Northern Ghana, accusing their wives of witchcraft and taking their belongings, they do, however, treat their wives with little care. Throughout, the novel is critical of the fact that men enjoy a kind of unbounded, peripatetic existence, while women remain rooted, tied to a sense of nationhood or home. In *Stories of Women,* Boehmer relatedly discusses how women are

made to serve as bearers of culture in many modern African societies (see Ch. 1 "Mothers, motherlands, and nationalist sons"). Boehmer is particularly critical of a "Mother Africa" discourse that renders women symbolically important to the project of nation-building, while simultaneously excluding them from active involvement in the public sphere (*Stories* 28). I see Badoe's novel as scrutinizing a similar gender imbalance, particularly in its focus on women's association with, and confinement to domestic spaces. When she thinks of Ghana, Ajuba instantly recalls the smell of her mother's cooking (TM 24). Polly's mother, Isobel, is also linked to the Venus family home, associated with household chores such as cooking and cleaning: "The improvements Isobel had embarked on that summer were complete: a brick terrace swept out from the back of the house [...] a herb garden of rosemary, sage and varieties of mint[...]" (TM 226). Badoe's novel here connects not only femininity, but also food with regional identity. Rosemary, sage, and mint, for Ajuba, conjure the gastronomic delights of England, while mango, in another passage, vividly evokes for her lush, green landscapes of Ghana (TM 24).

By contrast, Isobel's husband, Peter, travels all over the world: "An expression of her father's, I imagine," Ajuba observes wryly when Polly claims to be "a citizen of the world, at home wherever she pitched her tent" (TM 40). Indeed, both Peter and Michael, Ajuba's father and a British-educated lawyer, are what Selasi might describe as "Afropolitan," equally comfortable in London and New York as in they are in Lagos and Accra. This fact then gives them greater personal freedom than their wives; it also provides a resonant backdrop for their sexual philandering. That is to say, both men move as easily between countries as they move between different women's beds. Another way in which Badoe's novel emphasizes forms of gender inequality is by foregrounding wives who suffer as a result of their husbands' infidelity. Peter, Isobel's husband, has an affair with

the mother of one of Polly's classmates at school. Meanwhile, Ajuba's mother comes to be convinced that her husband, Michael, is unfaithful to her. "At heart I was my mother's daughter, imbued with Mama's outrage at Pa's infidelities," Ajuba says (TM 104).

Not only by representing men and women as unequally free but also by underlining the consequences this holds for the female characters of the story, Badoe's novel might be understood to offer a critique of patriarchy. Distraught, unable to create meaningful lives for themselves apart from their husbands, Grace and Isobel both commit suicide. Badoe's novel is clearly skeptical of "traditional" family relations: "Husband. Wife. Children. They came home worshipping the nuclear family," Ajuba's Aunt Lila tells her, remembering Ajuba's parents as a newly married couple (TM 26). It is an ominous statement. "With that sort of attitude in Ghana, Ajuba," Aunt Lila continues, "they might as well have worshipped the nuclear bomb" (TM 26). In *True Murder*, the claustrophobic arrangement of "Husband. Wife. Children" yields only disastrous outcomes for women.

In *True Murder,* once more, Ajuba's mother kills herself after arriving in London with Ajuba, hoping to begin a new life. Isobel, too, commits suicide at the end of Badoe's novel. The mere fact that Badoe litters her text with female corpses implies a critique of male privilege, in my reading, or at least suggests some form of gender-based outsiderness as a topic explored in her work. This gendered abjection, then, becomes part of the daughters' stories in the way daughters inherit their mothers' gender-based suffering. Polly's murder by Isobel is indeed the most prominent example of pained female inheritances in Badoe's novel. Isobel revisits the injury caused to her by her husband (i.e. his eschewal of her affection) upon her daughter, Polly, killing her even as she takes her own life: "Polly will never feel the pain of a woman discarded, contemptible even to herself" (TM 241). The novel implies that Isobel's action is one of mercy, not of revenge: by

murdering Polly, Isobel hopes to protect her daughter from the injustices she has experienced.

Yet, in thinking about the gendered outsiderness of daughter figures, not only of adult women in Badoe's *True Murder*, we might also turn towards Ajuba's eventual descent into madness. Badoe's novel once more begs us to empathize with the "mad" black woman and to admit external sources for her insanity, similar to how, in Rhys's novel, Bertha/Antoinette's "madness" is partially blamed on Mr. Rochester's extra-marital trysts. In Badoe's novel, Grace, Ajuba's mother, begins to lose her mind only after she suspects her husband's unfaithfulness, spurred to her demise by his philandering. Similarly, at the end of the novel, Ajuba begins to see ghosts in mirrors, afraid that her father's new wife, Nina, will kill her in order to secure Michael's complete affection. In this way, Badoe suggests that Ajuba has inherited her mother's suffering; she, too, has become a victim of jealousy. *True Murder* even implies that Ajuba will subsequently revisit forms of gender-specific suffering upon the next generation, as she stalks Nina and her unborn baby holding a comb, an iconic symbol of femininity and of the attention women pay to their appearances, capitulating to gender-based norms.

By contrast, in its images of a young girl child subverting, rather than being simply oppressed or "othered" by the patriarchal order, Oyeyemi's novel offers a slightly less despairing picture of gender politics than Badoe's. Whereas *True Murder* indulges in a narrative of doom, with Ajuba going blindly to her gender-determined fate like her mother, Oyeyemi offers us a heroine who is in a sense more plucky, more ready, in the novel, to make a change. Mafe, in her reading of Oyeyemi's work, suggests that Oyeyemi complicates the male-dominated Yoruba bush tradition on which *The Icarus Girl* draws "by imagining a little girl as the 'hero' and by creating female characters who – much like

the original Icarus – subvert paternal authority and put the wisdom of the 'elders' to the test" (Mafe 30). So, in putting a small girl at the center of the story, Oyeyemi revises Tutuola, destabilizing his position as the "father" of Nigerian letters. In her novel, a young girl, not an adult male (as in *the Palm-Wine Drinkard*), carries the thrust of the narrative.

Throughout the novel, Jess challenges the authority of her maternal grandfather, Gbegba, who "reigns," in Oyeyemi's phrasing, over Jess's large family from a three-story house "at the back of the compound" (IG 30). As Mafe observes, "More than just the familiar haunted house, the grandfather's home represents a patriarchal structure" (Mafe 25-26). Jess, for instance, disagrees with Gbegba when he complains that Jess's mother abandoned Nigeria for England in order to become a professional writer. "I was frightened that some enemy had laid a curse on her head so powerful that it had stolen every single bit of sense," Gbegba says of Sarah's actions, not making any effort to hide his disapproval (IG 27). "It couldn't have been that bad," Jess replies, contesting her grandfather's authority (IG 27). None of his other grandchildren speak to him so insouciantly; Jess, in this way, defies her grandfather's rule. Taking her critique of patriarchal structures further, Oyeyemi also imagines Jess and TillyTilly rearranging Jess's grandfather's library, putting books in different places and playing in her grandfather's swivel chair. The scene does significant violence to centuries of male-only authorship, allocating control of literary works to young girls. Mafe, for instance, reads this scene as subversive of the male-order as the "keeper of knowledge and tradition": "In the postcolonial Female Gothic novel, then, we see the appropriation rather than destruction of 'the symbols of male power'" (Mafe 30; 31). Notably, TillyTilly and Jess do not destroy the books in Gbegba's library; they reorder them, thereby arrogating literature's power – to codify, to persuade, even, to liberate – to themselves.

Mafe's account of the subversive themes of *The Icarus Girl* is consistent with Oyeyemi's larger critique of male privilege throughout her oeuvre. "But my feminism has never been against men," Oyeyemi says in an interview about her latest novel *Boy, Snow, Bird* (2014): "It's not erasure; it's just they're not the focus. In real life, they're quite nice" (Hoggard). This would seem to suggest that Oyeyemi's concerns have to do with the ways women have internalized a sense of their own inferiority, or acquiesced to gendered social norms. For instance, in *Boy, Snow, Bird*, Oyeyemi borrows heavily from the fairy tale of "Snow White." In the original Grimm Brothers' story, the heroine's stepmother asks a magic mirror, "Mirror, Mirror, here I stand. Who is the fairest in the land?," anxious to be assured of her own beauty (Grimm 184). Similarly, in *Boy, Snow, Bird,* as Oyeyemi explains her auctorial intentions to Liz Hoggard, "I […] wanted to explore the feminine gaze, and how women handle beauty without it being to do with men, *per se*." Oyeyemi thinks deeply about social beauty norms and how they affect and, often, disempower women.

Yet, in other contexts, Oyeyemi has taken a more targeted approach, seeming to point the finger not at widespread social attitudes, but at men directly. For instance, in an interview with Megan O'Grady, Oyeyemi claims that the inspiration for her fourth novel, *Mr. Fox* (2011), in which a misogynist author repeatedly kills his heroines by plotting their violent deaths, is taken from real life: "Women are constantly being killed by their husbands, lovers, brothers, and fathers – it's reported every day. When I first started writing *Mr. Fox,* I was interested in […] [the] violence that seems to lurk within the love men have for women" (O'Grady). From one angle, *Mr. Fox* might be read, therefore, as an act of protest against patriarchy, an attempt to uncover the kernel of violence "lurking" within modern gender relations.

Oyeyemi's spirited fight against male privilege is evident in other places in her *oeuvre* as well. For instance, in a scene from *White is for Witching* (2009), the narrator declares that the "only criticism" the heroine, Miranda, would accept during her Cambridge admissions interview, a discussion of several nineteenth-century British novels, "is that she was giving patriarchy precedence over the female consciousness explored in the Gothic" (WW 53-54). This phrase provides a tempting critical point of entry into Oyeyemi's oeuvre. Given how often she represents female protagonists (women take center stage in all of her five novels), we might imagine that Oyeyemi is unwilling to make the same mistake: in Oyeyemi's fiction, women's, not men's, perspectives are prioritized.

As I have been suggesting, Oyeyemi is largely a subversive, not a pessimistic feminist, though her writing is often profoundly threnodic as well. That is to say, the novelist attempts not only to destabilize androcentrism in her novels, privileging women's stories, she also documents, and laments, women's victimization by patriarchal orders. Across her oeuvre, Oyeyemi's female protagonists, black, white, of a variety of ethnicities, sexualities, and backgrounds, may be found similarly trapped underground or in isolated attics, hidden "trapdoor rooms," mirror-worlds, and "opposite houses" (heterotopic dwellings in Oyeyemi's second novel), as images, possibly, for the protagonists' entrapment in social relations constructed by and for the benefit of men. In the "Female Gothic," Diana Wallace argues, women use images such as the crypt, wall chamber, tomb and buttress room to "represent the heroine's fears of what might happen to her because she is a woman" (Wallace 155). For instance, in Angela Carter's *A Bloody Chamber* (1979), a young bride discovers a macabre chamber filled with the corpses of her husbands' previous wives. It serves as an apt metaphor for the heroine's loss of autonomy, and self, in

marriage. Themes of physical entrapment in Oyeyemi's fiction, too, may be a means of symbolizing women's confinement in social institutions.

Of course, the abject aspects of Jess's gendered existence are as clear as the empowered or subversive ones. Like these other female heroines, Jess is trapped in a netherworld, too. As I explored earlier in this chapter, Jess does not feel at home in society outside the cupboard, and frequently falls through the cracks, we might say, of the real, physical world of the novel, pulled through staircases (IG 146), or into mirrors. Earlier parts of this chapter examined how Jess's abject or marginal status in the novel is a result of her mixed cultural background or skin color. Yet, given what Mafe calls Oyeyemi's "feminist priorities" throughout her oeuvre (23) – that is to say, the author's near obsession with abject, excluded, or victimized women – it is safe to suggest that Jess's outsiderness, expressed in the novel through a variety of metaphors including the heterotopia, is a result of her feminine gender as well.

Jess's relationship with her mother supplies support for this idea of Jess's gender-based exclusion; the novel, crucially, explores gender inequalities through a child's eyes, using mother-daughter relationships to underscore the vulnerability of feminine actors. Mafe observes that, Sarah, Jess's mother, "challenges the authority of her Yoruba father (Jess's grandfather), as well as that of her English husband. But her female agency is often rendered 'unnatural,' even dangerous, as a result" (IG 26). Sarah, a published novelist, is made "monstrous" in the eyes of her father and husband for her reluctance to play the roles of submissive wife and daughter: "Your mother had no job, she was living far from home, and she was writing and saying that she would find some work and pay for her studies! Such nonsense!" Gbegba complains to Jess early in the novel: "I can tell you that I was afraid of witchcraft" (IG 27). Thinking of Badoe's essay for *Feminist Africa,* Gbegba's

mention of witchcraft clearly suggests that, in her independence, Sarah has flouted Nigerian social norms. Gbegba thinks her perverse, even "other" for it.

In turning now to what this means for Jess, or the daughter figure, in Oyeyemi's novel, throughout *The Icarus Girl,* Jess exhibits fear and, sometimes, hatred of her mother. When asked by her therapist to describe her parents, Jess labels Sarah as "Big" (IG 130). Her father is "Small, smaller, I mean. Than –" (IG 130). Later, asked whether or not she is afraid of Sarah, Jess answers tellingly, "I don't know," implying that she is, indeed, frightened (IG 256). Mafe reads Jess and Sarah's relationship through the lens of the feminine repressed. On the one hand, we could interpret this fear literally. By many measures, Sarah is an intimidating, imposing woman; Jess has good reason to be alarmed by her. Yet, on the other hand, in line with Mafe's reading, we might also say that Jess is not actually afraid of her mother, but rather what she represents. According to Mafe, Sarah signifies "the powerful but abject Feminine" (Mafe 26). As a woman plus a writer, Sarah iconizes a set of traits abjured by society. Again, Gbegba sees her as a sort of "other," tainted by witchcraft and magic. As female and an aspiring writer herself, Jess is, then, poised to inherit her mother's gendered outsiderness. "Hmm, I can see you are the same," Gbegba, Jess's grandfather says to her after Jess demonstrates her precocious language abilities, thinking of two synonyms for "confuse": "confuse, dissemble, obfuscate" (IG 27). Among the observations Gbegba could have made, there are few more likely to make Jess resent her mother. Like Ajuba and Polly, Jess stands at the end of a long line, inheritor to her mother's gender and auctorial talents but also, as a result, her gendered pain. As a woman and an aspiring writer herself, Jess is set up, like her mother, to exist on the social outside, "other." Oyeyemi's novel explores not only forms of race-based or cultural un-belonging, but, employing mother-daughter relationships, gendered outsiderness as well.

Racial, cultural, and gendered un-belonging: all three have been shown as central to Badoe's *True Murder* and Oyeyemi's *The Icarus Girl*, fundamental to the way in which these writers' employ children's perspectives to encode a kind of political commentary. Namely, I see their works as critical of the way in which black-skinned persons have been or are being discriminated against in England, as well as of how cultural difference can make it difficult to be accepted socially both in Africa and the west. Badoe's and Oyeyemi's novels, further, explore the ways in which women have been actively disadvantaged by men worldwide. As I have examined, Badoe's novel makes a slightly more balanced critique of gender relations globally by showing Isobel and Grace (one woman English, the other Ghanaian) similarly murdered by their husbands, driven to their deaths by their husbands' lack of care. In other words, Badoe's novel admits the presence of male chauvinism in both African and western countries. Oyeyemi's novel, in contrast, is more focused on African gender relations: it is Gbegba, in particular, who discriminates against both Sarah and Jess.

In addition to women and racial minorities, the authors might also be said to speak out politically on behalf of young people. Children in Badoe's and Oyeyemi's novels are sometimes victimized by their parents, especially, murdered. In other cases, however, they are also shown as unfairly subjected to ageist norms. So, in Oyeyemi's novel, a sense of not only racial, cultural, or gendered exclusion, but also age-based outsiderness emerges in Jess's use of the word "group." Speaking of her parents, Jess complains, "So now they both hated her, they were a *group* of two" (IG 247; emphasis in the original). Again, in Oyeyemi's novel, different vectors of social belonging are explored together: "group" is a word that has also been used to signal Jess's racial and cultural difference from her peers. Here, Oyeyemi uses the term in another context, but again to delineate a form of un-

belonging. It is clear that Jess considers her parents, adults, on the one side of a line and herself on the other.

Jess also employs the word "group" in an earlier setting, to describe the alliance that has formed between her mother, father, and head teacher, Mr. Heinz. The three adults have decided that Jess should be promoted from Year 4 to Year 5. Afraid for her future and feeling trapped, Jess holds a biscuit as a "talisman" against the three adults facing her (IG 88). The term "talisman" subtly evokes the Yoruba myths that have informed earlier chapters of the novel, when Jess meets TillyTilly in Nigeria; it is a "traditional" or "magical" image. At the same time, the more mundane "biscuit" might also be understood to symbolize Jess's age-based un-belonging. The "talisman" and Jess's defensive use of it suggests she feels herself both excluded from, and at a disadvantage relative to, the adult "group" before her.

Throughout the novel, Jess is presented with age-based assumptions, even, with what might be described as ageist bias. Her parents, for instance, often confront her with this idea of a "normal" child: "[her father] would like her to be brave, to be completely recovered, to be a *normal child* who wanted to see her friends at school" (IG 79; emphasis added). Jess's precocious intelligence, however, renders her "special": "Daniel looked at Sarah, who gave him a slight shrug (*They want to make our daughter special – what can we do?)"* (IG 88; emphasis in the original). Her erratic behavior makes her "weird." "[T]here's something about Dulcie and Tunde and even the others [...] that's *too* different from me. It makes me [...] weird" (IG 121; emphasis in the original). Certainly, Jess counts Dulcie and Tunde, one white and one black, as "different" from her racially. Yet, in this passage, Jess also includes "even the other" students in her class, thereby making her "weirdness" here more than about her race. As I see it, Jess is actually marking out her aberration from

childness generally, or the difficulty with which she struggles, as she puts it, to be a "normal child."

True, in Jess's departure from age-based norms, Oyeyemi maps Jess's exceptionality *within* childness. "Then the grown-up would say: 'What's the matter, Jess? Why are you sad?' And she'd have to explain that she wasn't sad, just tired" (4). Here, as in the above, Jess has a clear idea of a "grown-up's" expectation for her: that she be happy and play, that she be a "normal" child, not melancholy or gloomy. It is an expectation that she struggles to fulfill. At the same time, in tracing Jess's outsiderness within childness, or her difficulty living up to the label "child" and its demands, Oyeyemi might be understood to locate Jess's social outsiderness *as* a child as well, emphasizing the way in which childness itself can be marginalizing. For Jess, in other words, childness or the state of being a "child" is something oppressive, confining. It does not allow her to be comfortably herself. Whereas childhood and the conceptions attached to it cause her to question many aspects of her personality, adulthood, we might imagine, will allow Jess greater room to maneuver. Of course, growing up also entails becoming a woman, which, as we have seen, is something painful for Oyeyemi. It is also unlikely that Jess will be able to shed her race. Yet, at least Jess will be rid of one source of constant oppression: this idea of a "normal child" and the guilt, frustration, and isolation it brings daily into Jess's life.

Badoe presents the age-based outsiderness of her protagonist in similar ways. Like Oyeyemi, Badoe signifies the age-based outsiderness in her novel, first, by showing Ajuba's departure from age-based norms, or by her inability to live up to adult expectations. Similarly to Jess, Ajuba is aware of the assumptions adults hold about, and for her; also like Jess, she finds these expectations challenging. "Children are resilient little buggers," Archie Whittaker, the school doctor, says to Ajuba after one of her friends has a near-

death experience, "You'll have forgotten in a day or two" (TM 33). As often happens in Badoe's novel, though, Dr. Whittaker's assumption about children is proven wrong: Ajuba does not forget but rather carries the memory of Beth's near-death experience into adulthood. The entire novel is narrated in retrospect, with Ajuba recounting her life's traumatizing events in full.

In a similar instance of adults making false assumptions about children, when Polly and Ajuba begin to hunt clues to solve the murder of the two infants discovered in Polly's attic, "[Miss Edith] *assumed*, as did the other adults around us, that we were only interested in walking Candy and Fudge [Miss Edith's dogs]" (TM 140; emphasis added). In fact, Polly and Isobel are completing what they see as important detective work, a feature of the novel reminiscent of Boehmer's *Nile Baby* (2008), which similarly imagines two child "detectives," working to solve the puzzle of a strange fetus in a jar. Throughout *True Murder*, Ajuba's narration suggests that not only the adults in her life take little interest in her, but also that the attention they do pay is superficial. Early in the novel, Ajuba directly confronts some of the beliefs adults hold about her: "I've read somewhere that children are fascinated by death. I simply don't think that's true" (TM 41). Ajuba so rejects the suggestion that children have an innate obsession with mortality. In these several ways, *The Icarus Girl* and *True Murder* explore childness as a category of the "other." Ajuba and Jess are both aware of adults' ideas about children and, for the most part, they reject these, failing to see their own nature reflected in them.

Moreover, in *True Murder,* Badoe imagines actions of violence committed against children as well. This might be seen as another way in which children are presented as socially abject or marginal in her work. In an interview with Belinda Otas, Badoe declares that the original inspiration for her novel was the murder of a young girl at her British

boarding school, when Badoe was aged only fourteen: "It was such a shattering experience," Badoe says, "that I knew if I ever wanted to write anything in the future it would sort of be the impact it had on me" (Otas). "At the time," Badoe continues, "what struck me is how powerful adults are in the lives of children" (Otas). Incorporating this idea into her novel, Badoe highlights children's relative powerlessness in comparison with adults. Often, children in the novel are shown as marginal to the lives of adults, again, socially "outside": "as a child, a friend of their daughter's, my actions were *peripheral* to the drama unfolding in our lives," Ajuba says about her friend's parents' imploding marriage (TM 81; emphasis added). The children are relegated to a status of unimportance. In another passage, Ajuba declares, "Few adults are consciously insensitive to children. It's just that most of them are willing to sideline children's needs to follow their own trajectory in the pursuit of happiness" (TM 106). This passage not only points to children's marginality, on the "sidelines," it also hints at children as potential victims of adult caprice: adults ignore children's happiness, often even actively sequester it, in selfish pursuit of their own desires.

Of course, in thinking about the many ways adults mistreat children, Badoe's novel also features several events of infanticide: "the knowledge remained that we were acutely vulnerable in a world controlled by adults," Ajuba says at the end of the novel, after the murder of her friend (TM 248). The helplessness of children is bought prominently to the fore by Polly's death: "The pillow stifles her breathing, silences her screams" (TM 241). Infanticide is also present in the novel, too, in the mystery surrounding the two infant corpses. These corpses preoccupy Ajuba and Polly for much of the narrative, preparing them, as Ajuba suggests, for the event of Polly's murder: "It was if our discovery of the babies in the attic had been a warning [...] as if Polly, with her obsession with death, had

spent her months at school preparing for a murder, not knowing it was to be her own" (TM 249). Ajuba sees special meaning in the infant skeletons; they, too, like Polly, are the victims of a love-spurned woman.

Hints as to the cause of the two infants' death, at least for the reader, begin in the name of the mare owned by the former owner of Graylings, a Miss Fielding, to whom the two infants are connected. The mare's name is "Medea," a clear reference to Euripides' play, in which a Greek princess, Medea, murders her two children after being abandoned by her husband, Jason. Later in the novel, we learn through a sort of magical realist vision experienced by Ajuba that, indeed, at least one of the two babies has been murdered by Miss Fielding, who is a kind of Medea figure in the novel. "[T]he past, cradling the house in a sigh, relives its story" (TM 240). So, once more, Badoe's novel recalls Morrison's *Beloved;* the two novels prominently feature women who murder children. Yet, in Morrison's novel, as discussed, Sethe's murder of Beloved might be seen as a radical act of protest against slavery, while, in Badoe's work, Miss Fielding's actions arise from a place of peculiarly gendered pain. The novel implies that Miss Fielding and Miss Edith, the twins' actual birth mother, were more than just companions; they may have been lovers. Hence, hurt by Miss Edith's philandering with a man on holiday, which resulted in Miss Edith's pregnancy, Miss Fielding may have murdered one of the babies (the other was stillborn) out of revenge. She remains a pathetic figure throughout the narrative.

The events of infanticide in Badoe's novel are chilling, clearly intended – as is supported by Ajuba's signposts throughout the narrative, as well as Badoe's comment in her interview – to bring attention to the socially marginal position of youth. Indeed, in depicting Ajuba and Jess as "othered," injured, even, as a result of their status as "children," Badoe and Oyeyemi both contribute powerfully to their novels' overall

portraits of abjection. In other words, a certain kind of ageism is explored in the works in parallel to, and concert with, related forms of minority-based oppression. In my reading, childness functions in *True Murder* and *The Icarus Girl* alongside other vectors, such as race, culture, and gender, to map the protagonists as socially expelled. Children's perspectives, furthermore, highlight broader trends of racism and sexism by distilling these into more easily recognized forms. In Oyeyemi's writing, especially, the veiled bigotries of the legislature become the bold insults of the playground. Mother-daughter relationships, too, serve to underline the precarious position of women both young and old in African and western countries. To an extent, we might therefore see images of childness as instrumentalized by the authors, serving to make clear, or accentuate, their protagonists' un-belonging.

**Images of Agency**

Child figures are not only depicted as victims in these women's novels, however; this section also examines how Oyeyemi and Badoe in fact affirm the agency of their child figures, while at the same time using images of childness to reinforce the overarching themes of "outsiderness" present in their works. Admittedly, in *True Murder* and *The Icarus Girl,* children are dependent, often powerless; Badoe's and Oyeyemi's novels, like Abani's, Iweala's, Jarrett-Macauley's, as I go on to explore, do not entirely escape the charge that they stereotype children. Yet, children are also shown in Oyeyemi's and Badoe's novels as possessing strategies for resisting adult influence. More specifically, this section examines the several ways in which Oyeyemi and Badoe highlight children as constructive social agents, that is to say, as not merely passively constructed by adults (as one way in which children may be seen to be "othered" and abused), but rather contributing their own – often subversive – meanings to what it is to be a "child." Towards

this end, the section places Oyeyemi's and Badoe's works in dialogue with several scholars, such as Rex and Wendy Stainton Rogers, who have also emphasized the capabilities, not merely vulnerabilities, of children in their writing.

To be sure, Oyeyemi's and Badoe's novels might, at first, appear to offer their readers little that could trouble a typical "western" view of children. For instance, *The Icarus Girl* frequently incorporates word games and prose devices which might be said to reinforce notions of children's naïveté and playfulness. Oyeyemi lightheartedly strings words vertically on the page. She uses differently sized fonts or capitals when recreating TillyTilly's handwriting – "*HEllOJEssY*" (IG 59) – and occasionally represents Jess's thoughts phonetically: "Nye. Jeer. Reeee. Ah," Jess thinks quietly to herself while on the plane to visit family (IG 9). All of these features, in my view, support stereotypical notions of the inherently "creative" child, as discussed at length in my first chapter. Badoe's novel, too, relies on mainstream conceptions of childness. Polly and Ajuba, for instance, spend much of their time engaged in leisure, making up games or choreographing dance movements to songs: "Polly and I had decided to put on a show," Ajuba tells the reader (TM 217-218). So, like *The Icarus Girl,* Badoe's novel not only frames children as innately imaginative; it also acknowledges childness as a kind of performance. Ajuba and Polly put on a "show" – in a literal and figurative sense – for Polly's parents.

In such respects, these two novels seem to do little to subvert adult expectations of childness. Instead, they potentially reinforce adult assumptions, endorsing a generally Rousseauian ideal of the "child." In this way, the two works offer little that advances upon the novels addressed in the previous chapters; they, too, reduce children to a set of conventional images and tropes. However, this is clearly not the whole of the story. As already seen, Badoe's and Oyeyemi's novels in fact do much to subvert adult expectations,

firstly, by showing these as oppressive for the child figures in their novels: "Apparently, pre-teens weren't even supposed to pretend to fart in public. Not when adults are around at any rate" (TM 224). The policing party here is Polly, not her mother: Polly is embarrassed that Isobel has learnt of "the rude noises that Polly and I practiced when we were in the bath together," to quote Ajuba's words (TM 224). Nonetheless, once again, Badoe draws attention to the social norms that surround childhood, which is itself a kind of act of erasure. Revealing social constructions or norms makes them more obvious but less powerful, subtly undermines their pretense to fact.

Furthermore, throughout their novels, Badoe and Oyeyemi show us children who are aware of childness as a social construction and, moreover, aim to add their own meanings to it. For instance, in a scene from Oyeyemi's novel, Jess is angry with an airline hostess, who was "not smiling at her in particular, but at a child, at the *idea* of a child. Because she was an air hostess. Smiling at a child" (IG 11; emphasis added). There is something of Jean-Paul Satre's idea of "bad faith" in this passage. Both Jess and the air hostess dutifully perform their social roles, pretending to be unaware of their freedom to behave otherwise. The novel, again, correlates performance and identity; being a "child," for Jess, is in some respects about embodying the right behaviors. Like the waiter in the café described by Sartre, whose movements are a "little too quick, a little too rapid" (59), Jess is playing at being a "child": it is not a role she performs very well. Instead of responding to the air hostess with a flirtatious smile, happy and open, as the hostess obviously expects, "Jess gave a drowsy smile in return" (11). There is an implicit act of resistance suggested in Jess's "drowsy" smile; she is not merely constructed by the air hostess as a "child" but, in fact, contests the hostesses' conception. Jess mentions "the *idea of* a child" with obvious disdain.

Indeed, throughout the novel, Jess does not merely resent the expectations adults have of her, finding them limiting, she actively contests adults' opinions of her as well: "Jess herself had been offended by the concept of the babysitter […] 'I'm not a baby,' she insisted over breakfast as she carefully nibbled at the brown crust of her toast" (IG 132). The abiku is by nature a lawless, an "errant" child in McCabe's phrasing; Oyeyemi's novel, more than Okri's, explores this aspect of the figure from Yoruba folklore. Jess's abikuness, her "errancy" in her visitations by TillyTilly and frequent "attacks," provides her with another important means of establishing agency. At every point in the narrative where Jess feels the idea of a "normal" child constraining, we, Oyeyemi's readers, are made aware that she, Jess, has her own, differing conceptions of childness that do not conform to the majority view. "Now he was trying to say that TillyTilly was imaginary […] Glaring at him, Jess said, 'That's nice.' He didn't understand at all" (IG256). Jess here openly rejects her therapist's opinions. So, Oyeyemi presents us with a child who is in many ways even more disobedient, more resistant than Azaro, who defies adults' directives in *The Famished Road* more as a byproduct of his unusual gifts – his pull toward the spirit world – than as a result of explicit intention. By contrast, Oyeyemi gives us an active, a constructive child who directly challenges adults' desires and, thereby, draws attention to the way in which children, not only adults, bring their own meanings to the category childness; how they, too, participate in the "invention" of social categories.

Rex and Wendy Stainton Rogers submit, 'To model the child as construct*ed* but not construct*ive* […] permits us to see the young person as having their identity constructed by outside forces but not the young person constructing their identity out of the culturally available" (84; emphasis in the original). Children construct their own meanings of what it is to be a "child" from the images they are presented by the culture;

from the way adults behave towards them; as well as from their own unique experiences, notions of self, and observations of peer behavior. Hence, children should be seen as "agents in-their-own-right within the social context" (84).

Similarly, David Rudd suggests that there is no such object as a truly and purely "constructed" child, although adults obviously invest childness with their own ideas in literature. There are only "'talkings to' and 'responses from' different social locations" (Rudd 37). In other words, in life, as also, possibly, in literature, where adults' representations are informed by their experiences, childness is by nature a collaborative project. Adults may have their own idea of what is a "child" but so do children, who glean notions of childness from the surrounding culture as well as from their own experience. Furthermore, the ideas of each will be continually revised by their encounters: "The childness of a secondary school teacher who is also the mother of children aged seven and three will be very different [...] from that of a childless male tax inspector" (Hollindale 78). How adults think of children, in other words, is likely to be affected by the children they have met. D.W. Winnicott concurs, "I once risked the remark, 'There is no such thing as a baby' – meaning that if you describe a baby, you will find that you are describing a baby and someone. A baby cannot exist alone, but is essentially part of a relationship" (88). Winnicott is here speaking about an infant, or very young child, but his statement also applies to older children or, indeed, to any human person whose identity is shaped in, and through, social encounters – so, to us all.

In their novels, Oyeyemi and Badoe make this collaborative or iterative nature of childness clear. In fact, in contrast to the other novelists examined in this thesis, we might praise them as particularly sensitive to the existence of childness as a social construction, as well as keen to represent children as agents in their own right, as Rex and Wendy

Stainton Rogers put it, not only to paint childhood as a socially "outside," marginal, or to present some of the risks of being young. This idea of the child as an active, a constructi*ve* agent is made palpable in Badoe's novel as well, not only in Oyeyemi's. In a passage also mentioned above, Ajuba says, "I've read somewhere that children are fascinated by death. I simply don't think that's true" (TM 41). This is a clear example of Ajuba both aware of, and rejecting the dominant conceptions of childness, revising these with her own meaning of what it is to be a "child."

Of course, as we have also seen, there are good reasons for doubting Ajuba's declaration. Ajuba is, in fact, obsessed with death. The memory of her own mothers' passing, as well as the mystery of the two murdered infants in the trunk, haunts her every day. A fascination with death also characterizes Ajuba's friend, Polly. "She possessed a macabre interest in murder," Ajuba says of Polly, "She talked about it incessantly" (TM 12). The two children, together, play a game called "True Murder," a dark hobby that further belies Ajuba's implied suggestion that children are "disinterested" in murder. In "True Murder," the game, one child plays the role of a murder victim, another her killer: "My card was of a skull and crossbones, Beth's of a bleeding heart pierced by a dagger [...] this meant that I was to be the murderer and Beth my victim" (TM 18). At one point during the children's play, Beth accidentally falls from a tree; a rope then entwines around her neck, nearly killing her. So, "death," for Ajuba is not a distant thought but in fact a continuously present reality.

The children's macabre game, then, casts doubt on Ajuba's challenging of adult assumptions: her claim that children are not inherently attracted to death, as the unnamed author she has read suggests. Yet it also highlights her deviant childness, or the way in which Ajuba lends her own meanings to what it is to be a "child" and does not

merely passively accept the common trope of children as "innocent." Badoe leaves it unclear in what book or magazine exactly Ajuba has read that children are intrigued by death. However, most western adults are likely to endorse the opposite view. Children may sometimes be depicted as "little devils," Warner remarks in her Reith Lecture, yet more often they are represented as "little angels," incapable of willfully doing wrong ("Little Angels, Little Devils" 45). Tim Lott, likewise, finds it possible to declare in an editorial for the *Guardian*, "[…] in my view, children are beautiful because they possess something we have all lost – the quality of innocence" ("What Exactly"). As particular aspects of this "innocence," Lott goes on to list "ignoran[ce] of sex," a belief in the "irrational," as well as the specific inability to "grasp imaginatively that death will come." In other words, for Lott, as for many western adults, children are oblivious to, not enchanted by, the realities of human mortality.

The fact that Ajuba's interest in death is somehow deviant – a departure from prevailing norms – is made apparent in Badoe's novel, too, via Ajuba's own self-aware sensitivity about the children's grotesque past-time, which is inspired by a set of magazines that Polly brings to the boarding school. "The magazines, thick and glossy, opened up a landscape of *perversity* depicted in primary colours," Ajuba says, "It was my willingness to enter this underground world, delving into the shadows of Polly's imagination, that changed our lives irrevocably" (12; emphasis added). It could be that Ajuba's penchant for "perversity" here arises out of her own unhappy experiences; an obsession with murder, in other words, helps Ajuba emotionally process her mother's suicide. At the same time, Ajuba also clearly understands that the adults in her life disapprove of her interest in murder and is attracted to it for this very reason: "In the evening I found myself reading *True Murder* [the magazines] again, like someone unable

to resist picking a scab" (TM 41). Ajuba's attraction to the forbidden highlights her unwillingness to accept adult limitations and boundaries. Throughout the narrative, the children's game, as well as their investigations into the murdered babes at Graylings, repeatedly leads them into conflict with adult wishes and desires. "I'm going to say this once and once only, Polly," says Mrs. Derby, the headmistress at the children's school, "I don't want to see this magazine again. Or anything like it [...]" (TM 43). Defiant, the children ignore her.

Polly especially, in Badoe's novel, embodies a deviant or resistant childness. She is both aware of her own status as a "child" who lies outside typical norms and appears to revel in this fact. At first, Ajuba wonders if Polly's interest in murder might be due to her long residence in America. In another decolonizing reversal by Badoe, Ajuba sets up Washington D.C., the political centre of America, as a place of peculiar "savagery": 'The more I thought about it, the more I realised that Polly's stay in Washington, DC, a city she claimed was the most violent in the world, made her and Americans very different to other humans" (14). Here, Ajuba presents Americans in the role of "other," fundamentally "different" to other persons for their levels of violence. The novel in a sense writes back to Joseph Conrad, locating the "heart of darkness" not in Africa, as his eponymous work suggests but, instead, in America's capital.

Ajuba quickly realizes, however, that Polly's interest in murder is not merely a result of her nationality, but rather, a component of her unique expression of childness: "Jeez, Aj, you just don't get it, do you? Adults like a challenge. They see a kid like me, they want to reform me," Polly says, commenting on her own "anti-social" traits, i.e. her interest in death and lack of respect for authority (TM 45). Hence, Badoe's novel, too, presents a child who is self-aware and, moreover, constructive, articulating her own ideas

of what it is to be a "child," not merely passively consuming what she receives from adults. "They have no idea of what it's like being a pre-teenager," Polly continues, speaking of her parents (TM 45). Ajuba heartily agrees: "[…] They don't get it, do they? They don't get it at all,' I said […]" (TM 45). The two children, together, reject adults' ideas about, and for, them.

Polly's resistance to her parents' influence, as we have seen, does not, unfortunately, save her from death. Yet it does, in my reading, protect her status as a character – a complex personality – in the novel. In other words, Oyeyemi's and Badoe's works contrast starkly with Jarrett-Macauley's and Iweala's, which, as I argued, transform children into flattened tropes useful for a humanitarian message, not persons possessing agency and individuality in their own right. Conversely, *True Murder* and *The Icarus Girl* appear more child-focused or sensitive narratives than many novels written by adults, especially, those discussed in the previous chapter. To the extent that this is possible, where adult novelists of course occupy a different social position from children, and look back on their own childhoods through the distorting vapors of time, Badoe and Oyeyemi earnestly seek to do justice to the perspective of children, in my reading, acknowledging them as active, constructive social agents with autonomous wills.

This chapter has argued that the images of childness found in Helen Oyeyemi's *The Icarus Girl* and Yaba Badoe's *True Murder* are informed by, or gesture towards, multiple literary traditions, both West African and western. It has also built a case for abjection as a major theme of these novels, explored along many vectors, through race, culture, and gender but, especially, through childness. Finally, in contemplating how their works ask us, as readers, to reflect critically on our own assumptions about children, and, especially, foreground children as social agents, this chapter has read Oyeyemi and Badoe

as illustrating ways of writing about childhood that do not stereotype children but, instead, do justice to their status as human beings. Rudd writes, "There is still a tendency [...] to overextend the term 'child' such that 'childhood' is seen to ground their entire being" (31). Oyeyemi and Badoe, I would argue, avoid this tendency. Their child-characters come across as distinctive personalities, not simply or stereotypically "children," defined by their vulnerabilities not their competencies (Rudd 31). Rather, they are shown as individuals in their own right, with complex personal histories and original responses to the world.

# Conclusion

Throughout, this thesis has sought to emphasize the intricacy of child characters in a range of Anglophone West African narratives set both in West African countries and in the diaspora. To this end, it opened with a discussion of Ben Okri's central child character, Azaro, from *The Famished Road* (as well as *Songs of Enchantment* and *Infinite Riches*), as a symbol of repeatedly regenerating creativity. Okri harkens back to a concept of childness as a source of inspiration for the painter, poet, or novelist, it was argued, and uses the child figure in *The Famished Road* and the novel's sequels to investigate the creative features of vision, empathy, and resilience that he explores in his earlier fiction and develops in dialogue with the writings of the Romantics. Examining these different lines of influence, the chapter addressed Okri's child as a multidimensional figure, drawn from both western and African cultural traditions, and possessing greater richness and depth than scholars of Okri's writing have generally assumed.

The second chapter read the child figure through the lens of humanitarianism and Afro-pessimism. More specifically, I examined how traits of western childness such as innocence, dependence, resilience, as well as images of the child-body in pain, buttress themes of rescue in novels by Chris Abani, Uzodinma Iweala, and Delia Jarrett-Macauley and create a sense of crisis around the child. In the chapter, I also connected frameworks of international humanitarianism to politics of Afro-pessimism, suggesting that in prioritizing the western "Savior" figure, Iweala's, Abani's, and Jarrett-Macauley's novels cast subtle doubt on Africans' capabilities, although, in certain instances, as in Jarrett-Macauley's foregrounding of three local "savior" figures in her work, West African actors are shown in a more positive light. The chapter also considered how Abani's novel, in particular, deploys notions of children's spontaneous or immediate relationship with

language in order to support claims for the "truth," or credible witness, of the work. These claims have been challenged in recent years by a number of credibility scandals involving the child soldier narrative as a genre, as well as by the known difficulties of "bearing witness" to traumatic experience.

Chapter 3 examined how, in Helen Oyeyemi's *The Icarus Girl* and Yaba Badoe's *True Murder,* the marginal status of the child characters functioned to affirm the protagonists' related "otherness" as racial minorities, bicultural and female. Oyeyemi's and Badoe's novels might, therefore, be read as "intersectional," or as interested in how different forms of oppression operate alongside one another, entwining forms of race-, gender-, culture- and age-based outsiderness. That is to say, the writers recall us to Kimberle Crenshaw's observations about the ways in which the "violence many women experience is often shaped by other dimensions of their identities, such as race and class" (1242). Crenshaw explores how multiple vectors of oppression, for instance, race and class often work in tangent, a situation I see as similarly explored via the intermingling alterity present in Badoe's and Oyeyemi's works. In particular, the children's tender age and female gender combine to make them especially vulnerable victims of adults' violence, as I examined. In depicting how child figures resist the ways in which they have been "othered" by adults, or stereotyped as a result of their age, Badoe and Oyeyemi represent a textured or nuanced picture of "otherness" in their novels yet, at the same time, interestingly, show us a more complex portrait of the child than that explored by the writers discussed in Chapter 2.

My aim across all three chapters has been to encourage closer critical examination of child figures in West African literature, and, relatedly, deeper awareness of the many figurative uses to which child characters have been put in these works. Until now, many

scholars have chosen to focus on the child figure in Anglophone West African and related literatures as a symbol of the nation-state (Boehmer, Barker), or as a means of contesting colonial rule (Bharat). While these are productive heuristics, as I sought to make clear, the child figure also functions in more complex and variable ways. In Chapter 2, for example, I considered how Jarrett-Macauley and Iweala might be said to depersonalize their child characters, showing them without much agency and, furthermore, deprived of vivid or at least vividly realized inner experiences. In this way, their child characters not only appear "flat,"[57] they also are stereotyped, depicted without some of the characteristics we might ascribe to a human person; stripped of will and unique, inner desires. In Chapter 3, I explored the converse perspective. Potentially, Oyeyemi and Badoe's novels might be seen as empowering children, representing them in ways that draw attention to children's active, constructive capabilities, not only to the ways in which children are often negatively or passively constructed by adults – although they, too, depict some of the more stereotypical aspects of childhood, for instance, emphasizing associations between childhood and play.

In future, scholars might take this line of investigation further, seeking to step outside the dual frames of the "colony" or "nation-state" entirely, or to remain sensitive to resonances of the child figure in works of African writing that might not be directly related to conventional "postcolonial" or Afro-centric themes. Are questions of political and cultural identity important to our reading of African fiction? No doubt, they are. Yet where we over-prioritize such readings, we may, as literary critics and as readers, miss other ideas that are just as important: for instance, themes related to creativity, human suffering, and un-belonging, as this thesis has explored.

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[57] This is E.M. Forster's term for an underdeveloped character in his study *Aspects of the Novel* (1927).

In its investigations, this thesis has also sought to draw out the western strands of influence evident in six Anglophone West African novels and their peculiar visions of the child. The first chapter focused on Okri's indebtedness to the British Romantics, for whom childhood emblematizes both creative vision and moral innocence. Okri, I argued, relies upon these same ideas in his own work, and the impact of Wordsworth's thought, especially, can be felt throughout his writing. Developing the link between children and innocence, in particular, the second chapter, too, explored the way in which an image of a largely "innocent" child lies at the heart of three child soldier novels and is also prioritized within the humanitarian discourses with which, I argued, the novels overlap. While some writers, such as Abani, occasionally admit the moral culpability of under-18s involved in war, for the most part, ideas of children's moral blamelessness are supported. Abani, Iweala, Jarrett-Macauley, as well as Okri, therefore, seem to endorse a peculiarly western way of thinking about childhood, and the latter, especially, utilize the image of the innocent child, alongside other tropes, such as wounded bodies, to commend a course of humanitarian action in response to African wars.

The final chapter returned to the eighteenth-century, examining the Gothic tropes that are activated within Badoe's and Oyeyemi's works, which, similar to the function of Romantic allusions to Blake and Keats in Okri's oeuvre, undermine the dominance of secular reason as a way of understanding the world. In particular, Gothic motifs of haunting in their novels, alongside allusions to West African folklore, I argued, destabilize western epistemologies and admit "other" forms of knowing, especially animist belief-systems. In these ways, the thesis has shown that Anglophone West African writers are influenced by western conceptions of childhood, especially, from the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. We may see this as one result, possibly, of their belonging in a

global middle class and orientation toward an Anglo-American readership, two traits that all six novelists share. In the introduction, I examined how middle classes around the world often possess traditionally western views on children, including many traceable in origin to Jean-Jacques Rousseau. However, Okri, Abani, Jarrett-Macauley, Iweala, Badoe, and Oyeyemi all hearken back to historic western discourses in particular ways, embracing some aspects of childhood and eschewing others; that is to say, they lend their own meanings to the child figure and do not simply replicate inherited notions. Okri, for example, sheds fresh light on the creative potential implicit in children's half-formed, untrained insights. Abani, Iweala, and Jarrett-Macauley piquantly explore the convoluted nature of bearing witness to traumatic experience. Badoe and Oyeyemi, as I have explored, offer some of the most radical perspectives on the child figure, revealing childness as a social construction and prioritizing child figures who contest adults' conceptions.

To put it differently, these writers not only draw from historic discourses of the child – both western and African – they also add to them, encouraging their readers to think about children in new ways, and giving credence to particular aspects of childhood, such as agency, that have too frequently been suppressed. From its start, this thesis has embarked on an ambitious journey, aiming both to reexamine the figure of the child in West African fiction as well as to complicate the perceived position of the West African writer, discussing his or her western, not only African, sources of inspiration, and diverse and multifaceted themes. Ben Okri declares, "With the best writing of childhood [...] the world is made new. Fables become real. Reality becomes fabulous [...]" ("Childhood [4]" 111). Okri finds in childness a potent spring of inspiration: "A vaster power flows through one's being" in the act of reading about or contemplating childhood, he continues (ibid). Not all the writers I have discussed in this thesis hold the child figure in such high regard.

Yet, clearly, as the thesis has explored, the child figure presents a powerful symbol for many Anglophone West African writers, one that they employ not only to engage with colonial histories and legacies, as was argued by scholars such as Bharat and Barker, but also, as I have shown, to explore the nature of human creativity (Okri), the horror of recruiting children (Iweala, Abani, and Jarrett-Macauley), as well as the struggles of the minority person in diaspora (Oyeyemi, Badoe) – a vaster power, indeed.

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