

“The Wings of Whipped Butterflies”:

**Trauma, Silence and the Representation of the Suffering Child in
Selected Contemporary African Short Fiction**

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For Little Thando

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Abstract

This dissertation, which examines the literary representation of childhood trauma, is held together by three threads of inquiry. Firstly, I examine the stylistic devices through which three contemporary African writers – NoViolet Bulawayo, Uwem Akpan, and Mia Couto – engage with the subject of childhood trauma in five of their short stories: “Hitting Budapest”; “My Parents’ Bedroom” and “Fattening for Gabon”; and “The Day Mabata-bata Exploded” and “The Bird-Dreaming Baobab,” respectively. In each of these narratives, the use of *ingén(u)s* in the form of child narrators and/or focalisers instantiates a degree of structural irony, premised on the cognitive discrepancy between the protagonists’ perceptions and those of the implied reader. This structural irony then serves to underscore the reality that, though in a general sense the precise nature of traumatic experience cannot be directly communicated in language, this is exacerbated in the case of children, because children’s physical and psychological frameworks are underdeveloped. Consequently, children’s exposure to trauma and atrocity results in disruptions of both personal and communal notions of safety and security which are even more severe than those experienced by adults. Secondly, I analyse the political, cultural and economic factors which give rise to the traumatic incidents depicted in the stories, and the child characters’ interpretations and responses to these exigencies. Notions of subjectivity and intersubjectivity, identity and community, victimhood and survival, agency and disempowerment are discussed here in relation to the context of postcolonial Africa and the contemporary realities of chronic poverty, genocide, child-trafficking, the aftermath of civil war, and the legacies of colonialism and racism. Thirdly, this dissertation inspects the areas of congruence and divergence between trauma theory, literary scholarship on trauma narratives, and literary attempts to represent atrocity and trauma despite what is widely held to be the inadequacy of language – and therefore representation – to this task.

There are certain differences between the three authors’ depictions of children’s experiences of trauma, despite the fact that the texts all grapple with the aporetic nature of trauma and the paradox of representing the unrepresentable. To this end, they utilise various strategies – temporal disjunctions and fragmentations, silences and lacunae, elements of the fantastical and surreal, magical realism, and instances of abjection and dissociation – to gesture towards the inexpressible, or that which is incommensurable with language. I argue that, ultimately, it is the endings of these stories which suggest the unrepresentable nature of trauma. Traumatic experience poses a challenge to representational conventions and, in its resistance, encourages a realisation that new ways of writing and speaking about trauma in the African continent, particularly with regards to children, are needed.

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Introduction

Perhaps I should start by explaining that the idea for my dissertation was initially sparked by my first encounter with Uwem Akpan's "An Ex-Mas Feast," the opening story of *Say You're One of Them*, during the Christmas holidays of my Honours year. The story is set in Kenya and is narrated by an eight-year old boy, Jigana, who lives in a one-room shack with his unemployed, alcoholic parents, four prepubescent siblings, and a pregnant dog. Jigana relates the events leading up to his eldest sister, Maisha, who is thirteen-years old and has been 'working' as a prostitute to support the family, eventually running away from home. The desensitised tone which Jigana employs to describe his mother swearing at Maisha and accusing her of being a whore who wants to escape with some white client of hers, Maisha's increasing restlessness and rebellion against her parents, and the younger children's daily routine of going out to town in order to beg for food and money while their parents sleep off their hangovers and sniff glue to keep hunger at bay, was extremely unsettling. It is precisely this discomfort which led me to question my position in my own community, as a relatively middle-class person living in Johannesburg at the time. Nevertheless, the reality of an entire family sharing a small shack and children rummaging through bins for food over Christmas was not entirely alien. Indeed, as any South African will confirm, the incidence of very young, seemingly neglected children either begging or otherwise roaming the streets at any time of the day or night in this country is far from a stretch of the imagination. Given this context, then, the debasement, subjugation, and depravity of the children depicted in "An Ex-Mas Feast" raised grave concerns regarding the status of children in impoverished societies, especially since human rights discourse seems only to be relevant to the privileged and to have some purchase among the educated elite. Moreover, the representation of such children in fiction raises questions of an ethical nature, such as whether or not the very attempt to reproduce their suffering in literature is an exploitative act. This led me to question whether, as readers in the academic community, "we come to respond more acutely to literary sorrow [and suffering] than to the misery next door" (Steiner 22), a question which, although not the subject of my study, led to my interest in trauma fiction involving children in the African context.

The phrase which introduces my thesis title, "The Wings of Whipped Butterflies," is derived from the Cameroonian novelist, painter and poet, Mbella Sonne Dipoko's poem "Our History to Precolonial Africa," a poem which laments the disavowal and subjugation of African people at the onset of colonialism. The reason behind this choice, apart from the

obvious correspondence between suffering children and the poignant image of maimed and innocent butterflies, is that my thesis seeks to draw correlations between postcolonial Africa's identity and the systemic violence and atrocity which are, to a large extent, a colonial inheritance. In this regard, private traumas, in one way or another, arise from or are symptomatic of a collective legacy. My objective is to highlight the fact that even those traumas, such as losing a loved one or being abandoned by one's parents, which may be considered to fall outside of the scope of public memory since they seem to be confined to the domestic sphere, have their roots in this profound legacy of intergenerational transmission of trauma. Nevertheless, I am concerned with trauma insofar as it is "a wound in the mind, not a wound in society; it is a personal experience, not a social one" (Herrero x) and, more specifically, with individual and juvenile reactions to instances of collective violence. Therefore, while acknowledging the inescapable impact of socio-political forces on each of the societies depicted in the selected stories, my focus is primarily on the individual's reception and interpretation of atrocity, particularly when that individual is one of the most vulnerable and, perhaps paradoxically, most resilient of its members – a child. A close analysis of the representation of the impact of trauma on the individual child is facilitated by the fact that all the narratives under scrutiny are short stories. Indeed, it is the singularity of subject matter and the brevity of these narratives which enable their undeniable effect, since, in addition to outlining discord in both the public and private domain, they also seek to explore alternative ways of narrativising trauma within a circumscribed space.

There also exists a substantial body of research on trauma and narrative, both in the field of trauma studies in fiction and in psychology, such as Anne Whitehead's *Trauma Fiction*, Laurie Vickroy's *Trauma and Survival in Contemporary Fiction*, George Steiner's *Language and Silence*, Kali Tal's *Worlds of Hurt: Reading the Literatures of Trauma*, and Dori Laub and Shosana Felman's *Testimony: Crises of Witnessing in Literature, Psychoanalysis and History*, to name but a few. In this regard, my thesis highlights the relationship between traumatic experience and silence, as evidenced by the incapacity of linguistic structures to adequately signify trauma. By the same token, the problem of language's inadequacy is premised on the disjunction between words and reality. As Steiner observes, when an individual is confronted with atrocity, "what is seen can be transposed into words; what is felt may occur at some level anterior to language" (36). In other words, it is a generally accepted principle in contemporary poststructuralist literary studies that language can only ever *partially succeed* in signifying that which it purports to signify. Where the profoundly dislocating experience of trauma is concerned, language loses even this partial

success, and the victim of psychic violence is forced to resort to silence, a silence which is all the more expressive precisely because it overwhelms language. Thus, trauma fiction reveals what Steiner refers to as “the revaluation of silence,” a revelation which emphasises “the conceit of the word unspoken, of the music unheard and therefore richer” (67). All the narrative voices in the texts selected here are concealed behind several screens of silence, the principal manifestations of which may be located in the narratives’ reliance on symbolism, irony and, ultimately, bodily or corporeal expressions of abjection. It is therefore not solely what the narrators/focalisers report or observe that generates meaning in these stories, but also that which they cannot say, let alone fathom by using literal language. Notably, by drawing attention to the singularity of the body in pain, these narratives also emphasise the extraverbal nature of suffering. Thus, even though a child narrator/focaliser cannot articulate his/her anguish in words, it is nonetheless inscribed into his/her body.

It may be argued that the implied reader’s response to depictions of the traumatised child’s body is, on the one hand, an empathetic act of recognition but, on the other, a questionable, voyeuristic or morbid indulgence. The latter charge surfaced, for example, in comments on this study such as, “It’s such an ugly subject. Why would you want to do your thesis on something so ugly?” and, “I don’t think these stories are literary. They merely rely on shock-value. There is no aesthetic to them” – both by senior professors. Despite the fact that these remarks are dismissive, they are noteworthy in rehearsing elitist notions of aesthetic worth. Firstly, both commentators equate literariness with beauty and a comfortable reading experience, the antithesis of which is ‘ugliness’ and unsettlement. Secondly, they question the relevance and ‘aesthetic value’ of trauma fiction to literary studies as a whole. Thirdly, they implicitly pose the challenge of whether or not these kinds of narratives reinforce contemporary pessimistic perceptions of Africa as beyond redemption, a continent ravaged by starvation, poverty, and internecine conflict, whose inhabitants are unable to fend for themselves, let alone their children. Although the third of these concerns falls beyond the scope of this thesis, I do hope, at the very least, to gesture towards a possible answer by drawing on theories derived from Holocaust and slave testimonies, as well as trauma fiction in general, in order to argue for the importance of the individual subject’s experience of self and others in traumatic circumstances.

Each chapter of my thesis involves some investigation of the specific socio-political contexts which inform the representation of suffering children in NoViolet Bulawayo’s “Hitting Budapest,” Uwem Akpan’s “My Parents’ Bedroom” and “Fattening for Gabon,” and Mia Couto’s “The Day Mabata-bata Exploded” and “The Bird-Dreaming Baobab”. This is

followed by a close reading of the texts in question, paying specific attention to the ways in which silences and narrative discontinuities function in the representation of traumatised psyches. An examination of the installation and subversion of the normative social realist mode of representation evident in Bulawayo and Akpan's stories, and the magical/fantastical realist mode employed in Couto's narratives, forms an integral part of the discussion. Given that my research analyses five selected short stories by a Zimbabwean, Nigerian, and a Mozambican author respectively, it employs a broadly postcolonial framework, but also refers to theoretical works which deal specifically with literary representations of suffering and trauma, where these are relevant to the African context. All of the stories interrogate the suffering of the child narrator/focaliser as a result of various causes, such as parental neglect, socio-economic deprivation, and atrocity.

The specific questions I address include the following: how do these writers attempt to capture children's subjective experience of suffering; what narrative strategies do they utilise to negotiate the dilemma of the (in)adequacy of language in this regard; in what ways do their texts contribute to an understanding of the mechanisms by which children process traumatic experiences and of their developing sense of selfhood and community (or the lack thereof); and how are these authors' works positioned in relation to contemporary critical understandings of trauma fiction and in relation to each other? In addressing these areas, the thesis opens with a theoretical chapter which contextualises contemporary concerns of fiction emerging from the African continent in relation to conceptions of trauma, language, and narrative mode. The chapter also examines the installation of the stylistic device of structural irony, which accompanies the use of child narrators/focalisers in literary representations of atrocity and trauma. Chapter Two comprises a thematic reading of the NoViolet Bulawayo's short story "Hitting Budapest." I examine the text's use of symbolism, specifically as it undermines the ostensible realism of the story, and the representation of hunger, abuse, neglect and deprivation as seen through the eyes of the story's child narrator. Chapter Three analyses Uwem Akpan's "My Parents' Bedroom" and the (mis)perceptions of an ethnically ambiguous child caught in the cross-fire of the Rwandan genocide. I interrogate notions of subjectivity and intersubjectivity as they manifest themselves during an atrocity which robs this child of both of her parents, her home, and, ultimately, her innocence. Concerns regarding memories of childhood trauma and its retrieval, as depicted in Akpan's "Fattening for Gabon," are the focus of Chapter Four. Finally, Chapter Five provides a reading of "The Day Mabata-bata Exploded" and "The Bird-Dreaming Baobab" by Mia Couto, and examines the context in which these stories are framed and Couto's use of the fantastic in his depiction

of the child protagonists' experiences. In my concluding chapter, I indicate the importance of trauma fiction as a site upon which individual experiences, which are not a part of historiography, are acknowledged. Trauma fiction, I argue, inserts into the public memory the singularity of suffering and, in so doing, highlights the convergence of historiography, and public and private narrative. I also postulate that such fiction exposes the reader to what Geoffrey Hartman, in another context, terms some of the "darkest visions of human nature" ("The Holocaust" 30). It is this exposure, whether met with a voyeuristic or an empathetic response from the implied reader, which renders these narratives important archives of cultural memory.

My particular interest in each of these texts stems from the ways in which these authors innovatively endeavour to expand both the vocabulary and narrative modes through which suffering children have been depicted in African narratives. Though Couto has received considerable attention in relation to his vision of post-independence Mozambique, little to no critical work to date has emerged on Akpan and Bulawayo. Nevertheless, both authors have received critical acclaim: "My Parents' Bedroom" was shortlisted for the 2007 Caine Prize, and *Say You're One of Them* won the Commonwealth Writers Prize and the PEN Beyond Margins Award in 2009. Oprah Winfrey selected the collection as the book of the month in November 2009 and it was number one on the New York Times best-seller list in the same year. Similarly, Bulawayo's "Hitting Budapest" won the 2011 Caine-Prize. Given that the former's collection was published in 2009, and Bulawayo's as recently as 2011, this thesis constitutes a new contribution in focusing on the theoretical and representational implications of all three authors' engagement in the writing of trauma as experienced by children in specific African contexts.

Chapter 1

Trauma, Sublimity and the Representation of the Suffering Child

We must begin to probe the function of African literature as an instrument that wills new African realities into being, that imagines alternative configurations of our “real histories” either to affirm or transcend them. We must develop new ways of looking at African fiction.

– Simon Gikandi (*Reading Chinua Achebe* 2)

Violence is generative. In that sense, it’s like narration where the act of telling produces more story. Violence, too, reproduces itself.

– Zoë Wicomb (“Washing Dirty Linen in Public” 22)

1.1 Trauma and Postcolonial Narrative

There exists a general consensus among trauma theorists that the postcolonial condition is, by definition, one of sustained social trauma (van Boheemen-Saaf 27; Laub 57). It is, indeed, from this position that Sam Durrant opens his thesis on mourning:

Postcolonial narrative, structured by a tension between the oppressive memory of the past and the liberatory promise of the future, is necessarily involved in a work of mourning. Its principal task is to engender a consciousness of the unjust foundations of the present and to open up the possibility of a just future. (1)

The past, in the African setting, is characterised by a series of traumatic events which emerging narratives not only reiterate, but also attempt to reconfigure into the continent’s contemporary identity within the literary landscape. Thus, the tension lies not only in the nexus between the indelible past and a potential future, as Durrant argues, but also between a traumatic past and an inexplicable present. In light of this, the incomplete process of healing suggested by Durrant’s use of the term “mourning” further suggests that the confines of the present are restrictive to the extent that, even when acknowledged, they still problematise the notion of a potentially non-traumatic future. Accordingly, the kind of future envisioned by contemporary postcolonial fiction in an Africa setting is, in essence, post-traumatic rather than liberatory. For, as Kali Tal argues,

Trauma is a transformative experience, and those who are transformed can never entirely return to a state of previous innocence . . . the bizzare encounter with atrocity . . . can never be purified again. (119)

As a result, Durrant's thesis is not so much concerned with the future as it is with a violent history's irreducible impact on the present and the consequent work of mourning this recognition necessitates. With regards to the nature and impact of trauma on the public sphere, Neil J. Smelser argues that "it is possible to describe social dislocations and catastrophes as traumas if they disrupt organised social life" (37). The contemporary African setting, both literary and otherwise – still haunted by the spectre of its colonial past, the ravages of internecine conflict, socio-political instability and the prevalence of chronic poverty and economic hardship – is characterised by a disintegration of "the basic tissues of social life that *damages* the bonds attaching people together and impairs the prevailing sense of communality" (Erikson 460). Consequently, "We no longer exists as a connected pair or as linked cells in a larger communal body" (Alexander 4), but rather emerges as fragmentary and volatile. Despite this dissolution of community, Cathy Caruth observes of traumatic history that it "is never one's own . . . we are all implicated in each other's traumas" (*Explorations* 192). Collective traumas, then, affect notions of community and individual traumas are reflective of a communal malfunction precisely because they do not occur in isolation.

Durrant contends that postcolonial narratives are "confronted with the impossible task of finding a mode of writing . . . that can bear witness to [their] own incapacity to recover [the past and rediscover the present]" (6). Contemporary African narrative may therefore be classified as trauma fiction which not only "attest[s] to the frequency of trauma and its importance as a multicontextual social issue" (Vickroy 2), but also "offer[s] . . . alternatives to often depersonalised or institutionalized historiographies" (4). Such achievements through narrative are, however, complicated by the very nature of the phenomenon these texts seek to account for, namely the individual and collective trauma of the African continent.

With regard to Africa's collective trauma, if we adopt Elaine Scarry's observation, on the nature of pain, that "given any two phenomena, the one that is more visible will receive more attention . . . [the interior one is, by contrast,] so nearly impossible to express, so flatly invisible" (13) that it is misrepresented at the very moment one attempts to articulate it by using language, then bodily trauma may be relatively easy to describe in terms of its physical manifestations, whilst psychological suffering is not, primarily because it has no external object. Thus, theorists working from within the psychoanalytic model of trauma emphasise its interiority:

A wound of the mind – the breach in the mind’s experience of time, self, and the world – [] is not, like the wound of the body, a simple healable event, but rather an event that . . . is experienced too soon, too unexpectedly, to be fully known.

(Caruth, *Unclaimed* 4)

This description highlights several characteristics of psychological trauma, the first of these being its disruption of temporal structures; the second, its disturbance of the notion of subjectivity and the stability of ‘reality’; and the third, its unknowability. Trauma thus “impair[s] normal emotional or cognitive responses” (Vickroy 1) and presents itself as a challenge both to therapeutic and literary practice. Literature underscores the limitations of language’s referential capacity both in personal and literary narratives of trauma, limitations which will form a substantial part of the discussion which follows. Furthermore, the psychological disruption evoked by the aporia of traumatic experience, as suggested earlier, has an enduring impact on collective notions of identity; this affects intersubjective relations within the contexts in which it occurs because “individualised relational situations reflect the impact of more generalized social situations” (Vickroy 5). Trauma is therefore never purely a subjective experience suffered in isolation from social or cultural structures. Every trauma is indicative of collective dysfunction precisely because, in a community, what is personal is not “the secret of one person alone, as it [breaks] the boundaries of the person and [demands] to be shared” (Blanchot 19). What is shared in such a context then is also, ironically, precisely that which cannot be shared, expressed in language, or any other imaginable form of social engagement between subjects.

The relationship between trauma and narrative is thus paradoxical since, as Anne Whitehead observes, the narrativisation of trauma necessarily raises questions of representation. In other words, because trauma presents itself as “that which, at the very moment of reception, registers as a non-experience” (Vickroy 5), it “does not simply resist language, but actively destroys it” (Scarry 4). In literary narrative, this tension arises not only because atrocity presents itself as a “discursive deadlock in which language and representation are no longer able to express the horror or import of the experience” (van Boheemen-Saaf 2), but also because, in postcolonial societies, “cultural hegemony has been maintained through colonial assumptions about literary activity” (Ashcroft et al, *The Empire Writes Back* 7). If language is the “medium through which a hierarchical structure of power is perpetuated, and the medium through which conceptions of ‘truth’, ‘order’ and ‘reality’ become established” (7), then language itself is implicated in the conditions that give rise to trauma.

Christine van Boheemen-Saaf therefore argues that the postcolonial writer invents a “curiously hybrid and covert strategy of storytelling in the oppressor’s language, which unweaves its very texture as it narrates” (5). “Writing in the English language,” she contends, “points . . . to a presence of an absence, a lacuna at the very heart of . . . linguistic subjectivity” (6) which, in the postcolonial setting, signifies an “alienated relationship to . . . language” (4). Accordingly, in writing about trauma, the postcolonial author is engaged in a schizophrenic project of attempting to represent the unknowable in a language characterised by an alienating force, and the very act of writing is therefore itself inherently traumatic.

In addition, post-structuralist conceptions of language as an inadequate means of signification also play a role in the representational difficulties authors encounter in attempting to depict trauma. The inadequacy of language is taken up by silences which are not only indicative of linguistic deficiency, but also suggestive of trauma’s symptomatic impact on the collective consciousness of postcolonial subjects. In *Silences and Related Syndromes in African History*, Jacques Depelchin insists that

Among those who have suffered enslavement, colonialisation, steady and relentless economic exploitation, cultural asphyxiation . . . gender, race and class discrimination and political repression, *silences should be read as facts . . . which have not been accorded the status of facts.*

(3-4, emphasis added)

Although made with reference to historical writing, Depelchin’s claim here suggests that the ubiquitous silences in literatures arising from the postcolony are themselves highly revealing, since they signal the effects of atrocity and trauma. They are lacunae in these respective communities’ sense of coherence, and are facts insofar as they are the custodians of an invisible truth which can be hinted at in art, psychology, and historiography, but never fully recovered. Accordingly, Vickroy argues that “scholarship and literature on trauma is an important part of a group support process, attesting to diverse voices articulating extraordinary experiences and uncovering what has been suppressed and hidden” (19). Trauma fiction arising from the African continent may thus be regarded as an imaginary site at which historiography, and public and private narrative converge.

1.2 The Suffering Child in Trauma Fiction

The latter part of the twentieth century witnessed a burgeoning of literary research focusing on trauma narratives as “personalised responses to this century’s emerging awareness of the catastrophic effects of wars, poverty, colonialisation, and domestic abuse on the individual [as

well as the collective] psyche” (Vickroy x). Laurie Vickroy, Sam Durrant and Shane Graham, in particular, have highlighted the area of trauma representation in postcolonial literature, suggesting that the figure of the suffering child is integral to such research. Vickroy, for instance, contends that “traumatized children become poignant metaphors and individualised examples of the neglect, exploitation, disempowerment, and disavowal of communities, or even entire cultures” (xv). Yet, despite Vickroy’s observation, little research has been dedicated solely to representations of suffering children in the field of trauma fiction.

With regards to the international socio-political discourse surrounding the plight of children, particularly in the African context, Michael Fleshman observes:

In 1990, the international community declared, “Together, our nations have the means and the knowledge to protect the lives and to diminish enormously the suffering of children.” [Twenty-two years later] it is clear that, in fundamental ways, world leaders have failed to deliver on their promises to improve the lives of Africa’s children. (9)

In this excerpt from a United Nations report, “the suffering of children” alludes to inadequate living conditions, including education, health care, and the scarcity of resources. However, it may also be applied to the aftermath of colonialism, sexual exploitation and abuse. The contemporary African author, in attempting to engage with questions of the representation, agency and subjectivity of children affected by trauma, has to contend with the fact that, in a general sense, “the word [suffering] bears witness to an inexpressible reality” (Steiner 66). Moreover, discussions of the representation of children in trauma fiction emerging from the postcolonial setting must necessarily begin with the issue of marginality. bell hooks argues that:

Marginality [is a] central location for the production of a counter-hegemonic discourse that is not just found in words but in the habits of being and the way one lives . . . [It is] the site one stays in, clings to even, because it nourishes one’s capacity to resist. It offers the possibility of radical perspectives from which to see and create, to imagine alternatives, new worlds. (341)

While hooks’s contention may be applicable to Africans, Holocaust survivors and African Americans, in a general sense, the notion that one might ‘cling to’ or affirm one’s sense of being on the fringes is directly related to issues of personal agency and, ultimately, the amount of power and freedom one has in altering one’s circumstances. Personal agency, according to Michael White, is

a sense of self that is associated with the perception that one is able to have some effect on the shape of one's own life . . . that one is able to intervene in one's own life as an agent of what one gives value to and as an agent of one's own intentions, and . . . that the world is at least minimally responsive to the fact of one's existence. (150)

In light of White's definition, it may be deduced that, where children are concerned, particularly those of a prepubescent age, personal agency is, at best, under construction and, at worst, altogether absent. In attempting to represent the suffering of marginalised children, therefore, postcolonial trauma narratives may indeed function as a socio-political tool through which "radical perspectives" (hooks 341) on marginalised children's traumatic experiences may be examined.

Each of the authors selected for this study use child narrators or focalisers as vehicles to explore the effects of trauma, and each text constitutes an imaginary reconstruction of traumatised children's experiences within their respective settings. Ten-year old Darling's narration of extreme poverty in Zimbabwean author NoViolet Bulawayo's story "Hitting Budapest", is characterised by its non-committal delivery of what the implied reader nonetheless perceives as a terrifying struggle to survive. Similarly, nine-year old Monique, in the Nigerian author Uwem Akpan's short story, "My Parents' Bedroom," from his collection *Say You're One of Them*, comes to signify a generation of children affected by the 1994 Rwandan genocide. Akpan's "Fattening for Gabon," from the same collection, constitutes a specifically African account of both the effects and the causes of child-trafficking told from the perspective of ten-year old Kotchikpa. The child protagonists in the Mozambican author Mia Couto's "The Day Mabata-bata Exploded," from his collection *Voices Made Night*, and "The bird-dreaming baobab," from *Every Man is a Race*, abandon their corporeal existence, an existence which is characterised by seemingly meaningless violence arising from external forces which they do not understand. The common thread of all these narratives is therefore not merely the respective child characters' struggle to survive under horrific circumstances, but also each author's attempt to engage with and represent the aporia of trauma through the limited perspective of child subjects.

1.3 Unhinged Narrative and the Invisibility of Crisis

Atrocity, which is the precursor of trauma in Bulawayo, Akpan, and Couto's texts, is essentially devoid of recuperable meaning. In writing about the problems of representation in Holocaust literature, for example, R. Clifton Spargo claims that

Atrocity is quite simply the negative of all that is interpretable and all that might provide the foundation of historical consciousness and present understanding. As an event that is by definition entirely empty of meaning, atrocity resists continuity even in the ordinary sense of living our lives forward in time, and so casts suspicion on all redemptive or therapeutic endeavours to mend it. (5)

It goes without saying, therefore, that atrocity shares distinctive structural similarities with trauma, similarities which present themselves as discursive blockages to artistic representation. “In trauma,” Juliet Mitchell argues, “we are untimely ripped . . . a trauma . . . [creates] a breach in a protective covering of such severity that it cannot be coped with by the usual mechanisms by which we deal with pain and loss” (121). The “breach” inherent in all definitions of trauma may well be extended to its textual depictions. In other words, just as trauma disrupts the experience of self and others, it also fractures the narrative conventions by which identity and community are commonly represented. It is precisely this “formlessness [or] absence of form,” according to Jean-Francois Lyotard, that is “a possible index to the unrepresentable” (Lyotard 78), or the sublime – that which poses a challenge to all forms of representation. With regards to the above, Leicht contends that Lyotard defines the sublime as

a category for dealing with experiences which are beyond categories. It is a sort of self-negating name for the experience of alterity so ‘unnameable’ that it may be ascribed to . . . absolute transcendence . . . The sublime is that mark of the unforeseeable and incommensurable, of the inexplicable and incomprehensible, which defies all rules and reasons, and ultimately reduces us to silence – that “most indeterminate of figures.” (1610)

The sublime, he goes on to argue, “takes place . . . when the imagination fails to present an object which might, if only in principle, come to match a principle” (78); it is the locus of what Richard Kearney terms an “ontological dislocation” (493). Trauma, however, has no external object; it is visible only in that it is invisible, and thus manifests as that which, to use Lyotard’s terms, “exceeds both calculation and understanding” (77). Additionally, according to Kearney,

[For] Lyotard [,] even ugliness . . . the monstrous and the formless have their rights because they can be sublime . . . [He] retains the curious association of sublimity with “terror” – a terror which is in turn linked with the danger of impending death or destruction . . . the privation of good [and even the] terror of evil! (493)

With regards to terror and atrocity, in his essay on Holocaust historiography and fiction, Geoffrey Hartman addresses Theodore Adorno's famous assertion that writing poetry after Auschwitz is barbaric by postulating that

Even if art is viewed with suspicion because, as Adorno feared, it may stylize suffering in order to serve it up for popular consumption, this simply underscores the difficulty of transmitting . . . manmade inhumanity – of conveying it in the way Shakespeare's *King Lear* allows one of the darkest visions of human nature to be absorbed into the mind and heart. ("The Holocaust" 30)

Like Adorno, Lyotard maintains that "any attempt [to textualise the aporia of trauma] is a form of tyranny or totalization" (92). However, in line with Hartman's faith in the imaginative potential of literature, Lyotard also proposes that any narrative engaged in representing trauma should not so much endeavour to "say the unsayable, but [rather say] that it cannot say it" (92). As a result of the paradoxical trust in and suspicion of literary representation in relation to the terrifying and inexplicable, trauma narratives have traditionally attempted to articulate the inarticulable by "internalis[ing trauma's] rhythms, processes, [and] uncertainties . . . within [their] underlying sensibilities" (Vickroy 3), and to elude the preconfigured boundaries of established representational codes. According to Jonathan Culler, because genre "signals a particular relation to the world which serves as a norm or expectation to guide the reader" (159), it is implicated in the relation between textual form and generated meaning: "conventions stipulate what kind of pattern one is reading towards" (173). Therefore, representational issues surrounding trauma are profoundly affected by an author's choice of genre and mode.

In this regard, both Akpan's and Bulawayo's short stories may initially be regarded as realist, in that they enact most of the "self-imposed limits of [the] realist aesthetic" (Wonham 721), which is characterised by a "choked representation" (718) that cannot withstand the inadequacy of language in communicating experience. Burdened with the undertaking of "imagin[ing] or invent[ing] a fictional world which is more or less a copy of the real one" (Fowler 156), the realist aesthetic is heavily reliant on a clearly defined sense of space, temporality, and chronology. According to Louise Bethlehem, realism or, as she calls it, "representational literalism [is] constrained . . . not by 'free imagination' but by 'real life' as it presents itself everywhere" (2). However, she qualifies this by citing Michael Vaughan's assertion that "perception of reality is [in itself] a [problematic] issue" (Bethlehem 8). Consequently, in relation to trauma, which is implicitly characterised by non-perception, realist conventions are not only destabilised, but are also rendered null and void. Thus, Akpan

and Bulawayo's short stories utilise this representational mode, whilst simultaneously questioning its very efficacy in representing trauma. Their texts, involving the installation of child focalisers/narrators, symbolism and an extensive use of irony, at times gesture towards the impossibility of articulating trauma, while simultaneously proposing the need for supplementation or the creation of a new mode of expressing the effect of atrocity on the psychic well-being of the subjects depicted.

By contrast, Couto's fiction in general – which has been classified under the genre of magical realism (see MacKenzie, Gaylard, Gray, Chapman, Wood) – introduces elements of the fantastic in order to oppose what Jean-Pierre Durix refers to as “realism's typical limpidity” (79). Magical realism opens up “possibilities of border-crossing or boundary skipping between domains [which have previously been] blocked [or] methodically delimited” (79) by realism. Both the fantastic and magical realism have been described as “the underside of realism” (Jackson 83), and as a means to counter the “closed, monological forms” imposed by the realist aesthetic with “open structures” (83). Where realism relies on a (contestable) definition of reality, the fantastic “reveals reason and reality to be arbitrary, shifting constructs, and thereby scrutinizes the category of the ‘real’”. Consequently, “reason is made to confront all that it traditionally refuses to encounter” (Durix 81) and, in the case of trauma representation, that for which it is unable to account.

Moreover, as an offshoot of the fantastic, magical realism dissolves “Cartesian dualities: antinomies between natural and supernatural, [and between the] explicable and [the] inexplicable” (Wilson 223) by interfusing distinct fictional and ontological worlds and collapsing the dialectic between them. The interpermeability of these worlds, both in “The Day Mabata-bata Exploded” and “The Bird-Dreaming Baobab,” causes a hesitation which “leads the reader to question the existence of an irreducible opposition between ‘real’ and ‘unreal’” (Durix 80). In their representation of trauma, therefore, these texts also attempt to engage with its defining quality: the terrifying sublimity of both atrocity and psychological trauma. This engagement, foregrounded by the collapse of distinct fictional worlds, “recapitulates . . . a dialectic between ‘codes of recognition’” (Slemon 413) inherent in literary conventions. It may thus be argued that Couto innovatively endeavours to expand both the vocabulary of suffering and the fictional space of his texts in order to foreground the notion that, if empirical reality is mediated by language, then fictional representations of it are doubly so and, where trauma is involved, perhaps even triply so. In addition to incorporating silences and lacunae inherent in both traumatic experience and its

narrativisation, Couto, like Akpan and Bulawayo, also immerses the implied reader in a structural irony which complicates his/her interpretation of the narrated events.

1.4 Irony in Child-Focused Trauma Fiction

Akpan, Bulawayo and Couto's deployment of the perspective of the traumatised child in their respective texts raises some interesting issues. For example, Vickroy argues that

the embeddedness of the child with others is the overriding feature of early development, and the need for attachment, connection and integration with others is the preeminent motivational thrust of the human organism throughout life. (24)

Traumatic experience, especially during early childhood, causes an irrevocable rift in the cluster of needs which Vickroy calls a "motivational thrust". In literary terms, this process may be regarded as an interrupted or disrupted *bildung*, since the child, when confronted with that which "disrupts the individual's frame of reference and other psychological needs and related schemas" (McCann 10), has to reconfigure the set of coordinates from which s/he once derived meaning, a process which necessarily includes an unmaking of the self in an attempt to survive the circumstances which threaten both his/her subjectivity and personal agency. Accordingly, it comes as no surprise when, having witnessed her Hutu father being forced to bludgeon her Tutsi mother to death, nine-year old Monique of Akpan's "My Parents' Bedroom" asserts: "no one can ever call me Shenge again" (286). Monique's rejection of the pet name her father and his ethnic group ascribe to her signals her attempt to re-identify herself by renouncing her previous notion of self. This example suggests that the Rwandan genocide which results in her witnessing her mother's murder directly affects her individuation and sense of integration.

The situation described above outlines a disintegration on three levels: of the child's sense of identification with a parental figure or figures; of the child's sense of self/ego; and of his/her sense of "being-in-common" (Durrant 5) with members of his/ her community. If, as Vickroy argues, "our conceptions of self are determined and interpreted within cultural histories and contexts," then a breach of the nature described above constitutes a destruction both of the very notion of *being* a subject and of *being a subject amongst other subjects* (Durrant 5, emphasis added), and consequently affects existential notions of the self.

As previously argued, trauma is "suffered in the psyche precisely . . . because it is *not* available to experience" (Caruth, *Unclaimed* 61), and therefore constitutes a challenge to representation, particularly in relation to the cognitive and perceptual limitations of child

subjects. As such, Akpan, Bulawayo, and Couto's texts all draw attention to their respective representational difficulties by not only "mimicking [trauma's] form and symptoms" (Whitehead 3), but also through the installation of the stylistic device of irony. Structural irony is assured by the fact that each of the narratives is either told or focalised by a child, whose interpretive and perceptive capacities are, by virtue of their respective ages, necessarily limited. Consequently, the meanings which may be derived from the texts become heavily reliant on the dialogical interplays between perception and misperception, apprehension and misapprehension, knowing and not knowing, and, lastly, between language and silence. The use of children as vehicles to represent traumatic experience, particularly in the postcolonial setting, highlights the ambiguities inherent in such experience and constitutes an examination and critique of existing social and political structures.

By definition, structural irony is a narrative strategy which serves to sustain duplex meaning and evaluation by involving "a naïve hero or unreliable narrator whose view of the world differs from the circumstances recognised by the reader and implied author" (Ellenström 51). The installation of an *ingénu(e)* – a naïve or immature narrator and/or focaliser – in each of the texts dealt with in this study therefore facilitates the opening up of fictional worlds more inclusive of subjective interiority and hence the immaterial aspects of being. The latter occurs because the text is characterised by a double utterance: that of the implied author and that of the narrator/focaliser, a double utterance which generates numerous meanings from a single event because the latter is depicted from multiple perspectives. Consequently, the implied reader is perpetually engaged in amending the lacuna inherent in the narrative voice's perception and interpretation of events, and the irony implicit in this limited perspective.

Chapter 2

Returning to Paradise: Noviolet Bulawayo's "Hitting Budapest"

Ever since the 1960s, critics . . . have faulted writers for assuming that literary representation gives direct access to social reality while in fact their realism, as Coetzee . . . says about Alex la Guma, bears "the fingerprints of Literature all over it."

– Stefan Helgesson (*Transnationalism in Southern African Literature* 101)

The dominant mode of representation adopted by Southern African writers over the twentieth and early twenty-first century has been that of realism. This trend, Bethlehem states, arises as a consequence of "writers and readers assum[ing] that literature and life [maintain] a one-to-one relationship and that mimetic writing [is] capable of providing unmediated access to the real" (1; see also Gaylard 45). However, this assumption has been challenged not only by poststructuralist theories of language and representation, but also by inquiries into African cosmology and oral culture, and by philosophical queries into the nature of reality itself. As a result, mimesis has come to be regarded as "a turn toward a world that is by no means identical with empirical reality" (Gebauer and Wulf 9). Given these alternative perceptions both of mimesis and of the non-instrumental use of language, what Bethlehem terms "representational literalism" (6) is undermined by the unfathomable nature of trauma. The attempt at mimesis is further destabilised in texts dealing with trauma, a subject which resists "intrusive literary conventions such as chronology, [coherent] characterisation, dialogue, and a directive narrative voice" (Langer *Testimonies* 41), conventions upon which realism depends.

Narrated by the ten-year-old Darling, set in what is undoubtedly a Southern African country (most likely Zimbabwe), NoViolet Bulawayo's Caine Prize-winning short story, "Hitting Budapest" (2011), is a very recent example of an enigmatic realist text emerging from the African continent. Darling's casual narration of how she and five of her friends (Bastard, Godknows, Chipso, Stina, and Sbho) embark on an expedition from what she terms their "shanty" (44) or informal settlement, ironically named "Paradise" (43), in pursuit of something to eat in the middle-class suburb of Budapest, is permeated with structural irony. The latter is achieved through the use of a child narrator whose perceptions of her reality are juxtaposed with the implied reader's penetration into the traumas of neglect, sexual exploitation, socio-political marginalisation, and poverty to which she and her friends are exposed. In other words, Bulawayo's text implicates the reader in the construction of the underlying significance of the social, political and economic dynamics of trauma and

suffering as unwittingly conveyed by the narrator. The persistent use of irony in the narrative is thus reflective of the fact that “using language is never completely innocent because the linguistic fabric and the organisation of the world it carries with it determine the way the experience is perceived” (Durix 156).

The story begins with Darling explaining that the reason the groups of friends are going to Budapest, in spite of their parents’ wishes, is in order to harvest guavas. Upon arriving in Budapest, the children encounter a barefoot woman with dreadlocks who comes out of her house to interact with and take a picture of them. This happenstance reveals the power differential which those who are extremely poor have to contend. As a result, the children run away from the woman who, from their perspective, taunts them with what she has. Thereafter, they gorge themselves on the guavas and have to take a break from their expedition in order to defecate. While defecating, Stina discovers that there is another woman hanging from a noose in a nearby tree. The rest of the group congregate around the hung woman’s body and throw stones at her corpse. They soon grow tired of the game and decide to go back home. However, as they are leaving Bastard suggests that they ‘harvest’ the dead woman’s shoes in order to sell them for a loaf-and-a-half of bread. The children then all rush back to the woman’s body and retrieve the shoes, after which they run away from the scene.

My reading of Bulawayo’s story begins by examining the themes of deprivation and hunger in relation to the socio-economic configurations of “Paradise” as opposed to “Budapest,” and the notion of belonging as evidenced by the children’s contrastive experiences of being in one or the other location. My focus in section 2.1 is on questions of language, with specific reference to food, and the manner in which the child narrator engages with the theme of lack. The episode in which the children encounter a barefoot woman in Budapest, who takes a photograph of them, is essentially pertinent in section 2.2, since it throws into relief the uncomfortable issues of voyeurism, belonging, and ethical responsibility towards children – issues which implicate the reader in a misplaced empathetic subjective position. In section 2.3, I explore the children’s social invisibility, as indicated by the fact that the adults they interact with, apart from Mother of Bones, either ignore them or exploit them for their own purposes. In this regard, the pregnancy of ten-year-old Chipso illustrates the abusive appropriation of children’s bodies by the adults in “Paradise.” Chipso’s pregnancy, examined in section 2.4, is especially significant – both in terms of the kind of language the child narrator employs to describe it, and in relation to discourses of the gendered body as a site of subjectivity and cultural inscription. Similarly, section 2.5 analyses the body of the woman who has hanged herself, a scene encountered by the children towards the end of the

story. This scene plays a crucial role in the narrative's depiction of the (mis)treatment and abuse of female bodies in a setting characterised by poverty and disavowal. Above all, my reading will emphasise the lacunae instantiated by the use of structural irony, as it serves both to engage the reader's empathetic imagination and to provide multiple lenses through which the narrative action may be perceived.

2.1 Poverty and Alterity: Going Hungry in Paradise

"Hitting Budapest" opens with Darling stating

We are on our way to Budapest . . . We are going even though we are not allowed to cross Mzilikazi Road, even though Bastard is supposed to be watching his little sister Fraction, even though mother would kill me dead if she found out; we are going. There are guavas to steal in Budapest, and right now I'd die for guavas, or anything for that matter. My stomach feels like someone just took a shovel and dug everything out. (43)

The persistent use of the plural pronoun "we" indicates the children's affinity with one another, and their wilful disregard of parental authority (which cannot be enforced, since the parents are conspicuously absent). Implicit in the above passage is the reality that, behind what appears to be typical child-like truancy lies a need for food so severe that it outweighs any obligation to be obedient. Darling's description of the extremity of her hunger ("I'd die for guavas"), and the simile evocative of digging or forceful excavation which she subsequently employs, suggest that the guavas the children are intent on stealing are not so much a luxury or extravagance, but rather a necessity given the urgent need to keep the sensation of hunger at bay. The narrator's use of the plural pronoun here, and repeatedly throughout the narrative, functions as an index to the collectivity of the children's experience of hunger and suffering, and their undernourishment is a function of the dire socio-economic conditions which characterise the shanty settlement in which they live. As the opening passage reveals, then, the narrator immediately draws attention to the central dichotomy between scarcity and abundance, a dichotomy which is most pronounced in relation to the emphasis on the theme of food.

Food, in turn, is closely linked to the notion of place: while Paradise is associated with hunger, deprivation, and the children's social invisibility, for example, Budapest is connected to an abundance of food, affluence, and the invisibility of adults (with the significant exception of the barefoot woman). In addition to the irony that "Paradise" is hardly Edenic

and its supply of fruit is scant, Bastard's insistence, towards the end of the story, that "God does not live here" (47) underlines the absence of a benign and nurturing presence or environment – and, perhaps, moral universe. The symbolic names of Darling's troupe also reflect of this absence; Godknows' name, for instance, suggests futility and hopelessness, while Bastard's sister's name, Fraction, connotes incompleteness and fragmentation, both of which are incompatible with the notion of a Paradise. The religious, Christian overtones of the story are thus distinctive, in that they enhance the pessimism which, although undetected by the children themselves, nonetheless lies at the very heart of the narrative from the outset.

Darling describes Budapest, with its plenitude and comfort, as "like a different country. A country where people who are not like us live" (44). She explains:

The air is empty; no burning things, no smell of cooking or something rotting; just plain air with nothing in its hands. Budapest is big, big houses with gravelled yards and tall fences and durawalls and flowers and green trees, heavy with fruit that's waiting for us since nobody here seems to know what fruit is for. It's the fruit that gives us courage, otherwise we wouldn't be here. I keep expecting the streets to spit and tell us to go back to the shanty. (44)

Her comparison of Budapest to Paradise here foregrounds the ironic naming of the latter, because it suggests that Budapest, in being, amongst other things, laden with "flowers and green trees . . . heavy with fruit," (44) is more deserving of the moniker 'paradise'. She also scornfully notes that the inhabitants of this Edenic locale do not seem to recognise how lucky they are, and she perceives their disregard of the fruit as a waste of the food which she and her friends are in dire need of. Darling's personification of the streets of Budapest in the final sentence of the quote above signifies not only her feeling of not belonging or of being out of place, but also that she *herself* perceives herself and her friends as intruders who, if detected, will be treated with contempt and summarily evicted. This, then, impresses upon the implied reader the extent to which her self-identification or identity is characterised by negation: precisely because she focuses on what she is *not*, what she lacks and the types of rejections she anticipates from those more privileged than herself. She is thus also unwittingly suggesting that poverty confers a state of alterity, and that those who are poor are viewed as repulsive and consequently altogether other to those who are not. In a similar vein, her personification of the air in Budapest indicates that it is unburdened ("just plain air with nothing in its hands") and contrasts with her description of the air in Paradise, which smells of squalor – "burning things, [the] smell of cooking or something rotting" (44). The air in Budapest is neither invasive, nor imbued with the pervasive sense of diminished resources

and amenities that necessarily accompany acute poverty. Explicitly, then, the children's visit to Budapest is motivated by a desire not only to relieve their hunger, but, implicitly, to escape their circumstances.

Before setting off for Budapest, it becomes apparent that this is not the first time that the children have resorted to stealing fruit in order to satiate their hunger. "We used to steal from Chipó's uncle's tree, but that wasn't *stealing* stealing," Darlings confesses, "Now we have finished all the guavas in his tree so we have moved to strangers' houses. We have stolen from so many, I cannot even count" (44). Employing a childlike logic, Darling's statement defines *real* stealing as taking something from a stranger's house rather than from people you know. The repetitive focus on stealing in order to survive indicates not only the extent of the desperation which characterises the children's daily lives, but also signals the scarcity of both trees and fruit in Paradise. Having grown accustomed to the necessity of stealing, the children, as per Godknows' instructions, devise a system by which they can keep track of which trees and streets they have as yet not raided.

2.2 Alterity and the Barefoot Woman

On their way to the chosen location, the children walk past SADC street, "where [they] have harvested every guava tree" (44), and see a face peering at them from a window in a house in the yard of which is "the statue of a urinating boy with wings" (44). Darling's direct description of the manikin's appearance reinforces the presentation of Budapest as idyllic, but also implies the superfluous extravagance of the locale's inhabitants, and forms a direct contrast to the children's reality, because it signifies a carefree existence in a pastoral setting characterised by abundance. Similarly, the love, innocence, and angelic nature of the manikin highlight the extent to which the children, despite belonging to Paradise, are deprived of these characteristics. In addition to the glass of the window representing a barrier or obstacle between the woman observing and the children, in that it mediates the perception of the one peering through it, despite its claim to transparency, there is the further implication that the viewer's perception is itself distorted – as is confirmed by the woman's subsequent interaction with the children. This interaction underlines the children's alterity and exploitation at the hands of adults in this setting.

Darling also describes how the voice of the person peering from inside the house calls out to the children, telling them to stop, and a "tall, thin woman . . . [with] clean pretty feet" emerges from the house, with "a nice, pink camera dangl[ing] from her neck" (44). The

children obey her instruction, “not because the voice [tells] them to . . . but because the voice does not sound dangerous” and, when they see the woman, they “can tell from [her] thinness that [they] are not going to run” (44). Contrary to the conventionally Western association of slenderness with beauty and well-being, this passage implies that the children perceive thinness as a sign of physical weakness, a perception which they derive from their own circumstances. The narrator’s repetitive emphasis on the woman’s “not-dangerous voice” (44), together with her recognition that she is physically unthreatening, suggests that Darling is streetwise: she can ascertain whether someone is threatening or not from their physique and tone of voice.

Upon approaching the children, the woman first smiles and then proceeds to engage in a mostly one-sided dialogue with them from behind a “locked gate” (44), the keys to which she neglects to bring with her. This again reflects the distance already established between her and the children: whether intentional or not, the fact that the woman does not open the gate indicates that she is keeping the children at bay and foregrounds the voyeurism which marks her interaction with them. For instance, none of the children ask the woman her name and she herself does not divulge it to them. The children’s alterity in relation to the woman is further signalled both by her manner of dressing and by the motif of food: while she is barefoot as a matter of stylistic choice, the children are barefoot because they presumably have no shoes. She is also eating something which looks both delicious and colourful. From behind the gate, Darling observes:

I look up at the woman’s red, chewing mouth. I can tell from the vein on the side of her neck, and the way she smacks her big lips, that what she is eating tastes good. I look closely at her hand, at the thing she is eating. It is flat, and the outer part is crusty. The top looks creamy and soft, and there are coin-like things on it, a deep pink, the colour of burn wounds. I see sprinkles of red and green and yellow, and finally the brown bumps, like pimples. (44)

The microscopic manner in which the woman’s consumption of the unnamed and unidentified ‘thing’ is described and the speculation regarding the sensations this ‘thing’ elicits in her indicate a hunger so great that it forces the children to become voyeurs of others eating. Notably, the children are voyeurs of her, as she is of them. It is as if the social dynamic that defines their respective roles means that neither party can interact with the other without the distance implied by voyeurism. With regards to the voyeurism, the sensuous details of the woman’s veins and lips, together with the focus on the texture of the food item being consumed in the quoted passage, highlight Darling’s desire to experience what the woman is

experiencing and the extent of her longing for food. The narrator's scorn for what she perceives as the wasteful inhabitants of Budapest again surfaces in her bewilderment when the woman carelessly discards the item she is eating, without finishing it or asking the children if they want it: "We have never seen anyone throw food away" (44). Ironically, however, Darling's attribution of wasteful behaviour depends on who is doing the wasting and on what the object being squandered is. When Bastard throws guavas at the wall of the house Sbhø says she wants to own one day, for example, Darling does not respond with the same contempt she shows the woman. Her judgement of what may be deemed wasteful, therefore, is contingent, firstly, upon whether or not you are part of the friendship group and, secondly, whether or not food is something you have or lack. Given the narrative voice's whimsical or child-like character, it would seem that the former is the overriding determinant. Logically, then, just as Bastard is allowed to throw away guavas because they are a non-luxurious item for the children, the woman is not allowed to throw away the pizza or pie she eating because it is perceived as a treat.

After dispensing with the food item – from the children's perspective, an incomprehensible action – the woman tries to speak to Chipø, who "is not even listening [because] she is busy looking at the thing lying there on the ground" (44). Despite the poignancy of Chipø's gaze, however, the woman carries on speaking to the children as though nothing has happened. The latter's desperation at this point is cumulatively expressed by their fascination with the item of food, their astonishment at the woman's actions and, ultimately, Darling's admission: "we want to eat the thing she is eating . . . we want our hunger to go away" (45).

In light of the above, the gate which literally and physically separates the woman from the children also figuratively represents the class distance which hinders her from engaging empathetically with them. "The woman looks at us," Darling notes, "like maybe she wants us to laugh since she is laughing" (44), but they do not. This moment is fraught with significance: it encapsulates the woman's questionable ethical position in relation to the children, because it reveals not only her obliviousness to their needs, but also suggests that she is imposing her own on them. Her unreciprocated smiles and laughter emphasise the falsity of a position which, like the implied reader's, is characterised both by distance and by a misplaced sense of philanthropic identification. The reader's empathic imagination, stirred by his/her recognition of the dire circumstances informing the children's lived experience and enhanced by the narrator's blasé tone, which suggests that the latter is desensitised to her adversity, is repeatedly called into question through the parallel the narrative draws between

the implied reader and the woman. Just as the woman with the “big jewellery . . . [and] skin that doesn’t even have a scar to show she is a living person” (45) attempts to engage with the children, the reader is drawn into an empathetic relationship with the text which is as efficacious as the “Save Darfur” (45) T-shirt the woman is wearing. Inherent in Darling’s insistence that one needs scars to show one is alive is the suggestion that, in order to identify with the suffering of others, one has to have it physically imprinted on one’s body. As opposed to having such marks imprinted on her body, however, the woman wears a philanthropic slogan on her T-shirt, words which are revealed to be a luxury and empty of content for those in the circumstances described in this context. Like a soldier’s battle scars or a gang’s tattoos, the children bear the marks of their adversity on their bodies. Hence, contrary to the woman and the reader, who perceive these scars as signs of deprivation, the children display admirable resilience. In other words, while perceived as victims, the children are, in fact, survivors.

The woman’s blindness to the children’s experience and definition of themselves is especially highlighted by the episode in which, without waiting for their consent, she decides to take photographs of them. She makes them pose and utter the conventional cue for staged photographic smiles:

“Come on, say cheese, say cheese, cheese, cheeeeeese,” the woman enthuses, and everyone says “cheese.” Myself I don’t really say, because I am trying to remember what cheese means exactly, and I cannot remember. (44)

Although permeated by, to use Terry Eagleton’s terms, “the thick mud of cliché” (qtd in Bethlehem 7), this passage nonetheless reflects the experiencing self’s inability to link the referent “cheese” with something concrete – or vaguely recalled – in her experiential world. For the children, food is not a matter of naming and differentiation, but of availability. The fact that Darling hesitates to say the word “cheese” implies that, for her at least, the word has lost its meaning. In Darling’s reality, the object cheese does not exist except in the abstract; it is a word that, essentially, is meaningless. Despite this, however, Darling does eventually pose for the photograph, an action which enhances the falsity of the photograph – not only are the smiles fake and forced, but the word that has occasioned the ‘smiles’ is empty of content.

In the midst of this episode, Darling also recalls a story told to her by Mother of Bones – the fable of Dudu the bird “who learned and sang a new song whose words she did not know the meaning of, and was caught, killed, and cooked for dinner because in the song

she was actually begging people to kill and cook her” (45). This cautionary tale indicates the deceptive nature of language and the instability of meaning and reception: in addition to motivating Darling’s hesitation in repeating the word “cheese”, it draws attention to the meta-textual qualities of Bulawayo’s own narrative. The instability of the sign, as previously argued, is a problematic factor in the representation of trauma since it raises questions of language’s (in)ability to accurately represent reality. Thus, *Mother of Bones*’ fable may also be read as a code through which “Hitting Budapest” gestures towards problems of expression in the context it wishes to describe. A further interrogation of the adequacy of language, during the spectacle of the children “all singing the word [cheese] and the camera . . . clicking and clicking and clicking,” arises when Stina, who is characterised as “never really speaking,” begins “walking away” (45) from the group. Taken aback, the woman stops taking pictures to ask if he is “ok” (45), but the only response she is met with is the boy continuing to walk away and the others beginning to follow suit. While it may be argued that Stina walks away because he is tired of posing and wants to get to the guavas, his wordlessness imbues the gesture with a greater significance because it suggests a rejection of the woman’s appropriation of the children for her own ends. Her astonishment at the gesture and her futile inquiry into Stina’s well-being only serve to amplify the sense that she is oblivious to the children’s reality and unaware that they might be resistant to being treated as photographic material.

Furthermore, the woman’s insistence that the children pose for photographs and that they smile at the camera suggests that she, too, is a voyeur – in this case, of poverty. In asking the children to produce inauthentic smiles for the camera, she is in fact drawing attention to art’s inability to replicate reality. In other words, the fact that the photos she takes will depict the children smiling, despite the reality that they are hungry, renders the moments captured fundamentally untrue. Hence, what the photos represent is a meta-textual critique of whether or not ‘real’ life can indeed be reflected in art, particularly when the former is characterised by suffering and deprivation. Indeed, it could be argued that the taking of photographs – ostensibly the most unmediated or ‘lifelike’ form of representation – by implication indicates the reflexive manner in which the text questions its own narrative mode and, perhaps, all art. Read in the light of Helgesson’s comments in the epigraph to this chapter, the “fingerprints of Literature” in Bulawayo’s ostensibly realist text are evidenced by its symbolism, irony and, ultimately, by moments of meta-textuality such as those discussed above.

2.3 Children's Contact with Adults in "Hitting Budapest"

The encounter with the barefoot woman also emphasises the contrast between the children's intersubjective relations in Paradise, and those they experience in Budapest, a contrast especially evident in the manner with which the children respond to the woman smiling at them. As Darling reports, "we wait for her, so we can see what she is smiling for, or at: nobody really ever smiles at us in Paradise. Except Mother of Bones, who smiles at anything" (44). Unaccustomed to being treated with at least the veneer of kindness, the children are not equipped to respond appropriately to the woman's smile. At the very least, they find her behaviour puzzling, because she does not know them, and respond to it with confusion and suspicion. Implicit in Darling's observation, then, is the suggestion that the extreme material deprivation which characterises their shanty settlement renders its inhabitants so preoccupied with the pursuit of basic human needs that they have very little to smile about. The depiction of smiling as a luxury afforded only to those who are not starving therefore serves to amplify the dichotomy of scarcity and abundance, and the woman's implicit location in the realm of privilege, despite her bohemian and humanitarian appearance – her "Save Darfur" T-shirt, bare feet, dreadlocks (45) – and well-meaning gestures. The discrepancy is further evidenced by the fact that she asks to take snapshots of them, rather than offers to feed them, and in her misinterpretation of the direction of Chipo's gaze:

"What's that?" Chipo asks, pointing at the thing [the woman is eating] with one hand and rubbing her stomach with the other.
 "Oh, this? It's a camera," the woman says, which we know. (44)

The woman's misinterpretation of Chipo's gesture signifying hunger and her unintentionally condescending response to Chipo's question once again exemplifies the reality that, despite her philanthropic pretensions, she is merely an observer of the children's misfortune. Moreover, the distance between herself and the children is characterised not only by the physical boundary of the gate and the fact that she has what they lack, but also by her trying to impress the children by revealing that she is from overseas: "I'm from London," she says, "This is my first time visiting my dad's country" (44). Her positioning of herself as an outsider is further emphasised when she comments, "I can't stand the heat, and the hard earth" (44). Implicitly, then, it is her father rather than she herself who belongs in the country, and her discomfort with the climate further illustrates her sense of being out of place.

The notion that place is linked to privilege and mobility to escape from deprivation emerges when, upon arriving in Budapest, Sbho daydreams aloud of one day living in a

house in Budapest, a dream which she insists will be realised because she is “going to marry a man from Budapest” (46). In response to this assertion, Bastard is quick to point out that “Budapest is not a toilet where anyone can just walk in” (46). Instead, to gain access to privilege, one has to “go out of the country . . . make a lot of money and come back and buy a house in . . . Budapest or Los Angeles, even Paris” (46). Bastard’s response here underlines the notion of exclusion in relation to place in the story, and suggests the impossibility of thriving in one’s own country: as Darling has earlier revealed, Godknows’ uncle went to London, but did not return and no longer writes or sends them sweets (44). The general sense, then, is that the socio-economic climate of the country the children inhabit is not conducive to the betterment of its citizens.

In this regard, the name of the woman in Paradise who smiles indiscriminately and tells the children traditional African fables at bedtime – “Mother of Bones” – is noteworthy. Firstly, her name might be taken literally to signify her emaciated, skeletal frame, or that she has produced a child who is severely malnourished. Secondly, her mothering of the children suggests that the latter are, metaphorically, ‘the bones,’ the hungry ones, frail and waif-like. Lastly, the fact that “she smiles at anything” (44) indicates either that she is senile or unhinged, and is oblivious to her own condition and the conditions surrounding her.

At various points throughout the story, the narrator draws attention to the fact that the adults in Paradise treat the children with indifference. For example, in responding to the questions posed by the barefoot woman in Budapest, Darling observes, “We do not answer because we are not used to adults asking us anything” (45). Read in isolation, this could be regarded as articulating the hierarchical principle that children are minors and therefore not to be accorded equivalent attention as adults. Alternatively, as Darling indicates earlier, the adults are distracted by gambling, gossiping, and attempting to survive in dire socio-economic conditions.

Nevertheless, all of the children express the desire to escape their immediate environment, as is evident in the competitive one-upmanship of their respective dreams of getting out of Paradise. These ambitions, however, by their very improbability, are shrouded in a sense of unreality and futility. When Darling boasts about going to America to live with her aunt in the future, for example, Bastard quickly deflates her dream by retorting: “Well, go, go to that America and work in nursing homes and clean poop. You think we have never heard the stories!” (46). His response suggests the futility of attempting to escape suffering by changing one’s location. Implicit in his reference to the stories of others who have left Paradise in pursuit of what they thought would be a better life – only to be degraded by

having to take on humiliating, menial work – is the suggestion that poverty is a predetermined, ubiquitous and unalterable condition. In response to Bastard's cutting but insightful rebuttal, which the reader identifies as grounded in realities of which Darling is naïvely unaware or cannot fathom and therefore dismisses, Darling confides:

I think about turning right around and beating Bastard for saying that about *my America* . . . But I shut up and walk away. I know he is just jealous. Because he has nobody in America. Because Aunt Fostalina is not his aunt. Because he is Bastard and I am Darling. (46, emphasis added)

While indicative of an internal hierarchy within the group of the children, the above passage also reveals the author's intentionally symbolic use of names. As Darling implicitly (but ironically) asserts, her name ostensibly signifies she is wanted, loved, treasured and lucky: it is a term of endearment. By contrast, Bastard's name conveys the sense that he is unwanted, unloved and unlucky. The opposition between the two children's names, as interpreted by the narrator, is, however, undermined by the fact that both of them in reality inhabit a community characterised by lack, and are deprived of nurturing. Irrespective of their names, therefore, both children's experience is one of socio-economic hardship, marginality and invisibility.

The impossibility of escape is further evidenced by Chipo's already thwarted dream of receiving an education:

“When we were going to school, *my teacher* Mr. Gono said you need an education to make money, that's what he said, *my own teacher*.” Chipo rubs her stomach and says Mr Gono's name so proudly like he is *her own father*, like he is something special, like maybe it's him inside her stomach. (46, emphasis added)

Chipo's comment here reveals that the children no longer go to school, though the reasons are not divulged. Moreover, Darling's observations regarding the manner in which Chipo proudly speaks about her former teacher suggest that Mr Gono's treatment of Chipo has meant that she has come to regard him as a father figure – perhaps as a substitute for a father who is absent. The fact that Chipo no longer goes to school therefore means that not only has she lost a mentor, but also a man from whom she received support, encouragement and sympathetic attention. The loss of Mr Gono possibly has further implications, in that the constructive interaction Chipo had with him has been replaced by an abusive interaction with a grandfather who has sexually exploited and impregnated her. Given her pregnancy and the impending responsibility of having to look after a child whilst herself still a child, Chipo's earlier dream of achieving the education that, she insists, would confer upward social mobility, has been rendered highly improbable by her present and future circumstances. The

earlier description of her rubbing her stomach while she is speaking may thus be read as unintentionally reflective of the inescapable reality that her pregnancy delimits the possibility of a more prosperous future. Notably, the ways in which the children assert a proprietorial pride in certain places and people (“your home” “my own teacher” “her own father” “my America”) is deeply ironic, since that they do not, in reality, possess any of these – and are unlikely to do so in the future.

Additionally, the degree of familiarity and identification with which the children speak about foreign places implies the insignificance of the place they inhabit, and suggests that being in Paradise is like being nowhere. It is also reflective of the effects of globalisation, which means that, in a sense, these foreign places have already been incorporated into the children’s world – at least as desirable destinations, though in reality they have as little purchase as “cheese”. This is reflected in the children’s insistence that they must be able to return to Paradise. Another effect of globalisation, however, is the perpetual poverty of some communities. Thus, implicit in Bastard’s retort to Darling’s wish to go to America is the idea that she will essentially carry poverty with her wherever she goes. These other places are also interpreted by the children as only a means through which they can procure the financial security they need in order to survive in their context. Indeed, the game in which the children are engaging to determine who has the best dream of escaping Paradise, although comical, is ironised by the excruciatingly dire circumstances of their lived reality. Ultimately, it is clear to the implied reader that the children will not be going anywhere – either way.

The dichotomy between scarcity/poverty and abundance/material wealth, read in relation to the improbability of escape, is integral to the narrative’s depiction of the children’s suffering. Indeed, the manner in which these themes emerge from the limited interpretive capacity of the child narrator attests to the effectiveness of the author’s installation of structural irony: the gap between the children’s illusions, claims to a brighter future, and defiant bravado/one-upmanship, and the reality of their abject poverty, static and deterministic social context, and bleak future illustrates the complexity of meaning this stylistic feature generates.

2.4 Chipó’s Pregnancy

Within the context of Bulawayo’s narrative as a whole, the inattention to or social invisibility of children manifests itself in their neglect and exploitation, realities which initially emerge in Bastard having to look after his little sister and the children being unsupervised, but which are

more horrifically evoked by Chipó's pregnancy at the age of ten. Chipó's pregnancy signals not only the sexualised abuse of a child's body, but also connotes the gender politics which underpin the impoverished setting of Paradise: it is the site onto which the abuse of male power and the instrumental use of the female body for male sexual gratification are inscribed. The gravity of the offense here is exacerbated by the fact that her own grandfather is the father of her child; thus, not only is she a victim of masculine oppression, she has also been violated by a close family member. Chipó's pregnancy also suggests that her grandfather gives her attention when he is abusing her, and that therefore she can only receive this attention when she is used as an object of sexual desire.

The sexual violation of a child's body interferes with the child's identity and psychic well-being, particularly if the latter is primarily located in the body: "the body and embodiment are central – not peripheral to the development and construction of the self" (Cahill 131). Chipó's body thus represents a contradiction, since the depiction of a child about to give birth to another child sends mixed messages or is fundamentally ambiguous: it destabilises the conventional definition of what it means to have a child's body by not only attributing sexuality, but also fertility to it. Thus, while inhabiting a body on the cusp between childhood and puberty herself, Chipó will also be forced to perform the adult task of being the custodian of a life, a responsibility which far exceeds her cognitive and emotional framework. The life she is carrying is literally a burden which she is ill-equipped to shoulder, though Darling describes her stomach as "the size of a soccer ball, not too big" (44). Darling's comparison of Chipó's stomach with a soccer ball reveals the narrator's frame of reference, which entails using childlike comparisons to describe the supposedly adult phenomenon of pregnancy.

The manner in which Darling deals with the question of Chipó's pregnancy is noteworthy, since she exhibits no sign of being shocked or scandalised, but rather a childlike curiosity, and an offhand, noncommittal acceptance which suggests that this occurrence is anything *but* remarkable or out of the ordinary. Apart from the barefoot woman, who inquires as to how old Chipó is, and whom the savvy Darling describes as "looking at [Chipó's] stomach like she has never seen anybody pregnant" (44) while Chipó is eyeing the discarded item of food, for instance, there is no indication that any of the adults or children in Paradise either show concern about or question the propriety of the child's pregnancy. This speaks volumes about the apathy and hopelessness in that locale. The narrator's blasé depiction of Chipó's pregnancy demonstrates the narrative's installation of structural irony, since the implied reader will no doubt conclude that the child focaliser's perspective is characterised by

lacuna in both her socio-political and psychological awareness. Given this alignment, the implications surrounding the enormity of Chipo's violation and questions of social and ethical responsibilities towards children extend beyond the confines of the story to include the (mis)treatment of children in settings – fictional or otherwise – characterised by deprivation in general.

Darling's deadpan depiction of Chipo's pregnancy may also be read as a narrative device which ironically emphasises the latter's subjective unsettlement and the collapse of coherence in her experience of self, an unsettlement which is first expressed when the children stop on AU street so that Chipo can vomit (45). Obviously this can be interpreted literally as symptomatic of her morning sickness. However, given that the names of all the children, places and streets in the story are significant, the fact that Chipo vomits in the street named after the acronym of the African Union is especially telling, since this episode highlights the manner in which the narrative critiques political organisations and alliances which, although they proclaim that they assist communities plagued by poverty, unemployment and the like, exist only as words, disembodied signposts that have no material impact on these conditions. Thus, Chipo's vomiting figuratively signals a rejection of political structures which fail to protect the most vulnerable members of any society, especially children. In other words, the gap in awareness implicit here is, in fact, an *adult* failure. The narrative's critique of such organisations is further evidenced by the fact that a number of streets the hungry children walk along (SADC, IMF) are named after these putatively well-meaning, but evidently absent and ineffectual, political and financial organisations.

When Bastard becomes irritated at having to wait for Chipo, who is lagging behind on the road to Budapest, he interrogates then argues with Darling:

“Where exactly does a baby come out of?”

“From the same way it gets into the stomach.”

“How exactly does it get into the stomach?”

“First, God has to put it there.”

“No, not God. A man has to put it there, my cousin Musa told me. Didn't your grandfather put it there Chipo?”

She nods. (43)

Bastard's curiosity and mixture of ignorance and half-assimilated knowledge regarding conception and childbirth, in this passage, is juxtaposed with his (and Darling's) non-committal attitude to the very fact of their friend's pregnancy, and apparent lack of any sense of indignation, shock or impropriety in relation to its origins, as is particularly evident in Bastard's dispassionate question: “Didn't your grandfather put it there Chipo?” Implicit in the

seemingly nonchalant manner in which Bastard asks this question is the normalisation – or, at least, unexceptionality – of incest and child abuse in “Paradise.” Additionally, the fact that it is Chipó’s grandfather who is responsible for her impregnation points to the marked absence of any reference to Chipó’s parents, both in her own and her friends’ speech, and in the narration of the text itself. Thus, her pregnancy foregrounds questions of ethical relations between adults and children – for the implied reader, if not for the characters themselves. The absence of allusions to Chipó’s parents and, indeed, reference to *any* parental presence or supervision in the story, implies a localised or domestic malfunction. This, in turn, forms an index to the social coordinates of a fractured and disregarding community which, by virtue of being unable to protect and provide for its youngest members, is rendered dysfunctional.

Furthermore, it is significant that Chipó does not engage much in her friends’ discussion of her pregnancy, a discussion in which there is a contest between the offhand and (somewhat) more informed Darling and the ignorant and curious Bastard (whose name suggests that he should know more). For example, Bastard and Darling argue about how Chipó will feed the baby, the former commenting, “But Chipó’s breasts are small. Like stones.” And the latter retorting, “They will grow when the baby comes. Isn’t it Chipó?” Chipó herself responds: “I don’t want my breasts to grow. I don’t want a baby. I don’t want anything, just guavas.” Darling then relates that Chipó “takes off. We run after her” (44). Chipó’s resistance to the biological changes her body is undergoing and her psychological distress are evident in the desperate, but feeble and futile, way in which she attempts to negate the physical reality of her pregnancy, the fact that her breasts will indeed enlarge, and the inevitability that she will give birth to the child. Her dismissal here explicitly indicates she is not ready for the changes which are nonetheless occurring in her body.

In his essay on children’s psychological responses to trauma and their narrative reconstructions of traumatic experience in therapy, “Children, Trauma and Subordinate Storyline Development,” Michael White observes:

No child is a passive recipient of trauma, regardless of the nature of this trauma . . . children take action to minimise their exposure to trauma and to decrease their vulnerability to it by modifying the traumatic episodes they are subject to, or by finding ways of modifying the effects of this trauma on their lives. However, it is more common for these responses to go unnoticed, or to be punished, or to be disqualified through ridicule and diminishment within the trauma context. (148)

Read alongside White’s claim, Chipó’s attempt to reject the changes occurring in her body and escape the probing questions of her friends, together with the narrator’s inability to

penetrate the significance of her friend's behaviour, are symptomatic of both children's responses to traumatic experience. The meaning behind Chipo's outburst, for example, is contained in her assertion "I don't want anything," and in her flight, both of which indicate denial and an inability to cope with reality. The continuation "but guavas" clearly expresses her immediate priorities.

Chipo's loss both of her physical and psychic innocence necessarily undermines the potential for a change in her circumstances and, by extension, foregrounds the bleak circumstances with which her unborn child will have to contend. Thus, the fact that she is acted upon, that her innocence is both literally and figuratively 'killed' by her grandfather, further suggests that the kinds of violations she has endured and will continue to endure will, ultimately, rob her of personal agency.

2.5 The Female Body: Politics, Ambiguity and Self-annihilation

In her argument regarding the manner in which fictional representations of historical traumas inscribe such traumas on the bodies of characters, Vickroy claims that

Social conflicts are enacted in character's personal conflicts, where historical trauma is personalized by exploring its effects in bodily violations and wounds, in sexuality, or in the struggle to achieve emotional intimacy. (168)

The violation of the body is thus symbolic of disturbances in interpersonal relations and, by extension, ruptures in entire communities. Implicit here is the suggestion that one of the ways in which trauma is conventionally represented in fiction is via the effects of physical violation, particularly when grounded in sexuality. Bulawayo's treatment of the female body in "Hitting Budapest" is thus pivotal, because the social dysfunctionality which characterises the impoverished setting from which the children derive is illustrated with reference, firstly, to the figure of the pregnant Chipo and, secondly, through the corpse of a woman who has committed suicide.

Like Chipo's body, the body of the hanged woman the children encounter on their way back to Paradise, towards the end of the story, foregrounds a persistent pessimism and bleakness in the narrative, though perhaps the shock and horror the reader experiences at this climax to the events related is only momentarily shared by the children themselves. Overlapping with the moment in which the narrator provides a detailed account of herself and her friends defecating in the bush, the discovery of the body represents a moment of crisis

which is profoundly linked to the experience of abjection. The children are literally suffering from constipation and bloatedness, as Darling explains, having gorged themselves on the “bull guavas” in Budapest. “When it comes to defecating,” Darling disarmingly reveals, “we get in so much pain, like giving birth to a country” (46). Read in relation to her earlier description of Bastard running at the forefront of the group because “he won country-game [sic] . . . and thinks he rules” (43), the simile evoking a parallel between the painful process of defecation – “giving birth to a country” (46) – and the equally agonising process of achieving national independence implies that the country the children have inherited and inhabit is tantamount to faeces, and that the people who rule it are all ‘bastards’. Implicit, too, in the image of the guava seeds that “get you constipated when you eat too much” and which cause “so much pain” (46) when defecating is the suggestion that the scars of adversity the children bear are a result of being debased – in this case, even the food they eat violates them.

While the act of defecating entails the expulsion of waste, and hence the purification of the body, being in the presence of a corpse constitutes a destabilisation of the very notion of a ‘pure body,’ in that it represents the ultimate state of decay: death. Darling describes the disruption of the defecating episode by Godknows’ discovery of the woman’s body in terms which draw attention to the magnitude of her simultaneous disquiet and fascination at the scene:

The woman’s thin arms hang limp at the sides, and her hands and feet point to the ground, like somebody drew her there, a straight line hanging in the air. Her eyes are the scariest part, they look too white, and her mouth is open wide. The woman is wearing a yellow dress, and the grass licks the tip of her shoes. (47)

The woman’s thin arms and stick-like figure, silhouetted against the sky, suggest that she is thin or malnourished and thus more likely a resident of Paradise than of Budapest. Notably, while the woman’s gaping mouth is a result of *rigor mortis*, it is also evocative of a suppressed scream, a scream which symbolically connotes her vulnerability and marginality and, by extension, signifies that of all females in the context. This gendered experience, is primarily illustrated by the appropriation of Chipo’s body for male sexual gratification, and is also a function of women’s double othering/alterity as inhabitants of a dysfunctional community characterised by extreme deprivation. Similarly, the lifelessness evoked by the image of the dead woman’s empty, pale upturned eyeballs, and the sickliness symbolised by the colour of her dress, conveys a sense of degeneration and decay. The futility, finality and morbidity in this passage therefore correspond with the wider context of a setting characterised by hunger, poverty, hopelessness, neglect and exploitation.

Furthermore, the body of the hanged woman, juxtaposed with that of the pregnant Chipó, elucidates the failure of social, economic, familial and political structures to secure human dignity in this environment. This juxtaposition points to the irony inherent in the narrative's depiction of death. While the woman's presumed suicide, for example, signals a desire to return to the womb (to be buried or to return to a sublimated state prior to birth and after death), Chipó clings to the hope of a better life which the knowing reader perceives as a kind of death.

The fact that the woman does not have a name or an identity, apart from that ascribed to her by her sex, suggests, in a sense, that her self-annihilating body foregrounds the vulnerability of all female bodies in "Paradise". Hence, while the new life that Chipó's body is carrying represents the burden rather than the joys of motherhood, the hanged woman's body represents the death of hope. The latter may be inferred from the fact that, in a literal sense, the female body is the physical custodian of future generations; its annihilation therefore, in addition to presaging Chipó's fate, foregrounds the futility of the children's dreams of a different future. This pessimistic reading is first prompted by the episode in which the children "gallop along Hope Street past the big stadium with the glimmering benches [they will] never sit on" (43) on their way to Budapest, a seemingly minor detail which, together with the fact that Chipó has been robbed of her subjective integrity, prefigures the hopelessness evoked by the body of the hanged woman. Darling's recognition that she and her friends will never be granted access to the "glimmering benches" of the stadium, erected post-independence, thus impresses upon the implied reader the futility of hope itself in the story's context.

In writing about the role the body plays in histories of trauma, Vickroy argues that "the body becomes the testing ground for human endurance" (168). In similar vein, in her book on the physical violence of rape, Roberta Culbertson maintains:

No experience is more one's own than harm to one's own skin. None is more locked within that skin, played out within it in actions other than words, in patterns of consciousness below the everyday and the construction of language. (170)

Implicit in both Vickroy and Culbertson's claims is the notion that the body in pain or the suffering body constitutes an inexpressible reality, and that the endurance or survival of the body takes precedence over the ability to articulate one's lived experience in words. In this sense, the body speaks for itself. In light of the concerns raised by such observations, it could be argued that Chipó embodies an inarticulable violation which ensues from the socio-

political realities of her community, and that the hanged woman is the ultimate, mute expression of the damage wrought by a community torn asunder by pervasive and extreme poverty. As such, the representation of both female bodies in “Hitting Budapest” raises questions of responsibility and evokes an ethical response in the implied reader.

The desperation which characterises the community depicted in Bulawayo’s story is most shockingly displayed when the children steal the dead woman’s shoes in order to sell them and buy bread, implicitly a luxury rather than commonplace in this context. Bastard observes that “the woman’s shoes look almost new” and that if they sell them they can “buy a loaf, or maybe one-and-a-half” (47). What might appear to be a desecration of the lifeless and abandoned female body at this point is juxtaposed with the survival instinct of the children, and their determination to use whatever means are at their disposal to procure something, however meagre, to eat. Inherent in this juxtaposition is an ethical conundrum for the implied reader: the preservation of the dignity of the dead versus the necessity for survival. It is significant that this dilemma does not present itself to Darling and her friends for, immediately Bastard has proposed this plan of action, they “all turn around . . . rushing . . . running . . . running and laughing and laughing and laughing” (47), and head towards the woman’s hanging body to remove her shoes. Driven by bravado (perhaps even hysteria) and the overwhelming desire to escape hunger, the children’s actions are premised on the resourcefulness of necessity and the overriding need to improvise ways to feed themselves. The reader’s possible sense of abhorrence at the children’s proposed violation of the dead woman’s body emphasises his/her positioning as parallel to that of the barefoot woman in Budapest, since this emotional response is premised on the assumption that the dead are entitled to dignity and that the living are ethically charged to treat them with such. In the children’s lived reality, however, abstract concepts such as ‘the dignity of the dead’ are as effectual and as meaningful as “cheese,” since even the living, in this case, are deprived of basic human needs. This episode illustrates that the material possibility of food wins over abstract notions such as dignity. It may thus be deduced that the parallel the narrative establishes between the woman’s body and that of Chipo suggests that the ethical questions posed by the children’s violation of the woman’s corpse correspond with those posed by Chipo’s grandfather abusing his granddaughter. In other words, given the parallel, it could be argued that Chipo’s grandfather’s violation of his granddaughter’s body is similar to that of the children violating the corpse, precisely because both actions undermine what, in both cases, *the reader* perceives to be the sanctity of the body.

It may be inferred from the narrator's conversational tone in "Hitting Budapest" that she does not seem to take cognisance of the extremely disconcerting events she narrates. It is the *reader's* perception of the broader implications of these events which creates a sense of unease. Darling relates the story in a factual manner, with muted emotional content, which is unnerving to the reader as it is indicative of a psychic distancing or detachment. The *reader's* unsettlement is however premised on his/her own emotive response to the story. The narrative gestures towards the characters' internal emotional states through the use of metaphor, irony and symbolism, and the narrator's diction is symptomatic of the manner in which the subject matter, namely trauma, resists representation. Consequently, the narrative voice reflects not only of the limitations of the child focaliser's perceptive abilities, but also of the difficulty of attempting to inscribe meaning onto that which ineluctably resists such an attempt. The narrative voice's distance from the events she narrates is suggestive of an unresolved, or perhaps irresolvable, psychological distress. This reading is, however, contingent on whether or not the reader perceives the children more as victims than survivors, and responds emotively to their plight or perceives the narrative as a self-reflexive interrogation of children's suffering in locations characterised by acute poverty.

It is also highly significant that the story's closing episode constitutes the first occasion on which the children are described as laughing, the implication being that their laughter will be as fleeting as the satisfaction they will derive from eating bread they obtain by selling the dead woman's shoes. The children's laughter is simultaneously emblematic of their survival instinct and of the momentary relief afforded by what to the implied reader might seem a macabre windfall. The demanding activity of running and laughing at the same time connotes the expulsion of an anxious or hysterical energy symptomatic of resilience. Put simply, the children's response here suggests that their childlike actions are informed by what the reader, having experienced the structural irony of the narrative, perceives as a tragic optimism, but for them constitutes a temporary relief. Ultimately, the light-hearted delivery of Bulawayo's story not only complicates the reader's interpretation of what the child characters endure, but also implicates the reader in the need for the revision of human rights at a practical level.

Chapter 3

Fictionalising a Traumatic History: Uwem Akpan's "My Parents' Bedroom"

No matter how prepared we are to make sense of evil we are never prepared enough.

– Richard Kearney ("Evil, Monstrosity and the Sublime" 501)

There is an undeniable violence in [the] act of naming, because it effectively reduces the unspeakable terror and the singularity of the event to "one among many". The moment we call an event (or series of events) "genocide" it becomes, by unavoidable implication, "just another genocide".

– Leonhard Praeg (*The Geometry of Violence* 3)

Say You're One of Them derives its title from the penultimate story of Akpan's collection, "My Parents' Bedroom", a story which recounts traumatic occurrences in the child focaliser's life during the onset of the Rwandan genocide. Narrating against the backdrop of this social trauma, nine-year old Monique provides an account of the trail of events that lead, over two days, to her being attacked by armed men in her family home and witnessing her Hutu father bludgeon her Tutsi mother to death in their marital bedroom. The story begins at sunset with Monique noting that she and her baby brother, Jean, have been forbidden to go outdoors since the previous day. Their mother pretends to be leaving the house for the night, while warning the children to pretend no-one is at home if anybody should ask. During that night, however, Monique is tricked by her uncle André into letting him and a mob of Hutu people into the house. This mob, lead by Monique's great uncle, "the Wizard," ransacks the house and a few of the men assault and attempt to rape Monique. The children's parents return the following morning, but they do not want to listen to Monique's account of the previous night's events, opting rather to soothe her. On the second evening, the mob comes to the house again and this time Papa leaves with them after having been forced to kill his wife in front of his children. Ultimately, the family home, which forms the dominant setting of the narrative and which both restricts and determines the movements of the characters as well as the plot, is destroyed. The story ends with Monique and Jean, stranded amongst a colossal mass of abandoned corpses. Despite the implication that the father will inevitably be hunted down and killed, the ending also suggests that the children have been rescued from death through Maman having sacrificed her life to ensure their safety.

From the outset, Monique registers a tension in her parents' relationship, as the domestic setting is threatened by internecine conflict instigated by the public, or political,

sphere. The increasing proximity of this threat, evident in her surroundings and emphasised by the exponential rise of the tension between her parents, culminates in the ultimate of violent acts, that of Papa being forced to murder his spouse in front of his children. It gradually becomes apparent that the tension between the parents stems from their desire to protect the entire family unit; the safety of the family unit as a whole, however, must be sacrificed in order to ensure the safety of Monique and her younger brother. The phrase “say you’re one of them” (266) is uttered by her mother and constitutes a warning to Monique that if anyone should come to the house, she must tell them she is a Hutu. In constituting the title of the entire collection, the phrase implies that each of the narratives’ contexts constitutes an unfavourable environment in which the characters’ primary goal and motivation is survival. The phrase also signifies notions of identity, belonging and entitlement – all of which are undermined in “My Parents’ Bedroom” because they are constantly depicted as selective and exclusionary. Indeed, it is exclusionary manoeuvres which are at the murderous heart of the genocide itself.

Section 3.1 of this chapter provides a brief historical background to the Rwandan genocide and the complex relationship between language and atrocity in narrative. This is followed, in section 3.2, by a close reading of the depiction of the two central crises of the story in relation to notions of the body, subjectivity, and intersubjectivity. Section 3.3 examines the theme of sacrifice in relation to the Christian symbolism in the text, while section 3.4 comprises a discussion of the relationship between the motif of silence as a narrative tool in representing trauma. In all of the sections, the main emphasis is on the child narrator/ focaliser’s (mis)perceptions and reactions to the atrocity she witnesses.

3.1 Social Trauma and the Embodied Subject

In attempting to document his experience of the 1994 Rwandan genocide, the British journalist Fergal Keane confides:

In writing about Rwanda, I am conscious that my words will always be unequal to the task of conveying the full horror of the crime of genocide. For what I encountered was evil in a form that frequently rendered me inarticulate . . . Although I had seen war before, had seen the face of cruelty, Rwanda belonged in a nightmare zone where my capacity to understand, much less rationalize, was overwhelmed. (4)

In drawing attention to his inability to articulate the atrocities he witnessed, Keane’s statement may be read as a testament to what Steiner terms “the failure of the written word in the face of

the inhuman” (71). Keane underlines language’s inability to “be the equivalent of a reality” (Coward 47), particularly when the reality it seeks to represent is characterised by fragmentation and incoherence. As a result, he arrives at the conclusion that, faced with the incomprehensibility of the social trauma of genocide, the subject, whether as witness or victim, is violently acted upon and invaded by a phenomenon that destabilises notions of a stable, unitary subjectivity and defies understanding. In this regard, Chesca Long-Innes diagnoses the collapse of the realist assumption of verisimilitude in Couto’s early narratives as a reaction to “scenes and images of mass destruction” that, like the Rwandan genocide, have the power to damage “systems of perception and representation” (178). It therefore follows that, due to the sense of unreality social traumas present, textual representations of such atrocities pose particular challenges. Steiner’s insistence that language is unequal to the task of imitating reality, particularly when faced with a reality as ‘inhuman’ as the Holocaust, raises the further issue of what atrocity means in relation to notions of *being*/subjectivity and, consequently, inter-subjectivity or “*being-in-common*” (Durrant 5, emphasis added).

For Cahill, “intersubjectivity is rooted in the primacy of embodiment” (128), and she underlines the perception that “the body and embodiment are central – not peripheral, to the development and construction of the self” (131). It may be inferred from this that the body, in constituting the primary means by which subjectivity is constructed, is also the site upon which social and political ideologies are enacted. Thus, the discourses of race and gender are also inscribed on the body, which is “regulated [and constrained] by the norms of cultural life [and is thus rendered] docile” (Bordo 165). According to Susan Bordo, “[t]he body is not only a *text* of culture. It is also . . . a practical, direct locus of social control” (165).

The Rwandan genocide, which lies at the heart of Akpan’s story, “My Parents’ Bedroom,” initially arose from the social disruption caused by the “racially obsessed” (Prunier 6) first European explorers to ‘discover’ Rwanda and Burundi. These explorers immediately noticed differences in the physiognomy of a “population . . . [that was] linguistically and culturally homogenous” (Prunier 5). According to Gérard Prunier, “much was made of the physical features of the three groups – the Hutu, the Tutsi and the Twa – in heavy pseudo-scientific terms” conjured up by both European anthropologists and laymen (6). The full effect of this emphasis on racial classification arose when the colonialists “reorganised the social structure of Rwandan society by exaggerating [racial] . . . stereotypes and supporting the [Tutsi over the Hutu]” (36). German colonisers, who occupied the country between 1894 and 1919, considered what they viewed as the fine features of the Tutsi to mean that they were “Europeans under black skins” (Destexhe 38). And the Belgians, who assumed

colonial control of the country in 1919 after Germany's defeat in the First World War, exacerbated ethnic distinctions by actively favouring the Tutsi, allowing them greater access to education and indoctrinating them into Catholicism with the intention of 'civilising' them (Destexhe 36).

While the seeds of racial discrimination were laid by the colonialists upon their arrival, the first effects of such perceptions were not felt until the dawn of the 1950s, when Rwanda saw the establishment of political parties which were primarily aimed at fighting for the country's independence. Earlier, in 1926, the Belgians had begun issuing identity books which operated in a similar manner to the Pass system in Apartheid South Africa. These identity documents classified people according to the ethnic identity of either the majority population group – the Hutu – which comprised more than 80%, or the Tutsi minority, which constituted approximately 14%. The Twa people, who only formed about 1% of the population, were excluded. Ironically, these pass books, which were established in order to ascribe privilege to the Tutsi, later became the very means by which the Hutu identified and targeted them. Disgruntled with the Belgian colonisers and the Tutsi elite, who rose to privilege *only* because of their physiognomy, which was taken to be an index of their superiority, the Hutu began to rebel as early as 1951 and, with the formation of political parties, this rebellion culminated in Rwanda's first recorded massacre of the Tutsi by the Hutu in 1959, and the exile of more than 150, 000 Tutsi to neighbouring Burundi (Prunier 45). This conflict was further exacerbated by the republican democracy of Rwanda's first president, Grégoire Kiyabanda, a Hutu who replaced the Tutsi monarchy in 1962 (Prunier 54).

According to Alain Destexhe, the Tutsi, because they were favoured by the colonisers, became an easy target for genocide by the Hutus, since "anti-Tutsi propaganda presented them as a minority, well-off and foreign" (28). The racially-charged situation under democracy, together with the gradual withdrawal of the colonial authority, and the ultimate severance of this authority when the country gained its independence on 1 July 1965, left Rwanda in a state of crisis. The withdrawal of colonial authority, while politically motivated, also meant that the Europeans did not take responsibility for the seeds of racial tension they had planted in the country. While the second conflict occurred in 1979, it was not until 1990 that Rwanda saw the outbreak of its third and most devastating conflict between the Hutu and the Tutsi, a conflict which almost resulted in the near-extinction of the Tutsi by 1994.

In "My Parents' Bedroom," a heightened sensitivity to racial classifications – a remnant of colonial intrusion and disruption – is evident in Monique's narrative from the outset. Her father, she observes, "has a round face, a wide nose and . . . [his] lips are as full as a banana,"

while her mother “has high cheekbones, a narrow nose, a sweet mouth . . . [and] skin so light that you can see the blue veins on the back of her hands, as you can on the hands of Le Père Mertens, [their] parish priest, who’s from Belgium” (266). Monique’s contrast of her parents’ physical features implies that she has inherited a discourse of racial discrimination and sensitivity from her community. This contrast is also informed by an inherited notion of what kind of bodies belong to which racial group and, consequently, which bodies belong together and which do not. By extension, too, Monique’s comparison of Maman’s physical features with those of the Belgian priest is also suggestive of Rwanda’s colonial history – specifically of discriminatory practices which, as previously indicated, initially entailed drawing racially-defined categories between the European and the ‘native’, and then proceeded to classify the indigenous people into hierarchical groups. The narrative’s immediate emphasis on the racialised body thus foregrounds the manner in which the inscription of political discourses on the various bodies depicted in the story determines these bodies’ respective fates. In other words, “My Parents’ Bedroom” presents characters whose colour and physiognomy become the means by which they either assert a notion of belonging or, alternatively, are excluded and persecuted.

Destexhe maintains that the core characteristics of any genocidal persecution follow three steps: the enemy has to be “identified, targeted and ultimately slaughtered” (9). In relation to the first of these steps, “My Parents’ Bedroom” highlights the absurdity of the process of identifying one’s self and others in terms of race. This process is especially perceptible in the figure of Monique’s paternal great-uncle, Nzeyimana, whom she refers to as “the Wizard” (267). She introduces the Wizard by describing his physical features, the most distinctive of which is that his skin looks like “milk with a little coffee” (267). The Wizard adopts a self-imposed bachelorhood and justifies his decision by announcing that “he hates his skin and doesn’t want to pass it on” (267). On occasion, Monique observes, he also “paints himself with charcoal, until the rain comes to wash away his blackness” (267). Her fascination with the Wizard’s complexion, which she explains is the result of “a complicated story of intermarriage” (267), and the self-hatred evoked by her image of him attempting to camouflage himself under a layer of soot, suggest that he is of mixed racial heritage. It may further be deduced from this image that the Wizard perceives himself to be contained inside a body that defies racial inscription; in other words, his body is an anomaly which renders racial classification as either Hutu or Tutsi impossible.

Notably, the manner in which various members of the community interpret and interact with the Wizard’s physicality place him on the fringes of his community. He consequently

behaves in a manner that seeks to overcompensate for what other Hutus view as his ambiguous physical features by becoming an agent of extreme violence against the perceived ‘enemy’ – the Tutsi. It thus becomes apparent that actively implicating himself in the violence perpetrated against the Tutsis reinforces his place in the ‘them’/Hutu camp, particularly when these actions draw attention away from what may be construed as his own compromised claim to belonging. For the Tutsi, however, the desperate survival tactics they adopt in this genocidal environment rely not so much on “say[ing] you’re one of them [a Hutu]” (266), but on *looking* – or attempting to look – like “one of them”, the former being the more effective strategy. Ironically, given that the difference between a Hutu and a Tutsi physiognomy is itself a colonial construct, *looking* like “one of them” is revealed to be both as contestable and as futile as “say[ing] you’re one of them” (266).

A further illustration of the absurdity of identifying the ‘enemy’ purely in terms of the racialised body as an indicator of ethnic belonging lies in the fact that the perpetrators of the Rwandan genocide assigned the children of mixed marriages the ethnic identity of their fathers (Destexhe 31). Of her own physical appearance, for instance, Monique observes:

I look like Maman, and when I grow up I’ll be as tall as she is. This is why Papa and all his Hutu people call me Shenge, which means ‘my little one’ in Kinyarwanda. (266)

In contrast to Papa’s confidence in Monique’s safety, based on the knowledge that she is ethnically classified as Hutu, Monique’s physical appearance is the cause of much anxiety for Maman. While Papa “scolds his relatives when they say that it’s risky that [Monique] looks so much like Maman,” Maman “does not like going out in public with [her daughter]. . . She is always tense, as if a lion will leap out and eat [them both]” (267). Maman’s insistence that Monique “say [she’s] one of them” (266), in the opening passages of the story, is therefore not only a security measure, but also emerges out of this anxiety. Despite her mother’s insistence, however, Monique nonetheless forgets to tell the men who break into the house on the first evening that she is “one of them,” and it is the Wizard who later intervenes in the attempted rape of Monique by protesting, “*Oya!* No! Shenge is one of us!” (271).

By the time of the third massacre of the Tutsis by the Hutu in 1990, the Hutu forces had concluded that they would not spare children, as they had during the 1959 conflict; under this new regime, children thus also became targets for murder and abuse (Destexhe 21), particularly because they represented the next generation of Tutsis. As indicated above, however, children of mixed marriages presented an exception, since they were ascribed the racial category of their fathers. Nevertheless, the physical appearance of these children was

still read as an index of ethnic identity, as is demonstrated by the fact that the men who attempt to rape Monique initially assume that she is a Tutsi and therefore a target for their abuse, until the Wizard confirms otherwise.

Ironically, this is the same Wizard who, addressing Papa during the build-up to Maman's murder, later insists: "we must remain pure. Nothing shall dilute our blood. Not God. Not marriage" (285). The irony here lies in the fact that he, too, is a product of intermarriage, yet he condones a doctrine that condemns those of mixed race. In effect, what he is calling for in this exclamation is a pledge from Papa to uphold the 'purity' of their Hutu ethnic group by annihilating any individual who opposes or threatens that group's homogeneity, even when that individual is one's own spouse.

In dismissing ethnically mixed marriages as a 'dilution of blood', the Wizard is essentially reducing the institution of marriage to an expression of ethnic conformity intended to reinforce the notion that there are certain bodies that belong together. This dismissal is further reflective of the extent to which genocide "breaks the attachments of social life" (Erikson 460), a fracture that is starkly realised when Papa butchers his wife in the marital bedroom in front of his children. The privacy of one's body in this context is rendered public, precisely because, in being racially marked, it becomes the manner through which one's mode of *being* is determined. In this regard, in being one of the primary sites upon which ethnic conflict is played out in the story, the children of Maman and Papa's mixed marriage are themselves both the victims and survivors of the "degraded sense of community" (Erikson 460) arising from the disruption or rupture of social attachments.

Destexhe contends that any genocide "has to be a collective act . . . [that] foster[s] a feeling of belonging to [a particular] group and diminishes any feelings of guilt" (34). This assertion highlights the binaries that give rise to genocidal thinking and that prescribe notions of identity and belonging. It also suggests that the systematic violence enacted during genocide relies on the sense of anonymity provided by the perpetrators acting as a collective. Indeed, Leonard Praeg argues that the collective nature of the genocidal violence perpetrated against the Tutsi primarily arose from "people's willingness to imitate others" (42), a principle which served to disguise individual motives and responsibility. Notably, because binaries underpin language, it follows that language, too, was implicated in the exclusionary rhetoric of the Rwandan genocide. Hence, since language is, as previously intimated, implicated in literature's inability to recuperate trauma, the very means through which exclusion was fostered is itself questionable – to the extent of being absurd.

Operating within the ‘logic’ of the mob, both the Wizard and Monique’s paternal uncle, André, can exonerate themselves from individual ethical culpability. André, for example, does not react to Monique’s imploring screams during the sexual assault that takes place in her home on the first evening. His refusal to act, which illustrates the disruption of moral structures and the diminished sense of ethical responsibility in this context, is highly significant because it signals a change in his relationship with his brother’s family. Under ideal circumstances, which presuppose the existence of a contractual obligation to one’s close relatives, Monique’s uncle would be called upon to act in order to ensure her protection. However, because the genocide suspends such obligations, André is relieved of responsibility for his brother’s children. He is also besides himself with rage and a lust for vengeance because of the deaths of his own wife, Annette, who was a Tutsi, and their unborn child. Subsequently, his inaction causes a rift in Monique’s own conception of familial relations: she intimates her anger towards him “because he lied to get in” (271) and participated in the violation of her family home by attempting to remove his face from a family photograph (277). When the irate André lashes out at the children, having not found Papa at home, he ominously claims, “My bastard brother and his wife are not home? [. . .] He owes me this one. And I’m killing these children if I don’t see him” (272). Monique responds to this outburst in an innocent manner: “Whatever it is, I’m sure [Papa] will repay him tomorrow” (272), a response which reveals the extent to which she has not yet realised that familiar familial relations have been suspended.

At this point, Monique does not know that her father was present at, if not participated directly in, André’s murder of his pregnant Tutsi wife, Annette, and that what is ‘owed’ is, in fact, the revenge murder of Maman in return. Although the incident of Annette’s murder occurs outside the narrative, it forms a crucial motivation for André’s behaviour. The circumstances behind André’s murder of his wife constitute a precedent for what Papa is now expected to do – that is, kill his own wife. This correlation is made explicit in the later episode in which André strongly and derisively objects to Papa’s plea that someone else kill Maman by asking, “You love your family more than I loved mine?” (285). Papa’s imploration is met with similar disdain by the Wizard, who insists, “if we kill your wife for you . . . we must kill you. And your children too” (285). The Wizard’s response implies that the brothers’ killing of their respective Tutsi wives is sacrificial, because it is inevitable that other members of the Hutu tribe will murder those whom they perceive as being traitors to the cause of racial cleansing, and their families. Both André and Papa’s murderous actions may thus be read as an illustration of the disintegration of their personal agency and choice, their inability to

maintain their unwritten contractual and ethical obligations to their family units and, consequently, the inexorable corruption of interpersonal interactions during the genocide.

Within a broadly humanist framework, “all peoples are citizens of the universe . . . [therefore] killing someone simply because he or she exists is a crime against humanity; it is a crime against the very essence of what it is to be human” (Destexhe 4). The genocidal setting of “My Parents’ Bedroom,” however, represents the anomaly described by Durrant:

At the heart of histories of racism is the negation of the humanity of the other, an act of exclusion that has “pathological” consequences precisely because it introduces an external exception to the category of the human.
(4)

Both of these observations suggest that, between the second and third steps of the genocidal impulse, targeting and slaughtering respectively, the perpetrator has to alter his perception of the perceived ‘enemy’ as human and thereby negate it. Indeed, one of the primary means by which this was achieved during the Rwandan genocide was through the dehumanisation of the Tutsi, who were referred to as *inyezi* or “cockroach” (Praeg 43). This use of language to negate the humanity of the Tutsi directly correlates with the Nazi perception of the Jews as ‘vermin’ during the Holocaust, and has the same functional significance. Both terms suggest that members of a particular group are firstly, pestilential, and secondly, that their elimination is a matter of disinfecting the society.

Monique’s perception of André, for example, is transformed from a view of him as her father’s loving brother and her uncle, to brutish, bloodthirsty fiend. As she observes, the man who once stood smiling in a family portrait now has the look of a “madman” (269) about him. He is altered to such an extent that he is suddenly consorting with the Wizard, a relative he previously detested so much that he would not even “greet [him]. . . on the road” (267). This newfound affinity between people who would otherwise not choose to be associated with each other suggests that the hysteria of genocide elevates collective murderous purpose above personal antipathies, and is further indicative of the elimination of personal agency.

Similarly, from Monique’s perspective, Papa is transformed from victim and distraught parent to murderer. The present-tense narration of the build-up to the scene in which he kills Maman presents a Papa who “looks guilty, like a child who can’t keep a secret” (277). Like Maman, Papa becomes increasingly silent as the moment of the former’s death draws nearer. His anguish may be read both in his silence and in the fact that he sweats profusely and experiences tremors. His internal conflict is contrasted with Maman’s level-headed insistence that he carry out the only act that will ensure the safety of the children –

that is, kill her. When he protests that he cannot do this, she responds: “you can . . . Yesterday, you did it to Annette” (278), a statement which implies that she believes he must, of necessity, suspend what has hitherto been his ethical position in relation to his kin. The murders of both Annette and Maman are, however, somewhat ambiguous, because they could also be perceived as assisted suicides. Read this way, Papa’s complicity in the murder of his brother’s wife becomes a complex matter, since it entails killing her unborn child too; his involvement thus underscores the irony of his attempting to protect his own children from a similar fate. André’s anguish and rage may thus be located in the inescapable fact that he has killed both his wife and his family: he cannot save the latter by murdering the former.

3.2 Bodies in Crisis: Rape and Murder in “My Parents’ Bedroom”

Although the general setting of “My Parents’ Bedroom” may be interpreted as constituting the sustained social crisis of the Rwandan genocide, the story itself contains two central crises which occur on two consecutive nights in the story: the assault on and attempted rape of Monique, and the murder of Maman. It is highly significant that both scenes occur in the parents’ bedroom, because this location conventionally signifies the most private of domestic spaces. During the raid on the house on the first evening, Monique reports: “When I hear noises in my parents’ bedroom, I run there with Jean, because my parents never allow visitors in their bedroom” (271). Upon entering the bedroom she finds “two men rummaging through [her parents’] closet” (271). This passage highlights both the sanctity of the parents’ bedroom and the symbolic significance of the invasion as a whole, since the perpetrators violate the sanctity of the domestic setting by forcibly entering the house. The invasion also highlights the intrusion of public discourse into private spaces. It may thus be argued that Akpan here presents what Vickroy describes as a “postcolonial domestic space [which is] . . . a place of historical invasion – where home and world meet, conflict and become confused” (37). Moreover, the fact that the invasion culminates in violent acts against the most vulnerable members of the household – the children – in a quintessential domestic space, the marital bedroom, amplifies the significance of this violation. The bedroom thus represents the locale in which the full horror of the extreme public disharmony at large is enacted upon the bodies – specifically, the female bodies – of individual members of the community.

That both of the central crises in the story occur in the bedroom renders these incidents integral to the narrative’s focus on an intersubjectivity based on interactions between individuals whose subjectivity is principally defined by their bodies. Cahill argues that all

intersubjectivity, beginning with the maternal bond between mother and child, is primarily rooted in the reality of embodiment (128); moreover, she insists that “the shapes and habits of individual bodies are directly related to their political and social environments” (129). The assault on Monique and the sacrificial murders of both Annette and Maman illustrate the extent to which the intersubjective relations of the bodies in “My Parents’ Bedroom” are predetermined – indeed, overdetermined – and constrained by the socio-political environment that has resulted in genocide.

The traumatic effects of these crises evoke a sense of unreality in Monique, whose profoundly horrific experiences cause her to view both herself and others as disembodied. When the mob invades the house on the first evening of the narrative, for instance, Monique claims that she hears her uncle André calling out to her “in a dream” (268), and again, when Papa lands the machete on Maman’s head, she comments, “It’s like a dream” (285). The most distinctive of these episodes, however, occurs during Monique’s hallucinations towards the end of the narrative, when she imagines her dead mother is still alive and talking to her from the ceiling. All of these episodes suggest that Monique manifests dissociative symptoms in response to the corporeal abjection she experiences and witnesses. According to Vickroy, “splitting off from one’s awareness can reduce the victim’s immediate sense of violation and help them endure and survive the situation” (13), and Bruce Bradfield argues that “dissociation . . . represents the banishment of an experience from narrative and the subsequent disconnection of that experience from any potential interpersonal space” (9). The narrating I’s repeated comparison of these events to a dream sequence therefore highlights the incommensurability of the experiencing eye’s immediate reality, and reinforces the disproportionate extent to which the violent interaction of the bodies concerned is outside of Monique’s frame of reference.

The initial crisis and subsequent collapse of Monique’s cognitive framework occurs on the first evening, in which, as previously mentioned, the house is raided by a gang of men. These men not only vandalise the house, but one of them also physically assaults and attempts to rape Monique. The manner in which Monique presents this experience serves to demonstrate the extent to which her observations are coloured by her ignorance of sexual realities. In her description of the nameless, faceless man who attacks her, for example, she reports:

Pressing me down on the floor, the naked man grabs my two wrists with his left hand. He pushes up my nightie . . . and tears my underpants . . . I'm twisting and holding my knees together . . . he hits my face, this way and that, until my saliva is salted with blood. I spit in his face. Twice. He bangs my head on the floor, pinning down my neck, punching my left thigh. (271)

This harrowing description, which forms part of the first dream-like sequence in the narrative, is rendered particularly shocking in that it is narrated by a prepubescent child: Monique conveys the experience in a manner which indicates that she is aware of the physical impact of this brutalisation, but unaware of the gravity of the effect of this violation on her psyche.

The unrelenting force with which the perpetrator inflicts bodily harm on the nine-year old suggests that he either fails to recognise her fragility, or that he is only too aware of it and is unmoved. This episode highlights a consequence of the dehumanisation of the Tutsi, because it suggests that, for the perpetrator, Monique's body is positioned and read within a socio-political discourse of race hatred, rather than viewed in its singularity as belonging to a child. The assault therefore signals a moment of non-recognition for Monique, who conceives of herself as human when, in fact, she is not being treated as such. Rapists, after all, strip their victims of their humanity. Thus, the perpetrator's non-recognition of Monique's personhood causes her to question her own notion of self. If, as Cahill argues, "as a particularly sexual bodily attack on an embodied subject, rape constitutes a fundamental and sexually specific undermining of that person's subjective integrity" (115), then Monique's resistance to her attacker suggests a struggle not only to protect herself from physical harm, but also to assert her "subjective integrity" or personhood.

Although the episode does not culminate in actual penetration, the degree of the injury to Monique's psyche is implied in her subsequent confusion and her incessant return to the experience in memory, although she lacks the vocabulary with which to speak about it.

According to Catherine Mackinnon:

genocidal rape is . . . an official policy of war in a genocidal campaign for political control. That means not only a policy of the pleasure of male power unleashed, which happens all the time in so-called peace; not only a policy to defile, torture, humiliate, degrade, and demoralise the other side, which happens all the time in war . . . It is a rape to be seen and heard and watched and told to others : rape as spectacle. It is rape to drive a wedge through a community, to shatter a society, to destroy its people. (531)

In other words, genocidal rape represents a systematic violence which, although perpetrated against specific individuals, comes to denote the destruction of an entire community. Read

alongside MacKinnon's claim, the assault on Monique's subjective integrity demonstrates the ways in which violence in the story's setting – and rape, in particular – consists in one group negating and destroying the coherence of the other and, specifically, the latter's female members. The inscription of socio-political discourse on the bodies depicted in Akpan's story means that forcibly assuming control of someone's body, as the perpetrator does of Monique's, may be read as an attempt to destroy her sense of coherence. Hence, because the body is the primary locus of a person's psychic existence (Mitchell 125), an assault on the body constitutes an attack on the very entity that makes one a self and, by extension, adversely affects that self's relation to other selves.

Given that “the prepubertal child [is] not equipped with a full repertoire of defences at that developmental phase” (Neal 51), Monique's experience is traumatic partly because it “involves a radical sense of disconnection and isolation . . . [brought about by the fact that her] personal safety is put into question” (Vickroy 23). Furthermore, because trauma “destroys beliefs . . . in one's own safety” and one's “perception of the world as meaningful and orderly” (Vickroy 23), the incident and its positioning as the first major crisis of the narrative suggest that in this context an absolute breakdown of an orderly environment governed by a set of rules has occurred. Both the notions of community and of personal agency have been destroyed. The attack on Monique's body thus illustrates the collapse of a society characterised by a sense of coherence and stability. Here, as in “Hitting Budapest,” the body is the primary source of symbolism; it is the interface between the exteriority of social norms and the interiority of personal experience. The violent effects of this correlation between the private and public body, in “My Parents' Bedroom,” are illustrated in the fragmentation of the society's embodied subjects, and the diminished sense of self individuals undergo as a result. This is evidenced in the fact that Monique's attacker and the other people involved in the raid, apart from Tonton André and the Wizard, are nameless and faceless. The perpetrators are undifferentiated individuals whose identities have dissolved into a featureless collective, which is significant in that the lack of differentiation signals Monique's failure to identify or define one subject in relation to another. As a result, her own sense of self is called into question.

Mitchell maintains that the notion of self in childhood is related to the kinds of interactions the child has with others:

The primal question would be: who am I for this person/world I see?
And later: that man is the friend of that woman, that child is the
son/daughter of that woman – but who am I? This “who am I?” is not a
question of a self-sufficient identity, but rather a positioning. (124)

In terms of this logic, the child learns to define him/herself relationally. The child's *being* therefore relies on him/her being able to position him/herself *in relation to* someone else or some other body. Notably, Monique initially introduces herself by referring to her position within the (extended) family and the reader comes to know her through these references. The fact that the perpetrators are rendered almost anonymous therefore signals her failure to define herself in relation to them. This experience of alienation and of a collapse of self is captured in the moment before Monique loses consciousness after the assault, when she says: "My eyes show me many men in yellow trousers and overalls, many Wizards" (272).

It is also significant that, on the first evening, the Wizard "swings his stick at the crucifix . . . [until] Christ's body breaks from the cross, crashing on the floor. Limbless . . . [with] only bits of his hands and legs . . . still hanging on the cross, hollow and jagged" (270), since this serves as a premonition of Maman's body in an abject state. Moreover, because Monique associates the Wizard with paganism, and believes that he is an ogre or villainous figure with magical powers, his stick transforms, in her imagination, into a wand. Her interpretation of him thus fuses the mystical realm of childhood fancy with the lawlessness of a society in shambles. Hence, his destruction of the crucifix symbolically enacts the state of affairs already prevalent in the external environment, an environment in which all sense of order and ethics has been suspended. When he advises Monique: "If you want to live, don't leave this house for anything. Ghosts are all over our land. Bad ghosts" (273), the force of this admonition instils fear in Monique, who immediately interprets his words in a highly imaginative manner: "He whisks his cane and tosses his head as if he were commanding the ghosts into existence" (273). In her childish imagination, it is as though the Wizard conjures up the ghosts himself in order to frighten her. Her interpretations and responses here reflect both her misinterpretation of the urgency of his advice, and her childlike fear of his appearance. The Wizard is thus transformed from a mildly mystifying to a terrifying figure in Monique's eyes.

If, as Mitchell argues, humans come to recognise themselves in relation to others – "someone or something gives one a place in the world. They see me, therefore I exist" (123) – then Monique's experience implies that the *manner* in which she is perceived by others also determines the nature of her existence. Although she tries to identify the perpetrators with a known quantity – "wizard" – Monique does not recognise them as singular human beings, but rather as anonymous bodies. This lack of recognition, in turn, implies a shift in her definition of herself. The disruption of her ability to position herself in relation to these male bodies may also be read as a dissociative symptom of trauma, because dissociation is "a primary psychic

defence against the awareness of pain” (Bradfield 4). Hence, both the physical and psychic pain Monique experiences during the assault causes her to become disorientated and unable to position herself within her current reality.

The full manifestations of Monique’s sense of unreality reach their peak in the second incident of a body in crisis in the narrative, an incident which occurs on the second evening of the narrative. The episode begins with Maman finally giving up hope of evading the inevitable and opening the front door to let the mob in. Soon afterwards, she “runs into her bedroom” (284), followed by a frightened Monique and her younger brother, Jean. Papa is later led into the room by the mob and “give[n] . . . a big machete” (285). After confronting the terrible reality that he cannot avoid being forced to kill his wife if he is to attempt to save the children, “Papa lands the machete on Maman’s head” (285). Monique then remarks that “It’s like a dream . . . Maman straightens out on the floor as if she were yawning. Her feet kick and her chest rises and locks as if she were holding her breath” (285). With reference to Julia Kristeva’s conception of the abject, Nöelle McAfee asserts that, in the presence of a dead body, “the very border between life and death has been broken, with death seeming to ‘infect’ the body. And we who are faced with a corpse experience the fragility of our own life” (47). The details of Maman’s death-throes and convulsing body are indicative of the extent to which Monique’s sudden encounter with the fragility of life causes a rupture in her sense of cohesion and meaning, primarily because death presents itself as sublime. The horror the experiencing self feels at this point is captured in her descriptions of both her own and Jean’s responses to Maman’s corpse:

There’s blood everywhere – on everybody around her. It flows into Maman’s eyes. *She looks at us* through the blood. *She sees Papa* become a wizard . . . the blood overflows her eyelids, and *Maman is weeping* red tears. My bladder softens and pee flows down my legs toward the blood. The blood overpowers it, bathing my feet. (285, emphasis added)

Monique’s involuntary urination here indicates the extent to which she is traumatised, because her reaction illustrates a reversion to the preverbal and signals a spontaneous corporeal response to an experience that is too overwhelming to be articulated in words. Her psychological and emotional trauma thus expresses itself in a state of abjection – literally, a loss of control of her body or, more specifically, her bladder – because it is incomprehensible. The quoted passage reflects Monique’s inability to assimilate the reality of her mother’s death, as evidenced in her attribution of agency to the corpse or to a Maman who still “looks” at them, “sees” the transformation of Papa into a murderous monster, and “weeps” tears of

blood as result of the atrocity she witnesses. The grotesque image of Maman's blood-filled eyes looking on from beyond the void of death is evocative, in that it underscores the meeting of life and death – both of which are sublime – during a traumatic event. This image is also uncanny, since death seems to infiltrate life and the living Monique is, evidently, invaded by the death of her mother. Monique's incomprehension is echoed in the disturbing image of Jean trying to wake the corpse of his dead mother:

He straightens her finger but it bends back slowly, as if she were teasing him. He tries to bring together the two halves of [her] head, without success. He sticks his fingers into Maman's hair and kneads, the blood is thick, like red shampoo. As the ceiling people weep, he wipes his hands on her clothes and walks outside, giggling. (286)

This quotation marks a moment of non-recognition in Jean, who is presented as being quite oblivious to the meaning of his mother's dead body. His persistence in treating the body as though it were alive, whilst simultaneously attempting to reassemble his mother's severed head, demonstrates his total unfamiliarity with death. Monique's subsequent reaction to her dead mother's body further mimics that of Jean. In her hallucinatory state, for instance, she confides:

My mind is no longer mine; it's doing things on its own. It begins to run backward, and I see the blood flowing back into Maman. I see her rising suddenly, as suddenly as she fell. I see Papa's knife lifting from her hair. She is saying, "Me promised you." (286)

This highlights a distinctive symptomatic response to trauma, because the feeling of losing control of one's mind is, by definition, dissociation: a psychological *defence mechanism* which allows the subject to be elsewhere at the time of the trauma so as not to represent it to him/herself. Similarly, the disruption of the temporal sequence of what has hitherto been a coherent narrative also mimics the fragmentation of Monique's psyche. Hence, the reversal above of Maman's final words to Papa – "My husband, you promised me" (285) – reflects a psychic fragmentation which is expressed through a verbal disjunction. The reversal also implies that Monique is attempting to undo her mother's death by eliminating its very cause – the promise Papa made to Maman to sacrifice her to ensure the safety of the children. Language, in this passage, is marked by dissonance, a dissonance which serves to convey Monique's state of mind and the dislocation of temporality brought about by the simultaneous presence of Maman's body and her absence as a living person.

Ultimately, the scenes during and after Maman's death are crucial in the narrative's representation of Monique's psychic degeneration. The abjection of Maman's body, death's

violation of Monique's psyche, and Papa's involvement in Maman's murder culminate in Monique hallucinating that she can hear her mother's voice calling to her from the ceiling. In Monique's projection, she imagines her mother is hiding because "it's not safe for her to come down yet," and "Tonton André is hiding Tantine Annette in his ceiling and fooling everyone into believing that he killed her" (286). Monique's denial both of Annette and Maman's death may thus be read as an attempt to rewrite the incomprehensible event she has witnessed. The alternative present she imagines and her projection of a different future are symptomatic of her failure to assimilate a reality which has nonetheless transpired.

3.3 Landscape, Genocide and Sacrifice

Many of the tensions in "My Parents' Bedroom" are expressed in the parallels the narrative establishes between the killing of Maman and the Christian doctrine of sacrifice. This emerges in the persistent images of blood in the story, and the presence of Christian icons, such as the crucifix on the family altar. The destruction or vandalism of both of the latter sacred objects becomes symbolic of the annihilation of the household and of its individual members.

The altar, which, like the marital bedroom, is a central feature of Monique's family home, represents order and connotes the existence of an ethical or religious framework which governs the domestic setting. The first reference to the altar occurs in the opening scene, when Maman lights a candle before she goes out for the evening. Shortly thereafter, Monique, too, lights a candle. While primarily associated with the ritual of prayer in the Catholic church, candles in the story also signifies the dichotomy of light and darkness. The darkness of night represents a cover for violence and chaos and the light of day enables recovery and an attempt to make sense of the events which take place during the night. The lighting of the candles may therefore be read as a symbolic deferral of darkness: it is an act of faith which nevertheless seems impotent in the context of atrocity.

Similarly, the luminous crucifix, which is the central feature on the family altar, is not only an emblem of unconditional love and sacrifice, but also suggests a defiance of the connotations of darkness in the story. The main focus of the crucifix, the dead Christ, may be read in parallel to Maman, because both figures sacrifice their bodies and lives in exchange for the security or safety of others. In this respect, the passage depicting Maman's blood bathing Monique's feet, discussed in the previous section, recalls Christ washing his

disciples' feet in a lesson in love and humility prior to the last supper and the crucifixion. The Gospel according to Luke documents Christ's words on this occasion:

I tell you now, where I am going you cannot come. I give you a new commandment: love one another; as I have loved you, so you are to love one another. (13:33-35)

This biblical allusion is echoed in Maman's words just before Papa kills her, when she tells Monique, "Your papa is a good man" (283), and in the 'tears' of blood Maman's dead body weeps. Maman's insistence that Monique not judge her father too harshly for what she has made him promise to do suggests that Maman has resigned herself to the reality that the only way to save her children is to sacrifice her own life. Her tears of blood, therefore, literally and symbolically signify her undying love for her children, and her absolution of her husband.

Following her mother's death, Monique's overriding impression of her is expressed as follows:

All the things Maman used to tell me come at me at once and yet separately . . . Perhaps she is still trying to protect me . . . just as she stopped Papa from telling me that he was going to smash her head. (287)

Monique's hallucinations and her memories of Maman's words simultaneously intermingle in this passage, thereby reflecting the collapse of her perceptive framework. Although she intimates that her mother was, and is still, attempting to protect her, Monique is, however, oblivious to the reasons behind her mother's empathy towards her father, the man who kills her by "smash[ing] her head". From Monique's perspective, Papa's lack of options and agency in this situation have not registered: shortly after her mother's death, she immediately casts her father as one of those who are against her – that is, a "wizard."

In another instance of religious significance, Papa takes on the symbolic role of a masculine Madonna. Upon Mama's return to the house after the first evening, she is almost incapacitated with fear. Papa then assumes the 'feminine' roles of feeding Jean and bathing Monique. The significance of this reversal of the 'traditional' roles within the household foreshadows the reality that the maternal presence will soon be obliterated. The images of Papa holding and comforting Jean and weeping over Monique, in particular, are resonant of Catholic representations of the Virgin Mary as mother of the new-born Christ and *pietà*. Significantly, in this regard, Monique initially identifies Maman with the figure of "Marie, Mère de Douleurs, looking down" (273), and it is implicit that, upon Maman's demise, Papa will have to assume her maternal role, as well as his own. The uselessness of the Christian

iconography and Papa's inability to take care of the children after Maman's death both suggest the failure of redemption which attends sacrifice in the story.

After killing Maman, Monique classifies Papa as a wizard, a term which has come to connote a fearsome presence. He is now placed firmly in the category of 'one of them,' outside Monique's circle of trust. This radical shift in Monique's perception of her father is contrasted with her earlier memory of the Papa who carried her on his shoulders to the hills, with the winds transmitting his "jolly-jolly laugh" (278) into the distance – a world far removed from that of the haunted man who "goes to the window and holds on to the iron bars so that his hands are steady" (274). Likewise, the father who "scolds his relatives when they say that it's risky that [Monique] looks so much like Maman" (276) is very different to the one who looks at his daughter as if she is "no longer [his] sweet Shenge" (275), and who screams "you children are a burden to us!" (281). The latter Papa, robbed of personal agency and threatened with the loss of both his wife and children, can no longer dismiss the vulnerability of his wife and daughter's racially-marked bodies or ignore the fact that his responsibility to protect them is rendered impotent.

Above all, the secure world of the past is very different from that presented at the end of the story, a world in which:

There are corpses everywhere. Their clothes are dancing in the wind.
Where the blood has soaked the earth, the grass doesn't move. Vultures
are poking the dead with their long beaks. (288)

The desolation of an entire community, reflected in a landscape strewn with numerous corpses whose blood has disrupted even the movements of the natural environment, such as swaying off savannah grass, implies that the wholesale slaughter of people is a phenomenon of unnatural proportions. This image of discarded corpses also evokes the utter wretchedness of bodies which have been stripped of their humanity to the extent that they are not even given a proper burial. Implicit, here, is the notion that these other bodies also had lives, families and stories like Papa and Maman's. Just as the latter's dead body is left lying on the floor of the marital bedroom prior to being dragged out by her Tutsi people, there is no one to ritualistically mourn the deaths of the corpses. The implication, then, is that there are so many dead that there are hardly any people living to perform the rituals, like burials, around which communal ties are forged and acknowledged. This, in turn, highlights that the bonds of people in this context have essentially collapsed to the point where there *is* no community.

The narrative explores the disruption of both individual and collective lives in the genocidal context of Rwanda on multiple levels – psychological, emotional, corporeal,

environmental and supernatural – such that the discarded bodies demonstrate the bleak fact that the living may as well be dead. In addition, the image of vultures scavenging on the remains of the victims of the genocide adds to the devastation and carnage of the scene: since gathering vultures are archetypal symbols of impending death, the fact that they have settled means that death has already occurred – in this instance, on an unimaginable scale. Above all, this destruction culminates in utter isolation and disillusionment in Monique, who realises now that “no one can ever call [her] Shenge again” (286), since this is synonymous with her saying she will never want to be called ‘one of us’ – a Hutu – again. Given that the nickname signals that she has been accorded honorary status and included in the exclusive Hutu fraternity, despite her Tutsi appearance, her rejection of the name amounts to a denial of this ‘privilege’. Unwittingly, too, it speaks her desire to survive and to escape the racialised nomenclature that has precipitated the genocide. Thus, Monique’s words indicate her dawning realisation that she, indeed, *can* no longer be part of a family or a community, a realisation which foregrounds the moment at which her childhood comes to an end.

3.4 Trauma, (Mis)Perception and Silence

Silence itself is defined in relationship to words, as the pause in music receives its meaning from the group of notes round it. This silence is a moment of language; being silent is not being dumb; it is to refuse to speak, and therefore to keep on speaking.

– Jean-Paul Sartre (*What is Literature?* 38)

The incomprehensibility of the genocidal setting in “My Parents’ Bedroom” is predominantly conveyed through the disjunction between Monique’s perceptions and the reality perceived by the implied reader. Monique’s present circumstances are summarised by the Wizard who, following the scene in which she is sexually assaulted, tells her that they are living in “Bad days, girl, bad days. Be strong” (272). Although beyond Monique’s cognitive abilities, for the implied reader this explanation implies that her current circumstances are characterised by a state of anarchy in which men feel they have licence to sexually assault young girls, and that the latter are expected to respond with stoicism. Monique is nevertheless protected from her would-be rapist by the Wizard’s intervention.

The precariousness and volatility of the times the Wizard’s explanation evokes are further indicated when Papa, forcibly putting Monique to bed on the second evening, “kicks the teddy bear against the wall and stamps on Tweety and Mickey Mouse” (275). Both the

Wizard's words and Papa's uncharacteristic actions reinforce the idea that Monique needs to abandon her child-like and perhaps idealistic perceptions of what she has hitherto regarded as normal in her family and community life. Her struggle to accept these altered conditions is illustrated by the fact that the majority of the interchanges she has with her parents explicitly suggest that she has questions about the situation that she is unable and forbidden to vocalise. For the most part, instead of questioning her parents' instructions, she obediently complies with them, repeatedly consenting "*Yego, Maman*" (265), "*Yego, Papa*" (274), or retreating into the fringes, silent and silenced.

When Monique's parents return home after the evening on which she is assaulted, for instance, Papa "squats and holds [Monique's] hands," telling her not to be afraid and promising "[he] won't let them touch [her] again" (274). Immediately following these words, Monique tries to hug her father, "but he blocks [her] with his hands" (274). She does not comment on this withdrawal of physical comfort, which undermines the promise uttered only moments before, but instead responds with silence. She then "search[es her] parents' faces" and, finding that "they're blank" (274), sits "down [on the sofa] silently" next to Maman (274). Shortly thereafter, she "slide[s] over to Maman" but is "pushe[d] away with one hand" (274). The abrupt dismissiveness of her parents' gestures signals their acute distress and constitutes a departure from the normal way in which they relate to her. Maman's reaction is perhaps especially noteworthy, because the intention underlying it could be to ensure that Monique is not overly reliant on the affection and comfort of a mother who knows she will soon be dead. Monique's desperate need for physical warmth is again emphasised when she comments, "I resist, bending like a tree in the wind [towards Maman], then [I return] to my position" (274). Confused by Maman's withdrawal of maternal affection, Monique's retreat, in this quotation, signifies her dawning realisation that her parents are no longer physically or emotionally available to her and that, accordingly, she must look to herself for the fulfilment of her needs. This realisation, however, only reaches fruition after her mother's death and her father's abandonment of her and Jean.

Monique's parents' inability to engage with her needs, although a function of their experience of overwhelming terror and their frantic attempts to devise ways of ensuring the safety of their children, forces her into a silence which is all the more significant in that it does not necessarily mean that she has nothing to say. Notably, the passages in which she is silenced hinge upon the heavy suggestiveness of what she is *not* saying, of what, lacking the vocabulary, she is *unable* to say, and what *cannot* be said. Her silence is thus provoked by both her parents' reactions and her inability to make sense of or articulate her suffering. For

example, their omission of the actual term for her assault is perhaps a way of protecting both her and themselves from the reality of rape. This omission is particularly noteworthy, because it suggests that the brutality of the event is unspeakable or, alternatively, that assigning a term to it makes the event *more* real. Ironically, however, it is through the suppression of verbal articulation that the event's significance becomes all the more visible. Indeed, as the epigraph from Praeg in this chapter implies, assigning a term like "genocide" to an event makes it more real, in the sense of reducing it to something which can be described and discussed, while simultaneously reflecting the inadequacy of the term. In the case of Monique's assault, her parents' refusal to ascribe a term to the event attests to the reality that assigning words to something traumatic is, as Lyotard would argue, tantamount to a betrayal.

Similarly, the ghost motif in "My Parents' Bedroom" suggests the speaking silences in the narrative. From the outset, Monique repeatedly observes that her family home "feels haunted, as if [the] ghosts from the Wizard's stick . . . [are] still inside" (274). In a literal sense, these 'ghosts' are other Tutsis that her parents have been harbouring in the ceiling: these are the "invisible people . . . breathing everywhere" (278). Ignorant of this arrangement, Monique initially assumes that the noises she hears have been conjured by the Wizard to torment her. Upon her parents' return to the house after the first evening, for instance, she hears "a sneeze from the kitchen," a sneeze which, although ignored by her parents, makes her feel "a sudden fear enter [her] body" (274). This corporeal response indicates the extent to which the emotion of fear is unfamiliar to her and suggests that she feels invaded by a presence which is imperceptible. As a result, the incident increases the sense of unreality she has come to adopt as a survival mechanism. Her parents' refusal to disclose information about the state of affairs and, more specifically, their lack of reaction to the sounds Monique hears cause her to speculate: "maybe I am still dreaming, maybe not" (274). Her suspicion that perhaps what she apprehends may indeed not be a fiction is grounded in the sudden realisation that the people she once trusted are capable of deceit. This realisation, instigated by André lying in order to gain access to the house on the evening on which she is assaulted, is reinforced when she later observes her parents hiding H el ene's body in the ceiling. "Now I understand," she claims, "Nobody is telling me the truth today. Tomorrow I must remind them that lying is a sin" (284). Ironically, however, this statement reflects of the cruel reality that she does not understand at all, since she is assuming that there is an ethical structure governing the intersubjective relations in her family.

Furthermore, her adoption of the Wizard's vocabulary in describing the people in the ceiling as ghosts conveys the extent to which subjects, in this context, are both literally and

figuratively robbed of their freedom. Implicit in the word “ghost” is the notion that those whose movements are constrained, much like those who inhabit the family home, are as good as dead. Monique’s awareness of “ghosts” thus reflects the reality that, even though she cannot definitively name it, something is dreadfully wrong, a correlation which is horrifically realised in the passage in which the ghost motif reaches a climax, culminating in her first moment of defiance:

I see dirty water dripping down the white wall beside me. It is coming from the ceiling. At first, it comes down in two thin lines. Then the lines widen and swell into one. Then more lines come down, in spurts, like little spiders gliding down on threads . . . I touch the liquid . . . Blood.
(278)

This passage marks the moment at which the spectral presence of Monique’s imagined ghosts prefigures the unimaginable atrocity – her mother’s death at the hands of her father – she is about to witness. As a result of her shocked realisation, when Papa insists “it’s not blood” (278), Monique no longer retreats into her habitual silence denoting consent, but screams: “You’re lying! It’s blood! It’s blood!” (278). Her deviation from her previously reverential acceptance of her father’s explanations epitomises the shift in her perspective, that is, from her confident assertion that “Papa tells me everything” (276), to her insight that “[m]y parents are hiding something from me” (278). The looming silence of that which her parents have been concealing is thus directly linked to the ghost motif.

The image of blood leaking down a white wall in the quote above symbolises the extreme violence perpetrated against the bodies of those perceived as other in the Rwandan context, a violence which is revealed to be both profoundly shocking and absurd. The latter is particularly demonstrated in the incident in which the Hutu mob mutilate the body of Monique’s Twa friend, Héléne, to such an extent that her right foot “dangl[es] on strings, like a shoe tied to the clothesline by its lace” (284). Papa asks, in an earlier conversation about possibly harbouring Héléne: “how does this crisis concern the Twa?” (282). Implicit in his question and the subsequent physical harm done to the child is the suggestion that the perpetrators are blindly killing anybody who is not “one of them.” This bloodlust is, however, not only restricted to the Hutus since, after leaving the house following her mother’s murder, Monique notices another mob of people whom she identifies as being “our people on Maman’s side . . . chanting about how they’re going to kill Papa’s people” (288). This mob makes its way to what used to be her home and, after dragging out Maman’s corpse, they set the house alight: “By the time their fellow Tutsis,” who have been hiding in the ceiling, “begin to shout, the fire is unstoppable” (289). Prior to this ironic turn of events, Monique

wonders: “If Papa’s people could not spare Maman’s life, why would my mother’s relatives spare mine? Or my brother’s?” (288). Both this incident, in which the Tutsi mob unwittingly murder their own kind and Monique’s suspicion that they will spare neither her life nor Jean’s are reflective of the irrationality of the genocide, and the sense of displacement that the children feel as a result. Indeed, the story ends with Monique expressing a new and terrifying kind of understanding, indicated by her repetition of the Wizard’s advice: “we want to live; we don’t want to die. I must be strong” (289). In spite of this moment of limited insight, however, the kind of future envisaged by the story’s ending is far from hopeful. Both children’s hands are, in a sense, forever “stained” from the attempt to “raise the dead” (288). Their encounter with atrocity has left both of them with “eyes wide open” (288).

As “the wind spreads black clouds like blankets across the sky” (289) in the concluding paragraph, Monique and Jean, clad in clothes still drenched in their mother’s blood, are forced to forage for themselves. The importance of Monique’s new mantra about being invulnerable is contrasted with the image of her baby brother “playing with the glow of the crucifix” while “babbling Maman’s name” (289). Inherent in this contrast is the impracticality of wishing for a moral universe; the all-too-recent trauma of losing Maman and the stability of a family environment is replaced with a sense of wandering in the dark wilderness of atrocity. Ultimately, the desensitised repetition of “we want to live; we don’t want to die” (289) underscores the profound stasis of the story’s ending. While the luminous crucifix may partially illumine the dark world the children now consciously inhabit, it cannot provide them with the resources they need to survive. I would even go so far as to surmise that the story ends in stasis, precisely because it is comprised of an irreconcilable tension between a naïve hope for human goodness to prevail, while simultaneously suggesting the implausibility of this hope.

Chapter 4

Trauma, Language and Memory in Uwem Akpan's "Fattening for Gabon"

If one could isolate that space, that damaged chromosome in words, in an image, then perhaps one could restore order by naming. Otherwise history is only a tangle of wires. – Anne Michaels (*Fugitive Pieces* 111)

What went on in my mind at the time lacked forms and I cannot now set it down. – Chinua Achebe (*A Man of the People* 69)

"Fattening for Gabon," also from Akpan's collection *Say You're One of Them*, is an attempt to represent what Vickroy terms the "pernicious form of trauma" which arises from "the constant stress and humiliation associated with being a person of low socio-economic status" (18), particularly in a postcolonial context. It is this stress and humiliation that motivates the "smallish, hardworking" Benin-based Fofu Kpee (Akpan 33) to agree to sell Kotchikpa and Yewa, his ten-year-old nephew and five-year-old niece, as well as three of their offstage siblings, to a child-trafficking ring in Gabon. Initially introduced as a minor criminal with a "smuggler's instinct", an instinct which he has developed through his work as "an *agbero*, a tout, at the border" (33), Kpee is nevertheless also depicted as a loving uncle with a fine sense of humour. In its presentation of a specifically African account of the global phenomenon of child trafficking, Akpan's text highlights the dire social, economic and political conditions prevalent in Sub-Saharan Africa – conditions which give rise to and perpetuate trauma on both an individual and a collective basis.

The story begins retrospectively with a depiction of Kpee's modest household, which lacks both food and space, though its occupants (Kpee and his charges, Kotchikpa and Yewa) seem relatively content. Kpee is then visited by Big Guy, a man whom the children immediately regard with suspicion, who delivers a Nanfang motorcycle and then enquires after the additional children he thought he would be meeting on this occasion. This is the first of many visits from Big Guy, and sees the first altercation between the two men about the children. Kpee is quick to fabricate explanations for Big Guy's sudden presence in their lives, to misrepresent the origins of the motorcycle, and to be evasive about the reasons behind this new family friend's generosity in giving them 'gifts'. Subsequently, he tells Kotchikpa and Yewa that an NGO has taken an interest in them, and that they have to lie about their

identities when their new ‘parents’ cross the border with them into Gabon, where they will be provided with an education and a better lifestyle. As the grooming of the children in preparation for their new lives unfolds, however, Kpee begins to have doubts about what he is doing, doubts which culminate in an attempt to retract his decision to sell the children. By the time he feels this remorse, however, it is too late: the trafficking ring Big Guy represents will not countenance Kpee’s change of heart, and they keep a close eye on the household. After realising he cannot rescind his side of the bargain, Kpee decides to escape with the children on the bike in the middle of the night, but is caught, assaulted, and eventually killed by men hired by Big Guy. Subsequently, Kotchikpa and Yewa are imprisoned under guard and force-fed or “fattened” in preparation for their trip to Gabon and future as sex-slaves. By this point, Kotchikpa has grasped the truth of his and Yewa’s circumstances, and he contrives a plan to make a getaway. When he manages to prise open a window through which they can escape, Yewa, confused and mistrustful of him, begins to yell, thereby alerting the guard to their imminent jailbreak. Panic-stricken and desperate, Kotchikpa is forced to flee alone, leaving his wailing sister behind. The final sentence of the story records his unbearable distress: “I ran and I ran, though I knew I would never outrun my sister’s wailing” (140).

The fact that the story is narrated in the past tense by a now seemingly adult Kotchikpa raises concerns regarding the nature of traumatic memory and its recovery. Caruth, Laub, and Vickroy have argued that, in reality, the recuperation of a traumatic past through narrative is an exercise in testimony: in Laub’s terms, it a “process by which the narrator reclaims his position as witness” (85). This chapter is primarily concerned with the question of the adult Kotchikpa’s recovery of the trauma of having survived Kpee’s plan to sell him and Yewa, his subsequent guilt over having himself escaped but having been unable to rescue his sister, and the ways in which, retrospectively, he attempts to narrativise this experience, but fails. My discussion begins by focusing on the pervasive irony in the text’s dialogical interplay between knowing and not knowing and between perception and misperception. I then examine the story’s foregrounding of corporeality and the role of the body, an emphasis intimated in the use of the word “fattening” in the story’s title. This is followed by an analysis of the unknowable aporia of trauma, and the manner in which the narrative conveys the ambiguities implicit in Kotchikpa’s attempt both to communicate and to recover trauma’s latent and residual effects.

4.1 Irony and (Mis)Perception

The opening passage of “Fattening for Gabon” introduces several disjunctive codes (narrative distance, temporal dislocations, and misperceptions) which are later reiterated and developed in the story:

Selling your child or nephew could be more difficult than selling other kids. You had to keep a calm head or be as ruthless as the Bagardy-Seme immigration people. If not, it could bring trouble to the family. What kept our family secret from the world in the three months Fofu Kpee planned to sell us were his sense of humour and the smuggler’s instinct he had developed as an *agbero*, a tout, at the border. My sister Yewa was five, and I was ten. (33)

The use of the past tense in this passage immediately establishes the distance between the narrating and the experiencing self. If, as Simon Gikandi argues, “retrospective narration is predicated on the problematic assumption that a narrator distanced from events in time and place can confer a sense of coherence on past experiences” (110), this assumption is rendered especially tenuous by the traumatic nature of the events Kotchikpa relates and the incoherence both of his experience and memory of these events. Thus, although the opening passage reveals the narrator’s need to tell and hence understand his story, the time lapse between experiencing the events and actually telling the story gestures towards the silence at the core of witnessing and giving witness to atrocity. This silence Nadine Fresco describes as a “gaping, vertiginous black hole of the unmentionable years . . . It [is] a silence [which] swallow[s] up the past, all the past, the past before [and after]” (qtd in Laub 64). Even the retelling – in that it is selective and fragmented – is as much an act of concealment as of revelation or exposition. The resonating silence of Kotchikpa’s narrative is therefore “all the more implacable in that it [is] . . . concealed behind a screen of words” (Laub 64), as is particularly evident in the diction the narrator employs in the above extract.

The blasé tone with which Kotchikpa introduces the clandestine business of child trafficking and the characteristics one needs to cultivate in order to perform this deplorable activity assumes that the reader accepts that selling children is unexceptional or commonplace. It also suggests the extent to which the narrator needs to distance himself from his actual feelings in order to tell the story and remember or rehearse the horror he experienced at the time and continues to experience. While the first explanation raises questions of an ethical, political and socio-economic nature, the second speaks to a survivor’s primary symptomatic response to trauma, namely repression and dissociation. Both

explanations, however, demonstrate that Kotchikpa's apparent detachment or desensitisation leaves a remainder or supplement. Despite the fact that he does not explicitly express anger, indignation and a sense of loss, his light-hearted delivery increases the anticipated horror and sense of dread for the implied reader who, no doubt, responds less impassively. This sense of foreboding is heightened by Kotchikpa's seemingly nonchalant reference to his own and Yewa's ages at the time that Kpee attempted to sell them, since their youthfulness suggests that neither of them was capable of making sense of the sequence of events and that they were especially vulnerable, both to Kpee's deception and the child trafficker's manipulation. The narrative continues by relating several instances of misperception in Kotchikpa's experiencing self, his sister, and his uncle. The first of these is the discrepancy between the young Kotchikpa's limited access to the truth of his circumstances, Kpee's apparent myopia, and the implied reader's recognition of the grim reality. In particular, the Nanfang motorcycle, which constitutes the first of many material possessions Kpee acquires as a result of having agreed to sell the children and is the focus of the opening episode, demonstrates the disjunction between the children's innocence and ignorance and their uncle's deceit and complicity.

For Kotchikpa, the bike is a token of newfound affluence and a harbinger of better things to come, such as having regular meals to eat and the promise that he and his sister will be sent off to school in Gabon. He is initially overwhelmed by the bike's "smell of newness" (38), and Yewa is so entranced by its appearance that she treats it with the reverence of "a voodoo priest at his shrine": her hands are "afraid to make contact" and her large brown eyes "shine out from her lean face, as if the machine's aura forbids them to blink" (37). The bike evokes both wonder and curiosity in the children – to the extent that it follows the young Kotchikpa "into the land . . . of dreams." In one such dream, he relates:

I rode my Nanfang until I grew old, but the Nanfang neither aged nor needed repairs. At the end of my life, my people buried me atop it, and I rode that Nanfang straight to heaven's gate, where Saint Peter gave me an automatic pass. (45)

The bike functions here as a miraculous vehicle that bridges the gap between life and death, is invulnerable to wear and tear, guarantees access to heaven, and confers immortality on its rider who, through his alignment with the machine, is also impervious to harm. However, while the young Kotchikpa envisions himself liberated from a life of extreme poverty by the bike, the implied reader is acutely aware that the bike represents a down-payment on both his and Yewa's future exploitation.

Kpee, despite being privy to the true significance of the bike, is just as delighted at its arrival as the children – perhaps because he is naïve or is suppressing the guilt he feels at having agreed to sell them. Like Kotchikpa and Yewa, he perceives the Nanfang as a symbol of a rise in his socio-economic status: “God done reward our faithfulness,” he claims, “*Nous irons* to be rich” (37). Indeed, the bike generates so much excitement in the domestic and the public domains that it is depicted as increasingly dominating both in the opening episodes of the story. For instance, Kpee’s small household is cleared to accommodate the bike, and the doors and windows are secured to prevent its potential theft. Subsequently, it is blessed at the local church, and Kpee throws a thanksgiving party in honour of its acquisition. Throughout these elaborate proceedings, Kpee repeatedly lies about the Nanfang’s origins and misrepresents its actual meaning in relation to his and the children’s lives. His perception of the bike is, somewhat disconcertingly, as guileless as theirs: all three see it as a vehicle enabling ‘safe’ travel and conferring a sense of status and freedom. The reality, however, is that it has been delivered by Big Guy in exchange for the children, and therefore represents an explicit threat to their newfound sense of elation and self-importance. Moreover, it will ultimately fail to fulfil its function as a getaway vehicle when Kpee and the children later make a desperate attempt to escape from Big Guy and his trafficking gang, and it is the payment Big Guy later makes to the men who help him dig the shallow grave in which the defiant Kpee is buried. The bike is therefore an ominous material symbol of the children’s impending fates and a harbinger of their uncle’s death. Indeed, the potentially menacing aura surrounding the bike is suggested when, upon being told that the bike belongs to them at the beginning of the story, Yewa circles around it whispering, “We belong to you . . . You belong to us, we belong to you” (37). Her innocent chant is profoundly ironic, in that it unconsciously alludes to the deal Kpee has struck, though Yewa herself is oblivious to its role as a bartering mechanism. It also reveals the implied author’s intervention; the repeated phrase “we belong to you” envelops and overpowers the middle phrase, “you belong to us”, thus linguistically enacting the sinister reality that it is indeed the children who belong to the Nanfang now – or, at least, to those who bestowed it upon their uncle – and not the obverse.

Kpee and the children’s overjoyed reception of the Nanfang thus foregrounds the reader’s ironic awareness of the disjunction between perception and misperception, and between what the respective characters know (or, in Kpee’s case, choose not to acknowledge) and what they do not. Kpee’s intentional obfuscation of the bike’s significance and his (perhaps initially endearing) myopia also introduce the story’s dominant theme of seduction leading to betrayal, a shift evoked by the bike’s function as a token of the former but,

increasingly, the latter. This shift is manifested in the declining attractiveness of the Nanfang's appearance and the gradual change in the young Kotchikpa's enthusiasm for it. For example, he begins to understand that the bike ultimately means something different to his uncle than it does to himself and his sister: "In those difficult months, it seemed the machine was a source of stability for [Kpee], something he could always be proud of, *something he would still have when we left for Gabon*" (80-81, emphasis added). As the gap between ignorance and knowledge decreases – particularly after his uncle's disturbing and inept attempt to groom him and Yewa in sexual matters – Kotchikpa intuitively gleans the disturbing reality the Nanfang represents. His growing suspicions, which lead him to a grim conclusion: "I hated the Nanfang and vowed never to ride on it again" (97), precede Kpee's midnight confession that he is "no fit sell [Kotchikpa] and Yewa to anybody" (109).

Despite his earlier gullibility, Kpee too becomes increasingly more agitated and conflicted as the children's impending removal looms nearer. After witnessing his uncle arguing with Big Guy, for example, Kotchikpa senses his uncle's growing "frustration and doubt about our new life" (82), and notes that he is frequently restless and short-tempered with Yewa and himself. Kpee's unease is also literally and symbolically manifested in the setting. As indicated earlier, the procurement of the bike necessitates certain security measures, such as the installation of padlocks and latches on the windows and back door (83) – measures which, on the surface, appear innocent enough. However, in reality Kpee is physically confining the children to the house in preparation for their imminent departure: with Kotchikpa's help, for example, he cements in both the inner and the outer walls, "leaving no holes" for ventilation (82), and, despite the heat, he inexplicably (to Kotchikpa) keeps the windows permanently bolted. "Our home began to feel like an oven," the narrator observes on the first evening of these strictures, and then adds: "we couldn't sleep, even though we took off all our clothes" (83). The house's transformation into a claustrophobic space increasingly comes to mimic the anxiety and foreboding that both Kpee and the children feel, aggravated by the unbearable, hellish heat inside the dwelling, especially at night:

The light [from the lantern] was dim, but the heat in the room made it feel as if that flame were the source of our hell.

Fofo Kpee opened the door to go out for fresh air, and a breath of it washed over us before he closed the door and locked it from outside. I picked up his towel and started dabbing Yewa and myself, but suddenly Fofo came back in as if a demon were pursuing him. He was a restless man: he couldn't be inside; he couldn't be outside. He took the towel from me and started to dab himself, as if the cool air had made him even hotter. (85)

This restlessness, which marks the beginnings of Kpee's cognisance of the full implications of what he has done, suggests intense internal suffering, guilt and rising panic as he realises that he is trapped in a situation over which he has no control. Implicit in his discomfort is the sense that his betrayal of the children is also a betrayal of himself. In this regard, then, the Nanfang is both the payment he has received in exchange for the children and in exchange for his soul or conscience – as the references to Hell in the above passage make clear.

Kpee's almost Faustian bargain is also underlined by the rather dubious and self-serving Christian rhetoric in the story. When Kpee has the bike blessed at the local church, for instance, Pastor Adeyemi exclaims, "the Lord bless you . . . with a Nanfang. Poverty is a curse from Satan . . . Our God is a rich God, not a pauper" (49-50). The pastor's words – which link poverty with misfortune and sin, and affluence with godliness – are unconsciously ironic, in that they serve to condone Kpee's procurement of the bike but are oblivious to the human cost. Again, when Kpee tells the children to lie to their neighbours by claiming that the child traffickers are their relatives, Yewa points out, "You lie, Fofó . . . You go hell. You lie," to which her uncle responds, "[i]f you tell a good lie, you no go enter hell. Only de bad lies go put you for hell" (55). This duplicitous exchange emphasises the series of lies which Kpee has told and will subsequently tell the children, and implies that his later descent into a psychological hell is the result of his "bad lies" about the origins of the bike and the children's future prospects in Gabon. Ironically, too, shortly after this conversation, Kpee warns them: "dis world *est dangereux*. Make you no trust anybody" (55). While this advice is ostensibly offered in good faith, it also serves to safeguard his most treacherous "bad lie" and is highly manipulative. It suggests that he knows that the reason the children believe his lies is due to their ignorance and trust – they will not think that 'anybody' includes him. That the children have implicit trust in Kpee and do not think him capable of deceiving them emphasises the extent of his betrayal of them.

The most distinctive evidence of misperception in the story emerges from Kpee's naïve involvement with the child-trafficking ring. It is clear to the reader from the outset that Kpee does not fully recognise the gravity of his betrayal of the children and the implications of his agreement to sell them. Significantly, when Big Guy delivers the motorcycle and voices his irritation at finding two instead of the five children Kpee promised him, he warns Kpee: "you want play wid fire? . . . only dead people *dey* owe us!" (36). Kpee responds by assuring Big Guy that "Everyting *dey* fine . . . I sure say nobody go die" (36). This interchange constitutes one of many instances of situational irony in the text. On the one hand, Big Guy's warning suggests that the business of child trafficking carries ominous consequences,

particularly for those who, like Kpee, stand to profit from the exchange, and that the gang Big Guy represents is not above murdering those who do not comply with their side of the bargain. On the other, Kpee's responses to Big Guy demonstrate the extent to which he has underestimated the seriousness of the criminal activities in which he is now engaged. He believes he can defuse the tension underlying the interchange in the same manner he shrugs off his minor felonies – by using humour. Furthermore, his insistence that no one is going to die is, in retrospect, deeply ironic, since he himself is later murdered by Big Guy when he retracts his decision to sell the children and attempts to flee with them in the middle of the night.

From the moment Kpee accepts the Nanfang into his household, he is not only pawning the children's freedom, but also unwittingly relinquishing the power to change his mind – in effect, to control his own destiny. When Big Guy brings the bosses of the child-trafficking ring to Kpee's house for the first time, for example, Kotchikpa observes a new submissiveness in his uncle:

His face wore embarrassment . . . I hoped he would crack jokes and ring with laughter the whole evening, to entertain everyone . . . I had hoped he would start acting the fool . . . But he didn't. We were in his house, but he didn't even welcome the guests or introduce them to us. Now, he stood around like a new servant who had to rely on an older one, Big Guy, to know his bearing. (71)

Implicit in Kpee's discomfort and anxiety to please is the notion that his household has been usurped – both the physical space and its occupants are no longer his preserve. The degree to which he is no longer in control of the transaction in which he has involved himself is illustrated by his sheepish demeanour and his automatic adoption of a subservient role in the presence of the traffickers. These unequal power relations culminate in the form of shocking retributive violence when Kpee changes his mind about selling the children and is murdered by Big Guy and his cronies. Prior to his death, however, Kpee's misreading of what Kotchikpa recognises is his deference to the trafficking ring leads him to believe he can bargain his way out of the transaction. He tells Big Guy he will pay him back, an imploration to which the latter responds by bluntly alerting Kpee to the reality that “Dis ting no be about money,” but about the children (105). Kpee then seeks to reverse the entire exchange by surrendering the Nanfang, only to be met with an equally dismissive: “No way . . . keep de machine. Dat na wicked ting . . . You go destroy yourself if you negotiate like dis” (105). Big Guy's responses indicate that the bargain Kpee has struck with the traffickers is irreversible

and that he is out of his depth. In addition to losing control of his house and the children's fates, therefore, Kpee also forfeits his personal agency and, ultimately, his very life.

It is difficult to classify Kpee definitively as either a villain or a victim: his role in the selling of the children may best be understood in relation to his socio-economic position and opportunism, but also his gullibility. His motives in agreeing to sell his niece and nephew are shrouded in ambiguity, an ambiguity which is perhaps best encapsulated by Vickroy's argument that trauma fiction is primarily concerned with "human-made traumatic situations," and that such fiction provides a critique of the manner in which "societies are organised" (4). Nevertheless, whilst it is undoubtedly extreme poverty that causes Kpee to fall prey to manipulation by the child traffickers, and his agency in this situation is limited, he *does* choose to strike a bargain with them. The fact that he obviously views the children with affection but, with Big Guy's help, fattens them up for the purpose of selling them, suggests that he oscillates between treating them as members of his family and as commodities. An analogous situation emerges later, when one of the men who guards the room in which the children are imprisoned after Kpee's death tells Kotchikpa: "I no be bad man. Also, me I be fader; I get my own children. I no want sell anoder man children. I just *dey* do my work *o*" (117). The guard's insistence that he has no choice – that he is forced to suspend or suppress his personal feelings in order to "do [his] work" – presents the implied reader with an ethical conundrum. On the one hand, perhaps this 'work' is the man's sole means of income: the only way he can feed his own children is to participate, however reluctantly, in the exploitation of the children of other people. On the other, the loss of personal agency in the service of a crime against human – specifically children's – rights complicates the attribution of personal responsibility, since this powerlessness attests to the fractured sense of cohesion or integrity underpinning subjects plagued by the trauma of lack and deprivation. It also points to the reality that Benin, the setting of Akpan's story, is unable to provide, in general, for the welfare of its citizens. John Kearney observes, for example, that:

In Benin, which is one of the poorest countries in the world, parents cannot resist child traffickers' promises that their children will earn enough to send home large sums of money and will also be given a good education. In reality many of the children are smuggled into neighbouring Nigeria and used for quarry work. Others are even shipped off to Europe as domestic slaves. Little, if any, money is ever paid and some parents often do not see their child for years, if ever again. (93)

Thus what may appear to be Kpee's ruthlessness is mitigated by his context: he, like the children, is the victim of socio-economic circumstances in Benin, circumstances which make its citizens vulnerable to exploitation by those who have money and few scruples.

4.2 Trauma and the Body

I have argued earlier that, while trauma resists linguistic expression, it is manifested through the body, since the body is the primary site of subjectivity, and by extension, psychic existence. In "Fattening for Gabon", the body is not only the surface on which Kpee's guilt and anxiety are imprinted, it is also the site upon which violence is enacted against the children. The story's title draws attention to the importance of the body's role in the narrative, primarily because the children are literally fattened up in preparation for being sold in Gabon. One of the manifestations of the theme of seduction in the story is the fact that Yewa and Kotchikpa are provided with excessive amounts of junk food – the kind to which they normally would have no access, yet nevertheless crave – in order to entice them into believing the lies Kpee and his consorts conjure up to explain their journey to Gabon, to force them into compliance, and to render them more desirable to would-be 'owners.' When the child traffickers attempt to convince Yewa to accept the new name they have assigned her, she initially resists by asserting: "My name is Yewa Mandabou!" Shortly thereafter, however, they lay a spread of delectable treats in front of her and tell her that she can have anything she wants, on the condition that she lets them call her Mary. Yewa promptly trades her name for a can of Coca-Cola (70). This is followed by Kotchikpa's disturbing description of the drink being "poured into [his] sister's mouth. Yewa's face was upturned like a suckling lamb's" (70). The heartbreaking desperation this simile evokes is largely attributable to the archetypal symbolism of the lamb as an innocent. In using this symbolism to describe Yewa, therefore, the narrator highlights the extreme manner in which the traffickers use Yewa's innocence against her – as, in a sense, they have used Kpee's too.

While equally seduced by the sudden availability of food, Kotchikpa is also captivated by the possibility of once again having a maternal presence in his life. For example, when the woman who calls herself Mama initially arrives at Kpee's house together with Big Guy, Kotchikpa notes that she "squatted, and quietly swept us into a hug, as if the moment were too tender for words" (61-62). During this apparent display of affection (in contrast to Yewa, who is distracted by the novelty of the visitors' car), Kotchikpa confesses: "I wanted to hold her forever" (62). His response here, read against the backdrop of the children's untimely physical

removal from their HIV-positive parents and Kotchikpa's subsequent adoption of the 'feminine' roles of cooking, cleaning and mothering Yewa in their uncle's house, poignantly captures the young boy's need to be shown affection and nurtured.

Kotchikpa's preoccupation with the absence of his own mother and the lack of a maternal presence in Kpee's house not only renders him more vulnerable to exploitation, but also suggests the extent to which his assumption of responsibility for Yewa and for the domestic tasks in Kpee's household interferes with his own development as a child. As a result of the deprivation of his own emotional needs, the tenderness he attributes to 'Mama' is no doubt a projection of his desire for a surrogate mother-figure. The ominous quality underlying Mama's presence at Kpee's household, however, is underlined by the reality that she is actually one of the two leaders of the trafficking ring, and is intent on mollifying the children before selling them. Significantly, the experiencing self's misperception of his new 'Mama' is intimidated by the odour of her perfume, which overwhelms the room "the way the scent of the Nanfang had when it arrived" (63). While enchanted by the woman's fragrance and presence, Kotchikpa simultaneously, if unconsciously, highlights the correspondence here between this surrogate mother and the bike, since both initially appeal to his sense of smell. Sensory perceptions, then, though they have a powerful impact, are misleading.

The transformation of the children's bodies – from malnourished at the beginning of the story to bordering on obese towards the end – starkly articulates the extent to which they have been fed lies in being fed food. This parallelism is pointedly illustrated in the incident in which the traffickers bring two other children they have procured to Kpee's house for dinner, and one of them, Paul, vomits the food he has been forced to eat. Preceding this moment of abjection, Paul is presented as a "tall, frail-looking boy," with a "limp handshake" and "red and teary" eyes, who persists in hanging his head (72). In addition to his dejected demeanour, Paul is also "as silent and unmoving as a statue" (72). The only decisively assertive utterance he makes all evening is "I want to go home" (72), an utterance which confirms that he is an unwilling captive of the trafficking ring, and prefigures Yewa and Kotchikpa's similar fates. Paul's suffering is ultimately expressed corporeally in his vomiting which, like Yewa's wailing at the end of the story, articulates that which exceeds both language and silence. Symbolically, too, his expulsion of the food is synonymous with a refusal to accept the lies he and the other children have been fed, namely, that they are being offered a better life. Thus Paul's expression of homesickness finds a direct correlative in his nausea and ejection of the food he has swallowed. Indeed, after Kpee's attempt to sexually groom him and Yewa,

Kotchikpa confides: “For the first time, I empathized with Paul – and wished I could have vomited, like him, all the good food I had ever eaten in the past few months” (97-98).

Kpee’s body is similarly revealing. Kotchikpa and Yewa’s uncle is “sometimes called Smiley Kpee” (34), in part because of his generous sense of humour, but primarily because his face has been deformed by a knife scar sustained in a fight during his training to become an *agbero*. The scar extends from his left eye to the edge of his upper lip (34), and consequently that eye looks larger than his right one and he cannot completely close his mouth. Kpee’s scar and grotesquely lopsided smile suggest the underlying violence of survival in this context, a trauma which is concealed behind his sense of humour and his permanently distorted smile. Arguably, this physical asymmetry also signifies the duplicity which enables him to betray the children, since his face, “split in two by his trademark laugh” (45), connotes a schizophrenic identity, reminiscent of Robert Louis Stevenson’s Jekyll and Hyde.

Given that the eye is an organ of perception – of seeing – while the mouth is one of articulation – of saying – the scar which joins Kpee’s eye to his mouth functions as a heavy-handed metaphor which foregrounds the ubiquitous irony of a narrative in which the characters’ perceptions are, more often than not, misperceptions, and in which words do not always mean what they appear to mean. Kpee’s scar is therefore a bodily expression of the unreliability of perception and articulation. It symbolises the glaring disparity between what Kpee perceives and what he tells the children, as evidenced in his constant use of laughter as a means of covering up the unpalatable truth of his deceitfulness and his shortcomings as a minor criminal caught up in more serious felonious dealings.

Part of his ‘duties’ towards the child-trafficking gang entail initiating the children into the sexual acts they will be required to perform on adults in the future. During the scene in which, after much evident reluctance, he strips off his “wrapper” (94) and “part[s] his legs and grab[s] his genitals” (96), for instance, Kpee attempts to mask his own discomfort by asking the children “You naked, I naked, why you fear? . . . You have it, I have it” (96). Despite his words, however, Kotchikpa also perceives that his uncle looks “like a man in pain, a man who [cannot] take the heat anymore” (94). Kpee’s indecent exposure is curtailed by the children’s horrified reaction and by his nephew’s suggestion: “Maybe we should not go to Gabon” (96). The children are so excruciatingly mortified to see their uncle’s genitals that, for a long time after the episode, their relationship with Kpee is decisively altered:

Since that night when he went naked before us, we were scared to get close to him and said very little to him. He said little to us too. Silence grew between us like yeast, and the room felt smaller, while his presence seemed to expand. We looked forward to his leaving the house, and when he was home, sometimes we pretended to be asleep. (98)

Kpee's failure to induct the children into the sexual roles which they will be expected to perform in the future causes a relational rift in the members of the household to the extent that Kotchikpa now imagines that the scar on his uncle's cheek "looked like a worm journeying from his eye to his mouth, or vice versa, eating his good humour" (101). The association of worms with decay and ingestion not only means that this image signals Kotchikpa's growing suspicion that Kpee is not telling Yewa and him the whole truth, but also presages their uncle's imminent death and burial.

Akpan's text further develops its use of the body as a symbol in relation to the theme of confinement. After their escape attempt and Kpee's death, Yewa and Kotchikpa are locked up in a dark, unventilated room in which they are force-fed and threatened with physical violence. Kotchikpa relates how, on one occasion, Yewa ate so much that, after finishing, she "needed to use the toilet" and he "guided her to the pail" (124). He then continues, "soon the stink of her shit thickened the stuffiness in the room. When she finished . . . I offered her her portion of *akara* and *ogi*, but she said she was full, so I quickly ate it" (124). This passage highlights, firstly, the gradual transformation of food from a means of seduction to an instrument of torture and, secondly, the synchronism of food and faeces, where one is an immediate, involuntary by-product of the other. The latter suggests the extent to which the children's bodies have become abject and repulsive, in the sense that they no longer have control over anything, including their own bowel movements. The force-feeding also reinforces the child traffickers' perception of the children as commodities. Thus, while the feeding of children, beginning with the child suckling on its mother's breast, is traditionally associated with care and nurturing, the coercive feeding of Yewa and Kotchikpa subverts this notion and constitutes a form of violence and abuse. Kotchikpa, motivated by fear, eats compulsively despite his revulsion to Yewa's faeces, and his compulsive gorging is symptomatic of his loss of control over his own body, the instrumentalisation of which he seems to have internalised.

The various ways in which Akpan's story focuses on the primacy of the body – the seductive temptations of food, sensory perceptions, abjection, facial distortions as an index to character – read in relation to the dialogical interplay between perception and misperception

discussed earlier, may be regarded as symptomatic of what Gikandi terms “ a dialectic of insight and blindness” (111). Gikandi explains that, when the insights a narrator gains only have value “much later when the whole picture [is] clear,” prior to this what the narrator believes to be understanding is “also a form of blindness” (111). The experiencing Kotchikpa’s dawning awareness of Kpee’s deception and the narrating Kotchikpa’s retrospective reassembling of the series of events which led to him to have no choice but to abandon his sister reflect Gikandi’s dialectic. More profoundly, however, this process is evident in the gap between the young Kotchikpa’s experience of escaping from his captors and leaving his sister behind, and the narrating self’s anguished production of story’s closing sentence: “I ran and I ran, though I knew I could never outrun my sister’s wailing” (139), since this moment of ‘insight’ not only suggests the child Kotchikpa’s misrecognition of the immediate psychological impact of leaving Yewa behind, it is also a moment of blindness for the narrating self. Thus, whilst the experiencing self has no cognition of the trauma and insufficient distance from the moment of his escape to be able to scrutinise it, the narrating self, having over time endured the haunting memory of his lost sister’s wailing, has distance but still cannot access that which resides beyond Yewa’s wailing – resolution.

Indeed, the way in which Kotchikpa ends his story is in fact no conclusion at all, for the final line suggests that, even though the young and the adult Kotchikpa occupy different temporal spaces, the memory of this trauma is indelible and irresolvable; it will last a lifetime. In other words, the story’s ending captures both the elusive absence and the persistent presence of the originary traumatic experience. In its conflation of two futures (the one that has intervened between the experience and its narration, and the one which succeeds the act of narration), the final sentence also “generates narrative *possibility* just as much as *impossibility*” (Luckhurst 83) – it gestures towards that which has not been articulated, cannot be articulated and is, in the final analysis, inarticulable. Contained within the wail, however, is the possibility of expressing trauma through that which exists prior to and outside of language – namely, a primal and corporeal response to anguish. Paradoxically, then, it is this very reversion to the pre-linguistic which draws attention to that which it is impossible to speak of in words. The temporal continuity or immanence of Yewa’s wail thus also underlines this impossibility, since even the adult Kotchikpa cannot find the vocabulary to signify the torment contained in and beyond the wail. It is to theorizations of the aporia of trauma and the retroactive *and* future implications of Kotchikpa’s closing remark that I now turn.

4.3 Traumatic Recovery, Haunting and Temporality

According to Laub, trauma constitutes a “malfunction [in the] observing and recording mechanisms of the human mind”: the recollection or recovery of traumatic experience thus “testifies to an absence” (57). For Jessica Murray, the very nature of trauma emphasises its unfathomability, because it defies expression, Nevertheless, she maintains that “fiction opens up possibilities for overcoming [such] representational difficulties” (1). The aporetic nature of trauma strongly correlates with Maurice Blanchot’s notion of ecstasy, which he articulates as follows:

Ecstasy is without object, just as it is without a why, just as it challenges any certainty. One can write that word (ecstasy) only by putting it carefully in quotation marks, because nobody can know what it is about and above all, whether it ever took place: going beyond knowledge, implying un-knowledge, it refuses to be stated other than through random words that cannot guarantee it. Its decisive aspect is that the one who experiences it is no longer there when he experiences it. (19)

Blanchot’s notion of ecstasy here shares several qualities with trauma, three of which are relevant to my discussion. The first of these is ecstasy’s lack of an external object. In *The Body in Pain*, Elaine Scarry argues that, like physical pain, psychological suffering has no external object and therefore “no referential content” (5). Secondly, like ecstasy, trauma “issues a challenge to the capacities of narrative knowledge. In its shock impact, trauma is anti-narrative” (Luckhurst 79). And, lastly, ecstasy’s unfathomability, which “[goes] beyond knowledge, implying un-knowledge,” is also synonymous with that of trauma because, as Murray claims, it causes a rupture or “malfunction” in the mechanisms by which a human being makes sense of both his/her experiences and of him/herself. Blanchot’s conception of ‘un-knowledge’ suggests not so much a polarity between knowing and not knowing, but rather the annihilation of the very notion of knowing. It is the latter which forms an index to ecstasy, trauma and the sublime, and unsettles all epistemologies: language can circumnavigate, but not capture or render intelligible these extremes of experience.

Testimony, as an attempt at releasing the unruly destructive impact of traumatic experience located in the past, may potentially be regarded as a move towards a type of relief – in literary terms, catharsis. If, as David Carr claims, “lives are told in being lived and lived in being told” (51), narrativising or testifying to trauma is a matter not only of attempting to gain access to traumatic (un)knowledge, but also, to use Caruth’s expression, of “claiming” its occurrence (*Unclaimed* 10). In other words, testimony is a means by which to allow

internalised psychological pain to be transferred “to another outside oneself” (Laub 69). Paradoxically, however, by its very unfathomability, testimony is the site upon which the excruciating tension between trauma and ecstasy is played out *without* relief for the victim. In other words, testimony brings to the fore that which was not experienced while simultaneously highlighting the impossibility of representing that which occurred. Thus, the latent effect of trauma is foregrounded, but remains unresolved by the witness.

In relation to trauma’s indelible but irrecuperable impact, Caruth observes:

Traumatic experience, beyond the psychological dimension of suffering it involves, suggests a paradox: that the most direct seeing of a violent event may occur as an absolute inability to know it; that immediacy, paradoxically, may take the form of belatedness. (*Unclaimed* 91-2)

It may be deduced from Caruth’s claim that trauma’s violent impact is preserved in a temporal crypt, the opening of which is always after the fact, and that the force of what is released in testimony is inscrutable. Her observations are, therefore, necessarily connected to the central concern of “Fattening for Gabon” – namely, the recovery of a non-experience which has no external object or cognitive content, and is characterised by its inaccessibility. The poignant question, with regard to the considerations enumerated above, then, is: how does the narrating self of this text recover that which can only be described as “an elusive memory that feels as if it no longer resembles any reality” (Laub 76)?

In essence, first-person past-tense narration always implies *two* selves: the self described as experiencing a past event or series of events, and the self describing or narrating the event/s. Arguably, this rupture between the experiencing self and the narrating self is inherently traumatic, since the former cannot be recovered or adequated. However, this conundrum is further problematised when it is past trauma which is being narrated, since the experiencing self was not present at the moment of that experience, but ‘suspended’ or obliterated. Consequently, trauma causes a disruption to both the experiencing and narrating selves, and resides in a splitting of self. One might even go so far as to say that, in Kotchikpa’s testimony, the self is triply split: the initial violence of his original trauma results in the first rupture; the second is located in the distance between the narrating and the experiencing self; and the third, in the narrating self’s attempt to recollect and make sense both of the initial split and its belated and recurring impact in the intervening period. The concluding sentence of “Fattening for Gabon” thus expresses the narrator’s inability to articulate his suffering as a result of having been forced to desert Yewa, while simultaneously drawing attention to the manner in which both his and her psychological distress was and is

contained in her wailing – a non-verbal communication of pain from which Kotchikpa can *never* escape.

In its destruction of language, the experience of trauma and pain “brings about an immediate reversion to a state anterior to language, to the sounds and cries a human being makes before language is learned” (Scarry 4). Yewa’s wailing signifies a nonverbal expression of suffering, and forms an index to trauma’s sublimity: it is indicative of her incommunicable distress, *and* that of the narrating and experiencing Kotchikpa. Accordingly, the wail occupies the temporal space of the past, haunts the present and, in that the inexpressible cannot be resolved, invades the future. Although narrated in the past tense, therefore, the story’s contents are not relegated to the realm of the past because they are characterised by the inescapable iteration of past trauma in the present *and* future.

The final sentence reveals a memory which cannot be foreclosed upon, and that Kotchikpa’s telling of his story has failed since it has not provided and cannot provide resolution. His suffering, located in the chasm yet inexpressible simultaneity between his experiencing and narrating self, and between the latter and his future self, problematises notions of time, and hence ultimately resists his attempt to organise his narrative into a logical sequence of cause and effect.

Kotchikpa’s closing sentence thus suggests the haunting or belatedness of traumatic experience (Caruth, *Unclaimed* 17). According to Caruth, “the historical power of . . . trauma is not just that the experience is repeated after its forgetting, but that it is only in and through its inherent forgetting that it is first experienced at all” (17). This simultaneous presence and absence of an experience which defies cognitive registration, and which undoes the very notion of knowing, is contained by Akpan’s narrative in a core of silence – of the unsaid and the unsayable – which is paradoxically both imperceptible and yet profoundly felt. This silence is attributable to the disarticulation inherent in the experience of trauma. Indeed, the fundamental paradox at the heart of trauma narratives is their inability to capture the atemporality of trauma because, even in the most aleatory fictions, reading itself is temporally structured. As Petra Schweitzer points out, with regards to Holocaust narratives,

the historical truthfulness of trauma as structurally impossible experience resides in our desire to grasp an absent knowledge of the event, as our encounter with the ‘missed event’ *in the present* opens up the possibility of testimony. (61)

Schweitzer’s claim here echoes Lawrence Langer’s observation that the narrative voice in autobiographical testimony “imposes on apparently chaotic episodes a perceived sequence”

(41). Although this claim is made with specific reference to actual witnesses and survivors, it may also be applied to Akpan's fictional narrator's assumption of the role of 'witness' in the 'testimony' he presents, a role which evinces a rhetorical silence. According to Cheryl Glenn, silence becomes rhetorical when "it fills out the space in which it appears, [when] it can be equated with a kind of emptiness, [and when] it is not the same as absence or erasing" (4). The split between the narrating and the experiencing self mimics the fragmentary nature of traumatic experience, which "is not fully perceived as it happens" (Caruth 18). While applicable to any text involving retrospective narration, the distance between the narrating and experiencing self here is characterised by a haunting – Yewa's wail – which "comes to taint all other experiences, spoiling appreciation of the present" (Vickroy 12). The narrating self is plagued by a "tyranny of the past" (12), a past which cannot be grasped, let alone assimilated, in the same manner as non-traumatic knowledge. Consequently, the retrospective mode of "Fattening for Gabon" is essentially, but paradoxically, premised on the silence and inarticulacy to which the final sentence gestures.

Inherently, the recovery of traumatic memories through narrative, Laub insists, arises because trauma cannot be witnessed from the inside – which is to say that it cannot *but* be witnessed from the outside (82), which, essentially, means it *cannot* be witnessed. While narrative distance is a necessary requirement for testimony, however, it also functions as an instantiation of the unknowable. Furthermore, given the fact that the notion of memory connotes a selective and therefore fragmented process of recovery, testimony to trauma involves even greater fragmentation and incoherence, as the very content of the memory has not and, indeed, could not have been and cannot be cognitively registered. Akpan's text depicts a fictional space in which the "the cognizance, the 'knowing' of the [traumatic] event is given birth to" through the adult narrator's return to the unknowable event in his past. The attempt to arrive at knowledge is, therefore, paradoxically also an exercise in unknowing for, while the narrator attempts to imbue the events with a logical progression and coherence, this attempt is undermined by the structure of his memory which is characterised by a fragmentation that foregrounds "the failure of things to fit into a preconceived pattern" (Gikandi 109). Logically, then, while narrative distance is a necessary requirement for testimony, it can hinder the retrieval of traumatic (un)knowledge. It is precisely because trauma is devoid of pattern that its recovery, particularly in narrative, is problematic. Nevertheless, if trauma, in essence, is unrepresentable, fiction, which is inevitably concerned with its own (im)possibilities of representation, *does* have a role to play: it is, in a sense,

always already about expressing the inexpressible and gesturing towards that which is not and *cannot* be expressed.

Akpan's utilisation of irony, narrative distance, temporal dislocation, and symbolism reflects the paradoxical absence and simultaneous presence of traumatic experience. Kotchikpa's retrospective narration attests to the manner in which "traumatic memory persists in a half-life, rather like a ghost, a haunting absent presence of another time in . . . time" (Luckhurst 81). On the whole, the ending of "Fattening for Gabon" reveals how "the impossibility of speaking . . . otherwise than through . . . silence, otherwise than through [the] black hole both of knowledge and of words, corresponds to the impossibility of remembering and of forgetting" (Laub 65). Indeed, the attempt to recall, re-member or relate traumatic memory in Kotchikpa's narrative cannot rely on the speech act or narrative distance, because the narrator's past, present and future is embedded in the silence which subtends Yewa's wailing.

Chapter 5

“The Seduction of Ash”:

Mia Couto’s “The Day Mabata-Bata Exploded” and “The Bird-Dreaming Baobab”

I are sad. No, I’m not mistaken. What I am saying is correct. Or perhaps: we am sad? Because inside me, I’m not alone. I’m many. And they all fight over my one and only life. We go along reaping our deaths. But we have only one birth. That’s where the problem lies. That’s why, when I tell my story, I mix myself up, a mulatto not of races, but of existences.

– Mia Couto (“So You Haven’t Flown Yet, Carlota Gentina?” *Voices Made Night* 41)

I will die from the pounding of my heart which does not allow me to bend or move my arm but turns me into stone, fills my mouth with dry leaves, covers me in decay . . . I cry in my sleep, this sleep of death. Tomorrow has departed never to return, death has entered my dreaming entered my growing turned it into mud, and now I cry one small whimper, cry quietly into my memory saying, whispering, I am the opposite of life.

– Yvonne Vera (*Under the Tongue* 104)

Let us beware of saying that death is opposed to life. The living is merely a type of what is dead, and a very rare type.

– Friedrich Nietzsche (*The Gay Science* 109)

Chesca Long-Innes argues that Mia Couto’s installation of the fantastic in his short story collection, *Voices Made Night*, may best be understood “not so much as a product of any ‘magical realist’ poetics, but as ‘naturalised’, or motivated as a function of the collective neurosis of a [Mozambican] society traumatised by its continuing history of poverty and extreme violence” (158). Couto’s use of the fantastic, she adds, encompasses both empirical and psychic reality, and both are characterised by instability and elusiveness. The collection, she then maintains, constitutes a re-invention or reimagining of subjective realities constructed and perpetuated by the social trauma underpinning what she terms the “psychopathology of post-colonial Mozambique, in which the society as a whole is . . . caught in the grip of a profound depression or melancholia” (158).

Using Long-Innes’ thesis as a point of departure, I argue that Couto’s short stories “The Day Mabata-bata Exploded,” from *Voices Made Night* (*Voices*), and “The Bird-Dreaming Baobab,” from *Every Man is a Race* (*Every Man*), foreground the paradox of trauma’s unspeakability and hence all-too-present absence in the Mozambican setting. I begin

by highlighting the structural overlap between postcoloniality and trauma fiction in the African context, an overlap particularly pertinent to Couto's use of the fantastic in the aforementioned stories. I then provide a close reading of Couto's use of figurative language and symbolic use of landscape in his depictions of violence. As this violence is filtered through the consciousness of child protagonists, the focus in my close analysis of the two stories here will be on the disparity between their perceptions as opposed to those of adults. Finally, I examine the theme of death in both narratives, specifically in relation to the fantastical worldview of the children, and argue that the two children's deaths reveal some of the innovative ways in which Couto engages with the enigma of trauma representation in fiction.

5.1 Trauma, Magical Realism and Mia Couto's Mozambique

Couto's stories conform to Rosemary Jackson's definition of subversive fantasy, in that they are "predominantly realistic . . . [but spiral] through fantastic interludes of unreason, dream, violence" (126). "The Day Mabata-bata Exploded," for instance, opens with a disarmingly literal and yet peculiar description of an ox "suddenly . . . burst[ing] without so much as a moo," its carnage falling as "a rain of chunks and slices . . . as if the fruit and leaves" (17). This catastrophe is located both within the realms of the realistic (the ox has literally stepped on a landmine) and the non-realistic (its flesh transformed into water, fruit and leaves). The dualism which emerges is primarily achieved through the juxtaposition of the third-person narrator's perspective with that of the child focaliser, Azarias, and the ox's explosion performs a crucial symbolic role in the representation of trauma and its relation to the themes of death and rebirth in the narrative. As the story unfolds, it becomes apparent that this viscerally uncanny moment is, at the very least, indicative of a correlation between physical violence and psychological trauma in Azarias' immediate context and Mozambique as a whole. The landmine is also both literally and symbolically associated with fire, an element which features prominently in Couto's narratives and which is frequently linked with death.

The all-pervasive theme of death in Couto's fiction has prompted much scholarly interest. Lawrence Ngoveni's reading of *Under the Frangipani*, for instance, examines this theme in relation to issues of popular memory and nationhood, whereas Long-Innes' analysis of the psychopathology of Mozambique, as depicted in *Voices*, is derived from her understanding of the Freudian death-drive and Kristeva's work on melancholia. In both *Voices* and *Every Man*, however, death not only signifies the culmination of suffering in life,

but also transcendence through metamorphosis. In the two stories that are the focus of this chapter, suffering and trauma's indelible presence, in both an individual and a collective sense, suggest that life in contemporary Mozambique, as Couto presents it, is unbearable, and consequently that death, as an alternative to such an existence, is a means of transcendence. Thus, what Long-Innes reads as a manifestation of the Freudian death-drive in Couto's characters (168), or a suicidal leaning towards death, paradoxically signifies both the negation *and* the affirmation of life. Transmogrifications and the interanimation of the human and natural worlds in Couto's stories run parallel to the interfusion of the fantastic and the real, and signal the "acceptance of the supernatural as actual" (Gaylard 45), an acceptance which is conventionally associated with childhood.

The fire motif in "The Day Mabata-bata Exploded" emphasises a childlike interpretation of what initially appears to be an individual experience of trauma, but is, in reality, a collective trauma. Read as manifestations of a recurring collective memory of socio-political instability and violence, landmines in the story evoke Lyotard's concept of the sublime, since he posits that an encounter with the sublime is always associated with an awareness of "a terror which is linked with the danger of impending death or destruction" (97). In Couto's oeuvre, the constant dread stirred up by the landmines' pervasive presence is symptomatic of the land's inability to forget: his characters are haunted by the spectral presence of a traumatic history, whether this haunting is acknowledged by the characters themselves or not. Azarias' miscomprehension or misperception of the brutal power unleashed by the landmines is thus significant, for it suggests that he and, by extension, all Mozambican children are inheritors of a traumatic history and a traumatic present that they do not comprehend – that cannot, in fact, be comprehended.

Originally colonised by Portugal in the sixteenth century, Mozambique was the "scene of the anticolonial war until it was granted independence . . . on 25 June 1975" (Rogers 114). Under the leadership of Samora Machel, the country became a one-party state which aided the liberation fighters of its neighbouring countries, South Africa and Rhodesia, in their respective struggles against their racist governments. The Rhodesian government responded to this involvement by funding and equipping the "dissident, capitalist Movimento Nacional de Resistência de Moçambique (MNR) in an attempt to destabilise the country so that it would be unable to offer aid" to the rebel parties (114). While the liberation movements of both South Africa and Rhodesia eventually succeeded in overthrowing their racist governments, Mozambique "deteriorated into a full scale civil war," a war which persisted until the country's first multi-party elections in 1994. Written in the 1990s, Couto's

two short stories are deeply steeped in the legacy of the civil war and the resulting socio-economic climate of Mozambique, along with its citizens' psychological inability to comprehend and move beyond the collective experience of trauma.

Lara Buxbaum quotes a line, from *The Last Flight of the Flamingo*, which refers to the ubiquitous presence of landmines in Mozambican soil, "knowing how to tread this ground is the difference between life and death," and then argues that this ominous omnipresence denotes the transformation of a "maternal [and] nurturing" earth into a "deadly enemy" (22) and signals the persistent and repetitive intrusion of violence into the lives of his characters. As the most "visible and heartbreaking relics of the civil war in Mozambique" (Buxbaum 2), the landmines potentially release a lethal destructive force which is not only experienced as graphically violent, but is also inherently traumatic and resistant to representation. Azarias' encounter with the landmine is distressing, in that the incident affects his subjective framework in a manner reminiscent of Richard Kearney's conception of what occurs to the subject in a sublime moment. Using Lyotard as a point of reference, Kearney maintains that the subject becomes an "involuntary addressee of some inspiration come to him/her from 'I know not what'" (492-3).

Commenting on notions of community and subjectivity in the postcolonial context, Gaylard argues that

The self in postcolonialism is both multiply connected and multiply alienated, primarily due to the impact of colonialism . . . but also because of the reactions and disasters of the post-independence era. (54)

Gaylard's observations here share some interesting correlations with the effects of collective trauma, and are reminiscent of Erikson's assertion that collective traumas destabilise and disrupt the formation of notions of identity (460). The paradox of connection and alienation that Gaylard highlights implies the split or schizophrenic identity which characterises contemporary Africa, an identity which emerges clearly in Couto's representation of Mozambique. Indeed, Gaylard maintains that the burgeoning of magical realist narratives in the contemporary African literary landscape (50) – of which Couto's installation of the fantastic is an example – is a consequence of this instability, because the expression of trauma's aporetic nature is, in the postcolonial context, further complicated by notions of subjectivity and community which have themselves been disrupted.

Gaylard also postulates that "postcoloniality is a pause which has been created by uncertainty as to how to understand and respond to history" (50), and explains that "one reason for pausing seems to be the difficulty of articulating new answers [to questions of

identity, subjectivity, and community] and the arbitrariness of the old ones” (57). Where postcolonial narrative is concerned, the kind of ‘history’ to which writers respond is thus, by definition, always already a traumatic one. Further, if “African postcoloniality includes . . . the magical cosmology of many Africans” (43), the insertion of such mystical elements in African literature entails “the modification of an already existent notion of reality to include new phenomena” (45) such as “the supernatural, the fantastic, the improbable, the implausible” (44). Thus the fantastical elements and the coexistence of the magical and the real in Couto’s short stories dissolve conceptual oppositions, such as reason versus unreason, reality versus illusion, and the material versus the imaginative. If the realist mode “spurns paradox . . . [by seeking] referential (and reverential) equivalence, the one-to-one locking of word and thing” (15), the presence of paradox, in the form of the seemingly impossible represented as part of the possible, in Couto’s writing is a direct consequence of the inaccessibility of his traumatic subject matter, a realist or mimetic literary representation of which would itself be paradoxical, if not impossible.

Trauma is located neither solely in fact, where ‘fact’ is taken to mean empirical or phenomenal reality, nor in fiction, where fiction signifies the imagined or imaginary. Instead, it occupies a liminal space between these two ontological realms: it is both material and immaterial. Similarly, Couto’s fiction may be read as located between two modes of representation: realistic and non-realistic/fantastical, outer and inner, conscious and psychic/unconscious. The tension between these modes is dissolved to such an extent that the realistic and non-realistic merge or intertwine to form a hybrid ontology governed and determined by the laws of both. Geoffrey Hartman, for example, argues that, in literature dealing with the subject of traumatic knowledge and the sublime, “shock and dreaminess collude. [And] where there is dream there is trauma” (“On Traumatic Knowledge” 6). Couto’s narratives are not only oneiric, but also characterised by a curiously hybrid fictional space, a space which is inherently syncretic. Rawdon Wilson maintains that the magical realist text, in general, may be read as “a model of how different geometries, inscribing boundaries that fold and refold like quicksilver, can superimpose themselves upon one another” (210). The mercurial quality of Couto’s fictional worlds imbues his narratives with multiple significances: they are characterised by what Wilson refers to as the “copresence of oddities, the interaction of the bizarre with the entirely ordinary, the doubleness of conceptual codes, the irreducibly hybrid nature of experience (210).

Moreover, the use of child protagonists who, although inhabiting the ‘real’ world, constantly desire the ‘unreal’, in “The Day Mabata-bata Exploded” and “The Bird-Dreaming

Baobab,” serves as an additional vehicle through which the narratives achieve hybridity. The symbolic correlation between the ox’s explosion and trauma in the former story, for example, undercuts any strict relegation of the incident to the realm of the ‘real’, since the child’s interpretation of the episode is that the ox stepped on some relic of the ndlati bird (bird of lightning). This, then, demonstrates the manner in which Couto’s fiction enacts the magical realist convention of inscribing “two distinct geometries onto the same space” (Wilson 210). Gaylard also notes that magical realism is “perhaps rooted in the remembrance of childhood, with its attendant splendour of the world, whose multitudinous variety of actual and potential” (72) is accessible to children. This observation may thus be linked to the children’s access to the mystical/magical in their interpretations of their realities. Both the tree and the birds in “The Bird-Dreaming Baobab” are simultaneously located in the realms of the realistic and the fantastical. The baobab tree functions both literally, as a home for the nameless stranger who suddenly appears in a small suburban neighbourhood, and symbolically, as a gateway to a transcendental existence which can only be achieved through death, and the birds are linked to mysticism, freedom and a rebirth into otherworldliness. Both stories thus presuppose, from the outset, infinitude in the fictional world represented, since the distinction between what is natural and what is supernatural is collapsed, and the two become entangled in an endless cycle of becoming.

The role of the natural world and of place is central to Couto’s writing. Buxbaum argues, for instance, that the notion of place in this author’s oeuvre should be considered as more than merely a backdrop or setting, or the product of a magical realist poetics. Working from within an ecocritical framework which emphasises that “the relationship between the human and the non-human world is one of interanimation” (2), and subscribing to Gotta’s claim that “physical environment [is] a presence in its own right” (qtd in Buxbaum 3), Buxbaum contends that, in Couto’s writing, “the earth is alive, engaging and interacting with the characters” (2). Her emphasis on the role of the environment in Couto’s work is shared by many of his critics, including Long-Innes, Ngoveni, and Irene Marques, all of whom read the natural environment in relation to Couto’s concern with the socio-political and psychic realities of postcolonial Mozambique. Long-Innes and Ngoveni agree that insight into the socio-political configurations of Mozambique plays a crucial role in understanding Couto’s work. In her survey of scholarship on Couto, Long-Innes cites Patrick Chabal, who observes:

Poorly integrated by the Portuguese during the colonial period, badly bruised by the nationalist struggle and torn asunder by civil war, Mozambique is not yet a country in any meaningful sense of the word . . . Mozambique *is itself part reality and part fiction*.

(qtd in Long-Innes 156)

The crisis of identity, as highlighted by Chabal above, may be read in relation to Neil J. Smelser's contention that

In the case of a collective trauma, there is often an interest in representing the trauma as indelible (a national shame, a permanent scar, etc.), and if this representation is successfully established, the memory does in fact take on the characteristics of indelibility and unshakeability. (42)

And Couto himself has stated that, “[i]n a country like Mozambique, misery is the first environment” (qtd in Buxbaum 1), an assertion which signifies the ‘unshakeability’ of the collective distress this author imaginatively reconstructs. Both Couto’s landscapes and his characters symbolically enact the violent psychic scarring of the country’s inhabitants and the effects of violence on the basic tissues of community: his stories repeatedly critique and attempt to engage with the historical and contemporary social crises of Mozambique, crises which nonetheless form an integral part of its collective yet fractured and fraught identity. Chabal’s observation regarding the unstable definition of Mozambicanness – that the country is itself “part reality and part fiction” – suggests that the ‘real’ is lacking to such an extent that it cannot *but* be supplemented by the imagined, and that, by extension, fiction has a seminal role to play in the reconstruction and redefinition of collective identity. Indeed, Hartman observes, of notions of truth in historical and fictional accounts of the Holocaust, that when confronted with atrocity, “the line that is supposed to distinguish between factual and fictive versions of truth becomes a battleground precisely because a distinction that must be made is often difficult to make” (25-26). In the face of this dilemma, he posits that “imagination is [not] simply an addition to the compound we call reality, rather [it is] part of that reality” (26). Similarly, Couto’s fiction not only documents a particular contemporary moment in a traumatic Mozambican history, but also, through his use of the imaginary, the mythical and the transcendental, is able to negotiate several ways of perceiving and representing this moment, so as to engage the implied reader in an alternative manner of perceiving both history and ways of speaking about it.

Dolores Herrero and Sonia Baelo-Allué maintain that

Events are not inherently traumatic . . . for an event or situation to acquire the dimension of trauma, it must have destabilized the structures of meaning of a collectivity . . . the event must be associated with a strong negative affect, and be remembered in a culturally relevant way. (xiii)

Couto's narratives are situated in the context of postcolonial, post-independence and post-war Mozambique, and are haunted by the repetitive psychic recollection of atrocity. More specifically, as individualised examples of Mozambique's intolerable social, economic and political climate, his characters are possessed by what Vickroy, in another context, terms a material history of "racial, gender and economic oppression [which] distort[s their] formation of identity and relational bonds" (37). The instability arising from Mozambican history and the memory of the violence which accompanied this history are, in Couto's fiction, literally rooted in the landscape.

5.2 Violence and the Natural Environment

Narrated from the third-person perspective, "The Day Mabata-bata Explode" is the story of a young orphan boy, Azarias, who, while herding his uncle's herd of cows, witnesses the explosion of an ox. Afraid of being punished by his uncle for the loss of the ox, Azarias decides not to leave the fields to return to his home. Meanwhile, his grandmother notices that the boy has not returned and asks her son, the boy's uncle, to go out to look for him, but Raul only wants to have his supper. Shortly after dinner, three soldiers come to warn him that "bandits" have been laying landmines around the mountains. Only then does Raul, with encouragement from his mother, go searching for his cattle. When he does get to the mountain where Azarias is hiding behind the shadows, he tries to coax the child into coming out by promising not to punish him. The story then ends with Azarias coming out of from his hiding place only to step on a landmine. As intimated earlier, the use of Azarias as both protagonist and central focaliser of "The Day Mabata-bata Exploded" plays a crucial role in Couto's construction of a hybrid fictional world, since the boy's interpretation of events consists in an overlap between the real and the unreal, a conflation which imbues the text with irony and ambiguity. This process is highlighted from the story's outset:

Suddenly, the ox exploded. It burst without so much as moo. In the surrounding grass a rain of chunks and slices fell as if the fruit and leaves of the ox. Its flesh turned into red butterflies. Its bones were scattered coins. Its horns were caught on some branches, swinging to and fro, imitating life in the instability of the wind. (17)

On the surface, this whimsical description of the animal's violent disintegration seems to accord with Azarias' naïvety and ignorance of death. The metaphors and similes he draws between the fleshy shrapnel and rain, fruit, leaves and butterflies, symbols of fertility and transformation, also indicate the story's treatment of death, rebirth and the imagination. Similarly, the parallel the narrator draws between the ox's bones and monetary currency suggests the volatility of life in this rural setting: bones comprise the framework of the ox's anatomy, whereas coins are the rudiments of an exchange economy, and both are necessary for survival. Implicit in the associations of the corporeal with the natural is the notion that death is part of the constantly renewing cycle of life. The hauntingly beautiful description of the disembodied horns swaying in the branches and seemingly brought alive again by the wind may be read as a culmination of the passage's association of death with transformation, since the reanimated horns, previously the means by which the ox attacked and defended itself, imply that it has, in some sense, survived in being transmuted, or that death imitates life.

Azarias has no cognisance of the literal meaning of what he perceives as the spontaneous and inexplicable combustion of Mabata-bata:

The *ndlati*, the bird of lightning . . . only takes to the air when the clouds bellow and the sky grates. Then it is that the *ndlati* rises into the heavens on the wings of its madness. High in the air, it dons its clothes of flame, and casts its burning flight upon the creatures of the earth . . . Maybe Mabata-bata had trodden on some malign vestige of the *ndlati* . . . He had already seen thunderstruck cattle: they became burnt out carcasses, a pattern of ashes reminiscent of a body. (17-18)

The myth of the bird which emerges in turbulent electric storms symbolically corresponds with the ubiquity of landmines during times of socio-political turmoil. Similarly, the thunder which provokes the bird's "wings of madness," its "clothes of flame," and its "burning" flight may be read in relation to the background conflict which has caused "bandits" (19) to plant the landmines. In his ignorance of the correspondences he draws through his interpretation of the explosion, Azarias is nonetheless puzzled by certain anomalies: he is, for instance, aware that "[f]ire chews slowly, it doesn't swallow in one go, which is what had happened here" (18). Instead of being presented with the charred remains of a body, he has witnessed the ox instantaneously "pulverised, like an echo of silence, a shadow of nothingness" (17). While natural fire, such as that occasioned by lightning, preserves the form of the dead animal, the landmine destroys all evidence of the ox's existence, leaving only a layered silence rendered ominous in that it echoes. What remains of Mabata-bata is "a shadow of nothingness" (17),

an image which provocatively indicates that the intention of the landmine is not only to bring about an end to life, but also to eradicate any evidence of that life ever having existed. The extent to which Azarias is oblivious to the real threat posed by the legacy of a violent, conflictual history therefore suggests that he, like Mabata-bata, is in imminent danger of being annihilated by forces over which he has no control.

The ox's explosion may thus be read as an embodiment of violence in the Mozambican context, and mimics the ferocity with which the psyche 'splits' in the face of trauma. From Hartman's perspective,

Any general description or modelling of trauma . . . risks being figurative, to the point of mythic fantasmagoria. Something 'falls' into the psyche, or causes it to 'split' . . . The inner catastrophe . . . is inscribed with a force proportional to the mediations punctured or evaded. ("On Traumatic Knowledge" 1)

If the ox incident illustrates the figurative leanings of trauma representation because of its symbolic resonances with the *ndlati* bird, then the annihilation of Azarias, similarly by a landmine, at the end of the story signals the causal relationship between public discord and private calamity. Azarias' perspective on the interfusion of life and death, as depicted in his interpretation of Mabata-bata exploding in the opening passage has also emerged from his own experience of existence. The narrator explains that the young boy

had been working [as a cowherd for his Uncle Raul] ever since he had been left an orphan. He would get up when it was still dark so that the cattle might graze . . . Other people's children were allowed to go to school. Not he, for he was nobody's son. Work tore him early from his bed and returned him to sleep when there was no longer any trace of childhood left in him. (17-18)

As "nobody's son," Azarias is not only stripped of a secure family background, but also vulnerable to exploitation from a guardian who perceives him primarily as a "minder for his cattle" (21). It is as a result of his instrumentalist view of Azarias as a servant or lackey that Raul refuses to send the boy to school, thus depriving him of an education and the companionship of his peers. Instead of playing with other children, Azarias "only played with animals: swimming the river clinging to the tail of Mabata-bata, making bets when the stronger animals fought each other" (18). Implicit in this description and in Raul's mocking observation that Azarias "*will surely marry a cow*" (19), however, is a recognition of the extent of the boy's communion with the natural environment, based on a mutual intimacy and empathy. Azarias' substitution of human contact for the companionship of the ox and cattle, foregrounds his connection with the natural world and his sense that the human and the natural are interwoven.

Azarias' estrangement from the human world, although a direct consequence of his orphanhood, is also exacerbated by "mistreatment" (18) from the very people who are supposed to "care for his tiny soul" (19). The alienation he endures is expressed in his realisation that, in being "nobody's son" (18), he stands no chance of being treated as other children are treated. This is symptomatic of the death of his innocence, an innocence so eroded that "there was no longer any trace of childhood in him" (18). The boy's substitution of animals for humans thus connotes a rejection of human society, since his experience of the latter has taught him that it is characterised by enmity and ill-treatment.

The episode in which Azarias' uncle, Raul, goes out searching for his cattle and his nephew, after learning of the landmine explosion that has killed his prize ox earlier in the day, forms a striking illustration of the hostility the boy has come to expect from his uncle. Indeed, the child's decision to run away after the ox explodes is based on the justifiable assumption that he will be held responsible for the animal's death by his uncle. When Raul senses that his nephew is hiding somewhere close by, he tries to coax Azarias into coming out of hiding by promising him, firstly, that he will let him go to school and, secondly, that he will not hit him. As soon as both of these promises are uttered, however, they are undermined by a shift in focalisation to Raul's actual intentions. In the case of the second promise, for instance, Raul says: "*Show yourself, don't be scared. I shan't hit you, I promise,*" but immediately thereafter he inwardly notes: "He promised lies. He wasn't going to hit him: he was going to thrash him to death when he had finished rounding up the cattle" (20). Raul's prioritisation of his cattle above Azarias is highlighted here, since the primary reason Raul enters the landmine-infested fields is to retrieve his stock, and to punish Azarias for the death of his ox. Raul is so obsessed with his cattle that he is prepared to postpone hitting the boy until *after* he secures the animals. Moreover, the promises he uses to lure the child out of hiding indicate the extent to which he deceitfully attempts to manipulate Azarias' gullibility, wielding it as a psychological weapon. While there is no indication in the text as to whether Azarias believes his uncle or not, implicit in Raul's thinking – that he will agree to Azarias' demands to be sent to school for the moment, but later "correct the boy's illusions" (21) – is the reality that the relationship between the two is founded on the abuse of adult power, a power which is exerted against a vulnerable child.

Raul's interaction with Azarias is not only abusive and exploitative, however, it is also negligent. When a soldier arrives at the home Raul shares with his mother and nephew, to inform him about the ox's explosion and the landmines which have been laid in the area where the cattle and Azarias are now located, Raul's primary concern is to retrieve what is left

of his herd rather than to ensure the safety of the child. The whereabouts and welfare of “that son-of-a-bitch Azarias” are of little concern to him, given that “nobody [could] match [Azarias] on his knowledge of the land” (20) and his assumption that the boy can therefore take care of himself. Nevertheless, Raul’s disregard for familial responsibilities is not shared by his mother, who sternly reprimands him for being harsh on Azarias and reminds him that he does not know “the meaning of wretchedness” (21) – an indication of her awareness of Azarias’ vulnerable social position. Implicit in this reminder, too, is the notion that the degree to which one can empathise with another depends of the kinds of experiences one has had. Raul’s mother is suggesting that those who have *not* led a life of deprivation have a responsibility – perhaps a greater one than those who have similarly suffered – to at least feel empathy for those who have.

Raul’s inability to empathise and his mercenary approach to life are further illustrated in his treatment of the land. Unlike Azarias, who lives in harmony with both the animals he herds and the landscape he inhabits, Raul is depicted as out of place in nature. While engaged in his quest to find the cattle, for instance, he aggressively “tear[s] himself on the thorns” of the bushes he flounders through and, when he reaches the river, he climbs on the large rocks and, at the top of his voice, “issues the command: ‘Azarias, come back, Azarias!’” (20). His injunction is “answered” by the river, which responds by “disentombing its gushing voice” (20), seemingly in Azarias’ defence. Oblivious to the river, however, Raul continues searching for the boy. The arrogance with which his actions are performed suggests that he perceives the natural environment in essentially the same manner as he perceives Azarias, that is, as a commodity to exploit or as a means to pursue his own ends. His treatment of nature is a function of his misplaced notion of entitlement and disregard of others, both human and natural.

The narrative also suggests, through its depiction of Raul in the natural environment, that his antagonistic treatment of both the boy and nature is directly correlated to his own dehumanisation. While sitting down and trying to devise a plan to capture his nephew, he is described as “a statue of darkness” (20) and, when Azarias refuses to return home, the narrator reports that “Raul began to creep down the rock, cat-like, ready to pounce and seize his nephew by the throat” (21). Raul’s malevolence, juxtaposed against the pastoral image of Azarias playing with Mabata-bata earlier in the narrative, emphasises the extent of the uncle’s detachment from human bonds and a respect for the natural world. This detachment denies him access to a nurturing social or natural environment – in other words, his lack of empathy isolates him.

Raul's lack of empathy may be read as a contributing factor in the suicidal ideations which accompany the experience of trauma for Azarias, since the latter's profound depression ultimately leads him to embrace death as the only escape from his uncle's abuse. Like the suicide of the hanging woman in "Hitting Budapest," Azarias can conceive of no other means of escaping his circumstances and a context which dooms him to a life of suffering. After witnessing his uncle's prized ox explode, for instance, Azarias initially considers fleeing: "There was only one solution: to run away, to travel the roads where he knew nothing more. To flee is to die from a place . . . What would he leave behind to regret?" (18). This not only reflects Azarias' fear and his desire to escape abuse, exploitation and estrangement, but also suggests that all of these experiences are associated with a particular locale. Hence he feels he is "not running away: he is merely starting out along his road" (19). Ultimately, the place that causes his misery and isolation is his earthly existence, the alternative to which is a mystical transcendence attainable only through an abandonment of that existence. This abandonment is elaborated upon in the passage where he acts on his desire to flee:

He looked back at the fields he was going to leave behind without any regret . . . He set off in the direction of the river . . . When he arrived at the river he crossed the frontier of water. On the other bank, he stopped without even knowing what he was waiting for. (19)

Azarias shows no sign of regret or sense of loss. Preceding his decision to run away, he surveys his meagre possessions and concludes, "so little cannot inspire any remorse" (19). This absence of regret or remorse is closely related to the notion of lack or poverty in Couto's foreword to the collection, in which he contends that:

The most harrowing thing about poverty is the ignorance it has of itself. Faced by absence of everything, men abstain from dreams, depriving themselves of the desire to be others. There exists in nothingness that illusion of plenitude which causes life to stop and voices to become night.

Within the context of Azarias' story, life does indeed stop at the very moment he realises that he literally has nothing of value to lose and his abandonment of an earthbound life is encapsulated in his decidedly symbolic action of crossing the river. The threshold of the river, fittingly described as a "frontier" (19), is consistent with the negation of life because the body of water literally separates two banks, two places and, by extension, two worlds. Azarias' hesitation and suspension subsequent to crossing the river therefore suggests that the transition from one mode of being to another has not yet fully been realised. This transcendence is implied when, having crossed the river, Azarias is described by the narrator

as a disembodied name and a voice. Throughout the verbal interchange between Azarias, Raul and Grandma Carolina which takes place in the darkness on the banks of the river, the boy is depicted only once as emerging “from behind the shadows “ in the form of what the narrator describes as a “silhouette” (21). Azarias is thus already becoming insubstantial, and his indistinct corporeality prefigures the desertion of his earthly existence. Moreover, there is an ominous significance to his disembodied replies to Carolina’s implorations to him to return home: he initially asserts “*I’m going to run away*” (21) but, when she asks where he will go, he answers, “*I’ve nowhere to go, Grandmother*” (21). Azarias’ response suggests that he is plagued by a desire to escape and the seeming impossibility of doing so: it is only in the story’s final episode when, like Mabata-bata, Azarias is violently obliterated by a landmine, that this desire is realised and his transformation is complete.

The landmine explosion which ends Azarias’ life is described as “a flash which seemed to turn night into the middle of its day” (22), an explosion of such magnitude that its light figuratively overtakes the darkness of the boy’s life. Azarias then “swallow[s] all that red, the shriek of crackling fire” (22) and, shortly thereafter, sees the *ndlati*, emerging once again as a death omen, and senses “everything [beginning] to close in” (22) as the confines of the material world collapse. It is not, however, until “the river offer[s] him passage” by “sacrificing its water’s life” (22) that the boy runs towards his death. This description of how the natural world yields to and facilitates the boy’s transition from life to a new life in death suggests that the kind of transformation Azarias undergoes would not be possible had he not experienced intimacy with the natural world. The river, comprised of the transitory and dream-like element of water, colludes with the regenerative power of fire to assist Azarias’ rebirth into another world. Two interpretations of the landmine’s conflagration in the earlier incident of the exploding ox thus seem to converge in the moment when Azarias embraces “the passage of . . . flame” (22) at the end of his life – and, indeed, the end of the story. A literal interpretation of the destructive force and artificial blaze of the incendiary would ascribe a decisive finality and futility to the boy’s death, were it not for the fact that the narrative is rescued from such pessimism by Azarias’ earlier interpretation of the transmutation of Mabata-bata. The latter interpretation would seem to imply that he, too, will be transmogrified by fire, and thus reborn into a different kind of existence.

The symbolism in “The Day Mabata-bata Exploded” attests to the impossibility of representing the “inner catastrophe” of trauma (Hartman “On Traumatic Knowledge” 1). The suffering depicted in the text bespeaks the manner in which Couto’s “literary verbalization . . . is a basis for making the wound perceivable and the silence[s] audible” (Hartman

“Trauma within the Limits of Literature” 2). By introducing symbolism and interfusing the literal with the imaginative, Couto’s child protagonists straddle the realistic and mystical realms, and destabilise the authority and efficacy of a realism which is linked to the world of the adults.

5.3 Beyond Fire and Dreams: “The Bird-Dreaming Baobab”

The estrangement of Couto’s characters and their lack of empathy for others is also evident in “The Bird-Dreaming Baobab,” which is characterised by a profound emphasis on the natural environment’s symbolic enactment of a dis-location and alienation premised on racial difference. The story’s epigraph introduces the ubiquitous bird motif’s association with freedom: “*Birds, all those who know of no abode on the ground*” (31). Implicit in this epigraph is the suggestion that those who are earthbound, who are bound by conventional notions of belonging and possession, are not free. In the story, the treatment meted out to the baobab tree and its inhabitant, the otherworldly birdman, by the descendants of European settlers in Mozambique foreground notions of territoriality and exclusion. It is suggested that the earthbound are restrained by socio-political norms which govern hospitality and inhospitality. The story’s epigraph therefore prefigures the discrimination on racial grounds which later plays out in the story: racial discourse determines and distinguishes between those who belong and those who do not.

“The Bird-Dreaming Baobab” begins with the image of a black man with a variety of colourful birds arriving on the streets of a white neighbourhood in order to sell his birds. While the children of the community are fascinated by the man, their parents perceive him as an intruder and ban their children from interacting with him. One of the children, Tiago, despite his parents’ wishes, spends all his time with the birdman, who shares his indigenous knowledge of the natural and mystical world with the child. One night, while Tiago is with the birdman, the boy’s father together with other men from the neighbourhood arrive, only to physically assault and take the perceived intruder to the jailhouse. Tiago follows the men to the prison and waits outside where he falls asleep. He wakes up to discover the bird man gone and, presuming he has gone back to his baobab, goes there to find him. Meanwhile, the men also discover the disappearance of their prisoner and decide to set him and the baobab alight. The reader then discovers that the men have in fact set the tree alight while the child is still inside. Ultimately, the closing image, in which both the child and the birdman are transformed into parts of the baobab, implies that both of them have been killed.

To return to the opening section of the story: the white descendants of the Portuguese settlers who colonised Mozambique claim to own and belong to a particular portion of the town, which they then attempt to defend against the perceived threat of a black birdman whom they feel is an intruder in their territory. Upon the birdman's first appearance in the neighbourhood, the indignant white occupants speculate:

Who did that black think he was . . . Who had authorized those grubby feet to dirty the area? No, no, and no again. The black ought to return to his proper place. (31)

This passage indicates not only the sense of privilege and entitlement inherent in racial ideology, but also the general policy of exclusion which inheres in the utter refusal to accept an other into a restrictive definition of the category of the human. "The black" is identified only with reference to his physiognomy and his occupation as a bird-seller: the narrator remarks that he "didn't even have a name to shelter him. They called him the birdman" (31). The residents' indifference towards or elision of the man's name is perhaps the most telling example of his dehumanisation, since it is necessarily connected to a refusal to acknowledge his subjective integrity. As someone stripped of the markers of his humanity, the birdman remains an alien and unknowable other. This aspect of the representation of the birdman echoes Vickroy's insistence, in her discussion of Toni Morrison's *The Bluest Eye*, that "the colonized are . . . denied agency, control and identity within their own cultural spaces" (38). Indeed, the association of blackness with dirt or impurity emphasises the birdman's debasement. The insistent repetition of the word 'no' in the above passage also reveals a decisive rejection of this 'other,' and an unwavering negation born of fear and a nostalgic longing to cling to the colonial inheritance of racial entitlement. The latter, in particular, may be inferred from the narrator's observation that:

The whites were concerned at [the birdman's] disobedience, blaming it on the times. They yearned jealously for the past, when creatures could be tidied away depending on their appearance. The bird seller, by overstepping himself in such a fashion, was leading the world towards other awareness. (33)

As this passage exemplifies, the birdman's intrusion into the neighbourhood is threatening because it destabilises the normative association of whiteness with both authority and privilege. According to Vickroy, "colonizers also suffer under their own pathology . . . [because] to have such power over other human lives destroys the humanity of the powerful as well" (43-44). Thus, in emphasising the birdman's otherness, the settlers are not only creating a distance between him and themselves, they are also unwittingly bringing into question their own identity, since that identity is not so much characterised by negation as

dependent on it. The removal of the conditions under which negation may be perpetuated, destabilises self-definition. The whites' diminished sense of a coherent identity, which they diagnose as arising from 'the times' in the above passage, therefore indicates a nostalgic yearning for "a strong sense of privilege based on race" (Vickroy 45), a yearning which cannot be fulfilled. It is therefore the crisis of having to redefine their identity which provokes the settlers to violently resist accepting the birdman. Nonetheless, however much they reject the dawning realisation that their identity is unstable and in need of revision, they are both affronted and confronted by the black "son-of-a-bitch" who insists "on existing, unaware of the duties of his race" and whose "proper place" (33) is to be out of sight or invisible.

The racism inherent in this context indicates the residual colonial discourses which the settler parents forcibly attempt to transmit to their children. The children, however, resist assimilating this ideology, instead perceiving the birdman as a mystical figure enveloped by "a cloud of twitters," who fills their world with "sleepy melodies" and "stories" (31) – a description reminiscent of the Pied Piper of Hamelin, who enchanted both animals and children alike by playing his flute (Browning 10-96). The children's curiosity regarding the birdman and their consequent defiance of their parents are further emphasised by the symbolic parallel the narrative draws between them and the birds. As the narrator observes, when the birdman enters the neighbourhood, the birds "flood the street. Joyfulness was exchanged: the birds shouted and the children chirped" (31). The inversion of the verbs "shouted" and "chirped" suggests not only what Buxbaum refers to as an "interanimation" of the human and the non-human (2), but also the extent to which the children are like the birds, because they reject the constraints that necessarily accompany the racially exclusive discourse which informs their parents' perceptions.

Wendy Woodward argues that the prominence of birds, either as symbols or subjects, in Southern African narratives may best be read in relation to "the question of . . . voice so topical in postcolonial debate," more specifically, the voice of the "colonised subaltern subject" (241). In this regard, the correlation Couto's narrative draws between the birdman's marginality and his magical ability to attract birds and to entrance children is politically suggestive, in that the birds' melodies speak *for* the birdman. Although threatened by the birdman's very existence, the settlers are even more baffled by his feathered companions: "the Portuguese began to wonder: where in the name of magic did he get such miraculous creatures?" (33). And the narrator ironically muses, "might that black have a right to enter a world which was closed to [the whites] . . . Could it be that the birds were eroding the

residents' sense of self, turning *them* into foreigners? (33, emphasis added). The birds elicit both fascination and unease in the settlers; their ambivalent reaction suggests that the birds are harbingers of an unsettling of their social position, a position previously assigned with reference to racial distinctions. In other words, the mystical birds become the means through which the narrative gestures towards the need for a different set of socio-political coordinates. This is further evidenced by the fact that the birds are imbued with both agency and intentionality, in that they act autonomously and in defiance of social prescriptions – as, for example, when they rescue the birdman from the prison cell in which he has been incarcerated by the white residents. The birds' agency undermines their marginality and, by extension, that of the birdman with whom they are intrinsically associated. The world which is “closed” to the Portuguese but which embraces the birdman is also the world of nature, which the settlers have disowned the right to inhabit by virtue of their exploitation of the territory and its resources. Through their taming or domestication of the wild – “they themselves had already brought the most distant bushland to heel” (33) – the settlers have, in this sense, become agents of their own exclusion.

Unlike the birdman's birds, which are described as inhabiting cages that “didn't even look like a prison” but like “winged cages, cages that might fly away” (31), the children are subject to the authority and restrictions imposed by their parents, and are forbidden to play or interact with the birdman. This suggests a crucial contrast: the birdman's treatment of his birds is not characterised by a power differential between the dominant and the dominated, whereas the parents' treatment of their children is, to a large extent, motivated by a desire to control. For example, the narrator notes that, “determined to arrest [their children's] dreams, their tiny boundless souls,” the parents decree the street “out of bounds” (34), and forbid the children to go out, in an attempt to limit their access to and interaction with ‘the black’. The narrator's evocative description of the children's souls as both “tiny” and “boundless” again corresponds to the portrayal of the birds in the narrative – a parallel which foregrounds the children's relation to the natural world and a mystical or imaginative realm. In addition, the parents' attempt to contain the “boundless” by restricting the children's movements immediately imbues their homes with a prison-like quality. Indeed, the parents are offended not only by the birdman “overstepping himself,” but also by his influence on their children: “Even the children, thanks to his seduction, were forgetting their behaviour. They were becoming more like children of the street than of the home” (33). While the adults' fears derive from prejudice and a resistance to the freedom that accompanies the innocence of the imagination, the children's subsequent rebellion and defiance of their parents' authority arises

from a desire to be free – to be like the birds. Imagination is thus a precursor to the intimation and cultivation of alternative modes of being and of ‘being-in-common’ or intersubjectivity, modes which threaten the stringencies of a preconceived mode of discrimination and exclusion.

As indicated above, and as a consequence of the restraints imposed upon them, the children actively defy their parents’ authority. One little boy, Tiago, “more than all the others disobeyed and devoted himself to the mysterious birdman” (32). Tiago is presented as “a dreamy child, whose only gift was to pursue his fancy” (32); by virtue of his fanciful or visionary nature, he is more susceptible than most to the mystical aura surrounding the birdman. It is the unworldliness or otherworldliness Tiago recognises in the birdman which attracts him for, as the narrator notes, the birdman “did not come from a country called life” (31). The birdman’s unreal and ephemeral presence may be read as symbolic of the way in which the story reflexively critiques its own endeavour imaginatively to reconstruct the identity of marginalised. Moreover, it is because life, as Tiago knows it, is characterised by constraint that the birdman’s dreamlike quality presents him with the possibility of an alternative kind of existence, one which corresponds to his fancy. The kindred familiarity that exists between Tiago and the birdman thus signals the collapse of the very notion of difference instantiated by the adults’ racial discourse. Furthermore, the nature of Tiago and the birdman’s kinship is spiritual, and accordingly transcends the limitations placed upon it by an antagonistic socio-political climate.

As a mystical symbol closely connected to the birdman’s otherworldliness, the baobab tree in which he finds shelter is depicted as a repository of local history. The narrator reports that Tiago informs his parents that it is “a sacred tree. God planted it upside down” (32). The tree’s magically transformative potential, indicated by this inversion (it seemingly grows *into* the earth rather than out of it, its ‘roots’ substituting for branches), signifies a spiritual growth through the negation of what is deemed ‘natural’ in the material world. Tiago also tells his parents: “*The tree is capable of great sadness. The old men say that a baobab can commit suicide in despair by way of fire. Without anyone setting it alight*” (32), a description which anthropomorphises the tree through the attribution of the human emotions of sadness and despair. Moreover, its potential suicide in reaction to these emotions suggests its propensity towards death, a death by spontaneous combustion which, like the phoenix and *ndlati* bird, holds a latent potentiality of transformation or re-creation.

The anthropomorphisation of the baobab is symbolic of the manner in which the natural environment in this story figuratively weeps over the catastrophic state of affairs in

postcolonial Mozambique. These circumstances are particularly exemplified by the fact that Tiago's father and his neighbours collectively plot and carry out an assault on the birdman, who is subsequently imprisoned. Meanwhile, Tiago has followed the commotion, and witnessed the unprovoked attack. This sequence of events, which leads to the climax of the story, are encapsulated in the symbolic function of the baobab. When the settlers assault the birdman before arresting him, for example, "the flowers of the baobab fell like stars of felt. Their white petals turned red on the ground" (35). As this image illustrates, the physical violence directed at the birdman, who describes himself as "the natural offspring of the land" (35), causes the innocent spirits which inhabit the flowers to die. The red colour the petals assume not only suggest blood, but also the extent to which the destructiveness of human aggression is palpably re-enacted in the natural environment. Moreover, the quiet anguish of the petals' empathetic response, as was earlier suggested by the elders' tale of the baobab's suicidal self-combustion, indicates that the tree feels and suffers too. However, the pigmentation of the fallen flowers also foreshadows the appearance of the element of fire in the form of arson, and draws a direct parallel between this form of wanton destruction and the spilling of innocent blood. The image of the falling flowers thus epitomises Tiago's loss of innocence, a loss occasioned by his having witnessed extreme but unprovoked physical violence against the birdman, and the latter's suffering as a result.

Following the birdman's incarceration, Tiago stands dejectedly outside the prison playing the birdman's discarded flute, then falls asleep. Upon waking to find the birdman no longer in his cell (unbeknownst to him, the birdman has been rescued by a flock of birds), Tiago "decided to return to the tree. There was no longer any place where he might go. No street, nor house: only the baobab's belly" (37). Much like the children who are lured away from Hamelin by the Pied Piper because of the unjust treatment he has received from the adults of the town (Browning 96-7), Tiago is lured away from *his* home – both by his fascination with and concern for the birdman and as a result of the nonsensical violence he has witnessed his father and other neighbours commit. Above all, however, his decision to leave home is closely linked to his desire to abandon the material world he inhabits; thus, in a sense, he is actively seeking his own death. Significantly, in this regard, the association of the baobab's hollow trunk with a "belly" implies that the tree has maternal qualities and that Tiago is returning to the womb.

Tiago's abandonment of his earthly existence is similar to Azarias', primarily because they both meet their respective ends by fire. After the birdman's gaolers discover that he has escaped, like Tiago they assume that he has returned to his abode in the baobab, and set out in

a posse. Having reached the tree, in which Azarias and, presumably, the birdman have taken refuge, their “vengeful steps . . . crush[] the flowers underfoot” (37), and they proceed to set the baobab alight. The narrator then describes Tiago’s death and transformation into the parts of a tree: “the flames licked the ancient bark. Inside, the boy had unleashed a dream: his hair was growing into tiny leaves, his legs into timber. His wooden fingers dug rootlike into the soil” (37). The correlation the narrator draws between the boy’s death and the release of his dream of arborescence confirms the notion that the boy’s corporeal existence imprisons his true form, which is here transmuted.

The final passage in the story, which describes the culmination of Tiago’s transmogrification, is characterised by a dialogical interplay between the real and the fantastic, and by the ways in which the central characters and symbols of the story – the birdman, Tiago, the baobab, birds, flowers, dreaming and fire – are conflated:

The boy was in transit to another realm: he was turning into a tree, consenting to the impossible. And from the dreaming baobab, there rose the birdman’s hands. They touched the flowers, the corollas curled: monstrous birds were born and released, petal-like, on the crest of the flames. (37)

This moment of crisis, in which the baobab, the birdman (who seems to have been hiding in the tree), and the child are destroyed by fire *and* reborn in a transcendent realm, is figuratively enacted by the eruption of “monstrous birds,” which signify the release of the violence underpinning the postcolonial Mozambican setting. The birds are therefore directly a consequence of the settlers’ torches setting fire to the baobab and its occupant, and of the tree’s irrevocable anguish when confronted with atrocity and wilful destruction, both of nature and the bonds of human intersubjectivity. They are also an expression of fury at the atrocity of the accidental killing of a whimsical, innocent child and the intentional murder of the harmless birdman. However, the emergence of the birdman’s hands, like branches, from the “dreaming” baobab conveys a gesture of hope and resilience and an image of renewal and regeneration through fire, conjuring the natural processes by which flames and ash, much like the landmine explosions in “The Day Mabata-bata Exploded,” give rise to new growth.

Of this fire, the narrator exclaims:

The flames? Where were they coming from, invading the remotest frontier of the dream world? That was when Tiago felt the sting of the blaze, the seduction of ash. Then the boy, a convert to the ways of the sap, emigrated once and for all to his newfound roots. (37)

As this passage illustrates, the fire ‘invades’ the sanctity of the dream world, and literally kills the young boy who has chosen to be that world’s custodian. The “seduction of ash” – the

desire to abandon his corporeal form – is premised on Tiago’s rejection of a material world which, because it is marked by violence, threatens and constricts the world of the imagination. This rejection, however, signifies his acceptance of a death which provides him with an arboreal identity more congruent with his spirit – with “newfound roots”. The destruction of the tree thus reflects the failure of the imagination of the earthbound who, motivated by prejudice, are unable to transcend the strictures imposed upon them and to recognise the interanimation of the human and natural worlds, of the real and the fantastical, and children’s receptiveness to the mystical.

The use of children as vehicles to expound notions of intersubjectivity and responsibility in both “The Day Mabata-Bata Exploded” and “The Bird-Dreaming Baobab” serves to amplify the need for revision, healing, and survival in post-traumatic, postcolonial Mozambique. Azarias and Tiago’s rejection of the legacy of violence in this society, as symbolised by their abandonment of their corporeal existences, implies that the material realm is characterised by an unbearable and yet inescapable hostility which threatens life itself. Nevertheless, as Long-Innes notes with regards to Couto’s oeuvre, “one of the major challenges of literature and art is . . . located in the *invisibility* of . . . crisis, how to make *visible* in words that which seems impossibly beyond their reach” (179). The endings of these stories thus gesture towards that which cannot be articulated, and that which eludes the coordinates by which adults distinguish fantasy from reality.

Conclusion

In an interview about poetics and the act of writing, the South African author and scholar, J.M. Coetzee, maintains that, in Africa, “the only address one can imagine is a brutally direct one, a sort of pure, unmediated representation; what short-circuits the imagination, what forces one’s face into the thing itself, is what I am here calling history” (68). The task of the writer in this context, he goes on to say, “becomes imagining this unimaginable” (68). My reading of fictional representations of trauma in the African context, and the representational difficulties inherent in such writing, has been centrally concerned with the ethical commitment of literature on this continent, that is, its effort to do justice to a legacy of *injustice*. This legacy is most obvious in the traumatic socio-political backgrounds which inform each of the stories I have analysed. However, their respective emphases on specifically *child* protagonists’ interpretations and subjective responses to the turmoil and suffering they experience as a result, entails a particularly demanding act of the imagination, on the part of both the (adult) author and reader, since “trauma [is] an indicator of social injustice or oppression, as the ultimate cost of destructive sociocultural institutions” (Vickroy x) . In line with Coetzee’s argument, these stories thus illustrate the irresolvable tension between literature’s ethical commitment and its representational capacity to “imagine the unimaginable,” more especially where children are the victims and focalisers of the trauma concerned. In this concluding section, I wish briefly to compare and contrast the ways in which the stories’ endings retroactively interrogate their very ability to represent experiences that are beyond language. Though they achieve this erasure of their own conditions of being in different ways, they all similarly falter on the point of closure and resolution – as, in a sense, they must.

With regards to narrative, as previously discussed, trauma presents itself as a phenomenon that overwhelms language and thereby representation itself. It follows that, where narrative mode is concerned, the use of social realism – until recently the dominant mode in African writing – has had to contend with the contingency of trauma’s resistance to representation, and has therefore had to devise alternative means to intimate – but not represent – the *aporia* that is trauma. Thus, for example, while NoViolet Bulawayo’s “Hitting Budapest” is seemingly a direct, present-tense account, in a naturalistic setting, of a plausible escapade undertaken by the protagonist, Darling, and her friends, the narrative undermines its ostensible transparency through a number of strategies. These include the unconscious ironies which result from its being focalised by a child, ironies which undermine her ‘authority’ as a

narrator, and the fact that it is saturated with symbolic meanings and namings which alert the reader to its implied author's critique of the efficacy of language – and, more specifically, the language of humanitarianism, human rights, and philanthropy. This critique is extended by the story's introduction of a reflexivity with regards to representations of Africa and Africans – particularly photographic images, but also, implicitly, its own – which then positions the reader uncomfortably as a consumer of such representations, and raises ethical questions in regard to his/her *own* implicatedness. Ultimately, the story attests to both the vulnerability and resilience of the children involved, and asks the reader to interrogate/re-evaluate his/her response. The closing episode, in which the children steal the shoes from a dead woman's corpse in order to trade them for some bread, is particularly striking in this regard, since it amplifies the gravity of the children's need *and* demonstrates their resourcefulness in a context characterised by extreme poverty – a context in which survival overrules scruples. Moreover, as the anticipated sale of the shoes and purchase of the bread are not depicted in the narrative itself, Bulawayo's closing description of the children running and laughing, in what seems to be both excitement and fear, is profoundly thought-provoking. It signals the possibility that the children's hunger will not (ever) be satiated: since there is no indication of what they are running towards, the action captures a hope or desire which might be thwarted at any moment. Indeed, the symbolism in the story has conveyed an overriding pessimism with regard to the children's future prospects. Trauma's resistance to language is thus revealed through the narrative's reliance on structural and symbolic ironies which are beyond the child-narrator's grasp and left to the implied reader to intuit.

In my opening chapter I proposed that trauma fiction, specifically in the African context, is the locus upon which historiography, public and private memory converge. An obvious example of this nexus is found in Uwem Akpan's "My Parents' Bedroom", which is also focalised and narrated by a pre-pubescent child, but presented in the past tense. While set against the backdrop of the historical trauma of the Rwandan genocide, the story itself focuses on the annihilation of a particular family, and the children, Monique and Jean's struggle to comprehend witnessing the forced slaying of their mother by their father and the subsequent death of the latter. The story ends with the destruction of the family home, and the children, having narrowly escaped certain death themselves, are left stranded and homeless in the wilderness of an apocalyptic setting which visibly reflects nonsensical violence on an unimaginable scale. The narrator's closing mantra, "we want to live; we don't want to die" (289), echoes the reality confronting the children at the end of Bulawayo's story, and asserts a similar mixture of vulnerability and the instinct to survive. Akpan's narrative is also

similarly open-ended: an escape which both is and is not an escape, since the trauma of the immediate present will torment the children's future. "My Parents' Bedroom" personalises the experiences of a multitude of children during the Rwandan genocide. In narrativising the historical facts, it humanises the atrocity, but it presents the reader with an unforgettably haunting closing image which speaks to an unimaginable reality.

In an interview about trauma, the South African novelist and literary academic, Zöe Wicomb, draws a correlation between South African trauma fiction and Holocaust and slave narratives. Of Toni Morrison's notion of re-memory in her novel, *Beloved*, Wicomb observes:

It records the tragic event and the struggle to represent it, but whilst it is an act of remembering, the novel is also about the importance of forgetting; whilst the story is about healing, it negates at the same time the possibility of healing . . . In other words [Morrison] problematizes our received view of memory and narrative; memory is also bound up with forgetting. (19)

As with mourning, in trauma fiction concerned with testimony, the possibility of a future "is contingent on being able to transform a surplus of yesterdays . . . into *some kind of story*" (Durrant 8). In Akpan's "Fattening for Gabon," the narrator-focaliser Kotchikpa's account of his trauma is caught in this interface between remembering and forgetting, where forgetting, paradoxically, depends on remembering. It is thus remembering the trauma which is problematised by Kotchikpa's account, since the possibility of healing is constantly deferred as the narrative voice attempts to recover that which eludes him. The word "re-member" implies putting together or assembling, and could thus be regarded as the opposite of "dis-member". "Dismemberment" not only recalls the images of corpses, blood, and death in both Bulawayo's "Hitting Budapest" and Akpan's "My Parents' Bedroom," but also goes hand in hand with trauma and the inability to 're-member' in "Fattening for Gabon". The sexual violations perpetrated against Chipso and Monique are, in a sense, acts of dismemberment because they violate notions of the body and subjectivity as whole and complete. Recalling trauma therefore *must* be an attempt to re-member a dis-membered subjectivity. In "Fattening for Gabon" it is significant that Kotchikpa says he could never "outrun" rather than "forget" Yewa's wailing, since this suggests that he is being endlessly pursued by the sound. His 'escape' is thus physical, not emotional or psychological, since the trauma will never leave him. As Langer contends, the survivor "does not travel a road from the bizarre back to the normal, but from normal to bizarre back to a normalcy so permeated by the bizarre . . . that it can never be purified again" (119).

As has been established, trauma is an unfathomable wound to the psyche which is experienced as the sublime, that is, the inexpressible or unrepresentable. In the interview cited earlier, and speaking in the midst of South Africa's collective trauma of Apartheid, for instance, Coetzee aptly points out that "there is now too much truth for art to hold, truth by the bucketful, truth that overwhelms and swamps every act of the imagination" (99). The two stories I have analysed by Mia Couto – "The Day Mabata-bata Exploded" and "The Bird-Dreaming Baobab" – illustrate the distinctive impression made by atrocity and a ubiquitous trauma on cultural production itself. 'Truth', when taken to refer to the impact of a legacy of civil unrest and violence on both the material, lived realities and the psychological wellness of Mozambican citizens, as represented in Couto's fictions, is paradoxically both revealed *and* concealed by the mystical, that which resides beyond the realm of rationality and the known. The endings of both stories are particularly evocative and impressionistic, since they illustrate the ways in which Couto compensates for the irrecoverability of atrocity and the representational difficulties inherent in such recovery by interfusing the fantastical and the material realms, and the human and natural worlds. This magical realism imbues the narratives with a suggestiveness they would not otherwise have. Both Azarias and Tiago's violent deaths would be meaningless, essentially confirming a sense of the futility, helplessness and hopelessness of life in contemporary Mozambique, were it not for the transformative and mystical energy of the natural world which, in both cases, forms a gateway to the fantastical and transcendental. It is in this revision of the effects of civil war on the collective imagination of Mozambican citizens that Couto gestures at the fact that "trauma lies beyond the bounds of 'normal' conception" (Tal 15), and thus requires alternative 'sense'-making mechanisms in fiction.

In highlighting each author's engagement with the impossibility of directly representing trauma, I have attempted to identify the strategies they employ to attempt to transcend the limitations imposed upon fiction by the very nature of this phenomenon. I have also outlined the effect of using a child's perspective to uncover the paradoxes which lie at the very heart of trauma itself – more specifically, in the social, economic and political legacy of the postcolonial African context from which these short stories emerge. At the very beginning of my thesis, I used, as an epigraph, a quote from Gikandi, who argues that the function of African literature is as "an instrument that . . . imagines alternative configurations of our 'real histories' either to affirm or transcend them" (2). In similar vein, Gaylard maintains that:

Postcolonialists attempt to imagine new narratives so as not to become victim to narrative conventions. Whatever type of narrative is invented or chosen, its form is likely to be characterised by the urge to confound a naturalising logic and a linear time, an urge underlying the quest for both dystopian destruction and utopian creation. (112)

In light of these statements, I believe that Bulawayo, Akpan and Couto's stories reveal a growing trend in narratives arising from this continent which attempt to document and engage the reader in ethical issues surrounding the subjective experience of African children. These narratives compensate for the invisibility of crisis by evoking symbolism involving the body and abjection. Indeed, the open-ended conclusions of the stories are particularly significant because they imply the inconclusiveness of both the children's futures (which are not foreclosed upon) and African fiction's potential to engage the reader in an ethical dialogue with the text and, ultimately, with an all-too-intimate reality.

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