

4

No words for violence? *Song for Night*

I don't know how long I die. But I think I die for very very long time.
Ken Saro-Wiwa, *Sozaboy*

Narratives are the bastard children of war – the indirect and necessary products of violence.

Dinaw Mengestu, 'Children of war'

In the early 2000s a number of narratives centred on child-soldier figures involved in African civil conflicts began to be published by writers from Africa and the African diaspora.¹ Chris Abani's *Song for Night* (2007) is one of these 'bastard children of war', as the Ethiopian-American novelist Dinaw Mengestu calls them: stories that are 'long overdue and desperately needed' because, in the absence of narrative voice, 'we are left only with anecdotes, body counts and haunting images that we can never fully explain. Africa has had enough of these.'² In his second novella³ Abani intervenes critically in the process of giving 'voice' to the experience of boys and girls in civil wars, and takes on a similar challenge to the one posed by sex workers in human trafficking, to which he responded by telling the story of Abigail (Chapter 3). Eschewing numbers and media-like representations, the author focuses on a single boy's experience and his own coming to terms with killing and life loss (including his own). His representation of the child soldier as a killer and, at the same time, as a moral subject in the making is aimed at countering images of child soldiers in Africa that are powerful but have problematic effects in the West: although they are useful in order to focus attention on the violence of the numerous conflicts of the continent, these images also echo the colonial

perception of Africa as a dark place populated by innocents who are not responsible for their own action or destiny. Abani works against this view, posing a disturbing question about human nature. As his child soldier observes: 'If we are the great innocents in this war, then where did we learn all the evil we practice? I have seen rebel scouts cut off their enemies' ears or fingers or toes and keep them in tin cans as souvenirs. Some collect teeth, which they thread painstakingly into necklaces. Who taught us this? Who taught me to enjoy killing, a singular joy that is perhaps rivaled only by an orgasm?' (*SN*, 133).

To tackle such harrowing questions, the novella challenges the rules of mimesis and the conventions of literary realism in favour of experimental modes of expression and representation. Perhaps the most relevant trait of Abani's writing about child soldiers is his innovative take on the question of 'narrative voice' put by Mengestu: he does give a speaking platform to his young character, who can thus narrate war from his own personal viewpoint, but at the same time he severs his vocal cords. The complexity of this choice is reflected in a narrative that forces the limits of spoken and written communication across different languages (English/Igbo), and requires the reader to 'hear' and take in, through an act of telepathic attunement, the ghostly voice of a boy who joins a fighting platoon at twelve and, when he starts to tell his story three years later, is already dead. The initial address to the reader or listener problematises the question of communication as speech, and is key to one of the main themes of the text, drawing attention to 'relationality', specifically during and after the violence of war.

My Luck, the first-person narrator of the story, is a shell-shocked child soldier wandering in a surreal landscape after being separated from his platoon during a mine blast. His search for lost comrades constitutes the basic storyline of the text which, however, presents a highly fragmented non-linear structure, in tune with the fragmentation caused by the explosion of the landmine and its severe impact on the memory of the concussed child leader of the military unit. The first narrative line is frequently interrupted by flashbacks referring to the character's childhood before the onset of hostilities and in the early stages of the war, and it is in these temporal digressions, which disclose My Luck's personal experiences and

inner life, that the narrative increasingly finds its main focus and *raison d'être*. As My Luck wanders through the war-ridden wilderness of an unnamed African country, both the reader and the child narrator gradually come to realise that this is a mythical and metaphysical journey of self-discovery, forcing him to face the desires, fears, shame, and guilt he has experienced as a boy soldier. Unlike child-soldier stories such as Uzodinma Iweala's *Beasts of No Nation* or Chimamanda Adichie's *Half of a Yellow Sun*, which end with the possibility for the no-longer-innocent child to go back to the social world after the end of the war – thus turning the narrative into a fictional process of *Bildung* and development into social citizenship⁴ – *Song for Night* does not contemplate this way out. It is rather a failed coming-of-age story or, as My Luck realises, a grotesque parody of coming-of-age: 'I have never been a boy. That was stolen from me and I will never be a man – not this way. I am some kind of chimera who knows only the dreadful intimacy of killing' (*SN*, 133). My Luck is given no possibility of rejoining his lost platoon, and his journey ends when he is reunited with his mother in death.

As an early reviewer observes, the child is a disposable human being, having been trained as a minesweeper and 'specifically in the art of dying as quietly and anonymously as possible'.⁵ He dies on the battlefield without even realising it at first, and it is no wonder that, while searching for his lost platoon, he is often mistaken for a spirit. As the story unfolds, he encounters other ghosts and figures of the living dead: 'Here we believe that when a person dies in a sudden and hard way, their spirit wanders confused looking for its body. Confused because they don't realize they are dead. I know this. Traditionally a shaman would ease such a spirit across to the other world. Now, well, the land is crowded with confused spirits and all the shamans are soldiers' (*SN*, 99). Hit by the explosion of a mine, My Luck dies in such a 'sudden and hard way' and he is in fact one of these confused spirits. Eventually he finds his own shaman, an old man called Peter who appears 'like a lifeboat' (*SN*, 101) to help him on his journey – not back to 'life', but to recover a sense of cultural belonging, of connection to and responsibility for others (according to a vision of responsible connectedness to all that lives and to what lives on in memory) before he acknowledges his own

death. To do this he has to start a backward-moving journey: 'I am retracing my steps through places we passed. Something is off about it though, and yet as much as it is nagging at me, I cannot pinpoint what it is exactly, but I know it has something to do with the chronology of my memories' (SN, 46–7). At one point of this journey he realises that 'something is keeping me here' (SN, 55) and that he is 'mostly moving from one scene of past trauma to another, the distances between them, though vast, have collapsed the span of a thought, and my platoon is ever elusive. I am thoroughly confused' (SN, 137).

The sound of silence

'What you hear is not my voice', My Luck says at the beginning of *Song for Night*. 'I have not spoken in three years: not since I left boot camp' (SN, 9). Part of the practices concerning mine defusers in the army he has joined is to take away the child soldiers' voices, so that they may not scare each other with their death screams and avoid any risky distraction from their job. Bereft of language, the children experience the horror around them as an inner sound blast: 'in the silence of our heads, the screams of those dying around us were louder than if they still had their voices' (SN, 25). To replace lost speech they invent a sign language – a highly meaningful meta-language which, as Francesca Giommi points out, becomes 'a tool of resistance and self-assertion [...] more powerful than any human verbal language'.⁶ The children's sign language in fact structures the text itself. It can be said that what we hear in the opening section is actually the sound of 'silence', speech having been replaced by bodily gestures. The title of the section, 'Silence is a steady hand, palm flat', seems to be an injunction for the reader to stop and listen, while *silencio*, the Spanish word for silence the soldiers use in situations of real danger, encourages an even 'deeper silence' and, therefore, deeper listening (SN, 10). Having created silence around and within the reader or listener, so that she or he may meet the maimed child soldier on the same ground, the story may begin.

The words in the titles of the thirty-six sections of the novella repeatedly foreground parts of the body (hands, eyes, fingers,

fingertips, cheeks, ears, palms, nose, thumbs, head, face, forearms, arms, chin, heart) and signal that the children's sign code is connected pragmatically to their physical survival: 'Our job is too intense for idle chatter' (*SN*, 10). At the same time the linguistic use of the body and its performativity in the titles, as they accumulate in My Luck's narration, shapes the narrative and is mostly responsible for the poetic creativity of *Song for Night*. Abani employs lyric and hybridises the prose narrative, because multiple forms of expression are needed to begin to 'say' the unspeakable horrors of war. The musicality of the headings of the sections – 'Memory is a pattern cut into an arm', 'Dawn is two hands parting before a face', 'Love is a backhanded stroke to the cheek' – divide the narrative flow via a deliberate poetics, employing classical techniques of parallelism and chiasmus that call attention to the lyrical elements within the prose. The titles, Alexandra Schultheis Moore and Elizabeth Swanson Goldberg point out, are one manifestation of the deeper human syntax for which Abani searches in his literary and ethical exploration, 'a language desperately inscribed on and expressed through the body after the voice has literally been cut off'.⁷

The 'translation' of the children's sign language into poetic words is a product of the 'interior monologue' that erupts from 'the interiority of the head' of the child soldier, as 'there is something about the mind's interiority no less that opens up your view of the world. It is a curious place to live and makes you deep beyond your years and familiar with death' (*SN*, 11). Far from being basic or limited to military actions, it is a highly sophisticated expressive means and resembles one of the 'languages of life' that Mbembe talks about in *On the Postcolony*: languages that contain a whole 'life world' which 'is not only the field where individuals' existence unfolds in practice; it is where they exercise existence – that is, live their lives out and confront the very forms of their death'.⁸ The communicative strategy by which we can hear the child soldier's language of life is the challenge of 'gain[ing] access' to his head (*SN*, 11). This complicates the status of the written text as well as of the sign language, which are somehow asked to 'disappear' or move into the background when a different – psychic or spiritual – form of communication between the child soldier and his 'listeners' starts. From the point of view of narrative efficacy,

this seems an unlikely strategy, but, alongside invoking the close attention and proximity of the reader or listener, it addresses the question of the author's presence in the text, pointing to Abani's desire not to 'ventriloquize' the child soldier's state of abjection, as he explains in an interview:

I chose to give him no voice because children, and particularly children like him, always have others speaking for them. I chose to take away his voice to force the reader into a visceral journey with him rather than the spectacle of watching his suffering. I chose to take away his voice to force myself to not be able to take credit for speaking for him, or others in such situations. I took away his voice because it has been a practice in certain wars. I took away his voice so the readers couldn't speak for him and thus distance themselves.⁹

The writer expresses his desire to move away from a long-standing novel tradition, initiated by Daniel Defoe at the beginning of the eighteenth century, in which the master-I-narrator Robinson ventriloquises his black servant Friday, to produce the acceptable image of the 'good' native, servant, or subaltern. A similar critique informs the South African author J. M. Coetzee's rewriting of *Robinson Crusoe*, one of the most enduring master narratives of colonial Europe's taking possession of the world during and after the age of great discoveries. His *Foe* (1986) is a 'novella' about the complexities of imposing one's own story and one's own assumptions upon a radical other that ultimately not only remains inaccessible but also refuses to be written about. Coetzee's Friday does not speak and will never speak because his tongue appears to have been cut off by his capturers – an amputation that, similarly to My Luck's severed vocal cords, prevents 'voice' and oral communication. He is thus a question mark, a black hole in the narrative, which the woman who takes him to London to have his story written is unable to fill and that Daniel Foe, the writer figure, will turn (not in Coetzee's fiction but historically) into a properly domesticated voice.

However, if speechless Friday and speechless My Luck share a life of silence and subalternity, Abani tackles the problem of representation in a way that moves contrary to the (white) South African author's. He takes on the risk of giving justice to the boy soldier, he is ready to face the 'impossibility of representation' that he poses,

by refusing to mimic a character who is far beyond mimesis, and by giving him a distinctive voice. Connected to this risky project is the highly worldly and literary English of his character's interior monologue, which actually goes on in Igbo in the child's head. Unlike what happens in Ken Saro-Wiwa's *Sozaboy* or Uzodinma Iweala's *Beasts of No Nation*, where the boy soldiers speak in 'rotten English' (Saro-Wiwa) or a kind of experimental literary pidgin (Iweala), My Luck, as a wandering spirit, freely uses an artificial and adult dreamlike language, so capacious as to include literary and historical references, as well as a nonchalant comparison to Robinson Crusoe (*SN*, 55). As the result of a series of acts of translation and transmission, the speech that we finally hear reaches out to a global readership, in tune with Abani's intention of unmooring the narrative and letting its critical message loose upon the world.¹⁰ My Luck regains his speaking voice at the very end of the novel when he is reunited with his mother. This post-mortem embrace closes the narrative arc of the boy's odyssey and opens to a number of inspired critical readings. Among them I would like to single out the interpretations which see My Luck's completed journey and monologue as Abani's critique of a politics of wholeness, authenticity, and purity, which dovetails neatly with the text's formal features and representation strategies, and allows an analysis of the stigma connected to sexuality and gender in relation to the child soldier.¹¹

Of particular interest are also interventions that highlight the text's creative engagement with a postcolonial discourse about (African) life after necropolitics and its attempt to reduce the human to bare life.¹² Arguing that 'the discourse of biopolitics misses a whole dimension of both postcolonial resistance as well as its aftermaths', critics appropriately ask what comes after the nightmare of colonial domination and postcolonial conflicts: 'What is the after? The after is full of emotions, affects, and modes of being not credited in the analytics of power, violence, biopolitics, and devastation. From the perspective of the colonized, one cannot afford to stop hoping or believing.'¹³ This is a perspective that *Song for Night* invites us to think about and build on.

Wandering through a desolate dark forest devastated by war (registering the impact of violence on the environment), My Luck sadly considers that much of the generation surviving the war will

not be able to rebuild their communities because many of the parts won't add up. Wherever he turns, he encounters disfigured creatures, madmen, ruined children with 'bulbous heads pendulous over hunger-distended bellies with eyes washed out like the earth here' (SN, 80), and women missing body parts. Unbelievably however, all of them are holding on to life and hope, all of them want to survive beyond the aftermath of war. The 'after', for Abani, includes the life force of irrepressible childhood that claims its future, and the power of young (female) bodies disabled by war that relearn how to dance with others. A passage from the novella gestures towards the emergence of postwar, post-traumatic identities through the image of a little girl:

There were a bunch of disabled children dancing in a circle. A young girl with one leg standing off to the side leaning on a stick made fun of the dancers. Challenged to do better, she laughed, threw the stick away, and jumped into the circle. She stood still for a moment as though she was getting her bearings, and then she began to move. Still balanced on one leg, her waist began a fierce gyration and her upper body moved the opposite way. Then like a crazy heron, she began to hop around, her waist and torso still shaking. She was an elemental force of nature. I couldn't keep my eyes off her. I have never seen anything like it before or since – a small fire sprite shaking the world and reducing grown war-hardened onlookers to tears. (SN, 40–1)

Abani seems to imply that histories of trauma, whether individual or national, *must* shake the world, and cannot be repressed or recuperated through normalisation: 'they must become the source of transformation, and a new politics, a new dance' in which, Brenna Munro stresses, 'damage is honored rather than stigmatized'.¹⁴ This new dance and new politics will honour bodily damage, gender damage, and the psychic damage coming from the violent interruption of childhood and intergenerational caesuras. There is always hope, My Luck says, even in the middle of war: 'I remember a group I saw once. Children without arms or legs or both, men with only half a face, women with shrapnel-chewed scars for breasts – all of them holding onto life and hope with a fire that burned feverishly in their eyes. If any light comes from this war, it will come from eyes such as those' (SN, 40).

More specifically, hope in *Song for Night* comes from the persistence of love – mother love, erotic love – and from fragmented, foggy memories of one's own cultural identity, such as the 'tall tale' or 'legend' about the 'lake in the middle of the world' which, My Luck's grandfather explains, is the heart of the Igbo people.

'This lake is love. If you find it [...] you can climb it into the very heart of God,' he said.

'Where is this lake, Grandfather?'

He tapped me on the breastbone.

'Here. It is at the center of you, because you are the world.'

'How will I find it?'

He taught me a song. We sang it over and over, together, for the rest of the night until I couldn't tell where his voice ended and mine began, and where mine ended and the river began and where the river ended and my blood began. But I have forgotten that song. (*SN*, 63–4)

The prewar culture stresses a communion between generations, between the souls of human beings, of nature and the cosmos that, as we gather from My Luck's forgetting the song, has gone lost during the war. Still, the narrative suggests that some (other) vision of community is necessary for future healing. That is why My Luck's forgotten song and the crazy-heron little girl and 'fire sprite' inspire Sam Durrant's 'Mbembean' reading of *Song for Night* as an exemplary instance of 'spirit-writing' – a writing that 'reancestralizes' the world through multiple acts of association or accompaniment of creatures inhabiting the same damaged planet, across different times and physical or spiritual states:

it is not simply that nonhuman animals have souls too, but that they might have *our* souls. Not that we all have identical souls, but that, as My Luck discovers afloat on the River Cross, we cannot say where 'our' souls end and 'theirs' begin. Our soulfulness, our resistance to the deanimating forces of necropolitical modernity, depends on the remembrance of our relationality, our crossing, or what Herman Melville once termed our 'mortal inter-indebtedness'.¹⁵

For Durrant the possibility of life beyond necropolitics depends on the ability to acknowledge an expanded idea of 'ancestry or filiation'.¹⁶

I will go back to this point and also to other outstanding critical readings in the following sections of this chapter. For now I would just like to note that the reception of *Song for Night* has been remarkably insightful right from its publication, and that interest on the part of literary scholars has given rise to a suggestive body of criticism, which includes discussions of its genre and formal features, its connections to other child soldiers narratives, allegorical postcolonial readings, trauma and gender studies readings, psychological and ethical analyses, assessments of the role of the child in literature, as well as the novella's position in relation to current debates over human-rights-oriented approaches to literature and child soldiers in human rights discourse.¹⁷

Fucked watches, hybrid spaces, river crossings

Song for Night, which an early review defines as 'part *Inferno*, part *Paradise Lost* and part *Sundiata Epic*',¹⁸ troubles conventional expectations concerning the categories of space and time that, as this study shows, are central to Abani's work. All the physical and temporal settings of his fiction – slumping Lagos, peripheral London, fighting Igboland, suburban Los Angeles, Apartheid Johannesburg, the radiating Nevada desert – influence the characters' understandings of their present and their possibilities for the future. But temporal and spatial dimensions are mostly conveyed, with varying degrees of abstraction, through the protagonists' sense of their own ambiguous positionings. In *Song for Night* both time and space are very loose co-ordinates, and My Luck is in fact lost. The unnamed death-ridden war zones he traverses are fictional battlefields of an ongoing struggle for survival, which at first appear to be outside any recognisable history and location. This is certainly because My Luck reconstructs them in his head and with a silent voice that gives an otherworldly quality to his perceptions of where and when his experiences occur. Moreover, abstraction from reality is part of Abani's aims of foregrounding this story about children involved in killing, raping, looting as an expression of the extreme insanity of any (African) war. He confirms that the setting 'is meant to be non nation-specific. It is region-specific. It's

West Africa.¹⁹ Distance from the specifics of a recognisable conflict has the power to transcend the local while encompassing it at the same time; by presenting war as a potential pandemic, it brings attention to the global relevance of the issues addressed. Finally, abstraction is also motivated by Abani's attempt to re-enchant life after war, which turns My Luck's silent narrative into a song that illuminates the darkness of night.

The author never mentions the name of the country in which his novella takes place, although its setting is clearly a Nigerian one, nor does he erase the historicity of the events he fictionalises, but rather reinvents contexts that are historically and socially recognisable. Eleni Coundouriotis correctly states that the lack of historical specifics in the novella suggests 'the kind of flattening out of time that occurs in memory where the past is part of the present consciousness'.²⁰ However, *Song for Night* is not as temporally or geographically unspecific as she suggests. The text refers clearly to an Igbo geographical and cultural setting and to events connected to the Nigerian Civil War of 1967–70. An entire section of the novella revolves around a legend of the Igbo (*SN*, 59–64); there are allusions to 'progroms against the Igbos' (*SN*, 83); a racist joke involving Igbo, Yoruba, and Hausa construction workers (*SN*, 81); a reference to a new area in the Muslim north of Nigeria called 'Sabon Gari', meaning the infidel's quarter (*SN*, 86); and to the River Cross, the main watercourse in south-eastern Nigeria. The fact that Abani also includes 'references to Lexus cars' or *Star Wars* does not constitute sufficient evidence to claim that 'it cannot be Biafra in 1967'.²¹ *Song for Night* remains a loose artistic reinvention of a Nigerian historical moment, which the reader is invited to move beyond and extend both temporally and spatially. Abani's song thus resonates locally and globally, historically and allegorically, physically and metaphysically.²²

Fucked watches

My Luck has a difficult relationship with time. It slips away and he is obsessed by his inability to keep it. At the beginning of the story he provides information about the time of his fighting in the war, his age, Ijeoma's age, and her death 'a year ago' – but these

temporal references are not anchored chronologically and fail to communicate a clear timeline of the events.

I have not spoken in three years: not since I left boot camp. It has been three years of a senseless war [...]. It is a strange place to be at fifteen, bereft of hope and very nearly of your humanity [...] I joined up at twelve [...] If you are anything like Ijeoma you will say that I sound too old for my age. She always said that: said, because although her name in Igbo means Good Life, she died young, a year ago, aged fourteen. (*SN*, 9–10)

Though temporal phrases multiply, the positioning of characters and events in time remains vague and, as observed in a critical contribution on *Song for Night's* 'trauma aesthetics', the intrusive yet ambiguous temporal markers 'betray anxiety' and prelude to a growing detachment of the character/narrator from shared conventions of time-keeping.²³

Early in the text we find My Luck's own explanation of this temporal disorientation, which he ascribes to his muteness: 'I am better versed at the interior monologue that is really the measure of age, of the passage of time' (*SN*, 11). Lack of speech turns temporality into a purely subjective dimension, disconnected from conventional (and social) ways of 'measuring' time. The violent severance of his vocal cords is the trauma of voicelessness that My Luck, in his sign language, equates to death in the section describing the violent surgery the child soldiers undergo at the training camp: 'Death is two fingers sliding across the throat' (*SN*, 21). The silencing of the organ of speech – that permits 'voice' as individual expression and agency within social forms of interaction – is a mutilation also of his sense of time and severs him from temporal organisation and the linear progression of past, present, and future. He is aware that time eludes him, and thinks 'some kind of calendar' may be useful to keep track of the passing days (*SN*, 27). Though at a later stage of the narrative he invokes Robinson Crusoe as a reference for his isolation and fear in the tropical forest, he will never follow Defoe's character's example of marking time, consequently losing 'all sense of time' (*SN*, 104). Psychologically the child soldier turns inward and time stands still, just like his 'fucked' Timex wristwatch.

The symbolic presence in the narrative of My Luck's 'most treasured possession' (SN, 44) elaborates on the question of inner and outer temporal frames. The boy is deeply attached to the once golden-plated watch that belonged to his father and that his Uncle let him inherit, presumably because it was 'already broken' (SN, 43). The value of the object, denoting the connection between father and son, is clearly affective, while its time-keeping function is irrelevant:

The watch has one of those expanding bracelets made of a metal that was painted gold once, and its face is a mottled brown. Since I've had it, the second and hour hands have fallen off, both nestling like tired armatures in the bottom of the cracked glass case. My life it turns out is a series of minutes. I glance and *guess* it's about noon now. (SN, 43, my emphasis)

The useless watch reveals nothing about time: it leaves My Luck 'guessing' the time of day, and its progressive deterioration parallels the distancing of the boy from the time of the living. His perplexing subjective temporality is reflected in episodes that unhinge the narrative itself, because sometimes time stops and other times it runs too fast, as when My Luck tries to catch up with his platoon by riding a train, but when he gets off years have passed in what felt like seconds:

When I turn back to look at the station, by some trick of the light the train has rusted over, the station fallen into ruin, and the bombed-out track coiled in on itself like spaghetti and covered in vegetation that crawls everywhere in a rush of green. I know it can't be true though, I just came from there. Mirages are common here, I think, shaking it off. (SN, 139)

Such hallucinatory experiences, Hamish Dalley comments, undermine 'the hope that a universal dating system could contain My Luck's memories. *Song for Night* is thus "coiled in on itself" like the ruined railway line, refusing to project an integrating temporality that would mediate its contradictory sociocultural spaces'.²⁴ The time of the mind does not obey any rules and reminds us that My Luck is a ghost moving through liminal temporal and spatial dimensions in search for much more than his fellow mine defusers.

In his interior monologue the collapse of temporality as a collective exercise coincides with the manifestation of unruly and individual psychic or spiritual states that also transform outer perceptions of 'the real'. At the same time it is the precondition for renewed kinds of connections with the spiritual/magical dimensions that the narrative foregrounds.

Hybrid spaces

Any analysis of the category of space apart from the category of time may appear nonsensical, but what follows is closely connected to the previous section and is a necessary step in order to come to see the innovative chronotopic image of the man/child Abani offers in the novella. As Mikhail Bakhtin reminds us, the intersection of temporal and spatial axes and indicators is a formally constitutive category of literature, to the point that it defines genre and generic distinctions because, he says, 'the chronotope as a formally constitutive category determines to a significant degree the image of man in literature as well. The image of man is always intrinsically chronotopic.'²⁵ *Song for Night* explores and exploits to the full the possible narrative intersections of time and space, and from a distanced critical position from any rational, enlightenment-derived vision or form of representation. Durrant notices that in *Song for Night* 'there is not even the illusion of progress', and I agree that 'this suspension of time is paradoxically the condition for radical spiritual renewal, insofar as it allows My Luck *the time to inherit himself*'.²⁶ The novella's two interweaving narrative lines – of the child soldier acting and moving through time and space in the first, and of the lost soul migrating from the body of a casualty on the battlefield in the second – contain different but intersecting temporal and spatial indicators, with varying degrees of realism and abstraction that finally border on the surreal.

Both in the past that My Luck tries to remember and in his spiritual journey towards accepting death he is presented as standing on the threshold (*limen*) between many incompatible worlds. He is part of them all, and yet does not fully belong to any. I will focus just on one paradigmatic example of a liminal space in the novella. Before joining the army My Luck lived in a northern Sabon Gari, a

strangers' quarters inhabited by the Christian Igbos who, like him, resided in the predominantly Muslim north of the country. This is because he is the son of an Igbo imam, a 'gentle man' (SN, 53) who decided at a very young age to embrace Islam. My Luck's father is repeatedly punished for daring to challenge established sociocultural boundaries: he is excluded from both religious communities and, finally, killed. My Luck reflects that it was

a terrible thing in this divided nation, even in its infancy, for an Igbo man to be a Muslim [...] Everyone hated the mosque, sitting as it did by decree of the Saradua in the midst of the Christian enclave. Everyone hated my father [...] For a long time I hated my father too, but since he died, I have been trying to love him. (SN, 82)

The imam is murdered, as the Igbo press says, by '*other Muslims because he married a Catholic*' (SN, 100, emphasis in the original). He meets a violent death while in a trance that has put him in 'communion with angels and jinn' (SN, 145), in a place – his deserted mosque – that is a quintessential liminal hybrid site, a locus twice excluded from the city, a space whose sacredness is not a sufficient deterrent against homicide.

The 'unacceptable' hybridity that causes My Luck's father's death will nevertheless prove a safety net for the boy during the anti-Igbo riots he is involved in, recalling the massacres that took place in Nigeria from 1966 onwards and triggered the onset of the civil war. Abani draws on stories from the conflict, telling how the victims of violence were often asked to prove their belonging to a specific ethnic or religious group by speaking a certain language or reciting a certain prayer. The writer's revision of these moments of intercultural tension, played out in inflamed and deeply divided urban spaces, becomes visible when My Luck, trying to escape the incensed mob chasing the Igbo 'infidels', flees in the direction of the city's railway station. The Igbo boy, who speaks fluent Hausa, is stopped and asked to sing the Muslim call to prayer. It is by virtue of having lived in cultural and physical hybrid spaces and by being his 'hybrid' father's son that he survives:

In my best voice I began the call to prayer. A hush descended on the crowd as my voice went from a childish soprano to a cracked and

smoky alto and then back again. The cracks teased some with memories of loves lost and dreams turned rancid. To others it was a caress that burned. Finally, unable to stand it any longer, a man screamed: 'Stop! Somebody tell him to stop!' (SN, 87)

The 'cracks' in My Luck's voice signal that the boy is singing from a space that is inherently liminal and, in this specific instance, decidedly 'queer': the space of the child who is becoming a man. And these 'cracks', the passage suggests, have the power to speak to and revive a common humanity of loves, dreams, and caresses.

Hybridity, as 'the *in-between* space' that carries the burden of a culture,²⁷ is at the same time a space of death and renewal, of pain and creativity in Abani's representation. In *Song for Night* hybridity is a threat to the maintenance of a given social order, but it is also survival, linked to the creative potential that comes from moving across different states and ways of being. Having lived in often violent and sorrowfully divided third spaces of confrontation–negotiation–transformation, My Luck embodies the chronotopic image of the human being on the border, a liminal spatial category that is difficult to embrace and that is constantly shifting, but may also guarantee the continuation of life by other means.

River crossings

The last threshold My Luck has to negotiate on his journey to the otherworld is the one between the world of the living and the world of the ancestors, an in-between space par excellence. For most of the narrative he is stuck in a sort of limbo, an interval 'of living on the edge of death' (SN, 108), which coincides with the time of dying, or the agonising process of his soul relinquishing life before it may finally rest. The final step before reaching the spiritual world is the negotiation of the River Cross. 'We all have to cross it someday' (SN, 103), says Peter the African shaman figure, who is also the fisher of men, the guardian of the Gates of Heaven, and the keeper of its keys in the Judeo-Christian tradition. The River Cross is one of the many watercourses that appear in Abani's works. It is described as

a breathtaking river over two miles wide, in many places etched out of the horizon only by the line of palm trees on the opposite bank [...] There are many tales about how the Cross got its name. There are always many tales here, Grandfather said. Don't trust any of them, he always cautioned. Trust all of them, he warned. Some say it got its name because the Igbos are Hebrews who wandered down to West Africa from Judea and some of them brought fragments of Christ's Cross with them. Some say it is because in the past the Igbo used to crucify thieves and murderers on its bank. Some say it was named after the frustrated British engineer who worked for the Colonial Service Works Department. Not that he was named Cross. Just that he refused to make sacrifices to placate the water spirits, so the mother of them, the mami-wata, pushed down every bridge the man tried to build across it to link the first colonial capital of Calabar with the hinterlands. (SN, 60)

Like the Thames in *Becoming Abigail* or the Los Angeles River in *The Virgin of Flames*,²⁸ the River Cross is a figure of liminality and the transience of all that exists. As Grandfather says, its mythical status and power in West Africa is the product of 'local' tales that are also 'global', none of which is true, but all of which are if taken together. My Luck cannot escape the magnetism of the river, which gradually takes on a greater significance than simply a geographical marker. When he reaches it, however, he is not ready for the crossing. To enter the spiritual world he first has to undergo purification or, as Peter suggests, he has to find within himself the light the old man sees in him: 'You have all the light you need inside you' (SN, 104). The light may only come from retrieving and reliving memories that will allow My Luck to face his awful deeds and guilt. His monologue thus becomes a cleansing ritual that washes away the dirt that 'will not wash off with water' (SN, 129), and, when he realises that 'if water won't wash me clean, hope might' (SN, 130), his search for redemption moves from the physical to the spiritual level, and the light he is looking for starts to pour from within his own body.

The darkness/light metaphysical dynamics is one of the most important unifying motifs in the text. The metaphorical night that engulfs My Luck at the outbreak of the hostilities should not be confused with that 'one long night of savagery' that Achebe sees in colonialist discourses on Africa.²⁹ On the contrary it is a darkness

that may, and must, be confronted in order to move on, as Ijeoma explains to My Luck: 'These are memories. Before we can move from here, we have to relive and release our darkness' (SN, 94). It is for this reason that My Luck's night is still 'full of stars' (SN, 79), of tiny dots of light that, like beacons, will hopefully lead him to the path he has lost. Understanding 'how far into darkness' human beings can go 'and still find their way back to light' and, even more importantly, 'how much [it is] necessary for there to be darkness for the concept of light to exist' is a central question posed in *Song for Night*.³⁰ The predicament of the child character shows that guilt and redemption are two sides of the same coin, or that redemption is inextricably connected to the darkness of My Luck's guilt.

At the beginning of his journey into the good and bad memories of his life My Luck gropes in the dark. 'Night blends into day blends into night, seamlessly' (SN, 55), but 'even in daylight [... he is] plagued by vivid *nightmares*' (SN, 56, my emphasis). Although he manages to sleep, rest eludes him, because he cannot forget the day when he saw a group of old women's cannibalistic feast, and 'the little face, maybe a few months old' of the baby they were eating (SN, 18–19). My Luck, however, slowly comes to realise that even sins can be 'luminous' (SN, 147), thus learning to forgive his weaknesses and to proceed towards redemption:

This morning, unaccountably, I am filled with an almost unbearable lightness. This light comes not from a sudden wholeness on my part, but from the very wounds I carry on my body and in my soul. Each wound, in its particular way, giving off a particular and peculiar light. (SN, 141)

Darkness and light are inseparable from the exertion of memory, or rather 'rememory', in My Luck's monologue. What Toni Morrison calls rememory may be seen at work in Abani's novella as well: 'Rememory as in recollecting and remembering as in reassembling the members of the body, the family, the population of the past'; rememory as a sort of traumatic memory, that is 'the struggle, the pitched battle between remembering and forgetting', which constitutes the narrative strategy in her novel *Beloved*.³¹ Like Morrison, Abani stresses 'remembering, its inevitability, the chances for liberation that lie within the process'.³²

“Embodied” memories are part of this same process in *Song for Night*. ‘Memory is a pattern cut into an arm’, the title of the fourth section of the novella declares (SN, 27). Just like the trafficked girl in *Becoming Abigail*, My Luck resorts to scarification to inscribe memories of the dead on his body, carving crosses and Xs into his left and right forearms. The crosses are for his grandfather, father, mother, friends, and comrades-in-arms, ‘twenty in total. Eighteen are friends or relatives, as I said, but two were strangers. One was for the seven-year-old girl I shot by accident, the other for the baby whose head haunts my dreams’ (SN, 29). On his right forearm there are six carved Xs, for the people he ‘enjoyed killing’: his Uncle, the old women eating a baby, and John Wayne (SN, 29; see below for the soldier John Wayne). My Luck keeps touching and rubbing and troubling his ‘Braille cemetery’ as a way of grounding himself in a story that he may finally acknowledge as his own, whether he has suffered violence or perpetrated it, whether it was his responsibility or someone else’s, whether he is innocent or guilty or both. These tiny acts of self-harm are ‘ways of remaining embodied’ or ‘a mnemonic device for reestablishing bodily connection’,³³ but they are also ‘like a map of my consciousness, something that brings me back from the brink of war madness’ (SN, 15). This embodied map of Xs and crosses contributes to keep him in touch with the dead, to face his fear of the dark waters of the River Cross and embark on a vessel, which is actually a coffin, when the final moment of releasing his darkness comes. My Luck has no control of the coffin: ‘it spins around like a leaf turning in the eddy’ (SN, 155). It is only when he gives up his attempts to direct the course of the vessel, of his existence and of a senseless war – giving up the effort of rejoining his lost platoon, acknowledging his tiredness and letting everything else go – ‘*Fuck this war*’ and ‘*Fuck it all*’ – that he finally reaches the other shore.

Boys, girls, and love among the ruins

‘Love is a backhanded stroke to the cheek’, the title of the ninth section of My Luck’s monologue asserts; it is a gentle gesture you choose to make, to show that you desire and care for the other.

Remembering in a dream the first time he made love, the boy muses: 'I dream of Ijeoma and the night I lost my virginity to her. It is true that I had already had sex by then: John Wayne had forced me to rape someone, but that didn't count. That was sex, rape, this was love: this was choice' (SN, 49). The idea of love being a conscious acting out of one's feelings, in contrast to forced sex or rape, is described in the rest of the section, in which My Luck tries to reconstruct what happened after his involvement in the rape episode that, even more than killing, determines the loss of his innocence. In the evening, while the rest of the platoon are roasting a goat, Ijeoma takes him to the river and washes his feet and his face. This cleansing ritual resembling a baptism is followed by Ijeoma's inviting him to join her in the river. My Luck is scared of the dark waters, resists the girl's invitation, and sits on the shore, feeling strangely relieved and unconcerned: although he no longer knows what innocence is, in that 'sensual but childlike' moment 'it seems attainable' again (SN, 50). Then Ijeoma gets out of the water, kneels by the boy, kisses him, and initiates their lovemaking.

The passivity of My Luck in this episode, which inverts the rape scene, comments on the question of choice and consent as defining features of love, as well as on gender roles. Here the boy does not choose or impose himself on Ijeoma, but 'is chosen' by the girl, who cleanses his body, repairs his broken soul, and teaches him a kind of love that is the opposite of war: 'You should stop fighting now', she enjoins (SN, 50). Ijeoma is an active agent of survival and peace: though involved in a senseless war that will kill her, she performs those small acts of compassion and love that Abani believes may save us. What's more, she 'chooses' whom to love, whose side to stand on, to withstand the violence surrounding them, and My Luck 'freely consents' to her irresistible saving power. The relationship between the two critiques the grammar of imposed gender roles, redistributing agency and queering gender conventions to resist the necropolitical power that destroys their lives and devastates the local communities. This is not the only experience of love in My Luck's short life, or the only moment in which he seamlessly shifts from his 'manly' adherence to the logic of fighting and killing to his embrace of behaviours and perspectives exemplified by the women in his life, as well as 'eccentric' male figures like his father.

My Luck moves in and experiences the full impact of the suspension of codes of social and moral conduct in the state of exception that is war, when men and women and children find themselves behaving and acting in unexpected ways, some rules are exacerbated and others exploded, violence and death reign, and everything gets unmoored. 'War is another queer thing', Ken Saro-Wiwa says in *Sozaboy*,³⁴ his extraordinary prototypical example of an anti-war child soldier narrative, and in *Song for Night* the traumatic experience of war in fact seems to work as a 'queering' agent, where 'queer' broadly signifies the destabilising of identity categories designed to produce stereotypical behaviours, and a critical standpoint that acquires its meaning from its oppositional relation to the norm. Abani questions conventional ideas of the sexed or gendered subject, as well as the innocence/experience and power/powerlessness dichotomies, and observes how war dismantles any fantasy of purity, whether cultural, national, or sexual. As a positionality vis-à-vis the normative – a positionality that is available to anyone who responds 'differently' to 'normal' sexual practices – in *Song for Night* 'queer' may include the rituals of thirteen-year-old children such as My Luck and Ijeoma, making desperate love among the ruins of war. Abani does not stigmatise unconventional behaviours as perversions: he is more interested in the eccentric position occupied by the queer subject, for its potential to review the relations among power, desire, and survival. I am not sure whether we can say, with the critic Brenna Munro, that this is part of 'the queer project' of the African writers who have engaged with the child soldier narrative,³⁵ but the author's oeuvre is definitely intent on dismantling stereotypical behaviours and thinking, as well as representations of life that cover its complex hybridity and constant transformation. To understand the transformative power of his writing, readers need to suspend their disbelief and prejudices and let the shaman lead them to often uncomfortable levels of vision.

The novella is full of references to patriarchy and hegemonic masculinity in the prewar society and during the civil conflict, which My Luck suffers, observes, and analyses *a posteriori*.³⁶ Abani's literary texts often present Oedipal struggles between main characters and paternal figures embodying and upholding compulsory gender

roles. In *GraceLand*, for example, Elvis deconstructs masculinity through performance, a manner that pits him against fatherhood and all it represents – origins, authority, legitimacy – and against his own father, who stands for a world defined by ‘biological inheritance, maleness, which is an *a priori* signifier of specific goals and attitudes of socialization’.³⁷

Abani’s troubled relationship with his own father may represent a biographical source of reference for this reflection on the question of gender expectations in the Nigerian or West African context. As discussed in Chapter 1, he suffered his father’s violence for his inability to meet traditional standards of maleness from a very young age. He embodied a different kind of masculinity – which included writing poetry and reading about love in the texts of a homosexual writer who became his ‘guru’ – and this was incompatible with the patriarch’s normative ideas of gender propriety. As implied in his more autobiographical texts and as clearly stated in interviews,³⁸ the father’s violence had nothing to do with the son’s sexual orientation: ‘I’m not gay so he couldn’t beat me up for that. So my version of masculinity was something he couldn’t accept. And he totally hated the idea of my writing. He burnt my first draft of my first book, we had a lot of domestic violence. He really kicked the crap out of us.’³⁹ The author’s writing thrives on this early struggle against normativity, which is mirrored in the ambiguity of all his characters: ‘I play with sexuality in all my books’, he tells Colm Tóibín. ‘In *The Virgin of Flames*, the protagonist wants to be a woman. I write my characters from the inside out. There’s no spectacle to it, so of course the first question is, Where is your body in relationship to this text? That always fascinates me.’⁴⁰ *Song for Night* does not go that far, but it features both extreme patriarchal figures and less stereotypically defined male human beings.

Inside My Luck’s family, male violence and social pressure for gender normativity find expression through the figure of the ‘Uncle’, who beats My Luck for loving crocheting and not wanting to ‘play the rough games like other boys’ (*SN*, 53), without anyone criticising or stopping his violent behaviour. This same violence he extends to the boy’s mother, whom he has claimed as his wife after the death of her husband – his brother – ‘in the name of some old

custom' (SN, 53). In Igbo customary law the practice of 'inheriting' one's brother's wife is based on the belief that a woman is the property of her husband, and it supposedly aims at 'protecting' the widow (widowhood corresponding to a severe form of female social marginalisation) and exploiting her reproductive capacities to the fullest.⁴¹ In the experience of My Luck and his mother this practice does not socially 'rescue' them; instead they experience violence and subalternity (as well as marginalisation inside the family) as the victims of the Uncle's callousness and of self-perpetuating sexist social norms. In the novella we see again the patterns of the dysfunctional patriarchal family reproduced in the workings of society, in this case inside the military structure that rules in times of war, where the perpetrator/victim binary affects relationships both inside the army and between the army and the civilians. Sexual violence is seen as an integral part of becoming a soldier, and My Luck operates under the control of a perverse black male adult figure of military authority who inducts him into it. However, the text takes an important stand against sexual assault and the equation of masculinity with dominance.

In the war that My Luck has joined, Major Essein alias John Wayne is a compelling representation of necropower and an example of what Carrigan, Connell, and Lee call 'hegemonic masculinity', that is 'a variety of masculinity' which invariably subordinates others, not just women and children but 'young and effeminate as well as homosexual men' too.⁴² *Song for Night* interrogates the complexity of gender relations in the conflictual Nigerian context by focusing on the impact of war on gender formation and performance. The text is not only far from implying that all men are violent oppressors and that all women are victims, but definitely rejects the basic male/female dichotomy to point out that patriarchy – as a social system in which men hold power and control political leadership, moral authority, social privilege, and property – victimises both women and men. During childhood Abani's boy soldier is exposed to different ways of being a man offered by his father and grandfather and, thanks to his mother, grows up protected from the gender expectations of patriarchy. He is thus bound to collide with them when the outside reality enters his family in the guise of his Uncle's hegemonic masculinity and, later, when John Wayne

defines his experience in the army. The Uncle and the commander use physical violence to induce boys to perform in a 'manly' way, and punish them when they do not. In military life, in particular, masculinity becomes hyper-masculinity, and 'war provides the social space for its validation'.⁴³ *Song for Night's* John Wayne is presented as a caricature of a father figure:

John Wayne bent down, arms spread, a father home from work, except he didn't look like a father, more like a bird of prey. He picked up the seven year old girl and held her to his side. Something about him in that moment must have terrified her though, because she began to cry. 'What is your name?' he asked her. 'Faith,' she said, still crying. John Wayne touched her face tenderly, and then when she smiled tentatively through her tears, he threw his head back and laughed. 'This one is ripe. I will enjoy her,' he said, looking right at me, as though he expected me to challenge him, like I did the first time he had forced me at gunpoint to rape someone. (SN, 30–1)

The commander has voracious and wide-ranging sexual appetites. He rapes grown women as well as children of both sexes and is a parody of the 'real' John Wayne, if we think of the famous actor as the icon of restrained masculinity in American cinema.⁴⁴ The boys in his platoon perform the gender role assigned to them, enjoying the ensuing gratifications. During their raids in towns or villages they rape 'the women and sometimes the men' (SN, 76), ostensibly to assert control over their 'enemies'. This form of male sexual violence that targets both women and men undermines and 'queers' the model of masculinity enforced by the commander, while the text points to the unforeseen transformations of sex and gender behaviours created by war.

My Luck at first refuses to consider this destructive form of violation of innocent people as 'warfare'. Therefore John Wayne, who disapproves of resistance on the part of 'the only one who hasn't raped anyone yet' (SN, 75), forces him to rape a woman his mother's age. The boy's hesitation, also connected to his wondering what raping has to do with his mission to defuse mines, is interpreted as insubordination by the commander, who points a gun at his head: 'Rape or die' he orders. My Luck thus obeys and, as he climbs on to

the woman, he is surprised by his erection and the sexual pleasure he feels. Having performed as expected of him and having enjoyed it, he unexpectedly finds himself in the uncomfortable position of being both a victim and a perpetrator of extreme male violence. The horror of the situation and of having responded physically is reinforced by the incest-like relation between the adult woman and the boy:

I wondered how it was that I had an erection. Some part of me was enjoying it and that perhaps hurt me the most. I entered the woman and strangely she smiled. I moved, and as much as I wanted to pretend, I couldn't lie, I enjoyed it. The woman's eyes were tender, as if all they saw was a boy lost. She stroked my hair tenderly, whispering as I sobbed: 'It's all right son, it's all right. Better the ones like you live.' When I came, John Wayne laughed and put two rounds into the woman's head, spraying my face with her blood. The woman died with that look of absolute tenderness in her eyes. (*SN*, 75–6)

The child soldier's confession of enjoyment complicates the 'innocence' of the child forced to rape, but the woman's miraculous forgiveness and insistence on his child status somewhat absolves him from his responsibility. After this traumatic event My Luck finds consolation in Ijeoma, who 'saves' him by becoming his girlfriend. So the not-yet-adult couple begin to have sex to avoid sexual violence: 'whenever we raided a town or a village, whenever the others were raping the women and sometimes the men, Ijeoma and I made desperate love, crying as we came, but we did it to make sure that amongst all this horror, there was still love' (*SN*, 76). As Munro observes, 'this heterosexuality keeps My Luck at a distance, literally, from queer sexual violence, but it does not quite normalize him; a response to trauma, their adult heterosexuality is still temporally queer because of their age'.⁴⁵

Trauma eventually leads My Luck to kill his superior and the necropower exhaling from his every gesture, seemingly staging a rebellion against John Wayne's instructions about how to perform and use masculinity and sexuality in war. However, the gesture does not escape the perverse mechanism of the Oedipal relation, and My Luck takes the commander's place as the platoon leader. In his new role he relies on Ijeoma's support and does not emulate his

torturer, although being in this position at thirteen for him implies a problematic management of his emotions, of his still fluid identity and traumatic experiences. But the novella hints at the possibility of embracing this queer subject who has come into being through trauma.⁴⁶ Munro interestingly argues that, rather than reasserting normative masculinity in relation to the perverse commander by rescuing the boy soldier's innocence, as happens in other child-soldier narratives, 'Abani's boy soldier is a sign of alternate ways of being that do not rely on the perversity/respectability axis for legitimacy'.⁴⁷

The convention according to which war is not a woman's business is mirrored in *Song for Night's* representation of female characters as doubly subaltern victims. Submitted to domestic violence in times of peace, as in the experience of My Luck's aunt 'all bruised from a beating from her husband' (SN, 70), in times of war they undergo what Mbembe would call the necropolitical violence of the phallus. The only girl who in the novella exceeds this pattern is the female soldier in the commander's platoon. Ijeoma symbolically means 'good life', not so much with reference to the quality of her own short and troubled existence ended by war, but, I believe, as an invitation to recognise in her the qualities that may transform a warring society into a peaceful and respectful community. From My Luck's descriptions we understand how different she is from the rest of her companions, and that she possesses far superior skills. 'We all relied on Ijeoma to guide us. She always knew the right thing to do and the right time to do it', My Luck reminisces (SN, 16). The girl soldier is considered smarter than all of the mine defusers and she is the only one who has the guts to challenge John Wayne's power by asking him to see the military manual – 'the same manual they use in West Point, the same one they use in Sandhurst' (SN, 23): a book he keeps referring to in order to prop up his power, but that no one has ever seen. Her act of courage has no practical effect, but points to the survival of freedom of expression and critical thinking, and therefore of the human, in extreme situations such as war. These are indeed the qualities of a leader. Unfortunately they do not help Ijeoma to survive the conflict, but they productively haunt a narrative that contemplates the possibility of new gender roles for women, as well as for men, during and following the upheaval

of war. This, alongside her guiding love, is a further step towards Abani's 'queering' of the child-soldier narrative.

Described at the beginning of this section as gentleness and care for the other, love features as an antidote to violence and as what allows the characters' humanness to survive. My Luck moves between the desire for maternal love and adolescent love for a platoon girl; neither can erase the horrors of war, but both speak of the inner core of beauty and affect that survives and allows the already dead boy soldier to stay human in spite of it all. My Luck has experienced different kinds of love in his short life, in the form of a deep bond with his mother, who protects him from his Uncle's violence; and in the act of forgiveness from the woman he raped soon after joining the war. He has performed acts of kindness himself, which seem unbelievable when compared to his acts of cruelty.

While looking for his lost platoon, the boy meets an old man who feeds on bananas because he is too old to hunt, and he responds immediately to his state of need by hunting an antelope for him. His spontaneous generosity moves the old man, who reciprocates by playing a song for him. Thus, an act of love establishes a human bond between the young and the old, even during a conflict in the middle of nowhere. On a different stage of his journey, he decides to bury a skeleton drifting downriver in a canoe, because 'what is important is that this person be buried. Be mourned. Be remembered. Even for a minute. [... I] lift the skeleton with ease, careful not to shake any bones loose. To come back complete, it is important to leave complete' (*SN*, 67). My Luck performs an original burial rite so that even that skeleton, at the end of time, may resurrect and become whole again. The circle of life and death and return to life is sustained by the pervading belief in the novel that there is hope and there must be community again – a community that includes the living and the dead, bodies and spirits, totemic animals and all sorts of hybrid creatures.

In a 2007 interview for National Public Radio,⁴⁸ Abani commented on love as one of the most sublime things that 'coexist with the most devastating things in every context, in every culture, in every situation'. What transforms the world is not the denial of those things, but 'the recuperation of them, literally, through

love'. The love he is referring to is a force that 'ensures obligation. It's almost a primordial human nature, this compelling thing that makes us want to be better, that want to connect with other people.' Love transfigures 'things that seem dead or ugly into things that can become beautiful and sublime' and ensures that 'there is never despair. There's always only the subtle movements of hope through our lives.'⁴⁹

The author here espouses love as an emblem of the relationship with alterity and the figure of moral responsibility, as an inner force enabling moral decisions.⁵⁰ I see his discursive, figurative and bodily endorsement of love as a very powerful and demanding proposal: an invitation to see the world differently, through connectedness, imaginative sympathy, and proximity, through care and the caressing attention of the self in love with the other. This does not make the horror of war disappear, but forces us to reflect on the related question of whether we may mobilise the degree of utopianism and hope that is embedded in the notion of love and move from a desire, concern, or responsibility for the other to societal coexistence and a wider engagement with a good and just community, which is indeed a political matter and requires something like a 'macro' ethics for public life.⁵¹

Something rich and strange

In the second half of the narrative the landscape around My Luck suffers a fantastic sea-change, an enchanted transformation, as momentarily happens in Shakespeare's *The Tempest* after the shipwreck that kills Ferdinand's father.⁵² Just as Ariel's magical song turns parts of the King of Naples's dead body into corals and pearls, *Song for Night* mixes horror and beauty and transforms the damage wreaked by war into 'something rich and strange'.⁵³ The land itself becomes a place of the imagination, losing its materiality after witnessing an apocalypse, and its inhabitants begin to shed their specificities and morph into something else. In the burial episode referred to above, where the last day of reckoning is clearly evoked, 'the skeleton sways back and forth with the boat's motion and it makes me think of an elaborate decoration on a Swiss clock. There is a cobweb between the bony arm and the empty chest. It

is beautiful and shimmers in the fading light' (SN, 66). This same cobweb evokes the shape of his monologue, spun by a narrator morphed into a spider, a well-known character in the African cultural and narrative tradition, as well as in Black Atlantic cultures. West Africa is the home of Anansi, a folk hero, who is both spider and man, a trickster, a provider of wisdom and a keeper of stories. He embodies a multiplicity of roles, both light-hearted and profound, often providing the link between people and divinity. In African folklore the spider is sometimes considered to be a god of all knowledge and stories.

The boy soldier as an Anansi figure is supported by retrieved images of his younger self, hidden and crocheting in the narrow space at the top of his mother's house: 'Like a spider busy spinning a web, my mind weaves the night into terror' (SN, 33). From that secluded space, where his beautiful crocheting equals re-memorizing, he witnesses his mother's murder, the butchering of his father, the genocide of the Igbos up north, the killing of the seven-year-old girl whom his commander wanted to rape, the gorgons eating the boiled new-born-baby parts, the explosion that killed Ijeoma and even himself, and all the atrocities he saw and could not say aloud (SN, 33). With unspeakable acts now recalled and evoked, My Luck's crocheted tale may definitely abandon the rational tradition of art as mimesis and embrace transformation or, as Durrant puts it, 'the more spiritual understanding of art as transformative rite'.⁵⁴ This enables a vision of planetary connectedness that My Luck retrieves through the forgotten memory of his grandfather and his teachings. The enchanted web of a tale that shimmers in the fading light includes residual animistic knowledge from his 'tall tales' – coming from stories such as that of 'the lake in the middle of the world and the fish that live there' that are the custodians of the souls of human beings – and from his memories of the old man's understanding of life on earth (and beyond) as a network of shared and reciprocal responsibilities, as in the episode of the 'benediction' from a dolphin, which takes My Luck's soul for safekeeping (SN, 62). Resurfacings of this knowledge are balanced by the child soldier's witty remarks, as when he relates them to his down-to-earth experience of physical survival in the war: 'Oh well, I think, eating the last of the fish, wondering whose soul I can taste smoking

down to my stomach, and if anyone has eaten mine yet' (*SN*, 64). The boy cannot entirely trust either his memories or those stories, nor does *Song for Night* unproblematically suggest that My Luck should embrace Igbo cosmology, which to him is mostly lost.⁵⁵ It rather suggests that his redemption, or his joining the world of the ancestors, depends on his staying open to a world of connectedness and proximity, in which one cannot tell where one voice or body ends and another begins. He should learn how to read ancient wisdom as inscribed in all that exists, including the stars that form a 'wonderful song for night' (*SN*, 69). Like the dolphin they are repositories of souls: 'Every star, he says, is a soul, and every soul is a destiny meant to be lived out' (*SN*, 69). As Durrant perceptively argues, Abani invokes the capability 'of accommodating modernity within its sense of the sacred, scepticism within wisdom, the novelist within the storyteller'.⁵⁶

I see this inclusive stance as a development of Abani's persistent idea of 'becoming' as a transcultural process, and of 'transformation' as a collective rather than an individual necessity, which involves a larger 'planetary' perspective. Gayatri Spivak, who coined the term 'planetarity' as part of a critique of the negative aspects of globalisation, asks us to consider ourselves first and foremost as planetary beings, and to embrace the many differences that have the potential to separate us: 'I propose the planet to overwrite the globe [...] The globe is on our computers. No one lives there. It allows us to think that we can aim to control it. The planet is in the species of alterity, belonging to another system; and yet we inhabit on loan.'⁵⁷

In a response to Spivak's 'overwriting' proposal, Emily Apter comments that 'planetarity engages with world politics and an ethical vigilance against environmental catastrophism in an age of remote responsibility; it understands the subject as a provisional place-holder on this earth'.⁵⁸ This impermanent, decentred position of the human takes a further step in Mbembe's vision of planetarity from a post-nativist African and diasporic perspective, which resonates with Abani's. He argues that 'to reopen the future of our planet to all who inhabit it, we will have to learn how to share it again, amongst but also between its humans and non-humans inhabitants, between the multiple species that populate our planet'.⁵⁹ In what he calls our age of 'planetary entanglement',

openness to other archives, other memories, languages, epistemologies, faiths, and to other 'creatures' is crucial, as it may lead to alternative ways of seeing and being in the world that show us out of the dark night, like the tall tales of My Luck's grandfather or the stars in the sky over Biafra. Mbembe sees literature and the arts as central to this view of transformative planetarity. 'The magic of the arts of Africa and its diaspora has always derived from its power of dematerialisation, its capacity to inhabit the commonplace and sensible, precisely with the aim of transforming it into an idea and an event.'⁶⁰ Giving form, he adds, is 'to inhabit a space of essential fragility and vulnerability' because, particularly in African cultures, the attempt to put the infinite in sensible form is 'a forming that consists in constantly doing, undoing, and redoing; assembling, dis-assembling and reassembling'.⁶¹ There is no claim to wholeness, universalism, exclusivity, purity, or fixity in this. The arts in Africa 'come straight out of a fluctuating imaginary'⁶² born out of overlapping genealogies, at the intersections of multiple encounters with multiple elsewhere, including the ancient animistic knowledge that used to keep together the world of the living, the world of the dead, and the planet. *Song for Night* evokes this dizzy openness and connectedness and gives us a magical tale of ethical and spiritual responsibility that fosters hope and a re-enchantment of the world.

Notes

- 1 Uzodinma Iweala's *Beasts of No Nation*, Dave Egger's *What Is the What?*, Ishmael Beah's memoir *A Long Way Gone*, Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie's *Half of a Yellow Sun*, Biyi Bandele's *Burma Boy*.
- 2 D. Mengestu, 'Children of war', *New Statesman* (14 June 2007). www.newstatesman.com/books/2007/06/africa-war-burma-beah-sudan. All websites last accessed 20 January 2021.
- 3 About critical interpretations of *Song for Night*'s generic features see the analysis concerning *Becoming Abigail* in Chapter 3.
- 4 On this point see J. Slaughter, 'Clef à roman: some uses of human rights and the Bildungsroman', *Politics and Culture*, 3 (2003). <https://politicsandculture.org/issue/2003-issue-3/>, and *Human Rights, Inc.: The World Novel, Narrative Form, and International Law* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2007).

- 5 J. Vening, 'Fiction: *Song for Night* by Chris Abani', *M/C Journal* (28 June 2008).
- 6 F. Giommi, 'Negotiating freedom on scarred bodies: Chris Abani's novellas', in A. Oboe and S. Bassi (eds), *Experiences of Freedom in Postcolonial Literatures and Cultures* (Abingdon and New York: Routledge, 2011), p. 180.
- 7 A. Schultheis Moore and E. Swanson Goldberg, "Let us begin with a smaller gesture": an ethos of human rights and the possibilities of form in Chris Abani's *Song for Night* and *Becoming Abigail*', *ARIEL*, 45:4 (2014), p. 68.
- 8 A. Mbembe, *On the Postcolony*, trans. A. M. Berrett *et al.* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2001), p. 15.
- 9 Abani in Y. Goyal, 'A deep humanness, a deep grace: interview with Chris Abani', *Research in African Literatures*, 45:3 (2014), p. 236.
- 10 See B. Munro, 'Locating "queer" in contemporary writing of love and war in Nigeria', *Research in African Literatures*, 47:2 (2016), 121–38.
- 11 Munro, 'Locating "queer"'
- 12 For recent biopolitical analyses of the postcolonial see M. Griffiths (ed.), *Biopolitics and Memory in Postcolonial Literature and Culture* (London: Routledge, 2016).
- 13 A. Varadharajan and T. Wyman-McCarthy, "The world is spoilt in the white man's time": imagining postcolonial temporalities', in M. Griffiths (ed.), *Biopolitics and Memory in Postcolonial Literatures and Cultures* (Burlington, VT: Ashgate, 2016), p. 115.
- 14 Munro, 'Locating "queer"', p. 134.
- 15 S. Durrant, 'Creaturely mimesis: life after necropolitics in Chris Abani's *Song for Night*', *Research in African Literatures*, 49:3 (2018), p. 201.
- 16 Durrant, 'Creaturely mimesis', p. 179.
- 17 These interventions are discussed in the critical overview in Chapter 7.
- 18 See the review extracts: www.goodreads.com/book/show/960213.Song_for_Night.
- 19 C. Abani, '*Song for Night* highlights hope, despair', *Tell Me More*, NPR (4 October 2007). www.npr.org/templates/story/story.php?storyId=14982742.
- 20 E. Coundouriotis, 'The child soldier narrative and the problem of arrested historicization', *Journal of Human Rights*, 9:2 (2010), p. 195.
- 21 Coundouriotis, 'The child soldier narrative'. For a critical reading of what Coundouriotis calls 'arrested historicization' see D. Tunca, "Children at war": language and representation in Uzodinma Iweala's *Beasts of No Nation* and Chris Abani's *Song for Night*', in *Stylistic Approaches to Nigerian Fiction* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2014), pp. 146–74.

- 22 A. Schultheis Moore, 'Global specters: child soldiers in the post-national fiction of Uzodinma Iweala and Chris Abani', in W. P. Collins (ed.), *Emerging African Voices: A Study of Contemporary African Literature* (Amherst, NY: Cambria Press, 2010), p. 41.
- 23 H. Dalley, 'Trauma theory and Nigerian civil war literature: speaking "something that was never in words" in Chris Abani's *Song for Night*', *Journal of Postcolonial Writing*, 49:4 (2013), p. 450.
- 24 Dalley, 'Trauma theory and Nigerian civil war literature', p. 451.
- 25 M. Bakhtin, 'Forms of time and of the chronotope in the novel: notes toward a historical poetics', in M. M. Bakhtin, *The Dialogic Imagination: Four Essays*, ed. M. Holquist, trans. C. Emerson and M. Holquist (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1990 [1981]), pp. 84–5.
- 26 Durrant, 'Creaturely mimesis', p. 191 (emphasis in the original).
- 27 H. Bhabha, *The Location of Culture* (Oxford: Routledge, 1994), p. 38.
- 28 See Chapters 3 and 5.
- 29 C. Achebe, 'Novelist as teacher', in *Hopes and Impediments* (London: Heinemann, 1981), p. 45.
- 30 Abani in Kaufman, 'In conversation'.
- 31 T. Morrison, "'I wanted to carve out a world both culture specific and race-free": an essay by Toni Morrison', *The Guardian* (8 August 2019). www.theguardian.com/books/2019/aug/08/toni-morrison-rememory-essay.
- 32 Morrison, "'I wanted to carve out a world"'.
- 33 Durrant, 'Creaturely mimesis', p. 195.
- 34 Quoted in Munro, 'Locating "queer"', p. 121.
- 35 Munro, 'Locating "queer"', p. 123.
- 36 As regards notions of gender in precolonial West African cultures, the Nigerian scholars Ifi Amadiume and Oyèrónké Oyèwùmí argue that gender was imposed by European settlers in Igbo and Yoruba societies and was conceived differently before colonialism. In her *Male Daughters, Female Husbands: Gender and Sex in an African Society* (London: Zed Books, 1987), Amadiume emphasises that in Igboland the flexibility of gender construction meant that gender was 'separate from biological sex'. Therefore daughters could become sons and consequently male. 'Daughters and women in general could be husbands to wives and consequently males in relation to their wives, etc.' (Amadiume, *Male Daughters*, p. 15). The Igbo 'dual sex-system' is the polar opposite of the Western 'single-sex system', which carries instead strong sex and class inequalities. As soon as Westerners imposed their gender system in Igboland the roles of men and women started to be masculinised and feminised, and women took a secondary position in several

educational, religious, political, and economic fields (Amadiume, *Male Daughters*, p. 16). Similarly, Oyèwùmí's *The Invention of Women: Making an African Sense of Western Gender Discourses* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1997) points out that, before colonialism, gender did not exist in Yorùbáland. She underscores that 'Yorùbá genderlessness [was] not to be read as androgyny or ambiguity of gender. It [was] not genderless in terms of a presence of both male and female attributes. Instead it [was] genderless because human attributes [were] not gender-specific. Bioanatomical differences [were] a source of neither distinction nor identity in Yorùbáland [...] Anasex differences [were] incidental and [did] not define much' (Oyèwùmí, *The Invention*, p. 174; emphasis in the original). Seniority was rather the variable or 'principle that determined social organization', based 'on chronological age'. It was 'the foundation of Yorùbá social intercourse' and, 'unlike gender, [it was] not focused on the body' (Oyèwùmí, *The Invention*, pp. 13–14).

- 37 C. E. W. Ouma, "In the name of the son": fatherhood's critical legitimacy, sonhood and masculinities in Chris Abani's *GraceLand* and *The Virgin of Flames*, *English in Africa*, 38:2 (2011), p. 89.
- 38 T. Jones, 'An interview with Chris Abani', *The Believer Magazine* 12 (1 April 2004). <https://believermag.com/an-interview-with-chris-abani/>; C. Tóibín, 'Chris Abani by Colm Tóibín', *BOMB Magazine*, 96 (1 July 2006). <https://bombmagazine.org/articles/chris-abani/>.
- 39 Jones, 'An interview with Chris Abani'.
- 40 Abani in Tóibín, 'Chris Abani'.
- 41 See O. Bamgbose, 'Customary law practices and violence against women: the position under the Nigerian legal system' (Kampala: Department of Women and Gender Studies, 2006), 86–113.
- 42 T. Carrigan, B. Connell, and J. Lee, 'Towards a new sociology of masculinity', *Theory and Society*, 14:5 (1985), p. 587.
- 43 Cook in A. Honwana, *Child Soldiers in Africa* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2006), p. 53.
- 44 The John Wayne figure appears also in Abani's recollection of his own early experience of cinema in Nigeria, narrated in 'Omar Sharif comes to Nollywood'.
- 45 Munro, 'Locating "queer"', p. 129.
- 46 Harrow also refers to My Luck as 'queer, queered': a 'fifteen-year-old child soldier who does not sound like either child or soldier [...] enjoys in some part of himself being forced by John Wayne to commit rape, feels guilty over his pleasure, and ultimately takes a journey through a desolate unreal landscape of that state of exception outside of all

- locations, where souls of no value, of no use even for sacrifice, like *homo sacer*, pass through on their way to their final death'. K. Harrow, 'The Amalek factor: child soldiers and the impossibility of representation', *Postcolonial Text*, 8:2 (2013), p. 17.
- 47 Munro, 'Locating "queer"', p. 125.
- 48 Abani, 'Song for Night highlights hope, despair'.
- 49 Abani, 'Song for Night highlights hope, despair'.
- 50 See Z. Bauman's discussion of Emmanuel Lévinas's ethics, in Z. Bauman, *Postmodern Ethics* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1993), pp. 82–109. In her influential work *The Cultural Politics of Emotion* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2004), the philosopher Sara Ahmed also describes love as 'a way of bonding with others' and shows how often the pull of love towards another person, who becomes an object of love, 'can be transferred towards a collective, expressed as an ideal or object'. Thus the feeling of love shifts from the love that a subject feels for a specific person to the love that she or he feels for more than one person. To love and to be loved by someone means 'fulfilling one's fantasy image of "who one would like to be"' (pp. 124–9).
- 51 A reflection on this issue is provided by Bauman in a 1998 issue of *Theory Culture & Society* devoted to ethics for the new millennium, in which he argues, in ways that recall Abani's position, that, instead of joining forces with power-holders, sages, and legislators, contemporary moral philosophers should 'bring us back to where our humanity resides, not able to reside anywhere else: *to the incurable uncertainty and ambivalence of the human condition laid bare by the postmodern transformations* – to that necessity and impossibility of being moral which is rooted already in the original encounter with the Other'. Z. Bauman, 'What prospects of morality in times of uncertainty?', *Theory Culture & Society*, 15:1 (1998), p. 15, emphasis in the original.
- 52 A reference to Shakespeare's *The Tempest* can be found in Trilling's review of *Song for Night* 'You're never too young to kill', *The Guardian* (7 September 2008). www.theguardian.com/books/2008/sep/07/fiction.
- 53 'Full fathom five thy father lies; / Of his bones are corals made; / Those are pearls that were his eyes; / Nothing of him that doth fade, / But doth suffer a sea-change / Into something rich and strange.' *The Tempest*, Act 1.2.
- 54 Durrant, 'Creaturely mimesis', p. 191.
- 55 This is how Abani describes it: 'Igbo culture is comprised of a cosmology, philosophy of self and the world, environmental awareness, symbiotic relationship to the earth and the natural and supernatural world,

- ritual, social contracts and conduct and so much more, all woven into a language of being that is only nominally transactional, but which instead performs a profound reach into the ineffable. Everything in Igbo is inferential and malleable and ever evolving. In Igbo we call this Omenala and it is transmitted in its entirety in the language.’ C. Abani, ‘Chinua Achebe: my complicated literary father’, *The Wall Street Journal* (25 March 2013). www.wsj.com/articles/BL-SEB-74061.
- 56 Durrant, ‘Creaturely mimesis’, p. 199.
- 57 G. Spivak, *Death of a Discipline* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2003), p. 72.
- 58 E. Apter, ‘Responding to the *Death of a Discipline*: An ACLA Forum’, *Comparative Literature*, 57:3 (2005), p. 203. Planetary indeed offers an approach that resists ‘erasing the African’, and asks if and how, from the vantage point of the continent and its diasporas, we can extend our conceptual and theoretical imagination and produce alternative images of thought and representations that can hopefully help us live a different life in common. This question is taken on by the contributors of an issue of the journal *From the European South* (4, 2019) titled ‘Africa’s planetary futures’, edited by Annalisa Oboe. It is conceived as a forum of voices sparked by the work of Achille Mbembe, and collects contributions from the humanities, the social sciences, and the science and technology sectors.
- 59 A. Mbembe, ‘Africa in the new century’, *The Massachusetts Review*, 57:1 (2016), 91–104. Online version available at <https://africasacountry.com/2016/06/africa-in-the-new-century>.
- 60 Mbembe, ‘Africa in the new century’
- 61 Mbembe, ‘Africa in the new century’.
- 62 Mbembe, ‘Africa in the new century’.

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